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## Escaping the Disenchantment Trap: The Effects of a Tailored Campaign on Motivation and Participation of Young German Voters

### Abstract

Youth surveys permanently prove a general disenchantment with politics and politicians, leading to a decrease in participation and, as a consequence, a drop in voter turnout. Threatening the foundations of our democratic society, it is assumed that one way to get out of this vicious circle can be to enhance motivation and self-efficacy among young adults. This study looks at the potential of tailored campaigns that make politics visible for first-time voters, in order to increase their knowledge about current affairs, interest in political issues, and, subsequently, the willingness to vote. On occasion of the elections held for both the State and the European parliament in 2004, effects of a specially designed campaign were tested in a quasi-experimental design. 128 students of different high schools and vocational schools in the German state Thuringia obtained a 90-minute course unit on the election's background, including a major part that required the visualization of politics in a wall newspaper. Results indicate that a singular intervention is not able to counteract disenchantment with politics in general, but to raise short-term intentions to go to the polls.

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### Keywords

Youth participation, young voters turnout, first-time voters campaign, civic education, experimental case study, political knowledge, political interest, political behaviour

Empirical studies conducted during the past years seem to indicate that Germans feel less and less concerned by public affairs. Youth surveys in particular prove a general disenchantment with politics and politicians, leading to a decrease in participation and, as a consequence, a drop in voter turnout. Latest data from the well-established "Shell-Jugendstudie" [Shell Youth Survey, 15] (Hurrelmann / Albert 2006) indicate that the share of German adolescents aged 15 to 25 who would describe themselves as "interested in politics" dropped to a mere 39 percent (compared to 57% in 1991) although the linear downward trend may have stopped (34 % in 2002). Concurrently, political interest is closely related to educational background. Looking for the reasons behind this process, it becomes obvious that adolescents equate politics with political parties, which enjoy little confidence in this age group. These institutions of power are often perceived as being not transparent, not capable of solving adolescents' problems, and disregarding their needs, their problems and their fear of the future. Hence, the self-efficacy in political matters is low, young people feel as if they were not represented by political parties and their issues, and they are not attracted to parties in order to change this situation (see also Welniak 2002).

Although this diagnosis should not be generalized for all young people, it is a fact that political participation of adolescents in Germany decreases. At the same time, media use patterns shift towards a stronger success of entertaining formats while content of social relevance is systematically avoided (Feierabend / Kutteroff 2007). Thus politics become less and less visible for these young persons, and they are more and more perceived to be remote from one's own life. The low resonance in the ballots is only one outcome of this process. Threatening the foundations of our democratic society, it is part of a vicious circle, consisting of political disenchantment, leading to low interest in politics and little participation, which enhances the feeling of being powerless and thus reinforces disenchantment and so on. From the perspective of communication studies, two theoretical concepts are particularly relevant to explain these processes: the knowledge gap approach and disenchantment research. Both are not exclusively concerned with adolescents, but may well be applied to this target group.

The knowledge gap approach was developed in the 1970s and refers to the knowledge different groups in society gain from using media. The original hypothesis states that "as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease." (Tichenor et al. 1970). Please note that there is a strong dynamic component embedded in this approach: It is assumed that, over time, media use causes different effects for different parts of the audience. Obviously, this assumption of a widening gap between social strata (often operationalized as groups of a different level of formal education) should be particularly true for political knowledge and knowledge concerning political affairs. Empirical studies indicate a variety of dynamics, ranging from (1) even closing gaps (e.g. in the case of spectacular events with high media resonance such as 9/11, where all segments of society accumulate knowledge equally fast; see Emmer et al. 2002) to (2) a time-lagged closure of gaps (when a certain type of information diffuses from special interest to popular media, thus raising the knowledge level of popular media users with a certain delay) to (3) fields of knowledge where segments of lower status almost never catch up and the gap fosters and reinforces power relations in society, such as economic and political information beyond the top items of the political agenda (see e. g. Bonfadelli 1994).

So far, research on knowledge gap effects among adolescents in particular is scarce (see e.g. Meister et al., in press). With respect to the dynamics outlined above, two aspects should be emphasized. First, its low level of visibility in the media diet of adolescents already touches on one of the preconditions of the knowledge gap hypothesis: In this case, already the amount of information entering the 'system' differs according to the different media use patterns of young media users compared to adult users. In a second step, the same groups of adolescents who are assumed to retain little relevant information through the media might be less able to process the information received and to integrate it into their cognitive schemata. Hence, one plausible hypothesis states that adolescents with lower formal education display a lower level of political knowledge, partly caused by the lower visibility of political matters in their media diet. Furthermore, providing all adolescents with additional information should widen the gap – due to their lower ability to process the information, less educated adolescents should gain less than the better-educated, until saturation is achieved (ceiling effect).

Disenchantment research on the other hand looks at emotions and feelings of people towards the political system in general, and the role media coverage plays in this process. Early research, including evidence from the field of political cynicism (Cappella / Jamieson 2007) suggested that with increasing media use, people become more and more disenchanted with politics (see e. g. Holtz-Bacha 1990). The reasons were attributed to the special logic of mass media in selecting (predominantly negative) news on politics and politicians, emphasizing scandals, problems and mismanagement. Furthermore, the style of audiovisual media in particular reinforces this impression by focusing on individuals, 'good pictures', the unusual and dramatic events. Later research pointed out that these effects can be observed predominantly related to the use of entertaining media (see Wolling, 1999).

Again, evidence exclusively for younger people is not available, but it seems more than plausible that not only the cognitive effects described above, but also the distinct preference for entertaining media among adolescents might contribute to their overall disenchantment with politics.

## 1. Rationale of the empirical study

These observations raise the question if there is a way to step out of this vicious circle. Given the fact that media use patterns are made responsible for the critical situation in many cases, trying to change media content or media use patterns appears to be only one possible strategy for improvement. On the other hand, long-term evidence shows that direct, interpersonal communication is not only a strong mediator of media effects, but also an effective means of communication and social change (see e.g. Schenk 2000, 2007). In several realms like health communication or risk communication, so-called tailored campaigns contributed to opinion and behavioral changes in the respective target groups (see e.g. Roessler 2005). They consisted of different elements including media sources and face-to-face communication, and in many cases, successfully transported pro-social messages to their audience.

In order to enhance information, motivation and self-efficacy related to politics among young adults, a research team from the University of Erfurt<sup>1</sup> designed an information campaign to make politics visible for first-time voters in Germany. Targeting the group of young first-time voters, which seem to be more susceptible to efforts aiming at enhancing political participation (Roessler 2007), we tailored a campaign on occasion of the elections in Thuringia in 2004. On the same day (June 13, 2004) voters were called to the ballots for both the State and the European Parliament. The representatives of the State Parliament are regional politicians highly prominent in the electorate from their local campaigning efforts. In comparison, European elections are considered 'Second-Order Elections', since voters attribute a lower relevance due to the remoteness of the EU and the seemingly little power of the European Parliament (Schneider / Roessler 2005). Given the low voter turnout for European elections during the past years, combining them with the State elections promised to attract a higher share of citizen.

As a consequence, the campaign was designed to inform about both elections and to mobilize adolescent first-time voters in order to make politics and the elections more visible to them, working against the general disenchantment with politics. Independent from any of the parties running for the seats, we attempted to provide basic knowledge on the elections and the main issues of public debate; furthermore, our campaign aimed at conveying a positive feeling towards the political process in general and voting in particular. The whole intervention was based on didactic strategies that were assumed to optimize the outcomes, particularly approaches of collaborative learning, active involvement, feedback loops and evaluation phases (see Both / Unger 2005 for more details).

The campaign consisted of a 90-minute course unit, taught in May 2004, with the following structure: After a short welcome and an introduction to the course program, all students were assigned to one out of five groups working on an issue for 40 minutes each. Issues included democracy, elections, European Union, Eastern enlargement of the EU, and politics in Thuringia. Groups were provided with material prepared in advance, such as leaflets, brochures, newspaper articles etc. covering the issues. Another 20 minutes were devoted to the visualization of the group work: Each group produced a wall newspaper with the most relevant results, assuming that the two-channel presentation in an oral and a visual mode will enhance the effect of the campaign. Groups were then reassembled for a shorter second part to discuss the various results based on the wall newspapers. A final reflection of all participants concluded the course unit.

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Assuming an effectiveness of our campaign, we expected positive outcomes on three dimensions reflecting our theoretical rationale:

H1: The campaign will be able to reduce knowledge gaps concerning electoral topics.

H2: The campaign will reduce political disenchantment of first-time voters.

H3: The campaign will increase participant's intention to vote.

To collect evidence on this set of hypotheses, the campaign was framed by a pre- and a post-survey of participants, both conducted at least one week prior or after the course unit. The research strategy was based on an experimental setup which followed Solomon's design for panel studies: Controlling for treatment, survey and panel effects, measures of the experimental group are compared with measures of three control groups: one group that did not fill in the pre-campaign questionnaire but received the treatment, and two groups which did not receive the treatment, one of which again only completed the after-survey (see Yaremko et al. 1986). Adjusted to the theoretical background mentioned above, dependent variables addressed cognitive (knowledge about political issues), emotional (disenchantment with politics), and conative (willingness to vote) aspects and were measured before and after the course unit indicating the individual changes on all three measures. Additional questions concerned media use patterns and demographics of participants (for operationalizations see below).

To check for differences caused by formal education, the campaign was conducted in vocational schools as well as public high schools.<sup>2</sup> We selected two schools of each type in the area of Erfurt, state capital of Thuringia, Germany with the permission of the state educational board. All locations were comparable in terms of size, technical equipment, and urbanity. Altogether, four classes of a public high school accounted for 114 participants and ten classes in six different vocational schools for 158 participants. The gender distribution was balanced with 130 females and 141 males. After excluding students who did not qualify as first-time voters, who were not entitled to vote (age less than 18) or who did not participate in the second survey wave (panel mortality), we used data of 240 persons for our analysis. The experimental group (E) consisted of 128 persons (57 females, 71 males / 56 vocational school, 72 high school), the control groups (C1-C3) of 40, 38 and 34 persons respectively.

In a first step, we checked the differences between experimental and control groups for effects of the instrument and methodological artifacts based on our measures of political knowledge. As intended, the sample seemed unaffected by the pre-survey of our panel design: There were no significant differences on the  $p < .25$ -level (1) between E and C1 in the pre-survey, indicating that the knowledge level of E was not particularly high or low before the treatment; (2) between the pre- and the post-survey in C1, indicating that possible differences found for E can be attributed to the treatment; and (3) between E and C2 in the post-survey, indicating that the pre-survey delivered to E only did not exert a substantial influence, which was confirmed by (4) the non-significant difference between C1 and C3 (survey groups only, without treatment).<sup>3</sup> Similar checks were calculated for other dependent variables when necessary. Considering these results, it seems arguable that all results of the subsequent pre-/post-campaign comparisons can be attributed to the treatment.

## 2. Making politics visible: Effects of the tailored campaign on first-time voters

### 2.1 Political knowledge

A first aim of the campaign was to improve political knowledge among first-time voters. An increase in political knowledge should facilitate opinion-building and political participation while reducing the danger of political disenchantment. In some ways, better knowledge is perceived as a prerequisite for other benefits of a tailored campaign (see e.g. Kreuter et al.,

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to a public high school leading to a diploma that allows to begin with an University education, vocational schools accompany adolescents during their professional training primarily for blue-collar jobs and provide only some basic knowledge about society and politics.

<sup>3</sup> (1) E(pre) = 91.86 / C1(pre) = 84.73; (2) C1(pre) = 84.73 / C1(post) = 88.45 (3) E(post) = 117.75 / C2(post) = 125.45 (4) C1(post) = 88.45 / C3(post) = 87.97.

2000 in the field of health messages). Closing a knowledge gap between participants of higher and lower formal education would then contribute to a supplementary positive effect. Data on political knowledge was collected with seven items in the questionnaire, addressing electoral matters in general (1) and facts concerning the European and the State election (3 each).<sup>4</sup> All aspects were more or less intensely addressed during the course unit. Open- and closed-ended answers were summed up to an additive score ranging between 0 and 180. As the main result it can be noted that the knowledge index increased for all 128 participants of the experimental group from an average score of 91.86 points before the treatment to 117.75 points afterwards ( $p < .001$ ). At least concerning these few aspects, the campaign was able to improve short-term factual knowledge over a period of approximately one week.

However, it is important to re-analyze this result considering differential gains in subgroups of our sample (see Fig. 1). Pre-treatment knowledge was considerably higher for high school students compared to students from a vocational school mainly due to the high score of male high school attendants (107.76). In contrast, female high schoolers were roughly on the same knowledge level as students attending vocational school, where the gender difference was less substantial and in the reversed direction (m: 83.70 / f: 92.89). The knowledge gap assumes an increasing differential over time, and our experiments lend some support to this notion: Participants from a high school improved 33.54 scores in average, which is double compared to participants from a vocational school (16.56;  $p < .01$ ). It seems as if students with higher formal education benefited more from our campaign than others. But it should be emphasized that knowledge level increased in all groups ( $p < .001$ ) and even for male vocational schoolers which displayed the lowest gain (14.14) the pre-post-difference proved significant ( $p < .05$ ). Remarkably, female high school students benefited twice as much as their male counterparts (43.89 vs. 22.27), and thus the significant pre-campaign difference disappeared completely in the post-campaign measure (131.08 vs. 130.03; n.s.). Among vocational school attendants, dynamics worked in reverse – here females who scored higher before also gained more, leading to an enhanced but still not significant post-test difference (114.16 vs. 97.84;  $p = .13$ ).

To conclude our results concerning Hypothesis 1, we indeed found knowledge gaps between students with higher and lower formal education concerning political issues. But contrary to our expectations, the tailored campaign was not able to reduce this gap – it rather increased the existing gaps while counterbalancing originally measured gender differences in the high education group. Our campaign heavily relying on interpersonal communication and including means of visualizing content reproduced a pattern known from traditional mass media effects research.

## 2.2 Political disenchantment and political interest

The attitudes of adolescents towards politics were measured with a ten-item-scale of statements where participants marked their degree of approval on a five-point-scale.<sup>5</sup> We calculated mean scores for each individual with a lower value indicating a positive image of politics and a higher value marking disenchantment with politics. The overall mean for the entire sample previous to our campaign was 3.22. This value is close to the scale mean which suggests a slight tendency of disenchantment in the group. Earlier research argued that disenchantment might be enhanced by the consumption of entertainment media. Although our study was not able to test this assumption in detail, we included some measurement of media use that allows for some interpretation on this matter. Looking at the adolescents consuming predominantly entertaining media, their degree of disenchantment was significantly higher (mean=3.36;  $n=70$ ) compared to adolescents that stated a more

<sup>4</sup> Item dimensions: (1) principles of democratic elections; (2) role of second votes; (3) State president of Thuringia (name); (4) legislative period of State Parliament; (5) new countries in the EU; (6) European institution elected for; (7) domicile of the institution.

<sup>5</sup> Item dimensions: political engagement is exciting / politics too complicated / democracy best form of government / politicians don't care what ordinary people think / going to the ballots is important / party policies are boring / my vote has no impact on the political future / democracy is working good in Germany / most politicians do not cope with their duties / politicians are only interested in getting elected.

informational media use style (mean=3.04; n=57;  $p<.01$ ). And reversely, splitting the sample in three parts according to their degree of disenchantment (pre-campaign) resulted in a higher share of more disenchanted persons in the entertainment-only group (diff.=16.8%).

Turning to the effects of our campaign on disenchantment (Fig. 2), results were little encouraging. The index values measured by our ten-item-scale did not differ significantly between the pre- and the post-test – neither for the sample as a whole (3.20 vs. 3.15; n.s.) nor for the educational groups or for the gender groups. Nevertheless, differences were all in the assumed direction providing evidence that if there was a change, it was more likely to be towards a more positive picture of the political process. But still the differences were too small to be interpreted. With a change of -.13, both vocational schoolers and female participants improved their view on politics most (n.s.). Thus, it has to be concluded that the original ‘disenchantment gap’ prevalent in our data was not closed by the campaign: The highly significant pre-test difference ( $p<.001$ ) between high school (3.01) and vocational school (3.48) attendants persisted until the post-test measure (2.99 vs. 3.35;  $p<.01$ ).

Beyond these results on an aggregate-level, we were looking at individual differentials to make sure that our analysis did not conceal any relevant dynamics on the micro level. Altogether we observed 18 students for whom the disenchantment index decreased more than .50, on the other hand only three students displayed the opposite trend. The low number of cases proscribes any further analysis of the characteristics of these participants, but at least it seems safe to say that the campaign did not contribute to a further political disenchantment of adolescents. Integrated into their school curriculum, it could hardly be mistaken for classical forms of political communication and thus the risk of a counterarguing effect seemed low. Still it has to be noted that a singular measure such as a one-time course unit does not succeed in changing adolescent's perception to the political realm in general – a pattern which is quite familiar from countless media effects studies analyzing attitude change (e.g. Schenk 2007).

The same disappointing picture emerges when we replace the measure of political disenchantment by another measurement focusing on political interest. Both concepts seem to be related to each other – high political interest can be assumed to correlate with a low level of political disenchantment and vice versa. Again, a ten-item-scale was employed to collect data on political interest with respondents answering on a five-point scale.<sup>6</sup> The overall index, with high values indicating a high interest, remained almost unchanged between the two panel waves (2.95 vs. 2.91). Beyond the not surprising result that high schoolers assess themselves as significantly more interested in politics (3.06 vs. 2.78;  $p<.05$ ), we did not observe any relevant changes that could be attributed to the campaign. Obviously, a 90-minute course unit is not sufficient to substantially stimulate adolescents' interest in politics.

### 2.3 Behavioral intentions

In the present survey situation, actual behavior concerning the participation in a political process could hardly be measured. Designed to enhance the visibility of politics in adolescents' every day lives, we assumed that the campaign could influence at least the intentions of participants, in our case the intention to go to the ballots. In this particular case we had to differentiate between the two upcoming elections, as it could not be ruled out that a participant wanted to vote only e.g. for the European Parliament and not for the State Parliament. Looking at our sample as a whole (see Fig. 3), 57.8% of participants stated before the campaign that they were “sure” or “very probably” to vote for the State Parliament. Another 10.9% would probably not go to the ballots, and nine persons (or 7%) were sure not to vote. The remaining 22.9% were undecided or did not yet make up their mind whether

<sup>6</sup> Item dimensions: would describe myself as a political character / political decisions do not affect my personal life / keep up on current events / my time is too precious for dealing with politics / look for in-depth knowledge on political affairs / important to be up-to-date on current events / pointless to devote attention to politics / inform myself about the intentions of political parties prior to elections / political issues not relevant for me / feel myself well-informed about politics.

they wanted to participate in the elections or not. After our campaign, the number of decided non-voters had remained stable (9), while the number of students with the intention to vote increased by 6 (to 61.7%), representing a non-significant difference compared to the first measure ( $p=.14$ ) but at least in the direction we aimed for.

The impact of the campaign seemed more pronounced in the case of the European elections which are traditionally less popular among the electorate. Starting from a lower level of 45.3% of prospective voters, we observed a 7.9% increase in this group (10 persons) after the campaign. But at the same time, the number of decided non-voters also increased by five (3.9%), two of them being probable non-voters before. Most notably, the original share of almost one third of participants who did not even think about voting or not voting was diminished by half (31.3% vs. 16.4%). Given the significant difference between both distributions ( $p<.001$ ), the main effect of our campaign was to put the decision about going to the ballots at all on the agenda of individuals, leading to more acceptance (+10) rather than more reluctance (+5). An additional analysis (data not shown here) suggests that this tendency was more prevalent among high school students where all changes resulted in voting intentions ( $p<.05$ ).

Our final examination concerned the interaction between our dependent variables – that is political knowledge and voting intentions (as the campaign did not exert any significant influence on political disenchantment). Dividing our post-campaign sample in three groups of high, medium and low knowledge<sup>7</sup> resulted in substantial differences between the low group and the two others for both elections ( $p<.01$ ): Going to the ballots is far more popular among students of high and medium knowledge, while those who displayed little knowledge were more likely not to vote or to be yet undecided. In particular, high knowledge participants were more certain to vote in the State elections. Our analysis once more proves the strong relationship between political knowledge and willingness to go to the ballots, thus indicating that measures to improve knowledge may contribute to a higher voter turnout among adolescents.

### 3 Concluding remarks

Low interest of younger people in politics is assumed to threaten the survival of democracy in Western societies. Based on this diagnosis, our idea was to design a tailored campaign for first-time voters in order to convince them of the importance of politics for their daily life. By making politics visible in a 90-minutes course unit on occasion of State elections in Thuringia and European Elections, we expected positive outcomes on participants' knowledge, attitudes and behavioral intentions exceeding a short-term recall impact. Data from our empirical evaluation of the campaign suggests that singular interventions might be able to raise awareness of a political event, increase specific knowledge related to this event and the willingness to participate in elections. Small but significant changes persisted for more than a week, while the positive effects on disenchantment with politics or on political interest in general were adumbrated but almost negligible. On the other hand, it would have been naïve to expect a one-and-a-half-hour course unit to counterargue a whole life's experience and long-standing attitudes.

Still, our results indicate that bringing politics into adolescents' personal environment can be seen as a prerequisite for further identification with and interest in politics. At the same time, some attention needs to be called to our finding that support the basic knowledge gap hypothesis, where students with a higher education benefited more from the campaign than vocational school attendants. Obviously, tailoring needs to focus on the intellectual capacity of subjects in order to avoid dysfunctional side-effects. Furthermore, some evidence confirmed the well-established connection between the uses of entertainment media and political disenchantment. Maybe communication strategies should try to use entertaining content more intensely to achieve pro-social impact as suggested by the concept of entertainment-education (see the article of Arendt/Rössler in this volume). Finally, it should be emphasized that our campaign was based on interpersonal communication rather than

<sup>7</sup> Index values: high knowledge = 151-180 / medium knowledge = 111-150 / little knowledge = up to 110.

mass communication (which served as teaching materials only) and included audience activation and visualization of content within a didactic approach. This intense campaign situation requires a high individual effort and cannot be compared with mass communication measures such as educational TV spots or informational broadcasts. Leading adolescents out of the disenchantment trap by conducting tailored campaigns is a promising, but still costly and time-consuming task that could support and complement traditional school curricula.

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#### 4. Figures

Figure 1: Knowledge gain in different subgroups of the sample (index values; n = 128)

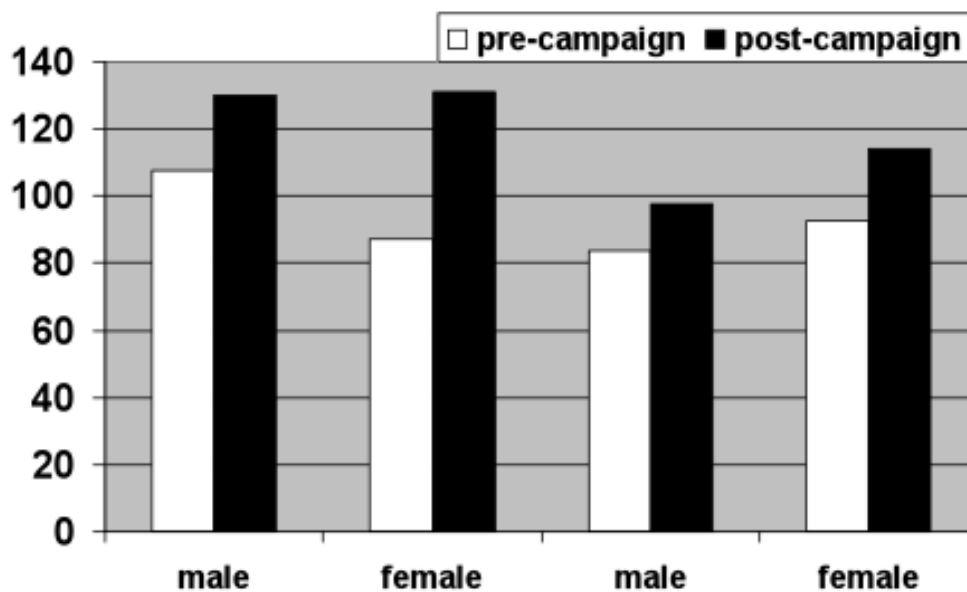


Figure 2: Disenchantment with politics before and after the campaign (mean values on a five-point scale with 1 = high disenchantment and 5 = low disenchantment; n = 128)

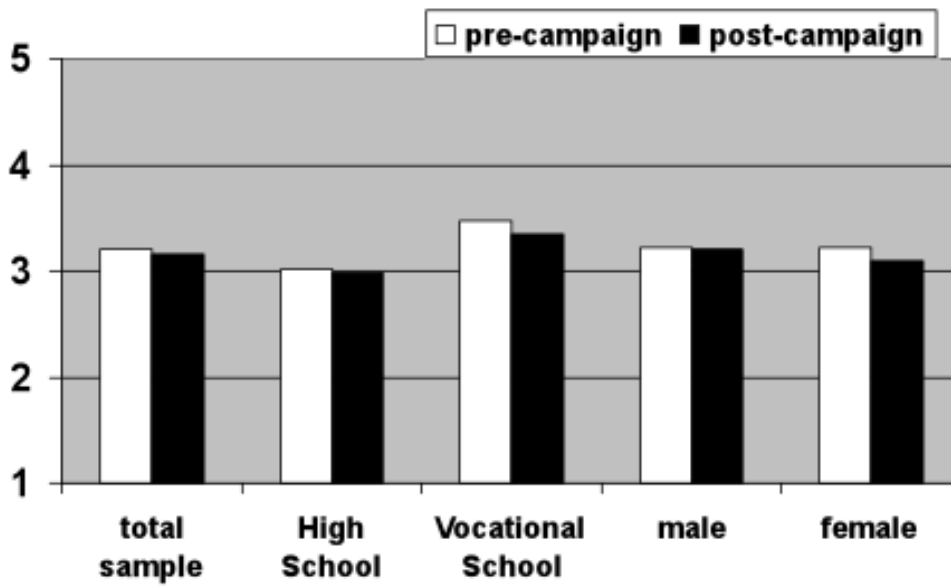


Figure 3: Voting intentions for European and State elections (shares in percent; n = 128)

