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Policy Effects on Behaviour

Persuasion Effects in Electoral Campaigns – A Comparative Analysis of Household Panel Data

By Ursina Kuhn*

Abstract

This study looks at the campaign effects of national elections, using household panel surveys from Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland. As household panels collect the party preferences of the same individuals on an annual basis, we are able to study individual dynamics over the electoral cycle. This makes it easier to distinguish between activation and persuasion effects than studying electoral panels conducted during campaigns. Using random effects models, we find strong evidence for the activation and persuasion effects of campaigns. Furthermore, we find that citizens with a high level of political awareness are least likely to be (de)activated and persuaded, but that, only in Great Britain, political awareness interacts significantly with the electoral cycle.

JEL Classification: D72

1. Introduction

Numerous academics have demonstrated that campaigns and media coverage matter for elections. Most importantly, campaigns *activate existing predispositions*. Activation may mobilize citizens to vote or reinforce their voting intention. Moreover, activation may make citizens return to their latent party preference, if they have changed temporarily to another party. In contrast to this well-documented activation effect, academics disagree on whether, or how much, campaigns make voters change between parties. While some studies found evidence for *persuasion effects* (e.g. Alvarez, 1997; Johnston et al., 1992; Lodge et al., 1995; Holbrook, 1996; Shaw, 1999), others argue that campaigns steer the vote toward a result that can be foreseen in advance and claim that campaigns do not persuade voters to switch parties (e.g. Finkel, 1993; Gelman/King, 1993; Finkel/Schrott, 1995). However, recent studies on U.S. presiden-

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tial campaigns (Campbell, 2000; Hillygus/Jackman, 2003; Johnston et al., 2004; Fridkin et al., 2007; Huber/Arcenau, 2007; Franz/Ridout, 2010) provide empirical evidence of the persuasion effects of advertisement. Yet, there is hardly any evidence of the persuasion effects of electoral campaigns outside the USA and much about the relationship between individual characteristics and campaign effect remains to be explored.

In this paper, we look at campaign effects in Western Europe using household panel surveys, which so far have not been used to study campaign effects. In Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland, every year these panels ask the same individuals about their party preferences. Campaign effects can be captured through the time lapse between the date of the interview and the date of the national elections.

Although not specifically designed to study campaign effects, household panels offer a unique opportunity to fill research gaps. First, we can study individual dynamics over the electoral cycle, which is a barely explored research field (Wlezien/Erikson, 2002; Andersen et al., 2005). Second – as will be argued in more detail later – we are better able to distinguish between activation and persuasion than with electoral panel surveys conducted during a campaign. Third, we aim to contribute to the understanding of heterogeneity among citizens (Zaller, 1992; Sniderman et al., 1991; Page/Shapiro, 1992). Fourth, we take a comparative perspective by looking at elections in Great Britain, Germany and Switzerland which represent very different electoral and party systems. We cover several electoral cycles per country so that conclusions go beyond the context of a particular campaign. Previous studies on campaign effects have focused on single elections and to a great extent on the USA. Finally, panel conditioning effects should be lower in household panels than in electoral panels. Panel conditioning effects arise because electoral surveys increase the attention paid to politics and campaigns (see Bartels, 2000 and 2006 for panel conditioning effects). There are two reasons why these effects are likely to be weaker in household panels. First, the intervals between interviews are much longer so that it is less likely that the previous interview will affect survey responses. Second, household panels are not primarily electoral surveys. As the proportion of interview questions relating to politics is relatively low, panel conditioning for political questions is less likely (see also Hillygus/Jackman, 2003).

In this contribution, we are interested in whether campaigns activate and persuade voters. Furthermore, we briefly address heterogeneity among individuals regarding their levels of political awareness and predisposition strength. We refer to campaign effects as the sum of campaign activities from advertisement, media coverage or other information related to elections. We do not study specific campaign events or advertisements and assume that the intensity and influence of campaign activities increases leading up to elections.

2. Persuasion Effects in Electoral and Household Panels

Studies conducted by the Columbia school on U.S. Presidential Elections in the 1940s represent the starting point of systematic research on campaign effects (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Berelson et al., 1954). The authors surveyed the same individuals at different time points during the electoral campaign and found strong activation effects but very weak persuasion effects.

Electoral panels are still a popular instrument for studying campaign effects (e.g. Finkel, 1993; Bartels, 2006; Lachat, 2007). Normally, the first wave takes place at the onset of the campaign and the last wave is carried out after elections. Activation occurs if citizens change their voting intention to be in line with predispositions. Persuasion occurs if changes are not in line with predispositions. The measurement of predispositions is, thus, crucial for distinguishing between activation and persuasion. Gelman/King (1993) argued that predispositions cannot be measured reliably before the campaign because they are not activated at this point. Thus if we refer to predispositions measured before the main phase of the campaign, we are overestimating persuasion as the activation of predispositions results in a great many changes. As a consequence, electoral panels cannot distinguish well between activation and persuasion because they measure predispositions in their first wave.

Household panel studies offer an alternative approach which allows a better distinction between activation and persuasion as we can measure predispositions at the last election instead of at the start of the campaign. The main difference is that predispositions are more likely to be activated during the last election than at the onset of the campaign.

3. Hypotheses

We are interested in whether the sum of campaign related information, which includes advertisement, communication and media coverage, makes citizens change between parties. The closer elections are, the more intense and frequent the flow of such information is. If campaigns have persuasion effects, changes between parties should become more frequent as elections draw nearer. If campaigns have activation effects, activation should become more frequent and deactivation less frequent as elections draw nearer.

To understand campaign effects we also need to determine whether campaigns affect different people differently. Key moderators of opinion change are political awareness and predisposition strength. Particularly for political awareness, there are many different theoretical approaches. Not only theoretical expectations but also empirical results have so far remained ambiguous. It seems, however, that the highly aware are least affected by new information as

they are more critical or already have information stored in their memory meaning that new input has a smaller impact. Strong predispositions should stabilize party preferences which means that deactivation and persuasion should be less likely for strong identifiers.

Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland have quite different electoral and party systems. Great Britain has a majoritarian electoral system with two dominant parties. Germany and Switzerland have proportional electoral systems with many parties, particularly in Switzerland. Switzerland is further characterized by direct democracy, strong federalism and no clear distinction between government and opposition parties as the the four largest parties form a coalition government. Due to these different institutional settings and the coverage of several electoral cycles in each country, results point to campaign effects beyond a specific election.

4. Data and Model Specification

We use household panel data from Germany (SOEP, since 1984, excluding the high-income sample), Great Britain (BHPS, since 1991, without Northern Ireland sample) and Switzerland (SHP, since 1999) to test for campaign effects. The question wording for party preference varies between the three panels which complicates the comparison of results. In Germany, respondents are asked about their party identification and in Switzerland about their voting intention. In Great Britain, respondents are first asked about their party identification. Non-identifiers are then asked about their voting intention.¹ Here, we use party preference as an umbrella term encompassing both party identification and voting intention.

In our model, we test whether campaigns affect the probability of being persuaded or activated. Persuasion and activation refer to transitions in party preference since the last election. If the party preference has changed to another party since the last election, a persuasion has occurred. If respondents have changed between having and not having a party preference, an activation or deactivation has occurred.

The dependent variable in the model is different transitions in party preferences (cf. table 1). Respondents without a party preference at the last election have been excluded from the analysis in order to ensure that each individual has positive probabilities for each transition. Otherwise, respondents who did not have a party preference at the last election would have a probability of 0 of changing between parties. This restriction implies that we do not observe activation but rather deactivation in the data. To measure the party preference at

¹ In 1992, actual voting choice in the elections was asked instead.

the last election, we use the preference reported within 365 days of the election date. Additionally, we include only citizens above 18 years of age. Table 1 shows that persuasion is least likely in Germany due to the different question wording. More individuals report a voting intention than a party identification and respondents with a party identification tend to be more stable than those without.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Dependent Variable

Transition	Last election	Current obs.	CH	DE	GB
	No preference		excluded	excluded	excluded
Reinforcement (1)	Party preference	Same party	61 %	65 %	72 %
Deactivation (2)	Party preference	No party	20 %	25 %	12 %
Persuasion (3)	Party preference	Other party	19 %	10 %	16 %
N observations			23,985	112,409	84,869
N individuals			6,190	17,323	8,726

Source: SHP, SOEP, BHPS.

The main explanatory variable, *closeness to elections*, is measured through the time lapse in days between the interview date and the closest national election.² The variable has been divided by 365 and multiplied by -1 to ease the interpretation of regression coefficients. We estimate campaign effects using random effects models which take account of both the variance within and between individuals and control for the clustering of the data. Separate regression coefficients for each country are estimated for deactivation and persuasion using the gllamm software by Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal. Reinforcement is the reference category. The reported results are unweighted, but weighting does not affect the conclusions.

We add several variables to the model: interest in politics as an indicator for political awareness, educational level and a time trend. Additionally, we control for attrition effects by including the actual number of interviews per person relative to the maximum number of interviews possible for this person. The latter is determined by age and the year of entry into the panel. Political interest is measured at four ordinal levels. To assess the effect of political awareness correctly, it is important to control for predisposition strength (see e.g., Zaller, 1992, Chong and Drukman, 2007, Lachat, 2007). Due to potential endogeneity problems, we do this in second model. Predisposition strength has been measu-

² In Germany and Switzerland, regional elections are also relevant but will not be considered further. In Switzerland, models reveal a significant impact of cantonal electoral campaigns on the volatility of voting intentions but the effect is smaller than for national elections.

red by the strength of party identification at the last observation (Germany and Great Britain) or a dummy variable indicating whether a respondent places himself on either side of a left-right axis or not (Switzerland). In a third model, we test for interactions between closeness to elections and political interest. Here we show estimates for the first model only but briefly comment on the results of the others.³

5. Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the regression coefficients for Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland.

Table 2
**Deactivation and Persuasion Effects in Germany,
Switzerland and Great Britain**

	Germany		Switzerland		Great Britain	
	Activation b	Persuasion b	Activation b	Persuasion b	Activation b	Persuasion b
Closeness to election	-0.11*** (-6.4)	0.27*** (11.3)	-0.15*** (-3.9)	0.25*** (6.8)	-0.08*** (-4.0)	0.12*** (7.1)
Interest in politics: low	-0.64*** (-14.7)	-0.13 (-1.8)	-0.50*** (-6.2)	-0.11 (-1.4)	-0.73*** (-17.4)	-0.27*** (-6.8)
Interest in politics: high	-1.23*** (-26.3)	-0.14 (-1.9)	-0.73*** (-7.7)	-0.33*** (-3.6)	-1.32*** (-28.0)	-0.50*** (-10.1)
Interest in politics: very high	-1.66*** (-28.3)	-0.23** (-2.8)	-0.96*** (-11.4)	-0.46*** (-5.2)	-1.75*** (-20.3)	-0.53*** (-7.6)
Educational level: Intermediate	-0.03 (-0.4)	0.40*** (8.5)	-0.46*** (-3.6)	-0.09 (-0.8)	0.14** (3.0)	0.12** (2.8)
Educational level: high	-0.49*** (-11.1)	0.18** (3.0)	-0.76*** (-5.2)	0.06 (0.4)	0.16** (2.2)	0.36*** (4.8)
Number of waves of participation	-0.20** (-2.7)	-0.08 (-0.9)	-0.50** (-2.9)	-0.53** (-3.4)	-0.68*** (-5.4)	-0.59*** (-4.4)
Year	0.03*** (13.3)	-0.05*** (-21.6)	-0.05*** (-5.1)	0.07*** (8.1)	0.07*** (22.3)	-0.02*** (-5.4)
Constant	-0.24** (-3.4)	-0.97*** (-9.5)	-0.00 (1.0)	-1.05** (-5.9)	-1.78*** (-14.2)	-1.34*** (-8.8)

Note: Multinomial random effect model; Regression coefficients * 95%; ** 99%; *** 99.9%; T-statistics in parenthesis.

Source: SHP, SOEP, BHPS.

In line with previous research (e.g. Gelman/King, 1993; Andersen et al., 2005; Selb et al., 2009) there is clear evidence for activation effects. In each

³ Results and details of all models are available from the author, upon request.

country, the closeness to elections makes deactivation less likely which implies that elections activate preferences. There is also strong evidence for persuasion effects: the closer elections are, the more changes between parties are observed. In each country, persuasion effects are stronger than activation effects.

The effect of political awareness, measured by political interest, is consistent across the countries. The more interested respondents are, the less likely they are to be deactivated or to change their preference. However, the effect is much stronger for deactivation than for persuasion. There are no signs for non-linear effects, as could be expected according to Zaller's RAS model (Zaller, 1992). The negative impact of political awareness remains significant once predisposition strength is controlled for (results not shown). However, predisposition strength has a very strong impact on the stability of party preferences, which is not surprising in view of previous research. The stronger the identification is, the more stable the preferences.

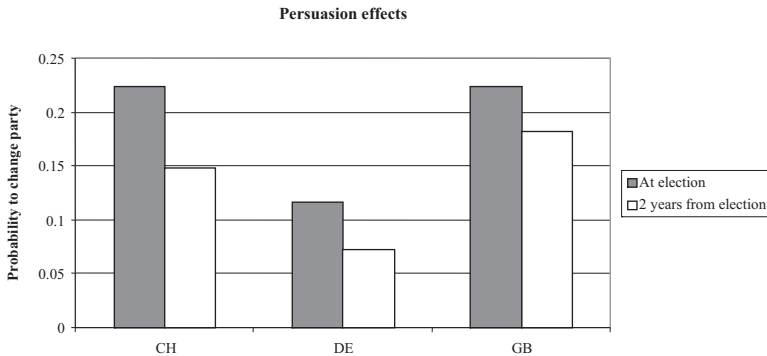
There is a striking difference in the time trend between Switzerland, on the one hand, and Germany and Great Britain, on the other. While deactivation has become more frequent over time in Germany and Great Britain, there has been a decrease in Switzerland since 1999. This difference may be related to trends in electoral turnout which has increased in Switzerland since 1995, while turnout rates are decreasing in most other West European democracies. Also for persuasion, the effect in Switzerland points to a different direction than in Germany and Great Britain. The increasing volatility in Switzerland corresponds, most probably, to aggregate changes in party strength which have occurred since 1999, mostly due to the rise of the Swiss People's Party (SVP).

Finally, the number of waves of participation relative to the maximum number of waves that a respondent could have participated in is negative and significant in all but one of the cases. This implies that more volatile respondents are more likely to drop out of the sample.

The predicted probabilities for persuasion, assuming individual random effects of 0, are shown in Figure 1.⁴ Because of the different question wordings absolute values cannot be compared directly between countries.

Finally, we tested whether the interaction between the closeness to elections and political awareness is significant as not all citizens may react to campaigns in the same way (results not shown). For Germany and Switzerland, these interaction terms are not significant. The higher volatility of the citizens with low levels of awareness does not depend on the closeness to elections. In Great Britain, however, the interaction is significant. Citizens with low levels of political awareness react most strongly to the closeness to elections and, therefore,

⁴ Predicted probabilities refer to individuals with low interest in politics, intermediate educational level and mean number of interviews and year of data collection.



Source: SHP, SOEP, BHPS.

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities for persuasion in CH, DE, GB

to electoral campaigns. For activation, the difference is not significant. Further research would be needed to understand these differences.

6. Conclusion

The similarity between the results from Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland with respect to persuasion is remarkable in various respects. First, the differences in the political systems do not seem to influence the impact of electoral campaigns. Second, differences in question wordings also do not affect results regarding the campaign effect. This finding challenges the traditional understanding of party identification as being less influenced by short-term factors than voting behavior. Third, the strong evidence of persuasion may come as a surprise considering that academics still disagree as to whether or not campaigns have the power to persuade voters. However, our results are in line with recent results on U.S. Presidential Elections which also found evidence of persuasion effects (Hillygus/Jackman, 2003; Johnston et al., 2004; Fridkin et al., 2007; Huber/Arceneaux, 2007; Franz/Ridout, 2010; Wlezien/Erikson, 2002).

Although this study found that campaigns persuade voters, it cannot say how and in which direction. The measure used to capture campaign effect is very general and cannot be connected to any specific campaign activities and campaign events. The results rather suggest a general effect of electoral campaigns, irrespective of the specific country or election. The contribution that household panels can make to research on campaigns should be seen as a complement to conventional research designs using electoral panels, rolling cross sections or experimental data. The use of household panels has clearly shown that electoral campaigns not only activate predispositions but also persuade voters.

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