

2005 elections: No media conspiracy

A comprehensive analysis of the media influence on the German election results

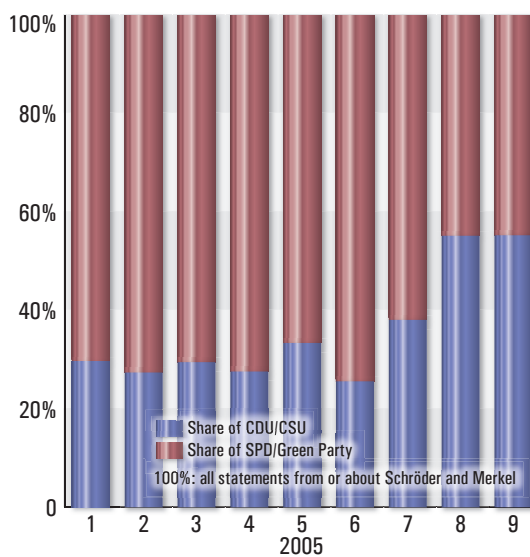
Had the German parliamentary elections been held on the 11th instead of the 18th September, the media trend in the preceding week – after the TV debate – would clearly have indicated a result closer to the actual outcome: Relative to the polls, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) would have lost and the Social Democrats (SPD) would have won. The media pressure on the Christian Democrats was enormous, especially because the media picked up the SPD campaign against Paul Kirchhof, the tax expert in Angela Merkel's campaign team. Yet in the week before the elections, the media pressure on the CDU/CSU clearly subsided, without benefiting the party on election day. The most common explanations offered for this are either the obvious conspiracy theories, or they contradict the verified empirical knowledge of decade-long election and media research. A rigorous analysis is badly needed. Media content analysis can offer some clues.

The 2005 German parliamentary elections have left many at a loss: Politicians in Berlin have started to draw some conclusions from it, but opinion and election researchers are still struggling with the most important open questions. The election result not only deviated from the prognoses by some

percentage points, but also in its overall tendency. It has left scientists and journalists in need of an explanation. After all, editors had let themselves be swayed by the pollsters for weeks and months beforehand. On election night, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder let himself be carried away by a drastic media bashing: The media, he ranted, had waged a campaign against him and red-green policy.

Schröder did not apologize for his outburst, but

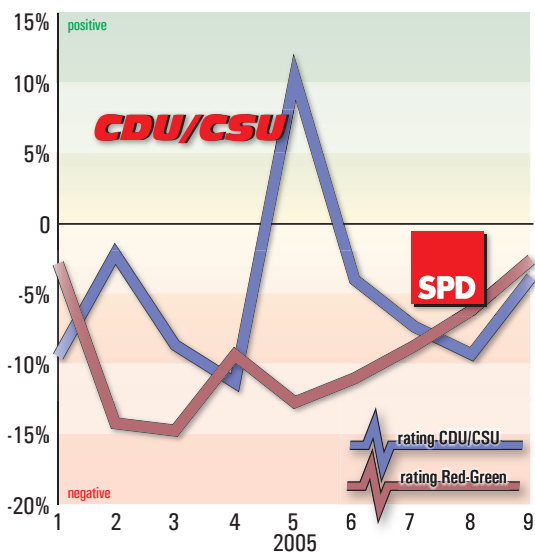
1 Coverage of Red-Green and Union in German TV News



Source: Media Tenor 01/01 - 09/17/2005 Basis: A total of 53,331 (SPD/Grüne/Government), 28,909 (Union) statements in 7 TV news shows

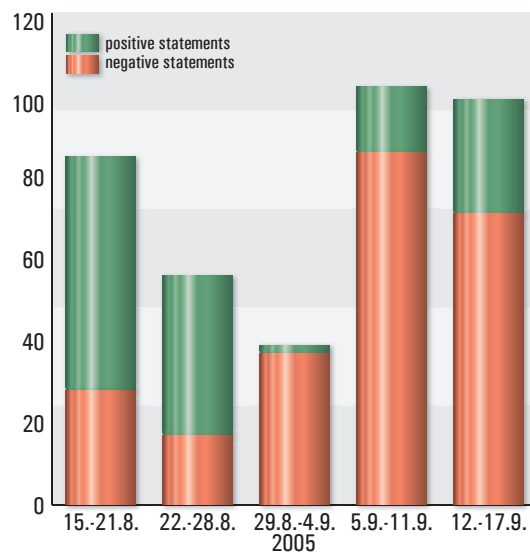
Toward the end of the campaign, the coverage shifted compared to the preceding months: The focus was less on the legacy of the red-green government, but more on the Christian Democrats.

2 Rating of Red-Green and Union in German TV News



Source: Media Tenor 01/01 - 09/17/2005 Basis: A total of 53,331 (SPD/Grüne/Government), 28,909 (Union) statements in 7 TV news shows

3 Number of positive and negative statements about Paul Kirchhof



Source: Media Tenor 08/15 - 09/17/2005 Basis: A total of 381 statements about Kirchhof in 7 TV news shows

meanwhile he has regretted the effect of his appearance. If his accusation was true, it would presuppose that the voters' mood had corresponded to the election results weeks before the opening of the polls. In that case both the polls and the media's conforming assessment of the situation would have been wrong.

Such a conspiracy of pollsters and editors is difficult to imagine. The assumption that the voters truly ignored the media image in such large numbers also contradicts existing empirical results of research on media effects. Up until the end of last year and the beginning of this year, fluctuations in the so-called "Sunday question" ("who would you vote for if elections were held the coming Sunday?") could be explained by the preceding assessment of political protagonists in television coverage (see also the article in the theory section of this magazine). Have the voters emancipated themselves from the media within a few months, or have other effects been overlooked in the past, which used to point into the same direction as the media but did not this time around?

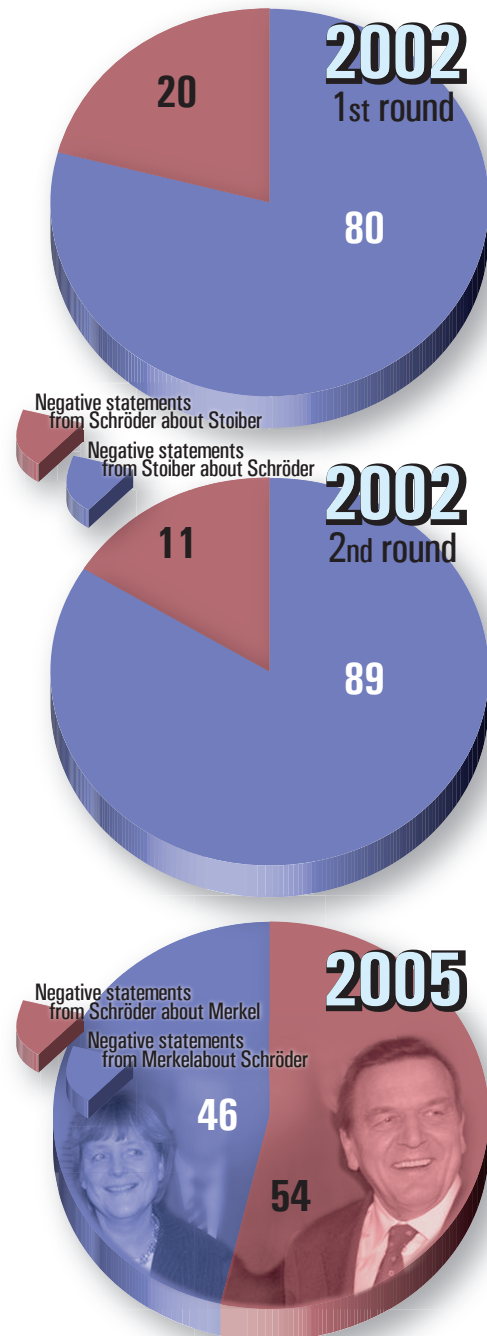
Obviously the voters' situation on the actual election day differs from the hypothetical "Sunday question". Those who go to the polls have usually made up their minds on whom to vote for. Moreover, there was a particularly high number of absentee votes this year.

Comprehensive analysis of the election results

Opinion researchers have not been able to provide a convincing explanation for their prognosis problem, yet (see also the article by Thomas Petersen of the opinion research institute Allensbach). Media research can show, however, that the coverage did shift in the last weeks before the elections. Yet there is not single, clear-cut explanation for these elections, but rather a variety of factors that must be considered separately.

In fact, a number of observations corroborate the assumption that the impact of the media on the election results must be viewed from several perspectives. The analysis of the 2002 parliamentary elections has shown that different groups of voters reacted differently to media messages (comp.: Brett-schneider, Frank/ Rettich, Markus: „Medieneinflüsse auf das Wählerverhalten“, in: Falter, Jürgen W.; Gabriel, Oscar W.; Weßels, Bernhard (Ed.): Wahlen und Wähler. Analysen aus Anlaß der Bundestagswahl 2002. Wiesbaden 2005). Depending on the situation, core voters and swing voters react quite distinctly to media coverage. Core voters can only be mobilized

4 TV debates 2002 and 2005: overall assessment of Schröder and Merkel



Source: Media Tenor 2002/2005

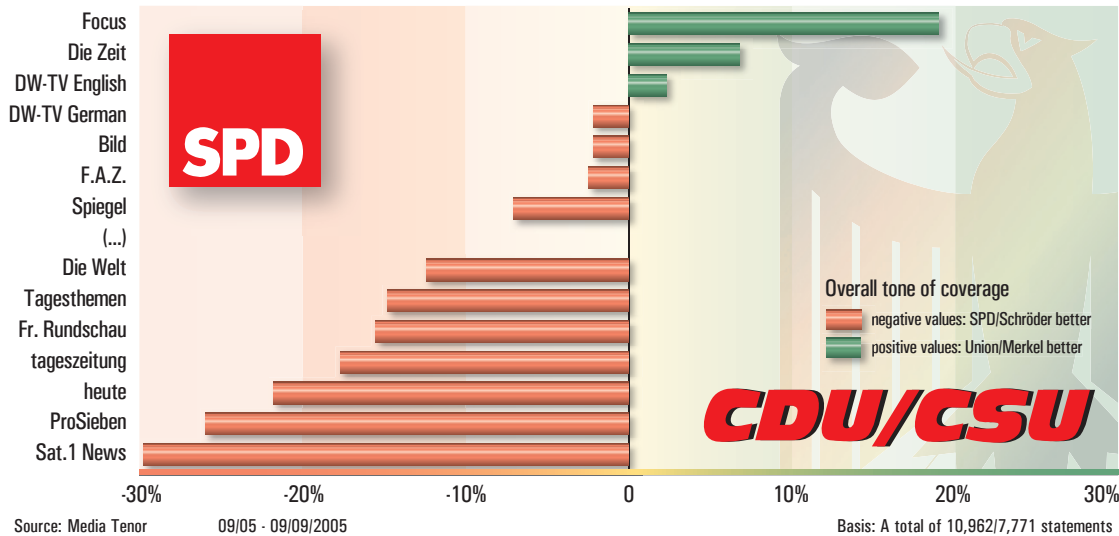
Basis: 249 statements of Schröder and Merkel

when the media do not exert a massive counter pressure. Swing voters, who are generally less politically interested, react more to short-term media trends.

Toward the end of the campaign, the coverage

Chancellor Schröder presented himself much more aggressively than during the 2002 campaign: He criticized Merkel significantly more than Edmund Stoiber three years ago.

5 Direct comparison between overall assessments of the CDU/CSU and the SPD

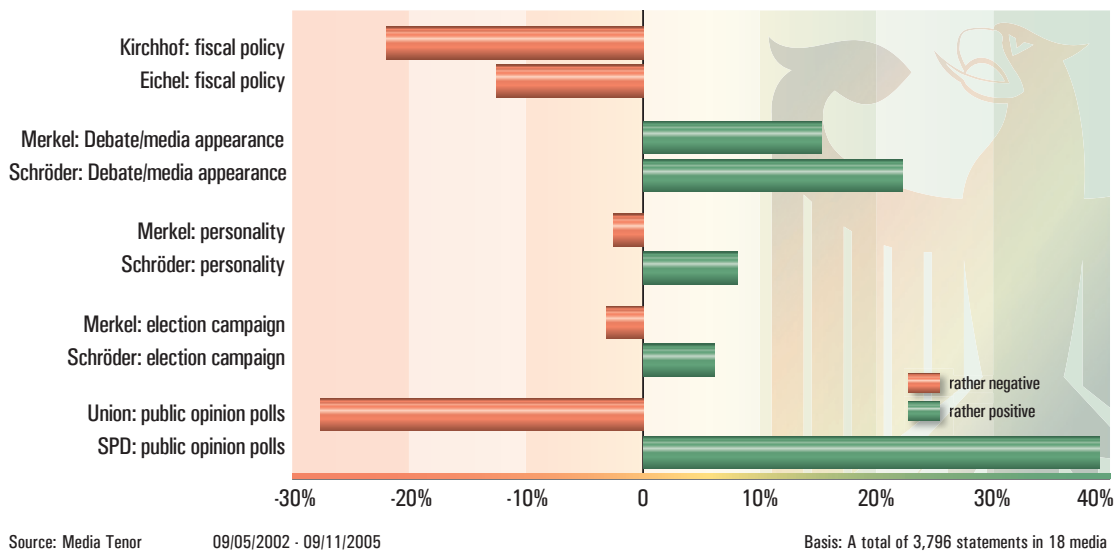


shifted compared to the preceding months, as **graph 1** illustrates. The focus was less on the legacy of the red-green government, but more on the Christian Democrats. Television news covered them twice as much in the last weeks preceding the elections than in the months previous. The government even took advantage of the alleged secure victory of Angela Merkel: Red-green appeared to be dead, what mattered was the future government's platform.

The media's logic worked exactly the way the Social Democrats had intended when they moved up the elections by one year: In the end, red-green was not only covered but also criticized less, both compared to the previous years and compared to the Christian Democrats (see **graph 2**).

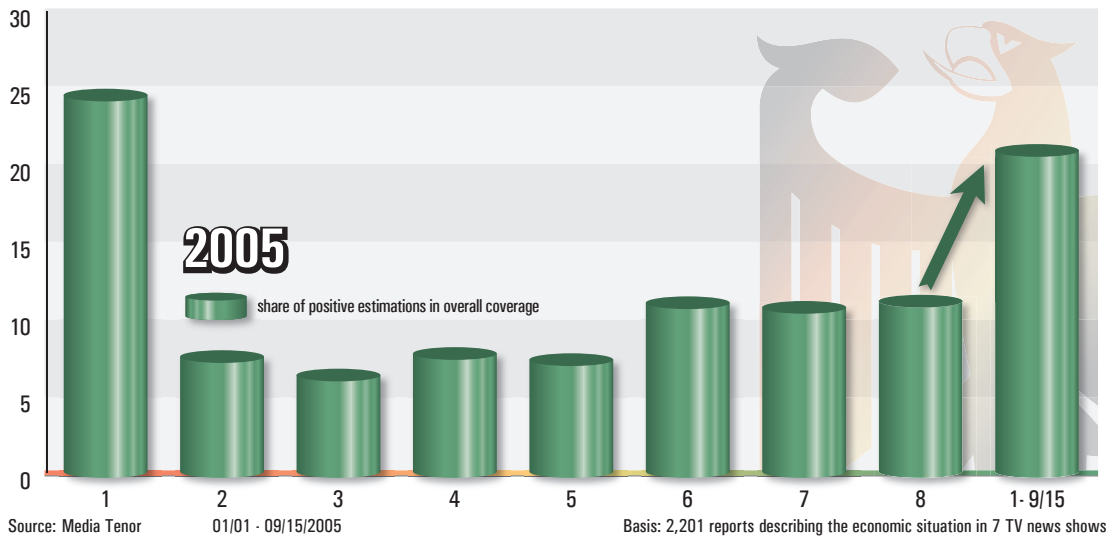
Chancellor Schröder had already changed his thrust at the SPD party convention at the end of August. His main goal was no longer to win over voters for his reformist "Agenda 2010", but to warn them of a black-yellow government (a coalition between the Christian Democrats and Liberal Democrats). At that point in time the polls were correctly showing that the Social Democrats had a problem with mobilizing their voters. Their weak polling results were due to the fact that the month-long media pressure had made the core voters uneasy. Already before the state elections in North-Rhine/Westphalia, the Chairman of the SPD, Franz Müntefering, had tried to mobilize his core voters with the "locust campaign" (equating

6 Assessment of several protagonists relating to selected issues



SPD was ahead on the assessment of the central topics in the coverage of that week: Kirchhof's tax policy received more negative coverage than Angel Merkel positive reporting on her performance in the debate.

7 Share of positive estimations of the state of the economy 2005



certain aspects of capitalism with a locust plague). At that time it had been fruitless.

Before the parliamentary elections, the situation was different, because this time the campaign was directed against a political opponent. As the “professor from Heidelberg” (Merkel’s tax expert Paul Kirchhof), the locust had a face. Schröder castigated Kirchhof’s radical ideas on tax and pension reform, although they were not part of the Christian Democrats’ election platform and even though the alleged disadvantages for certain groups did not correspond to Kirchhof’s detailed calculations.

**Detailed media analysis shows:
Only indirect effect of the TV debate**

Graph 3 shows that Kirchhof’s assessment in the TV news changed dramatically over time. Merkel’s “brilliant stroke” turned into the weak spot in the media image of the Christian Democrats: While the tax expert was still primarily assessed positively in mid-August, the number of negative statements increased significantly in the next to last week before the elections. In the meantime, the TV debate between Schröder and Merkel had taken place on September 4th.

One week before, when Schröder was having a real go at Kirchhof at the SPD party convention, the criticism was first registered in the coverage. After the televised debate, however, the negative coverage on Kirchhof increased dramatically. In September, the Social Democrats cut through with their criticism, but also the statements of TV journalists were negative in 28 percent of cases.

The TV debate was responsible for that: Chancel-

lor Schröder had used this platform to mobilize hesitating SPD supporters. He presented himself much more aggressively than during the 2002 campaign. **Graph 4** shows the comparison of the television debates on the level of statements: Schröder criticized Merkel significantly more than Edmund Stoiber three years ago.

The assessment of the TV debate was considered to be the first major error political observers committed, granting Merkel a respectable success. According to snap opinion polls on the night of September 4th, however, a majority of those interviewed considered the combative chancellor to be the winner. When the SPD gained ground in the subsequent “Sunday questions”, this was interpreted as proof that the television event had had a direct influence on the voters.

If this had been the case, it would undermine the results of media effect research up until now: Researchers used to be certain that television debates do not have a noticeable effect on their own, but rather through the subsequent commentary in the opinion forming media.

However, this thesis was not refuted in 2005. A detailed analysis of the coverage in the days after the debate shows that the trend turned against the Christian Democrats in almost all the media analyzed, as **graph 5** illustrates. It shows the direct comparison between overall assessments of the CDU/CSU and the SPD. From the Christian Democrats’ point of view, the balance was only positive in the foreign news service **Deutsche Welle TV** and the weekly **Focus**, which had been written before the debate, as well as the *Zeit* that granted Angela Merkel the gravity to become chancellor despite the

TV debate.

In all the other media analyzed, the assessment of the SPD was better, sometimes even clearly so. The news programs of **Sat.1** and **ProSieben** declared Schröder as the winner of the debate. Even the **Bild-Zeitung**, which the Social Democrats accused repeatedly of waging a campaign for the Christian Democrats, assessed the SPD slightly more positively in the week subsequent to the debate than the CDU/CSU.

Yet the media pressure on the Christian Democrats did not even result from the aftermath of the debate. Journalists evaluated Schröder more positively, but Merkel still positive enough – a result similar to the snap opinion polls, which attributed a higher score to Schröder but hardly a knockout.

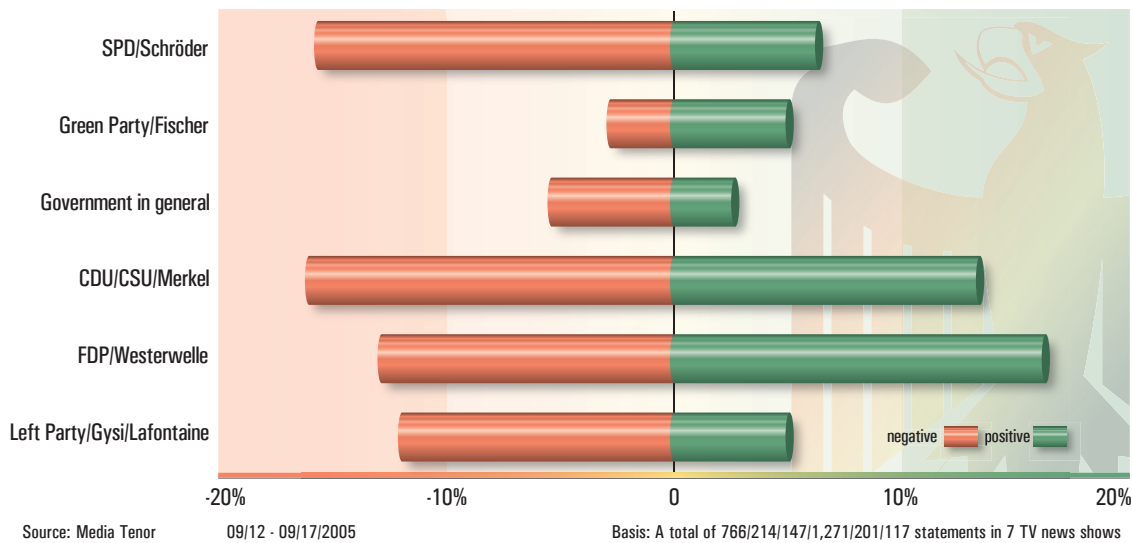
Graph 6 shows that the SPD was ahead on the assessment of the central topics in the coverage of that week: Kirchhof's tax policy received more neg-

Media push for the SPD two weeks before the elections

If the parliamentary elections had taken place one week after the debate, the media trend would have clearly worked towards the Christian Democrats losing and the SPD gaining ground relative to the polls. Schröder became more visible in the coverage on the SPD, primarily on positive issues. The media gave the SPD the winner's image and an election victory of the CDU/CSU and FDP was declared an attack on John Q. Public's wallet.

This type of coverage had the potential of mobilizing the core voters of the SPD, deterring middle-class core voters of CDU/CSU and steering the undecided voters away from them. Moreover, coverage on the economic development in Germany was more positive than before. Negative assess-

8 Assessment of German parties in TV news 09/12 - 09/17/2005



ative coverage than Angel Merkel positive reporting on her performance in the debate. The coverage on opinion polls focused on the trend rather than actual numbers: The SPD got the winner's image. Moreover, Schröder scored higher than Merkel on personality and campaign.

This reinforced a trend, which brought the final phase of the campaign closer to where it was in 2002: The Chancellor accounted for almost two thirds of the coverage on the SPD, a trend that had started in mid-August and got stronger after the debate. Similar to Edmund Stoiber in 2002, Angela Merkel only accounted for one third of the statements.

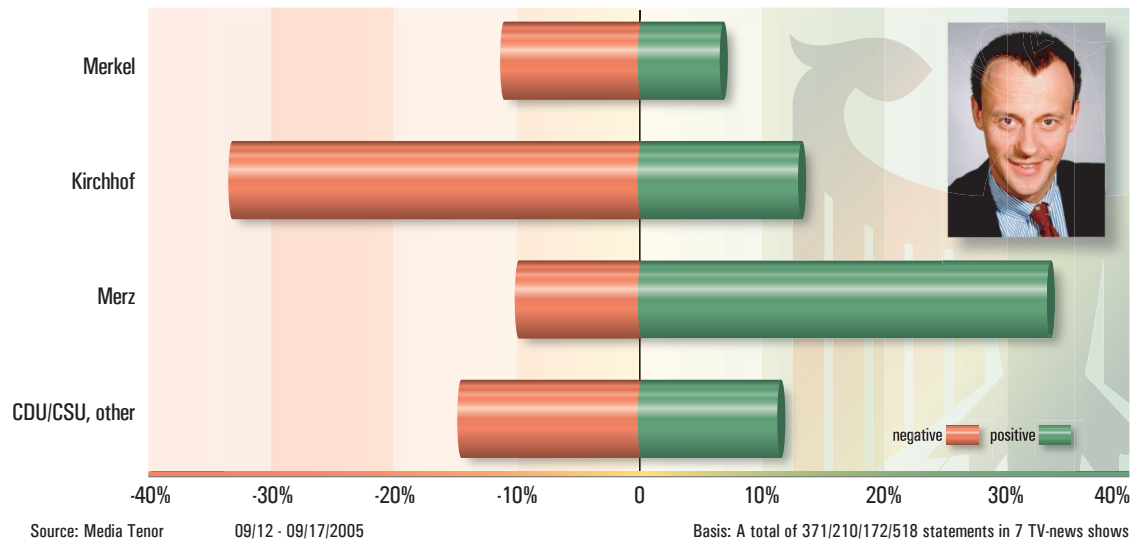
ments of the situation still predominated, but the share of news stories with a focus on positive news increased significantly (**graph 7**).

Just like in 2002, the opposition's main asset and supporting argument for a change of government disappeared: the weak media image of the government. The labor market, a chief problem area of the red-green coalition, lost its significance in the media. The CDU/CSU's well-respected reputation for economic and financial policy did not withstand the media pressure against Kirchhof.

But the elections with the surprising result was not held on the 11th, but on the 18th of September. The last "Sunday questions" before the elections

9 Assessment of the CDU/CSU in TV news 09/12 - 09/17/2005

Polarized coverage on the Christian Democrats in the last few days before the election: Negative statements primarily referred to Kirchhof and Merkel, positive ones to Friedrich Merz.



did not predict such a setback for the Christian Democrats. In the week before the elections, the media pressure on the CDU/CSU had subsided significantly, as **graph 8** on the television news coverage illustrates: Overall, the Christian Democrats were even assessed slightly better than the SPD, the share of positive statements was more than twice as much. The Linkspartei (Left Party) was still under pressure, but not quite as much as in August. The media image of the Greens was slightly positive on balance, as was that of the FDP. Overall, the smaller parties were not the focus of television during the last week before the elections.

Such a media trend shortly before the elections is normally an indication that, compared to the most recent polls, opinions are not changing significantly, any more: None of the parties was subject to a constant counter pressure that would have been strong enough to deter core voters. The undecided, less politically interested voters did not receive a clear impulse one way or the other.

But the election result did not correspond to the most recent polls and the opinion researchers' prognoses, at all: The CDU/CSU did worse by approximately 7 percentage points, and not all the lost votes had gone to the FDP, which did better than expected by about 2 percentage points.

Content analysis data clearly refute the assumption that the setback for the Christian Democrats was primarily due to the undecided voters. The slight decrease in turnout rather suggests that many of the undecided turned into abstainers in the end. It is more likely that many absentee voters had been impressed by the media image of the preceding week, because the polls one week before the

elections had not reflected the strong doubts among the core voters of the CDU/CSU. The big question is why so many of its core voters continued to shy away from the party, although its media image improved just before the elections.

Graph 9 shows how polarized the coverage on the Christian Democrats was in the last few days: Negative statements primarily referred to Kirchhof and Merkel, positive ones to Friedrich Merz. The latter is a tax expert like Kirchhof, but is currently not part of the CDU/CSU leadership ranks. It is possible that such a split media image would be unable to console the Christian Democrats' core voters that had started to doubt. After all, the public confrontation between Angela Merkel and Friedrich Merz splits the party at two decisive points: Economic expertise and unity. Effects of social standardization would have caused the pollsters to measure incorrectly – a kind of spiral of silence in reverse. An argument against this is the fact that the first "Sunday questions" after the elections have essentially confirmed the results of September 18th. The result of the content analysis offers clues, but also leaves open questions – questions primarily to the opinion researchers. Ret

Basis:

Media: Bild, Die Welt, F.A.Z., Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz; Focus, Spiegel, Die Zeit; ARD Tagesschau und Tagesthemen, ZDF heute und heute journal, Deutsche Welle TV: Journal in German and English language, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben Nachrichten

Timeline: 01/01/ - 08/17/2005

Analysis: All statements on parties, politicians and governments on a federal and state level as well as all news stories with descriptions of the economic situation in Germany.

Open questions:
How long are the after-effects of strong impulses on voters?
In what voter groups did the Christian Democrats primarily lose ground?
What was the share of absentee voters?
How stable was the party connection of the CDU/CSU voters throughout the election year? Would a "spiral of silence in reverse" be measurable?
What impact did the perception of the economic situation have on the voting decision?