The German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES)

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Introduction

The German Longitudinal Election Study GLES is one of the largest projects of contemporary German political science, and an important pillar of an emerging architecture of large-scale research infrastructures in the German social sciences (Kämper and Nießen 2008). Focusing on the next three federal elections (due in 2009, 2013 and 2017), it will observe and analyze how today’s mobile electorate adapts to changing constellations of electoral politics in Germany which is characterized by a hitherto unknown degree of complexity. Using state-of-the-art methodologies, the project aims to generate and analyze a comprehensive, complex, and integrated data base that links cross-sectional with longitudinal data, both short-term and long-term. It will combine surveys about voting behavior with key dimensions of the context within which votes are cast, by means of analyses of media, candidates, and campaigns, and it will span several elections, covering both campaign periods and the time in-between elections. All data generated by this hitherto most comprehensive program of German electoral research will be treated as a public good and made immediately accessible to all interested social scientists worldwide. On the long run the GLES is to be transformed into the GES, an institutionalized German National Election Study. This paper will document the GLES and its aims, first discussing the background and developments which led to its creation and specific features, and then describing its basic design and its components as well as its governance arrangements in detail.

Developments Leading to the GLES

The GLES (cf. Rattinger et al. 2008) will be the largest election study ever undertaken in Germany by far. Its creation as such, but also the specifics of its design can be understood as reflections of a number of recent developments within international electoral sociology (cf. Schmitt-Beck 2009).

Recent Developments in International Electoral Research

(i) Traditionally, election studies have by and large been guided by a small set of related questions: Who votes, and for what reasons? If so, which candidates and/or parties are chosen, and, again, for what reasons? Typically, these questions were focused at particular national elections. Representative surveys of voters (often cross-sections, sometimes short-time panels) were the method of choice to answer these questions. In Germany this kind of methodological approach has dominated electoral research for the past decades, with the remarkable exception of the seminal election study of 1961 which was the first academic election study ever undertaken in Germany. This project is famous to the present day not only because of its pioneering role within German political sociology, but also for its sophisticated, multi-faceted research design. It was a highly ambitious, complex project which not only included several national, regional and local voters surveys, but also expert interviews with political elites, leading journalists, and interest group representatives as well as content analyses of newspa-
pers and TV newscasts. Up until the present day this study sets standards for the discipline (Scheuch and Wildenmann 1965; Scheuch 2000). However, after this innovative and original study the same kind of orthodoxy became prevalent in German electoral research that also has been characterizing electoral research in many other countries. Most subsequent election studies were restricted to large voter surveys, many of them only cross-sectional, some supplemented with short-term panel components, in more recent years also with long-term panels, spanning several elections, and occasionally with a media content analysis (for overviews cf. Schmitt 2000; Gabriel and Neller 2000; Niedermayer 2001).

In recent election projects from several countries, this rather narrow frame of questioning and collecting data has given way to a broader perspective that seeks to understand elections as part of broader processes of political representation, including multi-fold and dynamic interactions between citizens and office-holders as well as candidates for political office, with political parties and the mass media functioning as mediating agencies. Along with this came a pronounced interest in the dynamics of the communicative processes taking place over time between citizens on the one hand, and parties and their candidates on the other, implying a move from cross-sectional to longitudinal study designs (Romer et al. 2006), and the necessity to go far beyond mere voter surveys in data collection (e.g., by adding candidate surveys, party campaign studies, and media content analyses). Moreover, electoral studies recently have begun to broaden their scope beyond the narrow focus on election periods themselves, and are coming to see inter-election periods as similarly important for election outcomes (Güllner et al. 2005), again increasing data requirements as need arises to collect data not only during the few weeks of the 'hot' campaigns immediately preceding elections, but also at more or less dense intervals during entire electoral cycles. In addition to this, election studies also start taking account of the multi-level characteristics of many political systems, especially federal ones, by implementing election surveys on different levels of government. As electors' political behavior becomes individualized and increasingly volatile, it seems clear that ideal designs to study contemporary elections need to include specific components for capturing the short-term dynamics immediately preceding elections, on the one hand, and for tracking the long-term changes that take place over whole electoral cycles, on the other. Ideally, it should also be possible to compare short-term campaign dynamics on the long run, across several elections.

(ii) Closely connected to this is a trend of electoral studies becoming less 'sociological' and more 'political'. Traditionally, election studies tended to see individual voters and their attributes as the sole key to understanding the outcomes of elections – as if these were taking place in a political vacuum. Recent studies, in contrast, try to explore how elections can be better understood by taking into account the institutional and situational political contexts within which they take place (including the behavior of parties, candidates, the media, and other actors). Naturally, such a perspective requires to direct attention beyond individual elections, by comparing various elections in both cross-national and longitudinal perspective. Hence, elections themselves become units of observation in complex multi-level research designs (Thomassen 2005). Obviously, such studies are far more demanding than the traditional ones
in terms of data requirements. Although older than general participation studies, electoral studies lag behind this field with regard to internationally comparative projects – for obvious reasons. National elections are in many respects idiosyncratic affairs (beginning with their dates), and studying them in internationally comparative perspective poses serious challenges in terms of study designs and instrumentation. Yet, recent years have seen significant steps towards successfully dealing with these problems (Kaase 2000). One is the 'Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)' – a collaborative program of research among election study teams from several dozen countries around the world (including Germany) which all include a common module of survey questions in their own post-election studies which are further enriched with system-specific macro variables to allow for multi-level analyses, studying interactions between system characteristics and individual behavior at elections (http://www.umich.edu/~cses/).

(iii) Another important trend, with both theoretical and methodological ramifications, is the attention that theories and concepts of cognitive psychology increasingly find among electoral researchers. The traditional arsenal of theoretical tools the discipline successfully worked with for decades had been borrowed from sociology, economics, and 1950s psychological field theory. During the past decade, applications of modern models of information processing and judgment have greatly deepened scholarly understanding of the mechanisms underlying voting decisions (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Neuman et al. 2007) – a development that has yet fully to reach German electoral research. Connected to this is an important methodological impetus leading to a new emphasis on experimental methods, including experiments embedded in representative voter surveys which have been made possible by the recent progress in computerized interviewing, including online interview techniques.

(iv) Yet another trend that has been important for the creation of the GLES is a clearly strengthening interest within the professional community to move beyond single election projects and engage in establishing permanent, integrated data infrastructures for electoral research. More and more countries are institutionalizing National Election Studies as part of their social science data infrastructure, in the sense expressed in the American National Election Study's statement of mission: 'The American National Election Studies (ANES) produces high quality data on voting, public opinion, and political participation to serve the research needs of social scientists, teachers, students, policy makers and journalists who want to better understand the theoretical and empirical foundations of national election outcomes. Central to this mission is the active involvement of the ANES research community in all phases of the project.' (http://www.electionstudies.org/) While the United States were the first country to establish a National Election Study, there are also a good number of other countries, such as Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and most Scandinavian countries where since many years National Election Studies have been enjoying a relative secure status as institutionalized parts of social science research infrastructures (Thomassen 1990; Katz and Warshel 2001; Franklin and Wlezien 2002). In other countries, like Austria, researchers have recently made substantial progress in moving towards the establishment of similar projects for collecting election-related data.
In the same regard, it also deserves mention that a multi-national team has recently been awarded funding under the EU 7th Framework Programme to carry out, at the occasion of the 2009 elections to the European parliament, a pilot study for the creation of an extensive European infrastructure for research into citizenship, political participation, and electoral democracy in the EU (http://www.piredeu.eu/). Leading the tradition of European Election Studies (EES) which began at the first election to the European parliament in 1979 to new frontiers, this infrastructure will provide a comprehensive empirical database regarding voters, candidates for election to the European Parliament, media coverage of EP elections, party manifestos issued in connection with these elections, and contextual data relevant to these elections. Moving far beyond an exclusive emphasis on surveying voters, this project also impressively illustrates the trend towards broadening the scope of election studies towards dynamic studies of political representation mentioned above. Importantly, these new infrastructures are not intended to serve exclusively the data requirements of scientists specializing in electoral research, but to address – by appropriate means of data dissemination – also the information needs of a more general public, ranging from political actors (MPs, government agencies, parties, organized interests, etc.) over journalists to members of civil society.

Electoral Research in Germany

During the past decades German electoral research has achieved a high and internationally respected professional standard (Thomassen 1994; Klein et al. 2000; Falter and Schoen 2005). Within German political science, it is certainly one of the theoretically and methodologically best developed sub-disciplines. However, in contrast to many other countries in Germany there is so far no insitutionalized National Election Study that at each election reliably produces high quality data as a public good – without doubt a glaring gap in the otherwise very well developed German social science research infrastructure (KVI 2001: 66; Niedermayer 2001: 33; Kaase and Klingemann 1994: 351-6; Kaase 2000: 32-4; Schmitt 2000; Gabriel and Keil 2005: 635-6). To be sure, at all national parliamentary elections since the first one in 1949 representative voter surveys have been carried out and for each election at least one such survey is nowadays accessible to scientists for purposes of secondary analysis through the GESIS data archive (cf. Mochmann and Zenk-Möltgen 2000; KVI 2001: 110-8; Niedermayer 2001: 24-34). As mentioned above, since 1961 such studies have been carried out under the auspices of academic institutions (albeit up until the 1980s often in cooperation with research institutes from the private sector); all previous election studies were conducted by commercial institutes. All of these studies were organized as stand-alone projects, directed by varying individuals or groups of researchers who – in line with the ‘proprietary’model of research organization (Dunleavy 1990) – exercised full control over their research program. Usually, they were (co-)funded as ad hoc projects by the German National Science Foundation DFG or other funding agencies (cf. Mochmann and Zenk-Möltgen 2000; KVI 2001: 110-8; Niedermayer 2001: 24-34). In several respects a situation such as this entails severe disadvantages for political research which may considerably hamper its scientific progress:
At each parliamentary election anew, to realize an election study is precarious, and there are no guarantees that there will be one at all. In Germany, all depended on whether one or more researchers or research teams invested the time and effort to apply for funding with the German NSF (DFG) or other funding agencies, and submitted proposals of sufficient quality. Unlike countries like France, in Germany this unfortunate constellation did not lead to a lack of studies at particular elections. But at the 2005 election, due to its unusual circumstances as an early-called election, there was a substantial risk that no election study could be realized. A recent discussion of the state of election research in various countries adequately described the German situation as "uncoordinated competition with no pre-set budget limit and, critically, no pre-set floor. [...] In principle, there could be more than one 'national' study – or none at all." (Johnston and Blais 2007: 10)

If responsibility for election studies is changing from election to election, and depends on individuals' decision to apply for funding, there is no guarantee that studies will always meet the same – and the highest – methodological standards. As there is no institutionalized system of methodological monitoring outside of the research funding agencies' referee systems studies may – and in fact do – differ substantially with regard to methodological details that are to be considered crucial in order to maintain the various studies comparability. Moreover, as there are optimal, but also second-best (or worse) methodological options, design diversity may also entail an uneven quality of studies.

The lack of continuity and decentrality that is a consequence of this uncertain and shifting basis impedes the continuous observation of political attitudes and behavior, as on the long run there is no continuity in instruments. In Germany, a tendency towards "idiosyncratic study designs" (Schmitt 2000: 533) was noted. In part, this has been due to a lack of coordination, but in part it has also been a rational response to structural incentives, as the need to justify new projects in terms of their potential for scientific innovation to obtain funding is at odds with the aim of continuous societal monitoring. As a consequence, if there are several parallel studies, their comparability is not guaranteed so that their findings cannot be pooled, while analyses of long-term change of political attitudes and behavior are affected by a substantial risk of error (Niedermayer 2001: 25; Gabriel and Keil 2005: 618).

As a consequence of the prevalence of the proprietory model of data collection, data are not automatically made accessible to the wider scientific community. If data from a study become available for other scientists than the principal investigators, it usually occurs only a long time after the election, so that it is impossible for academic specialists for electoral research to provide analyses of electoral behavior directly after the event, except for those few who are personally engaged in an election project, and for researchers from the private sector who can draw on the polls they conducted for the media. Hence, while elections, their results and the reasons behind these outcomes are
always of high topical interest to political scientists, politicians, journalists as well as
the broader public of politically involved citizens, this situation seriously impedes the
community of electoral researchers' ability to quickly cater to the information needs of
the scientific, the political, and the general public on the basis of valid findings from
thorough primary analyses of original data. Again, structural incentives encourage
such more or less extended data monopolization, at least for studies funded by the
DFG and comparable agencies, since successful applicants for research funding need
to make sure that they make the best possible use of their data themselves, in order to
be able to report successful execution of their projects to funding agencies.

- A lack of openness with regard to study design, instruments, etc., leaves potentials for
scientific innovation unexploited. Under such conditions, principal researchers – usu-
ally individuals or small groups of researchers – execute full control over their studies.
Hence, below the level of research funding agencies' referee systems there are no insti-
tutionalized routines for letting the innovation potential of the profession fertilize elec-
tion studies. Moreover, this entails a systematic bias against productive input of
younger scholars who are not yet in a position to successfully launch their own large-
scale projects.

Drawbacks such as these can only be remedied by a genuine National Election Study in the
sense of a continuous program of empirical social research that meets the highest methodo-
logical standards, rests on a solid organizational base and transparent governance structure,
enjoys the security of permanent or at least long-term funding, and is accountable and open to
the entire scientific community of academic empirical social researchers both with regard to
the input side (i.e., with regard to developing the study design, questionnaires, etc.), and the
output side (i.e., with regard to data availability and distribution) can remedy these disadvan-
tages. In Germany, this diagnosis was shared among many members of the scientific commu-
nity, and eventually action was taken to change the situation. To work towards the goal of
establishing a German National Election Study in 2007 German electoral researchers founded
the 'German Society for Electoral Research (DGfW)', an association with the stated purpose
to establish the long missed institutionalized election study in Germany. It seeks to include all
German academic electoral researchers in its proceedings as well as any other social scientists
from Germany or abroad who are interested in contributing to the creation and advancement
of an institutionalized German Election Study. At present the DGfW has more than 50 mem-
bers from about two dozen universities and research institutions, and represents all genera-
tions of German electoral researchers, including a substantial number of younger researchers
(see http://www.dgfw.eu).

The GLES is a direct product of the engagement of the DGfW. Although covering three sub-
sequent elections, the GLES is still a research project. But it is understood as a crucial stepping stone towards the eventual establishment of a genuine, institutionalized German National Election Study (GES). In its working principles it therefore tries to emulate the principles of
typical National Election Studies to as large an extent as possible. It is understood as being
essentially a project of the entire scientific community of electoral researchers as well as other social scientists in Germany and abroad who are interested in advancing German electoral research. Therefore it has committed itself to an open-door policy with regard to both designing the study, and disseminating the data. A Call for Modules and a Call for Questions have generated responses both from Germany and abroad, and several promising proposals have been included into the research program of the GLES. Once data will have been collected, it is planned to make them available to the scientific, but also the broader public as quickly, and as easily as possible. To link the study into the broader international landscape of electoral research a commitment has already been made to routinely include the modules of the CSES in the GLES. In bearing with the general trends described above, the GLES is to encompass not only voter surveys but also other components (a candidate survey, interviews with party officials, media content analyses), in order to be able to place voting behavior in the broader context of the parties’ campaign communications and the mass media’s political coverage. Moreover, the study is to include several longitudinal components (both repeated cross-sections and panels) that are to capture both the short-term dynamics taking place during election campaigns and the long-term dynamics over electoral cycles. In bearing with the recent opening up of electoral research for concepts and theories from political psychology the study will place particular emphasis on analysing (applying dynamic perspectives wherever possible) the information flows between parties, politicians and the electorate, including how they are mediated by campaigns and the mass media, as well as the processing of this information on the part of voters.

The GLES: Overview of Design

In 2008 the German NSF (DFG) decided to include the German Longitudinal Election Study GLES in its program of funding long-term research activities in the social sciences. It considers the GLES a part of an emerging architecture of large-scale research infrastructures with the task of continually monitoring and analysing social and economic changes and their conditions as well as consequences in Germany (Kämper and Nießen 2008). While the other pillars of this architecture, including the German General Social Survey ALLBUS (http://www.gesis.org/dienstleistungen/daten/umfragedaten/allbus/) and its internationally comparative complement, the European Social Survey ESS (http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/), the German Socio-Economic Panel GSOEP (http://www.diw.de/english/soep/29012.html), as well as the two new large-scale panel studies PAIRFAM, a long-term project on families and partnership (http://www.pairfam.uni-bremen.de/), and the National Edcuation Panel Study NEPS (http://www.uni-bamberg.de/neps/), are primarily serving the data requirements of sociologists and economists, the GLES is addressing a key theme of political science – the way how political power is distributed, but also how powerholders are held accountable at general elections, the core institution of representative democracy.
Over three subsequent periods of funding, the GLES is to examine the German federal elections 2009, 2013, and 2017 and therefore will be able to track the German electoral process over an extended period of time and at an unprecedented level of detail. The principal investigators of the study are Hans Rattinger (GESIS/University of Mannheim), Sigrid Roßteutscher (University of Frankfurt), Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck (University of Mannheim) and Bernhard Weßels (Social Science Research Center Berlin). Evelyn Bytzek (University of Frankfurt) serves as the project manager, and several research assistants at each of the involved institutions are responsible for carrying out the study at the operational level. As there is no academic field organization in Germany (except for smaller CATI studios at some universities), most of the fieldwork is assigned to private institutes.

The GLES will comprise various, interrelated components at each of the three next elections:

- An extensive face-to-face pre- and post-election cross section survey of a random sample of voters (evenly split into pre- and post-election subsamples) will form the core of the study. Insofar the GLES will continue the tradition of electoral research in Germany (and many other countries). To allow for in-depth analyses of how today's individualized voters choose at elections, this survey will encompass a large number of variables to account for as many potentially relevant predictors of vote choices as possible, and it will include a large number of cases to allow for meaningful analyses of even small subsections of the electorate (component 1).

- Several components are to allow for an in-depth analysis of the short-term dynamics preceding elections. The GLES will include a rolling cross-section (RCS) campaign survey that allows for tracing developments of public opinion in response to parties’ campaigning and media coverage at the aggregate level on a day-to-day basis (based on a random sample of voters, and conducted by telephone). This pre-election study will be complemented by a post-election panel wave to allow for the individual-level analysis of relationships between orientations held during the campaign and those held at the end of the campaign, including actual voting decisions (component 2). Since it is mandatory to observe effects of campaigns at the individual level in the pre-election phase, this component will be complemented by a short-term campaign panel survey, which will be conducted based on an online access panel (component 3). These two survey components (whose content will match the core parts of component 1) will be accompanied by studies examining the context of voting: A campaign media content analysis (component 4) focuses on the most important issues, candidate profiles and evaluations by the media, the parties’ reported electoral prospects and their coalition signals. Additionally, as in recent elections the parties’ leading candidates’ TV debates have quickly become the key events of election campaigns the GLES will include a detailed study of the conduct and effects of the TV debates (component 5). Moreover, to be able to assess the electoral effects of local district candidates’ personal electioneering, the study will include a candidate campaign survey (component 6). Components 4 to 6 will allow to draw a comprehensive picture of the supply side of elections.
Independent of the GLES project itself, but supplementing it in one important respect, there will also be a medium-term tracking of public opinion by means of monthly online surveys during the six months preceding the 2009 election, to capture important developments preceding the campaign itself (component X). Together, the short-term components of the GLES and the additional component X will provide unprecedented insights into the pre-election dynamics of voters’ orientations, as well as into the electoral context, constituted by the parties, their candidates, and the media. They are to provide a detailed and fine-grained examination of individual and aggregate level changes on the part of voters as they are brought about by processing the information presented to them by parties, candidates, and mass media.

- As opinion formation on the part of voters does not stop when a campaign is over, but carries on over the entire electoral period up until the next election, a full understanding of the electoral process requires to observe not only one election and the campaign that precedes it, but several elections in succession, using an integrated set of instruments for long-term observation. Restricting the project to only one election would preclude any meaningful analysis of the key question that poses itself with regard to the future of the electoral process in Germany, i.e., the amount of electoral change that occurs from one election to the next, its nature and causes. A long-term panel survey, which – based on component 1 – interviews the same respondents at all three elections included in the GLES project is to provide deep insights into the extent and patterns of electoral change (component 7). A continuous long-term tracking survey, conducted online over the entire electoral cycles, will allow for the close observation of the dynamics in-between elections of voters’ perceptions and evaluations of parties and politicians, including the analysis of the impact of second-order elections (component 8). For a better understanding of the reasons behind these dynamics, a parallel long-term media and event analysis (component 9) will accompany it. By combining these two components it will be possible to explain changes in the course of parties’ popularity. Taking second-order elections (at the state (Land) and European level) into account will provide data allowing to analyze the impact of such elections on national elections, thereby closing a major gap in German electoral research.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the various GLES components and their timing with regard to the federal election of 2009. For the elections of 2013 and 2017 analogous designs are planned.¹ The long-term components are to link these elections so that integrated analyses become possible. All survey components are connected by a largely identical core questionnaire that is complemented by component-specific questions that are necessary to attain the particular goals of each component. Additionally, a similar time frame provides the opportu-

¹ Although the GLES has been included in the DFG's long-term funding program for large-scale social science research projects, and is acknowledged as a key part of the German social science data infrastructure (cf. Kämper and Nießen 2008), it will be necessary to apply for funding for each election anew. Hence, funding for the entire project is not yet secured. Rather, funding of future rounds will depend on the project's success in previous periods of funding.
nity to compare different components. The cross section survey is at the same time the first wave of the long-term panel; its respondents will be interviewed over three subsequent elections. Parallel to survey components, the campaign media content analysis, the TV debate analysis, the candidate campaign survey and the long-term media and events analysis provide contextual information for the explanation of individual behavior measured by the survey components.

Figure 1: The German Longitudinal Election Study GLES (2009 wave): Overview of Components

The GLES: Components in Detail

The Core: Pre-election and Post-election Cross-Section Survey (Component 1)

Extensive cross sectional surveys are the core of all election studies worldwide. Such a study will also form the core of the GLES for each of the three elections (component 1, directed by Sigrid Roßteutscher and Bernhard Weßels). The total number of interviews will be 4,200, which are split evenly between a pre- and a post-election survey. All German nationals of voting age with a permanent residence in Germany belong to the universe of the sample. The ratio between East and West German respondents will be one-third to two-thirds, so that East Germans are overrepresented. This kind of oversampling is necessary for our analytical purposes since major changes are expected to occur especially in the Eastern part of the country. The cross section component will be conducted as Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI), which will last about one hour on average. Hence, it is possible to draw a compre-
hensive picture of social and political attitudes as well as the political behavior of the respondents. This is facilitated by CAPI-technology, which allows applying complex survey instruments. The questionnaire will be related to previous electoral studies in two respects: On the one hand, many questions from the 1994-2002 Bundestag election panel study by Falter, Gabriel and Rattinger (ZA No. 4301), and the 2005 election study by Kühnel, Niedermayer and Westle (ZA No. 4332) will be applied, so that the GLES is closely linked to previous electoral research. On the other hand, the post-election questionnaire will incorporate the CSES module and hence link the GLES to international electoral research and guarantee continuity of the 1998 (ZA No. 3073), 2002 (ZA No. 4216), and 2005 (ZA No. 4559) German CSES studies. The pre-election questionnaire will contain more questions regarding the use of rational expectation heuristics, such as the perceived prospects of smaller parties and coalitions. Furthermore, the pre-election questionnaire will be linked to all components focusing on the election campaign. Across elections, the cross section surveys will allow for aggregate comparisons. Moreover, the cross section survey of 2009 will also serve as the foundation for the long-term panel (component 7).

Rolling Cross-Section Campaign Survey with Post-election Panel Wave (Component 2)

Several elements of the GLES are designed to allow for the best possible measurement of the short-term dynamics of campaign communication and its effects. To achieve this, movements of public opinion need to be observed at close intervals during the campaign. The GLES is to combine two components that complement one another for that purpose (components 2, directed by Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, and 3, directed by Hans Rattinger). The first consists of a daily rolling cross section (RCS) campaign survey with 100 interviews per day on average for the final 60 days of the campaign. Interviewing will be organized in such a way that not only the entire sample but also the subsamples available for each day of the campaign will constitute random samples of the universe of all voters. Conducted by telephone (CATI), it will thus produce about 6,000 interviews in total, and cover a sufficient span of time with enough interviews per day to allow for robust results. Interviews will last about 25 minutes on average. RCS studies trace aggregate change on a day-to-day basis, and are very sensitive instruments for measuring campaign-induced shifts of public opinion, immediately registering voters’ reactions to any foreseeable or unforeseeable event occurring during the campaign, and allowing to detect the decay or sustenance of these effects. Although they do not capture intra-individual change during the campaign, they can be easily supplemented with a post-election panel wave, which then allows for pre-post-election comparisons at the individual level based on a representative sample. Using an RCS campaign survey as the pre-election wave, followed by re-interviews of the same respondents after the election (also conducted by CATI) has therefore in recent years become a standard design for analyzing short-term change at elections (Johnston 2001; Romer et al. 2003). It combines the advantages of the RCS design with those of a pre-post-election panel survey and has been successfully introduced in Germany for analyzing campaign dynamics at the Bundestag election of 2005 (Schmitt-Beck et al. 2006). It will therefore also be adopted for the GLES. While this design has been applied in recent years by many election studies in other countries and has thus established itself as a
kind of standard, it has one important drawback in that it does not capture intra-individual short-term dynamics of attitudes that occur during the course of the campaign.

Short-term Online Campaign Panel (Component 3)

A separate short-term panel study over the course of the campaign thus is another important element of the GLES, since including several pre-election panel waves cannot be included in RCS surveys (at least if conducted by CATI). For reasons of field logistics, running multi-wave CATI surveys at close distance with the same respondents is almost impossible. Online surveys based on access respondent pools allow for much shorter field periods, as there is no need for interviewers – the main reason why field periods for CATI surveys may stretch out over extended periods of time. Respondents of online surveys drawn from access pools typically respond very quickly as they themselves control the location and time when they complete their interviews. Hence, this mode allows for including a multi-wave pre-election panel study in our project that very efficiently complements the RCS study. We will use the existing online access pools of the survey institute and draw a subsample of German nationals at least 18 years of age. The short-term campaign panel will track attitudes over a period of 12 weeks prior to the election and consist of six pre-election and one post-election wave. The panel will start with 3,000 respondents who will be interviewed at two-week intervals. The short-term campaign panel component allows for a close monitoring of intra-individual change during the campaign and will provide information about short-term effects on change of political attitudes and behavior. While the short-term campaign panel will provide substantial information about intra-individual change, the representativeness of this component is problematic because of panel attrition. Moreover, online studies are not fully representative for the electorate, as they include only respondents with access to the internet. However, a comparison of the data obtained from the short-term panel to those of the RCS study allows for an assessment of these processes. Components 2 and 3 complement one another, and together provide an internationally unprecedented basis for rigorous analysis of campaign-induced change of attitudes and behavior among voters.

Campaign Media Content Analysis (Component 4)

Short-term movements of perceptions, attitudes, or electoral preferences on the part of voters can only come about as responses to the reception of some kind of current information. The (traditional) mass media are the main source of such information during German election campaigns. The thematic agenda of the campaign, the presence and evaluation of parties and candidates (including the sources of these evaluations), messages concerning relations between the parties such as criticism, attacks, but also, importantly, coalition signals, as well as statements about electoral prospects (originating from polls but also from other sources), and reports on significant events that may or may not be related to the campaign itself, but have a potential to influence voters evaluations of parties and their candidates – all these are present in media content. To register this information it is essential to include a media content analysis in the GLES (component 4, directed by Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck). These data will be col-
lected in such a way that they can be linked to the survey data, most notably the RCS component as well as the short-term campaign panel. The variable structure of the content analysis will closely match the surveys (which in turn will collect detailed information about the respondents' media use). In order to be able to identify important turning points for public opinion, but also in order to allow for a precise matching of the content data to the RCS campaign survey and, somewhat less precise, to the online campaign panel it is essential that such data are collected on a daily basis. The content analysis will include the most important German mass media, either with regard to their ratings, or with regard to their opinion leader role within the German media system: The main evening newscasts of the four channels with the highest ratings – the public broadcasters’ news programs “Tagesschau” (ARD) and “Heute” (ZDF), as well as the newscasts from the most popular commercial channels “RTL aktuell” (RTL) and “News” (SAT1); the news magazines of ARD (“Tagesthemen”) and ZDF (“heute journal”); the five most important national quality newspapers (“Die Welt”, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, “Frankfurter Rundschau”, “die tageszeitung”), the most widely read tabloid “Bild-Zeitung” which is at the same time the newspaper with the largest total readership in Germany, and the weekly news magazines “Der Spiegel”, “Focus”, and “Die Zeit”. Apart from the dynamic analyses, the content analysis will also allow for aggregate analyses, describing media coverage of the campaign in total. In the long run, these content analyses will provide data that are comparable over time and therefore allow tracing long-term developments of campaign coverage in Germany.

TV Debate Analysis (Component 5)

At recent elections, TV debates between the chancellor candidates of the two large parties CDU/CSU and SPD have become major events in the campaigns for national parliamentary elections. The project team therefore expects at least one such debate also to take place at the next elections. Attaining the research goals outlined above concerning TV debates requires a complex research design (component 5, directed by Sigrid Roßteutscher, in cooperation with a team of specialists comprising Frank Brettschneider, Thorsten Faas, Jürgen Maier and Michaela Maier). Nationwide surveys are only of limited value when it comes to studying the processing of information by individual voters. An experimental approach seems much more promising in this respect, including a pre- and post-test questionnaire in combination with real-time-response (RTR) measurement during the course of the debates. Equipping participants with dials to allow them to express their evaluations during the debate, one can easily link viewers’ reactions to the actual progress of the debate, which can provide innovative insights about the processing of information. Obviously, this design needs to be complemented by a content analysis of the debate, a coding scheme for which has already been developed in previous debate studies (Maier and Strömbäck 2008). In order to study the stability and persistence of debate effects, the amount, quality and directional content of the follow-up communication has to be covered (Maier and Faas 2006; Maier and Maier 2007). This implies surveying the participants a third time a few days after the debate and finally for a fourth time right after election day to determine whether debates – directly or indirectly – ultimately affected their voting decision. Aside from this, the RCS and the short-term campaign panel, of
course, also provide valuable insights about the existence and persistence of debate effects. Finally, the general content analysis of campaign communications plays an important role when it comes to linking the stability of debate effects to the content of media follow-up-coverage of the debates. Taken together, RTR measurement allows for the study of information processing while RCS, the short-term campaign panel, and the third and fourth round of interviewing the participants of the experiment allow for studying effects over the further course of the campaign. The content analysis of the debate, but also of the follow-up communication, allows for linking changes in attitudes to the processing of information.

Candidate Campaign Survey (Component 6)

In the German mixed-member electoral system local candidates and their campaigning provide important contextual information for voters in the run-up to elections. Therefore, a candidate survey will be included in the GLES, to register how local candidates campaign in their districts, but also to learn about their political attitudes which can then be compared to those of voters (on the basis of identical questions). The candidate and cross-section survey data can be connected on the bases of geographical codes, so that voters can be matched to those candidates actually running in their electoral districts, allowing for estimates of the effects of local candidates’ campaigns, but also for representation analyses. The candidate campaign survey will be realized as a standardized postal survey of all candidates, i.e., district as well as list-only candidates of the parties that are (or were likely to be) represented in the Bundestag (about 2,500 in total) will be part of the survey (component 6, directed by Bernhard Weßels, in cooperation with an expert team, comprising Thomas Gschwend, Hermann Schmitt, Andreas Wüst and Thomas Zittel). The fieldwork for the candidate study will start shortly after the 2009 Bundestag election. In order to substantiate the findings from the standardized instrument it is planned to apply a mixed-method approach and to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews with a small sample of candidates (about 30) and representatives from party campaign headquarters. Two criteria will be used to select the respondents. First, candidates will be recruited who compete in highly contested as well as largely uncontested races. Second, candidates will be selected in light of their position on the party list and the safety of their seat. This component of the project is important in order to validate the meaning of particular campaign strategies and to understand the motivations of candidates in adopting one campaign strategy rather than the other. The representatives from the party headquarters will be selected by a positional approach, choosing individuals who were close to the national campaign and fulfilled functions within this campaign. The focus of these interviews will be on the relevance of the local level of campaigning for the overall strategy of the party, the meaning that is attached to the local level, and the strategies of the national campaign focusing on the local level. Additionally, information on national aspects of campaigning, including the relevance of different strategies, such as internet and “politainment” formats, will be gathered. The candidate study will build on two successful predecessor studies in 2002 and 2005 (ZA No. 4225; Zittel and Gschwend 2007) to allow for the analysis of stability and change through comparison over time while it also allows for the inclusion of election-specific question modules. The common core will consist of data on the respondents’ background, recruitment and
selection, campaign behavior and attitudes, as well as policy positions. The candidate survey data will be linked to aggregate characteristics on the district level and individual voter data from the cross section surveys. This data linkage will permit a comprehensive comparison between districts, candidates, and voters.

**Long-term panel survey (Component 7)**

Although conducting cross-section surveys before and after a general election is a necessity by many criteria, it became clear very early in the history of electoral research that studying individual change in voting behavior based on cross-sectional data is impossible. Since the project is interested in the tracking of long-term individual change in political attitudes and behavior it is necessary to use panel surveys, which cover several Bundestag elections (component 7, directed by Hans Rattinger). It is planned to establish a rolling three-wave panel as it was realized in a previous project, covering the three elections from 1994 to 2002 by Falter, Gabriel, and Rattinger (ZA No. 4301). The respondents of the cross section in 2009 will be the first wave of a panel that spans the three Bundestag elections from 2009 to 2017. The rolling three-wave panel design links the long-term panel component of the GLES to electoral studies conducted by the principal investigator responsible for this part of the project for previous Bundestag elections: The panel survey that started with the Bundestag election of 2002 will be continued. These respondents were already re-interviewed in 2005, so that the survey in 2009 will be the third and last panel wave for these individuals. The second study to be continued is the cross-section study by Kühnel, Niedermayer and Westle at the 2005 election (ZA No. 4332). These respondents were re-interviewed in October and November 2007, in order to ensure their continued cooperation. The survey in 2009 will be the second panel wave for them. Respondents will stay in the same survey period, either pre- or post-election, in all waves. This close connection to the cross section component implies that the field time of the long-term panel and the cross sections is identical. In addition, both are surveyed with a very similar questionnaire and the same survey method (CAPI). Since panel surveys are inevitably confronted with attrition it is decisive to minimize this by motivating panel respondents to remain in the panel between the Bundestag elections of 2009 and 2013. Short re-interviews will therefore be conducted every year by CATI. The main purpose of the re-interview in 2010 is to verify and update the contact data, so that it will only take about five minutes. The second re-interview in 2011 will last about ten minutes and offer, in addition to panel maintenance, the opportunity to ask a few substantive questions. Thus, we will be able to track individual changes in attitudes and political behavior that occur between two consecutive elections.

**Long-term Online Tracking (Component 8)**

While the long-term panel helps to understand how and why political attitudes and behavior change at the individual level from one election to the next, it cannot capture changes that occur over the course of the four years between two elections (or between two waves of the long-term panel). Although commercial polling institutes offer monthly survey data on public
opinion, these surveys do not fit the central questions in the other survey components of the GLES and also often use inconsistent instruments. Hence, for the tracking of short-term changes between the panel waves the only possibility is fielding surveys at regular intervals between two Bundestag elections with a largely constant questionnaire. Thus, it is necessary to establish a long-term tracking component as part of the GLES (component 8, directed by Sigrid Roßteutscher). For methodological reasons, but also because to save costs, these surveys will be conducted online, respondents being drawn from an access pool. Every cross-section will consist of 1,000 respondents that are representative for the population of German internet users who are at least 18 years of age. The long-term tracking component further recognizes the fact that the Federal Republic of Germany is a political system of multi-level governance, in particular regarding elections in the states (“Länder”) and to the European Parliament (EP). The questionnaires of the respective cross sections will therefore also include state-specific question modules when a state election occurs within four weeks before or after the regular fielding time of the long-term tracking survey (four times in 2009 [Brandenburg, Saarland, Saxony and Thuringia], two times in 2010 [Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia] and six times in 2011 [Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Bremen, Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania]). These question modules will provide information about attitudes and political behavior with respect to the state level and state elections, and similarly so at the occasion of EP elections. Since the number of respondents in a representative sample for Germany would be too small to conduct meaningful analyses for smaller states there will be oversampling (to a sub-sample size of 500) for those states in which state elections occur close to the field time of the respective tracking survey.

**Long-term Media and Event Analysis (Component 9)**

Accompanying the tracking surveys (component 8), a long-term media and event analysis will be conducted, in order to explain changes in the parties’ popularity in-between federal elections and the results of state elections by examining the public issue agenda, politically relevant events and the evaluation of politicians regarding issues and events (component 9, directed by Sigrid Roßteutscher). For reasons of efficiency it will not be as in-depth as the media content analysis related to campaigns (component 4). It focuses instead on a constant monitoring of the media agenda. It is planned to proceed in three stages: First, to track the course of the media agenda continually by analyzing the weekly political magazines “Der Spiegel” and “Focus”. This will enable the project group to identify possible effects of events and political issues. Second, in the month before a tracking survey an additional analysis of front pages and political sections of two daily high-quality newspapers, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” and “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, as well as the most widely read tabloid “Bild-Zeitung” will be content analysed inorder to allow for more detailed analyses of the dynamics of public opinion preceding the respective online tracking surveys. Third, if there is a state election close to the survey, the long-term media analysis will take this into account by additionally analyzing important regional newspapers. The relevant newspapers will be identified by looking at the diffusion rate of regional newspapers and selecting those that guarantee to reach the biggest part of the state electorate (approximately two in small and four in big
states). Hereby, differences in reporting between national and state media can be identified which might be crucial for decision-making by voters. Because of the huge amount of information that needs to be processed, the long-term media and event analysis will be conducted by means of computer-assisted content analysis.

**Supplementary Component: Campaign Online Tracking Surveys (Component X)**

Outside of the GLES project itself and funded separately (through a grant by GESIS, the German Society of Social Science Infrastructure Institutes, which will also provide logistic and infrastructural support for the GLES project itself), but closely connected to it, additional online tracking surveys, comparable to those comprising component 8, will be conducted on a monthly basis during the last half year before the 2009 election. This component is to supplement the two short-term components 2 and 3 (RCS campaign survey and online campaign panel survey) which will monitor voters' responses to the campaign at close distance. At several previous German elections significant turns in public opinion occurred several months before the start of the 'hot' campaign in the immediate run-up to the election, and they were often foreshadowing the election results. Although not representative for the German electorate, the campaign online tracking surveys will provide a means to detect and analyse such movements in public opinion. As a number of other elections will take place during this period in Germany (the election of the Federal President (by the national parliament and representatives of state parliaments), the European election, and several state elections) possible dynamic effects emerging from the campaigns and outcomes of previous elections on voters' party preferences for the upcoming national election (often assumed, but never shown) will become visible. The successive cross-sectional surveys of component X will always include a common core (largely overlapping with the survey instruments of the GLES) as well as specific questions referring to the specific situational circumstances of each wave.

**Linking the Components of the GLES**

Obviously, to achieve its full potential, the different components of the GLES need to be closely linked. Regarding the survey components, common core questionnaires and similar fielding times allow to compare results regarding quintessential questions of electoral research. Making use of different survey modes (CAPI, CATI and online) within one election study framework also allows to yield insights into the effects of survey modes. In addition to this, using different survey modes also provides the opportunity to analyze the three upcoming elections within a wider range of former (which are mostly based on CAPI and CATI designs) and future elections studies (which probably will make more use of online designs). The GLES thus links the past and the future of electoral research in Germany and will also serve as a guideline for the choice of survey mode to address different voter populations.

The GLES also supplements survey components with directly measuring the context of the election campaign. To assure strong links between these components the surveys will carry
complex sets of questions regarding the context, i.e. about the perception of the TV debate, media use and campaign perception. This allows for performing multi-stage analyses of the process how media reporting and campaigning affects vote choice. To give an example, content analysing the TV debate and also content analysing media follow-up reporting on the TV debate first provides the opportunity to analyze possible biases in media reporting. In the next step, by making use of the information about the respondents’ media use and the evaluation of the candidates with regard to the TV debate, effects of media reporting can be assessed which in turn might affect vote choice. The results from such an analysis then can be compared to the results of the TV debate study itself which focuses on the process of impression formation while watching the TV debate. Consequently, by incorporating components focusing on detailed context informations, the GLES benefits twice: First, these components provide information (i.e. explanations) for attitudes measured in the survey components. Second, the components focusing on campaigning, i.e. the TV Debate Analysis and the Candidate Campaign Survey, benefit from related questions in the survey components which allow to reassess their findings by making use of high numbers of respondents.

**The GLES: Governance**

The GLES is the outcome of a determined effort of the members of the German scientific community of electoral researchers to move ahead towards the creation of a genuine National Election Study for which they chose the organizational form of a voluntary association – the German Society for Electoral Research DGfW (http://www.dgfw.eu). Activity within the DGfW is organized in three layers. Overall, it has about 50 members, and thus includes virtually all members of the German scientific community of academic electoral researchers (as well as some colleagues from other countries which are also welcome as members). The members have elected a board of 11 individuals who in turn have elected four persons out of their midst to serve as chairpersons. These chairpersons took responsibility for pursuing the project, i.e., developing the project idea, drafting and submitting the research proposal (Rattinger et al. 2008). They now serve as principal investigators of the GLES, and they will carry responsibility for reporting about the project to the funding agency DFG, as well as developing the proposal necessary for securing the second round of funding which is to cover the general election of 2013.

Importantly, during all of this the organizational structure of the DGfW has served, and will continue to serve, as a multi-layered network for information exchange, disseminating information about all proceedings related to the GLES, and collecting feedback from the scientific community whose data needs the GLES ultimately is to serve. While the four chairpersons of the DGfW and principal investigators of the GLES have taken the lead in developing and governing the study, the board of the DGfW (presently consisting of Martin Elff (University of Mannheim), Thorsten Faas (University of Mannheim), Jürgen Maier (Technical University of Kaiserslautern; preceded in office by Steffen Kühnel, University of Göttingen), Andrea Römmele (International University Bruchsal), Hermann Schmitt (University of Mannheim),
Harald Schoen (University of Bamberg) and Bettina Westle (University of Marburg) continuously serves as the main link of the study to the scientific community. The board has at all stages been informed about the development of the project, and at dense intervals feedback as well as all kinds of input have continuously been sought from its members who thus have contributed enormously to the development of the study's design as well as the research instruments of its various components.

While the board is continuously involved in the proceedings of the GLES, providing stimuli and expert feedback, and discussing important decisions with the chairpersons/study PIs, the ordinary members of the DGfW are informed about recent developments at all critical junctions, and occasionally also their active input is sought, though in more circumscribed ways. Examples are a Call for Modules, launched while the overall study design was developed (and resulting in the inclusion of components 5 and 6), and a Call for Questions during the development of the survey instruments in order to optimize their quality. It must be noted, though, that participation in these Calls was not restricted to members. Being able to participate in choosing those taking the lead in developing the study has so far been the only genuine selective incentive connected to membership status within the DGfW. Restricting data access to the members also would contradict the basic philosophy of openness guiding the GLES. Membership in the DGfW must thus be considered a true example of altruistic participation to pursue the public interest – in this case the interest of all those among social scientists who are interested in elections and what these are about, as well as, more generally, the interest of the public in understanding the workings of the core institution of its democratic political order.

References


