Regional — national — supranational.
How the German press covers election campaigns on different levels of the political system[1]

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ABSTRACT: The analysis of election campaigns is a long-standing tradition in communication science. Since the classic Erie County study (1944) there have been multiple studies on how the mass media cover parliamentary and presidential elections. But the studies primarily focused on elections at the national level and a growing number also at an international level. The role of the mass media in regional elections has been analysed considerably less often. One field which has been neglected so far is to compare press coverage on the aforementioned three levels of the political system, namely the regional, the national, and the supranational level. Our quantitative content analyses of German newspapers (2009–2011) show if and how much election campaign coverage on these three levels differs. Because of these differences we propose to distinguish between first-rate coverage (of national elections), second-rate coverage (of regional elections), and third-rate coverage (of European elections). The gap between these levels may result in different perceptions of the campaigns by the public.

KEYWORDS: Germany, election campaigns, election coverage, political system, political communication, quantitative content analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of election campaigns is a long-standing tradition in communication science. Since the classic Erie County study (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) there have been multiple studies on how the media of mass communication cover parliamentary and presidential elections. These studies document how elections and campaigns, media and coverage, and citizens' voting behaviour have changed over the course of several decades (Lange & Ward, 2004; Dahlem, 2000; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008).

In the whole process, the focus was mainly on the national political level. Yet the citizens in democracies are also called to participate in other elections.

A prime example of this is the elections for the European Parliament which have been held regularly in the member states of the European Union since 1979. In the meantime, there have been several studies conducted on a regular basis (Blumler, 1983; Holtz-Bacha, 2005; de Vreese et al., 2007; Maier et al., 2011; Tenscher, 2011). In some cases, comparisons between the coverage of national and European elections have been made (Wilke & Reinemann, 2007; Boomgarden et al., 2011; Strömbäck & Nord, 2008; Wilke et al., 2011). One fact which has been largely neglected so far, however, is that there are also elections at a local or regional level in democracies. Germany is one of the countries for which this is the case. Using this example, an attempt will be made to compare press coverage not only on two (Tenscher & Schmid, 2009) but on three levels of the political system, namely the regional, the national, and the supranational. The main research question is how similar or different this coverage is. How much space is devoted to the coverage in each case and what is the salience of the campaigns? Which forms and sources do the journalists use? Particularly important is the role of the top candidates and their evaluation. Are there different degrees of personalization and authenticity? To compare election coverage on the three levels might be relevant for their salience in the perception of the citizens and their involvement in the political system. But it will be difficult to decide if the coverage reflects "objective" discrepancies between the levels or if these are shaped by the media.

GERMANY'S POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE LEVELS OF ELECTIONS

At the beginning it seems necessary to give some basic information on the levels of the German electoral system. Not everybody will be familiar with this. The German political system as it exists today was established after the collapse of the Nazi regime in 1945. In the occupied zones under allied control, democratic structures were first created in the form of regional units, the so-called *Länder* (states). These were merged in 1949 to create the Federal Republic of Germany and a shared constitution, the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law). The Soviet Union went its own way and established a dictatorship in its occupied zone in 1945. This culminated in the creation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949. The separation of Germany into two states persisted for four decades to come, until reunification in 1990.

The political system in Germany is characterized decisively by the legal provisions of the Basic Law. Article 20 says: "The Federal Republic of Germany is a democratic and social federal state."

"Federal" means that the country is composed of a number of states, 16 as of today. Five more states were added to the original 11 of the old Federal Republic after reunification. Political federalism is a long-standing tradition in Germany. It goes as far back as the Middle Ages (Funk, 2010). A national state was not created

until the nineteenth century (much later than in other parts of Europe). The Basic Law decrees a system of checks and balances, a separation of powers between the national parliament (*Bundestag*) and the central government (situated in Berlin), on the one hand and the state parliaments (*Landtag*), i.e. the regional governments (in their respective capitals), on the other. Representatives of the states form a second chamber (*Bundesrat*). The central governing bodies mostly hold power over foreign policy, monetary affairs, postal and communication systems, and matters of national defence; the regional bodies are predominantly in charge of cultural and educational matters. In other areas they have to work together.

Article 28 of the Basic Law further decrees:

> The constitutional order in the Länder must conform to the principles of a republican, democratic and social state governed by the rule of law […]. In each Land, county and municipality the people shall be represented by a body chosen in general, direct, free, equal, and secret elections…

According to the democratic-constitutional principles, the representative bodies are on three separate levels: 1) Local, Municipal, 2) Regional, 3) National. In addition to these legal provisions the Basic Law decrees the transfer of political power to the supranational level. As prescribed in Article 24: "The Federation may by law transfer sovereign powers to international organizations."

In 1992 a new article 23 was introduced into the constitution which includes this possibility for the European Union (EU). Besides the transfer of sovereign rights to the EU, the participation of national and regional parliaments is ensured. This is of paramount importance when it comes to the European Parliament, which comprises representatives from all member states of the European Union.

A parliament of this kind has existed since the 1950s, but its political position has been strengthened considerably by the progress in European integration. Since 1979, the European Parliament has been elected every five years. The goal was to involve citizens more directly in European policies and to offer them more political access to the European Union. In the course of time, the framework conditions for these elections have changed decisively. First of all, the number of European member states has increased periodically and currently stands at 27. Second, the function and role of the European Parliament (EP) have altered with time. National legislation of member states has increasingly been influenced by decisions on the European level, which in turn are more dependent on the consent of the European Parliament. On the other hand, the Parliament has taken on more control tasks and has to decide on choice of personnel, especially in the case of the European Commission.

Because of the European Elections, the electoral system of the Federal German Republic currently consists of four levels, namely: 1) Local, Municipal, 2) Regional, 3) National, and 4) Supranational: European.

On these four levels (depending on the legislative period) general, free and democratic elections are held in Germany every four or five years. As much as the aforementioned basic principles apply to all elections and other common features

are present (for example, with regard to party structure, see Kost et al., 2010), there are still differences concerning the process, the organization and the goals, as well as the intensity and scope.

RANK ORDER OF ELECTIONS AND ELECTION COVERAGE

When the first direct elections for the European Parliament were held, Reif and Schmitt made the basic distinction between "first-order" and "second-order" elections:

> Second-order elections are, of course, neither new nor unfamiliar either in the European Community or in Western democracies as a whole. In each of these systems one can discern with relative ease which are the decisive elections: the "first order" elections in parliamentary systems are the national parliamentary elections, and in presidential systems, the national presidential elections. In addition to these, however, there is a plethora of "second order" elections: by-elections, municipal elections, various sorts of regional elections, those to a second chamber and the like. (Reif & Schmitt, 1980, p. 8)

The authors make this distinction mainly because of the differences in turnout regarding national ("first-order") elections and European ("second order") elections. They saw their terminology validated in later elections; others have found it similar in their studies as well. Thus it became an established concept (Norris, 1997; Schmitt, 2005; Koepke & Ringe, 2006; Hix & Marsh, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2007; Strömbäck & Nord, 2008). Reif (1984a; 1984b) called European elections "additional national by-elections," and thus put them on a level with "local-, regional-, or general council elections, provincial- or county-elections, the different kinds of by-elections, etc." (1984a, p. 343), while at the same time speaking of the danger "that the direct election for the European Parliament […] might degenerate into a third-class election" (1984a, p. 352). In 1997, he finally subdivided elections into three types:

> In the eyes of citizens, SOE [Second-Order Elections] would be less important than FOE [First-Order Elections], but are still "real elections." They "produce" a (local, regional, European) government, especially a Head of Government […] "TOE's" [Third-Order Elections] "produce" an assembly but have no impact on the "production" of the respective government. (Reif 1997, p. 121)

Since European elections do not, or only indirectly, result in forming a "government," in the strictest sense they have to be assigned to the third type.

The cited differentiations have been developed in the field of political science and help to analyse specific political characteristics of democratic elections (especially with regard to turnout), but they can also be consulted or adapted when elections are seen through the lens of communication science. Relevant studies exist for national elections since the 1940s and for the European elections since their inception (1979). Despite the observed differences between national and European

elections and their respective coverage, Reif and Schmitt's concept has only been re-modelled recently for the differentiation between "first-rate coverage" and "second-rate coverage" (de Vreese et al., 2007). It remains unclear however whether in this case three types can be detected in terms of coverage of regional elections and how they are precipitated. An empirical examination of this question, which still needs to be answered in the case of Germany, does not to our knowledge exist.

The question raised is of some interest because of different reasons: Does any hierarchy exist in the campaign coverage on the different levels of the electoral system? Which similarities and which differences can be observed on these levels? We may expect differences particularly concerning the amount and placing of the coverage. Besides, the role of the top candidates on all three levels may not be equivalent. Resulting from such elements of the coverage, conclusions can be drawn on the perception of these elections by the citizens, and if the rank order of elections can be confirmed, we would like to find out in which respect "first-," "second-" and "third order elections" deviate from each other in the media coverage.

DESIGN AND METHOD

In order to answer the question as to how the campaign coverage differs in the political system's three levels in Germany, the following three studies are combined. They were created separately, but as far as possible have used the same design and the same instrument: with the help of a content analysis the campaign coverage in four newspapers of regional, national, and European elections was investigated.

Regional: State elections

In each of the 16 German states, there are provincial parliamentary elections every four or five years. These are spread over the years according to the electoral cycle. Not all 16 elections could be included in our analysis but we decided to include at least two in order to broaden the basis for comparison. The opportunity emerged because there were simultaneous elections in two states on 27 March 2011, in Rhineland-Pfalz (Rhineland-Palatinate/RLP) and Baden-Württemberg (BW). Both states are located in the south-west of Germany and differ in size. Baden-Württemberg is the third-largest German state with regard to size (35.8m km²) as well as population (10,755m). Its capital is Stuttgart. Rhineland-Palatinate's size (19.9m km²) places it eighth among the German states and sixth with regard to population (3,999m). Its capital is Mainz. The two states combined make up 18 per cent of the entire German population (and roughly the same proportion of all citizens entitled to vote).

Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg each have a parliament of their own, which is elected anew every five years. From the elected representatives, the prime minister of the local government, who in turn forms the local government, is elected by a majority vote. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the social democrats (SPD)

have been in power with an absolute majority since 2006 and before that in a coalition with the liberals (FDP). In Baden-Württemberg the Christian democrats (CDU) have now been in power for 52 years, and since 1992 in a coalition with the liberals (FDP). The initial situation in each state was quite different by 2011. It was predictable that the SPD would lose its absolute majority in Rhineland-Palatinate, but would be able to continue in government with the help of the Green Party. This was exactly what happened after the elections (Gothe, 2011). The situation was quite different in Baden-Württemberg, where the Greens traditionally had a quite strong position. Here, the governing coalition was threatened with being voted out of government, and the constellation of the political problems played a decisive role in the election campaign. The former opposition parties, the Greens and the SPD, did in fact obtain a small majority and form the government. The CDU for the first time had to form the parliamentary opposition (Gabriel & Kornelius, 2011).

The setting of the election date on 27 March was not only characterized by events and problems which had significance for both states. It was also overshadowed by national and international events. The earthquake which occurred on 11 March 2011 off the Japanese coast, triggering the catastrophe in Fukushima nuclear power plant, arguably had global consequences. These events re-ignited the lively discussion about nuclear energy in Germany, especially after the government had decided on longer running times for its nuclear power plants. Under the pressure of current events in Japan, this policy was abandoned almost immediately.

Four newspapers from each state were subject to a content analysis of campaign coverage in the last four weeks prior to the election date. These were the following newspapers:

Rhineland-Palatinate
- *Allgemeine Zeitung* (AZ) (Mainz)
- *Die Rheinpfalz* (RP) (Ludwigshafen)
- *Rhein-Zeitung* (RZ) (Koblenz)
- *Trierischer Volksfreund* (TV) (Trier)

Baden-Württemberg
- *Mannheimer Morgen* (MM) (Mannheim)
- *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* (StN) (Stuttgart)
- *Badische Zeitung* (BZ) (Freiburg)
- *Südkurier* (SK) (Konstanz)

National: Bundestag elections

On the national political level in Germany, the Bundestag (equivalent of the National Assembly) is elected every four years. The last election was held on 27 September 2009. In the four years prior to that, a grand coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) was in power. The two parties, usually in opposition to each other, formed a coalition in 2005 because no other majority

could be reached in order to form a government. Because the SPD had lost a considerable number of votes, Gerhard Schröder had to cede the office of Chancellor to Angela Merkel. In 2009, the majority ratios shifted again. The Christian Democrats could now form a coalition with the Liberals (FDP), and the SPD had to take up the role of the opposition after devastating losses in the polls.

The examination of campaign coverage spans the four weeks prior to the election. A content analysis examined four daily newspapers with a more or less national distribution. These were the following newspapers:

- *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) (Frankfurt)
- *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) (Munich)
- *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) (Frankfurt)
- *Die Welt* (DW) (Berlin)

These newspapers are the preferred subjects of scientific analysis because they represent a cross-section of the political spectrum, covering the left (FR), moderate left (SZ), moderate right (FAZ) and the right (DW).

The main focus of the election campaign in 2009 was the financial and economic crisis, which had been caused by banking meltdowns in 2008 (first in the USA) and had global effects. As far as domestic policy was concerned, the question of whether the grand coalition would persist or be replaced by a "small" one dominated discussion.

Supranational: European Parliament elections

The European elections can be viewed as elections on a supranational level in the case of Germany. They are held every five years. The goal is to determine the German representatives for the European Parliament. This ratio is currently 99 out of 736. Their election is regulated by a special law (*Europawahlgesetz*). The aforementioned national parties also compete in the European elections. For these elections, they compose lists of candidates who are elected into the European Parliament depending on their respective number of votes. The individuals at the top of these lists can be considered as the top candidates but they will not automatically hold certain functions or offices as a result of their position on the list. The last European elections were held on 7 June 2009. The turnout was 43.3 per cent, an increase of 0.3 per cent in comparison with the 2005 elections. In 1979, for the first European elections, the figure was 65.7 per cent, a rate which has never been matched since. The analysis included the coverage in the last four weeks prior to the elections and also considered the aforementioned four newspapers with national distribution:

- *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) (Frankfurt)
- *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) (Munich)
- *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) (Frankfurt)
- *Die Welt* (DW) (Berlin)

Earlier studies have already proven that European campaigns are primarily dominated by national topics and domestic policy. They are usually used by the respective opposition in order to "get even" with the government and to "teach them a lesson." This can also be said of Germany (Wilke & Reinemann, 2007). In 2009, the competition was limited by the fact that the two big parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, were cooperating in a grand coalition which formed the government.

As this overview on the design shows, the method applied for comparison and the content analyses at the different stages and elections were mostly arranged analogously. In the case of the regional elections it was a logical step to analyse regional/local newspapers, since the respective elections would only attract limited attention outside the respective state (and in national newspapers). For regional and national elections one sample was created for each, in which every second article was included. In order to reach the absolute frequencies the values had to be doubled afterwards. In the case of the European elections, however, all the relevant articles were selected in order to provide a base of sufficient size for analysis. Every article that was covered four weeks prior to elections and featured one of the top candidates or the election campaign was selected. The content analysis extended over two levels: the items per se, and the images. In order to make a direct comparison possible, an attempt was made to keep the categories for the content analysis as similar as possible. In addition to formal categories (extent, ranking, authors/sources) aspects of content were captured. The main focus was on aspects of personalization and the presentation of the respective top candidates. The codebook for this had previously been used for a long-term study focusing on the German Bundestag elections (Wilke & Reinemann, 2000) and was inspired by a well-known American study (Patterson, 1993). The categories were adapted for the other elections. The coding reliability ranged from very good to acceptable (values between 1.00 and 0.72 after Holsti).

In the following, the results of the three content analyses are presented. According to the implicit logic of the different political levels on which the elections are taking place, the charts display the data for the two regional elections on the left, for the parliamentary election in the middle and those for the supranational European elections on the right.

FINDINGS

Amount of press coverage

The amount of coverage is a basic indicator of the significance attributed to an election by the mass media. Table 1 indicates in how many articles the analysed German newspapers featured the regional, the national and the supranational elections in a four-week-period.

Table 1. Amount of press coverage (number of articles)

	Regional		National	Supranational
	Federal state election RLP (2011)	Federal state election BW (2011)	Bundestag election (2009)	European elections (2009)
Articles	348	630	604	195
Characters per line	962,312	1,553,842	2,108,004	749,187

At first sight, our assumption that regional elections are "second-order elections" does not seem to be accurate, given the fact that most articles have been published on the Baden-Württemberg election in 2011 (630), even more so than those covering the Bundestag-election (604), but this should be looked at comparatively. For one thing, the Bundestag election in 2009 drew little attention from the press. Compared with the previous elections in 2002 and 2005 only half as many articles were published (Wilke & Leidecker, 2010). Second, the assumed hierarchy for the elections is in fact manifest when we take a look at the actual volume of coverage measured in characters. The Bundestag election's dominance as "first-order election" is quite obvious then.

A significant difference can be seen between the states in 2011. The respective elections were covered much less intensively in Rhineland-Palatinate than in Baden-Württemberg. For the latter, this can be explained by the higher level of potential explosiveness and political tension. Not only the issue of nuclear energy but also the new construction of the central train station in the capital Stuttgart had stirred public opinion in Baden-Württemberg for many months. Furthermore, the election outcome remained rather open and a government change seemed likely, which was not the case in Rhineland-Palatinate. Thus, the high number of articles in Baden-Württemberg is a result of this situation. Overwhelmingly in third place ("third-order election") is the coverage of the European elections. On the other hand, the articles on the European elections are the longest (average of 3,841 characters per article) followed by the Bundestag election (3,490 characters per article). The articles on the regional elections are a little shorter on average (RPP: 2,765; BW 2,466 characters per article).

Dynamic of the coverage

With the dynamic of the coverage we wanted to see how the newspapers' articles are spread over the last four weeks before the elections. The evaluation can be seen in Figure 1.

The course of coverage in the four weeks of the campaign's "hot" phase differs in the three kinds of elections. The most remarkable observation is that the European
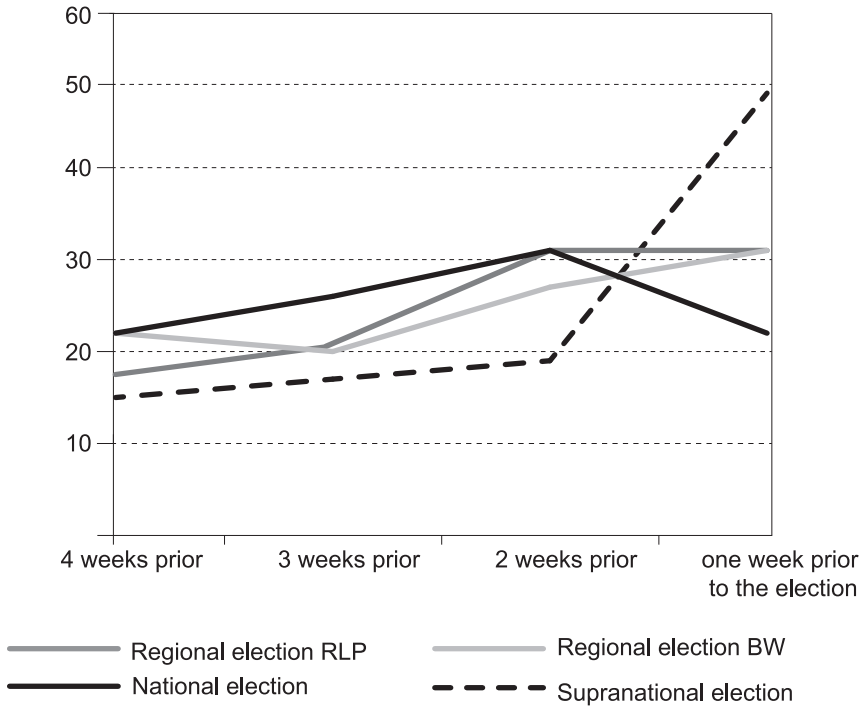
Figure 1. Course of press coverage (share of articles per week; in %)

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009 and 192 articles of the coverage of the supra-national (European) Parliament election 2009.

election campaigns attracted the least attention during the first three weeks and that it only increased in the week prior to election day. Almost half of the articles were only published during this week. On the other hand, the coverage of the Bundestag election had already reached its peak in the third week. The reason for this was the top candidates' television debate 14 days before the election. Following this event, a large number of articles were published. During the fourth week the frequency of articles published subsided again. The dynamic of coverage on the regional elections lies in between these values, in a manner of speaking, increasing continuously until the end of the campaigns, and in the end were rather close to each other in both Federal states.

Placing

The placing of campaign articles can also offer some insight into the significance which journalists attributed to the elections (see Figure 2). "First-order" elections are placed more prominently in newspapers than "second-" or "third-order" elections.
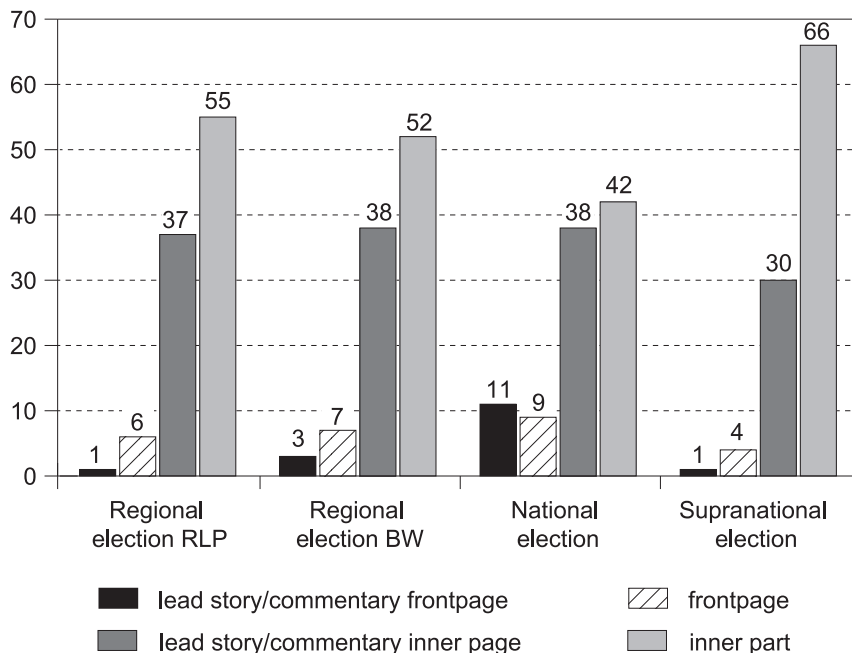
Figure 2. Placing of articles (in %)

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009 and 192 articles of the coverage of the supra-national (European) Parliament election 2009.

The findings actually support a triple gradation of elections: the least prominent placing could be found for articles on the European elections. Two thirds were in the inner pages of newspapers, and every third article was a lead story or commentary on the inner pages. Best placed were articles on the national election: every fifth was on the front page, every tenth a lead article. The amount of articles on the inside was proportionately smaller. The regional elections on the other hand are situated somewhere between national and European elections. They were less successful in becoming lead stories or being placed on the front page of the newspapers. The articles on the election in Baden-Württemberg, however, were placed a little more prominently than those on the Rhineland-Palatinate election. This too could be a reflection of the differing political significance attributed to the two elections.

Journalistic formats and sources

Newspapers treat election campaigns in different journalistic forms and formats. Whether they do so with different kinds of elections still remains to be determined, as it is quite difficult to form a theory on the matter. Our analysis shows however that such differences do in fact exist (Figure 3).
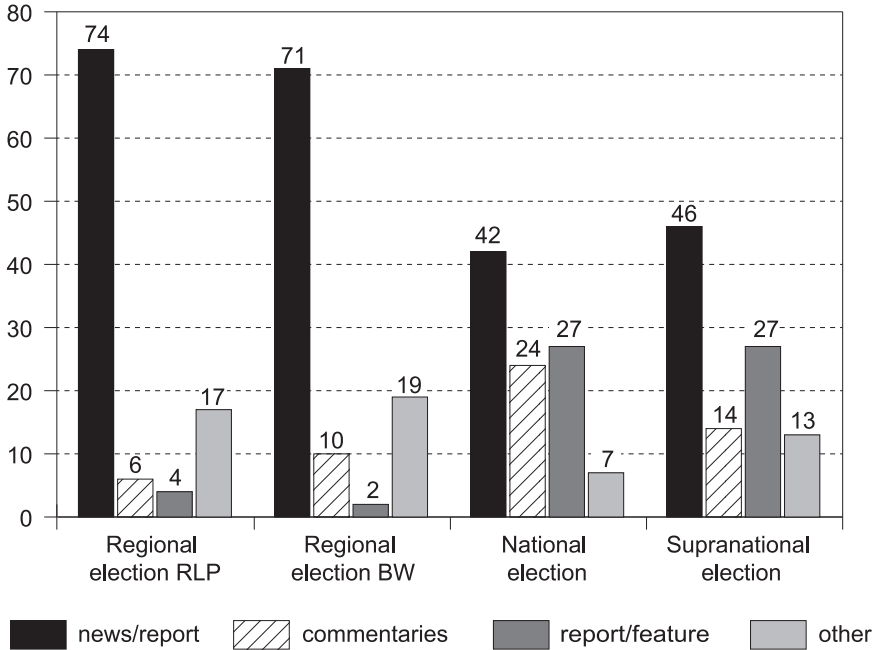
Figure 3. Journalistic forms of press coverage (in %)

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009 and 192 articles of the coverage of the supra-national (European) Parliament election 2009.

The basic form of journalistic coverage is news/reports, i.e. accounts which follow the professional rules of information. This form clearly dominates in three-quarters of the cases covering the regional state elections. In the case of the national Bundestag election only about two-fifths of the articles are composed in this manner, and barely half of the articles in the case of the European elections. In turn, there is a much higher degree of commentaries in the case of the Bundestag election. The coverage of the European elections shows a "medium" percentage of this form. There are two possible explanations for this: either information is really the centrepiece of coverage when it comes to regional elections, and "subjective" forms, especially commentaries, are less important, or these traits are general characteristics of regional newspapers and thus typical of the newspaper type which was analysed here. As regards national elections on the other hand, information is not so dominant, and they are covered and commented on in a much more "subjective" manner, or here again the general traits of the analysed national newspapers emerge. In the case of the European elections, the same newspapers were examined: the percentage of "subjective" coverage and commentaries is considerably lower than for the national election. Thus, there are quite a number of facts which point to the specific significance of the national parliamentary election, the "first-order

election," as the reason for their being treated differently by journalists from "second-order-" and "third-order elections." Long-term studies on the German Bundestag elections since 1949 have shown that "objective" information has tended to decline steadily, whereas "subjective" forms have increased (Wilke & Reinemann, 2000; Wilke & Leidecker, 2010).

There are almost no differences with regard to the authors of the campaign articles. In all three kinds of election, the articles were written in 76 to 88 per cent of cases by the newspapers' own journalists. The political significance of the reported events renders them the exclusive preserve of the editorial staff. Material acquired from other sources such as news agencies only plays a secondary role, and this can also be said even for national and supranational elections, where own coverage has increased over the years (Wilke & Reinemann, 2005, p. 165; Wilke et al., 2011, p. 165).

Personalization

Modern election campaigns are usually characterized by a high degree of personalization. This means that certain individuals are at the centre of media coverage, and increasingly become the means of interpretation of complex issues as well as an anchor for evaluations (Holtz-Bacha, 2003, p. 20). In particular, top candidates, who in the case of regional elections run for the office of prime minister of the provincial government, or chancellor in the case of national elections, and of course representatives of the European government in supranational elections, are at the centre of media coverage. Since the representatives of the European Parliament — as opposed to the candidates of the office of German chancellor on the national level and prime minister of the local government on a regional level — do not run for a certain function or office, usually the candidates are less high-profile, if not being a party member "from the reserve" (Fahrenholz, 2009). In contrast, in the course of Bundestag elections or regional parliamentary elections — because of the significance of the office in question — candidates who can boast a high profile will usually be chosen to run (Wilke et al., 2011). Thus, it is quite likely that election coverage on the regional and national level is more personalized than that of elections on the supranational level. Between the national and regional campaign coverage there is yet another gradation of personalization to be expected, since the reach of governmental power spreads over the entire nation in the case of the chancellor (on the national level), while it only extends to the population of a state in the case of the prime minister of local government (at the regional level).

The degree to which campaign coverage has been personalized was included in our study as the number of items which directly relate to at least one top candidate. Although this was one of the necessary criteria for inclusion in the content analysis of the newspaper articles, the press coverage shows differing values (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Reference to the candidates (in %)

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009 and 192 articles of the coverage of the supra-national (European) Parliament election 2009.

As a matter of fact, and as already suspected, the share of items which relate to a top candidate indicates that press coverage of the European elections is less personalized or less focused on candidates than that of the national Bundestag election or the regional elections. Whereas about one-third of articles on the European elections bear reference to one of the top candidates, the coverage of the Bundestag election takes first place in this category, with three-quarters of the articles referring to a top candidate. Between these extremes lies the share of articles relating to a top candidate in the regional elections (RLP: 56 per cent, BW: 46 per cent). The remarkable difference in the share of articles referring to a top candidate may be attributed to the fact that the campaign in Baden-Württemberg in 2011 was heavily dominated by controversial issues (such as environmental and infrastructural policy).

Visualization

Another indicator for personalized campaign coverage can be found in the number of images displaying top candidates published within the four weeks prior to the elections. A trend towards more visualized campaign coverage in television (Schulz & Zeh, 2006) as well as in the daily press (Wilke, 2011) has been observed in the last few years. "Altogether, the political leadership is featured […] in images in television and print more frequently" (Maurer & Reinemann, 2006, p. 128). This increasing visualization conveys the impression of a lively and personal campaign to the voters (Schulz & Zeh, 2006, p. 288). In accordance with the aforementioned higher significance

attributed to candidates in national and regional elections as opposed to European elections it was to be expected that this would also become visible in the campaign coverage of national and regional elections, meaning that candidates would be seen more often than in news items on the supranational European elections (Figure 5).
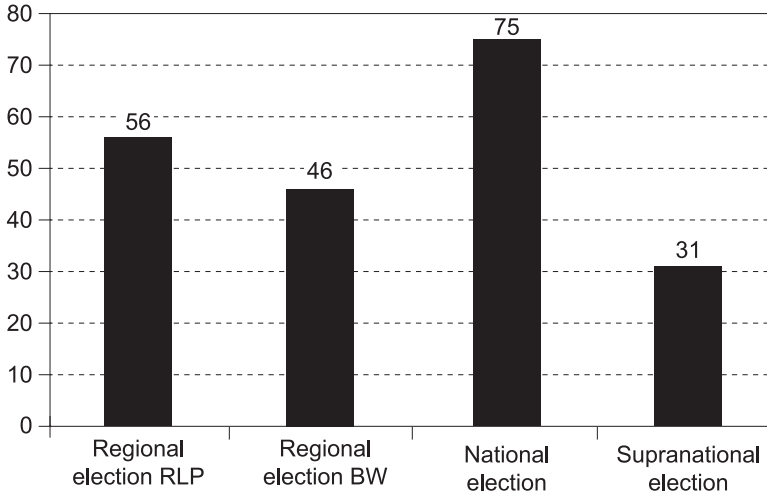

Figure 5. Pictures of the candidates

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009 and 192 articles of the coverage of the supranational (European) Parliament election 2009.

At first sight, Figure 5 seems to indicate that the differences in intensity of campaign coverage also become visible when it comes to visualization. The highest number of images was published in relation to the Bundestag election, the lowest with regard to the European elections. In this case as well, the regional elections are to be placed somewhere in the middle. This impression must be corrected, however, when we take into consideration the different volume of overall coverage and the number of images per article. Then, the campaign coverage of the regional election in Rhineland-Palatinate appears to be the most visualized. About every fourth item on this regional election contains one image in which at least one top candidate can be seen (RLP: 0.25 images per item). In comparison, only about every eighth article in the four newspapers four weeks before the elections featured pictures of the candidates in Baden-Württemberg (BW: 0.13 images per contribution). This is even fewer pictures than the newspapers published of EP candidates four weeks prior to election day, namely 0.18 pictures per article (which means that every fifth article contains one image of the candidates). The fact that most pictures were published which refer to the regional election in Rhineland-Palatinate could be explained by the combination of the type of regional newspaper, the greater "proximity" of the

candidates and the relatively high amount of articles that relate to the candidates. The fact that the items on the regional election in Baden-Württemberg were less illustrated has its cause in the large amount of short articles which ordinarily have no space for pictures.

Authenticity

The more often articles refer to the candidates who are running for office, the more likely it is that the articles will feature quotes. At the same time the press coverage will appear more authentic, depending on how many of the candidates' original messages — in their own words, not those of the journalist — it will feature. Because the coverage of national parliamentary elections is more focused on candidates than that for the other two elections, it is to be expected that their candidates will be quoted more often. Regional parliamentary elections should again fall somewhere in the middle.

In fact, the coverage of the Bundestag election shows the highest percentage of quotes by top candidates at 28 per cent, whereas the European elections coverage shows the lowest value (at 18 per cent of articles). Coverage on the regional parliamentary elections is situated between the coverage of national and supranational elections with values of 21 per cent (BW) and 24 per cent (RLP). The volume of the candidates' quotes (measured in lines) also corroborates this hierarchy (see Figure 6).
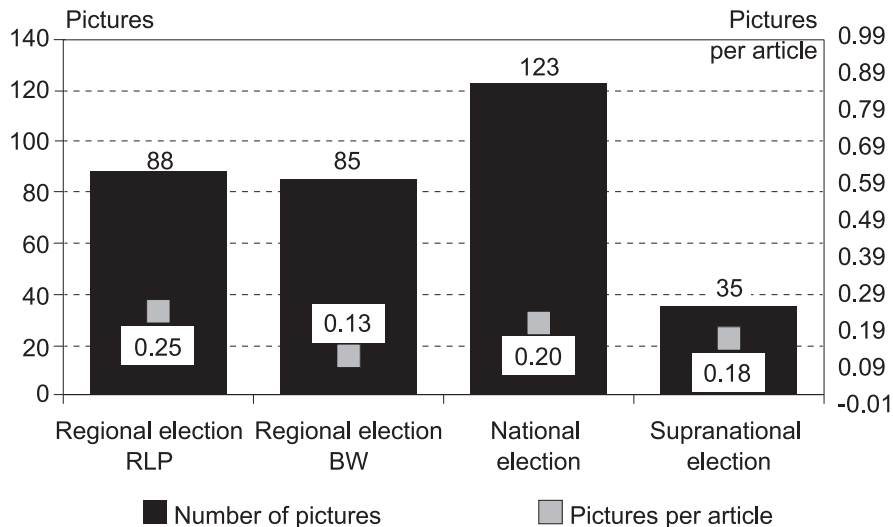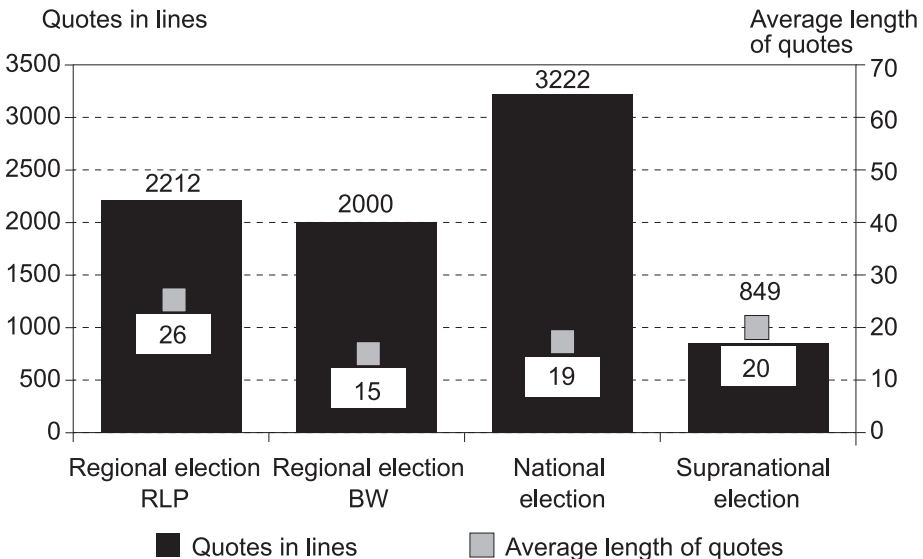

Figure 6. Quotes from candidates

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009 and 192 articles of the coverage of the supranational (European) Parliament election 2009.

The largest volume of candidate quotes can be found in coverage of the Bundestag election with a total of 3,222 lines. In second place are the articles covering the regional elections: the articles on the Rhineland-Palatinate election contain a total of 2,212 lines of quotes and those on the election in Baden-Württemberg 2,000 lines. The least quoted — in only 849 lines — are the EP candidates.

Since different numbers of articles have been published on the four elections mentioned above, the findings which have been presented so far are not relevant enough on their own. When we calculate the average length of candidate quotes (by respectively dividing the total length of quotes by the number of articles which feature quotes), it becomes clear that the EP candidates are not quoted the least, but rather comparable to the national election. The volume of quotes by the top candidates in the regional election in Baden-Württemberg is the smallest (with an average of only 15 lines). One striking fact is the length of quotes in the coverage of the regional election in Rhineland-Palatinate: here, the candidates are quoted most extensively with an average of 26 lines. These candidates thus had the greatest possibilities of having their statements conveyed to the readers in their own words. In this respect, the coverage of the regional election in Rhineland-Palatinate has the highest degree of "authenticity." How can this be explained? Figure 3 indicates that the proportion of other journalistic forms was relatively high in the case of the regional elections (RLP: 17 per cent; BW: 19 per cent). For the campaign coverage in Rhineland-Palatinate this can partly be explained with a relatively high number of portrayals (eight per cent) of and interviews (five per cent) with the candidates. These journalistic forms in particular usually contain statements by the candidates.

Candidate evaluations

Finally, we would like to examine what kind of image of the top candidates is conveyed in campaign coverage and how these were evaluated in the different campaigns (Figures 7 and 8). In this case we will limit the scope of the analysis to the regional elections and the Bundestag election, since no evaluations of the candidates in the European elections were coded (because of their limited presence).

As far as our definition is concerned, an article includes an evaluation if at least one candidate is attributed with or denied positive or negative characteristics. The bars in Figure 7 show the number of articles that include evaluations of the candidates (divided into incumbent and challenger). The regional election in Baden-Württemberg is an exception to this, given that here — as opposed to the other regional election and the Bundestag election — two challengers had a realistic chance of claiming the office of prime minister of local government.

All three campaigns have in common that, regardless of regional or national application, there is a so-called incumbent bonus in the coverage (Wilke & Reinemann, 2000, pp. 101–127). The articles evaluate the incumbent more frequently than the challenger, and without reference to the elections' rank order.

Figure 7. Intensity of candidate evaluation (number of articles)

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009.
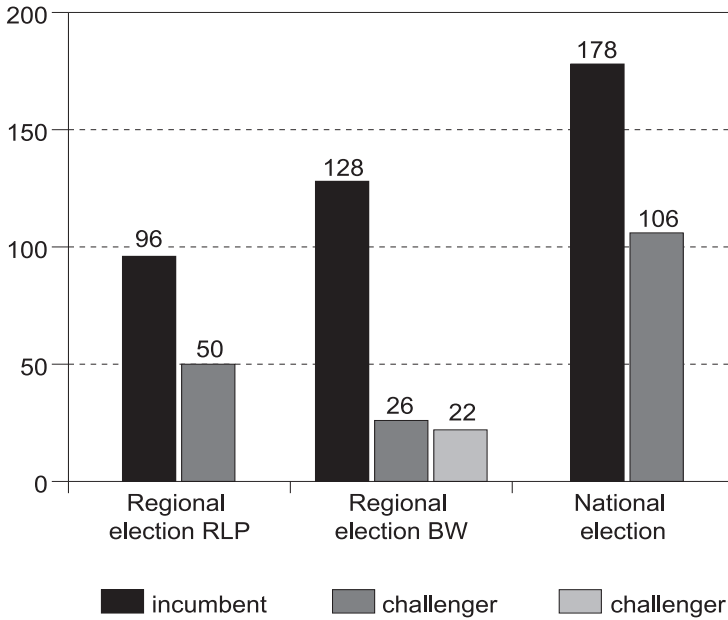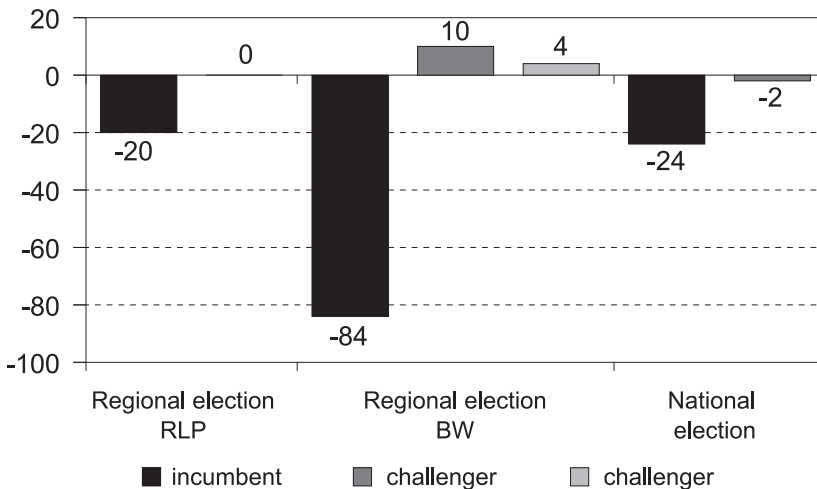

Figure 8. Candidate evaluation (positive minus negative articles)

Basis: 348 articles of regional election coverage in RLP 2011, 630 articles of regional election coverage in BW 2011, 604 articles of the coverage of national Parliament (Bundestag) election in 2009.

We were not only interested, however, in the number of evaluating articles but also in their tendency (positive or negative). Therefore the balance between the proportion of positive and negative articles about the candidates was calculated (see Figure 8).

Altogether it shows that the incumbents are evaluated more often, but at the same time more negatively than their challengers. This finding seems to be independent from the rank order of elections. The party identification of the candidates did not play a role in the evaluation. The incumbent in the 2011 regional election in Baden-Württemberg was rated very negatively. He was publically discussed in quite controversial terms since taking office in February 2010 because of his "polarizing demeanour." This even increased in the course of the campaign. In comparison, both his challengers were evaluated a lot more positively by the press.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of our paper we referred to a typology already established in political science, namely "first order" and "second order" elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), which was later adopted by communication science (de Vreese et al., 2007). Because of the stated differences in coverage of national and European elections, de Vreese et al. (referring to Reif and Schmitt) distinguish between first-rate coverage (national elections) and second-rate coverage (European elections). When the coverage of the German regional parliamentary elections is included, however, the differentiation between first- and second-rate coverage has to be amended, i.e. extended. Our findings show that European and regional election coverage may not be located at the same level. Rather, regional elections are located between the coverage of national and supranational elections for most of the examined indicators. Regional elections are covered more extensively (1) than European elections, but less extensively than the Bundestag elections. Both regional elections were covered more continuously (2) than the European elections, and the articles on the regional elections in the regional press were placed more prominently than those on the European elections (3). Furthermore, the top candidates in the European elections were mentioned less frequently (4), quoted less (5) and shown in fewer pictures than those in the regional elections (6). The top candidates were mentioned, quoted, and illustrated most frequently in the coverage of the Bundestag election (7). Given these findings, it seems reasonable to differentiate between three levels of election coverage, namely:
- first-rate coverage (of national elections)
- second-rate coverage (of regional elections)
- third-rate coverage (of European elections)

The three levels of the political systems in Germany on which elections take place (regional, national, supranational) thus significantly determine the respective campaign coverage. The Bundestag elections are the most important with regard

to the balance of power for the whole of Germany. The regional elections only determine the balance of power within one state, whose government only exercises limited power regarding the big picture. The European elections still appear to be of "tertiary importance" despite the fact that this is a gross underestimation of these elections (and the European level in general).

We identified some aspects of coverage, however, which are seemingly neither determined by the type of election nor by the level of the political system. There were no (or only minimal) differences between the various elections as far as journalistic forms and authors of articles were concerned. Furthermore, it became evident that in national as well as regional elections the incumbent was evaluated more frequently, but at the same time more negatively, than his/her challengers. These aspects appear to be "constants" of campaign coverage which are not influenced by the level of the political system at which the elections were held. Such constants are even superimposed by current developments in election campaigns: this was quite obvious, for example, in the very negative evaluation of the CDU's top candidate in the Baden-Württemberg election 2011.

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