Extended Abstract

Education policy in the televised debate before the state election 2011 in Baden-Württemberg: Content, perception and effects

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We analyze the discussion about education policy in the televised debate between prime minister Stefan Mappus (CDU) and Nils Schmid (SPD) before the state election 2011 in Baden-Württemberg. We answer three research questions:

1) Which aspects of educational policy were discussed in the debate, did the candidates emphasize certain aspects, and did the candidates use certain rhetorical strategies?
2) How did the viewers evaluate the candidates’ educational policy statements during the debate?
3) Which direct and indirect effects did the discussion about education policy have on the viewers’ post-debate evaluations?

Televised debates in the run-up to state elections

Televised debates among candidates for the head of government are important events in modern election campaigns. Previous studies in Germany have analyzed televised debates between candidates for the position of chancellor (Faas & J. Maier, 2011; Maurer, Reinemann, J. Maier, & M. Maier, 2007). Televised debates reach a large part of the electorate (Zubayr, Geese, & Gerhard, 2009), can influence voters’ political ideas and opinions and consequently can alter election results – at least in close elections (J. Maier & Faas, 2011). Although televised debates are long-established in election campaigns on the state level, there have been no empirical investigations of their effects. We see at least three reasons to change that: Firstly, in state elections the top candidates of the parties have a strong impact on voter decision making (Völkl, 2009). Secondly, the candidates in state elections are relatively unknown, and therefore media effects are more likely and tend to be stronger in comparison to chancellor debates (Brettschneider, 2005). Thirdly, by investigating contents, perceptions and effects of those “miniature campaigns” (J. Maier & Faas, 2013, p. 76), researchers are able to draw further conclusions about state election campaigns in general, which are widely ignored in political communication research.

Educational policy as a major political issue for state level politics

In the German federal system, the 16 states are almost solely responsible for education policy. Education policy is therefore known as the heart of state politics (Hepp, 2011, p. 166). In public discussions particular attention is paid to school
The discussion about school policy is characterized by the confrontation of two different concepts: The conservative / liberal camp (CDU and FDP) traditionally supports a three-tier school system which streams pupils by ability into three different types of secondary schools. The left camp (SPD and B90/Die Grünen) supports a concept focusing on integrated comprehensive schools in which children study together over a longer period of time (Hepp, 2011). In the eyes of the voters, education policy is one of the most important issues at the state level. This was also true in the run-up to the state election in Baden-Württemberg (Roth, 2012) – despite the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima, which grabbed a lot of media attention in the week before the televised debate.

Method

We present results of an quasi-experimental study (n = 200, quota sample by age, sex, education level, political interest and party identification) conducted in two cities in Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart and Ravensburg). The participants were invited to watch the televised debate at the universities. The participants’ evaluations of the candidates during the debate were recorded by real-time-response-measurement (RTR) (J. Maier, M. Maier, Maurer, Reinemann, & Meyer, 2009). In addition the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire before and after the debate. A quantitative content analysis of the debate was conducted. For our analyses, only the category relational strategy (acclaim, attack, defense; Benoit, 2007) is relevant. Intercoder reliability was sufficient: Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .83$ (two coders, Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). This design has proved itself as reliable in previous studies of televised debates. It enables researchers to link participants’ evaluations before, during and after the debate at the individual level as well as with specific statements of the candidates during the debate (Maurer & Reinemann, 2003; Reinemann & Maurer, 2007; Faas, J. Maier, M. Maier, & Brettschneider, 2009).

Results

Research Question 1: The discussions about different plans for the schools were central to the education policy part of the debate. Schmid supported the idea of integrated comprehensive schools in which children study together over a longer period of time, whereas Mappus praised and defended the existing three-tier school system. Equally extensive were Mappus’ attacks on the plans of Schmid, saying that his reform would “destroy” the existing school system. Besides, there were shorter discussions about pre-school education and tuition fees for university students.

Research Question 2: The evaluations of the two candidates during the debate were mainly affected by voting intention. In all three parts about educational policy the participants evaluated their candidate more positively than the opponent. But there were differences between the three educational topics in the strength of this effect, and in the evaluation of the candidates by the undecided participants. During the discussion of pre-school education and university tuition, Schmid held an advantage over Mappus comparing the evaluations of their re-
spective supporters. During the discussion of schools, Mappus held an advantage comparing the evaluations of the respective supporters as well as the undecided recipients.

Research Question 3: After the debate, Mappus was attributed a greater competence in educational issues by his own supporters, the undecided participants and even by the supporters of B90/Die Grünen. Schmid’s competence rating changed in dependence of the participants’ party identification: supporters of the SPD evaluated him somewhat more competent, whereas the supporters of Mappus rated him somewhat less competent. We conclude that Mappus not only convinced many participants of his own competence. His attacks on the proposed reforms of the opposition also lead to a worse evaluation of Schmid’s competence by some participants. In order to explain these changes, we link the educational competence evaluation before and after the debate and the RTR ratings of the candidates during the three educational policy parts of the debate. Controlling for voting intention and formal education, a path analysis reveals that only the RTR ratings of the discussion about school systems contribute to the explanation of the competence evaluations after the debate. Beside the expected effects of voting intention and competence evaluations before the debate, we can also identify an impact of the participants’ formal education: viewers with Abitur were more likely to evaluate Mappus better than Schmid. We also find a polarizing effect: Before the debate, the competence ratings of the candidates were only weakly correlated. After the debate, there was a strong negative correlation: The better a participant rated the education policy competence of one candidate, the worse he or she rated the competence of the other candidate.

Finally, the debate also had an impact on the viewers’ perceived relevance of education policy. After the debate more viewers mentioned education policy as one of the most important problems in Baden-Württemberg (agenda-setting effect). The evaluation of Mappus’ education policy competence became more important for his overall evaluation after the debate (priming effect).

Discussion

Concerning election campaigns at the state level, our results indicate the great importance of educational issues. Even in a televised debate, that took place only five days after the nuclear catastrophe on Fukushima and therefore against a background of a public and media agenda which was dominated by discussions about nuclear policy, the parts of the debate on education policy – and especially the one on school policy – revealed to be of utmost importance. Education policy became more important for the viewers, and the evaluation of the candidates’ competences changed significantly. Mappus, who took a traditionally conservative stance on the issues by defending the existing three-tier school system and attacking any reforms, profited from these discussions. Most likely, education policy will be an important issue in future public discussions at the state level, and especially in election campaigns. Future research has to address the question whether the opponents of major reforms have an advantage in education policy discussions, as indicated by our results.
Concerning the broader research area of debate effects, our results highlight the importance of priming effects which can be triggered by small parts of the debates. We show that not only the more general issue of education policy became more important. Also within this political field a concentration on the specific dispute about school systems can be observed. The findings indicate that a few statements of the candidates can influence the outcome of a debate. It seems likely that these effects can be more easily triggered by statements on positions that the viewers already agree with but are not aware of as an important political controversy between the candidates. In our example, Mappus suggested that Schmid’s reforms would quite radically change a school system which was regarded highly by most viewers. As a consequence of this narrowed issue definition of educational policy, Schmid was rated as less competent in this field. On the contrary, Mappus enhanced his ratings. We argue that these changes are for the most part a priming effect within the broader field of educational policy, and not so much a persuasive effect. Building on this case study, we invite more research on the relation of priming and persuasive effects of televised debates both between distinct dimensions of perceived candidate qualities and within evaluations of a specific policy competence.

References


