

Convincing Voters

An experiment in the Canton of Schaffhausen

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This study analyses three different fictitious political communication designs related to two votings in the canton of Schaffhausen (Velo-Initiative and Hornkuh-Initiative). An online questionnaire addressing citizens' evaluations on these designs and their impact on voting behavior was administered. The data was analysed using Gerber's Big Five of Long-Term Characterization (2011). The analysis suggests that political campaigns can reduce uncertainty, but could not confirm that a strategy correlates specifically with an opinion change among swing or party voters.

Keywords: Political communication, voting behavior

1 Introduction

The analysis of voting behavior is currently in turmoil following the results of Brexit in the United Kingdom (June 2016) and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (November 2016). Aside from underlining the difficulty in predicting voting behavior, these events have underlined the difficulty of explaining voting decisions. This contribution explores strategies and mechanisms of political communication that lead to changes in voting preferences. More specifically, analysing the role of individual characteristics and of citizens' voting habits, whether they are identified as 'party voters' or 'swing voters'.

The Swiss canton of Schaffhausen is used as an empirical terrain. Several times a year, Swiss citizens vote on referenda as well as popular initiatives. While studies of voting behavior and voting results have been numerous (Cristin et al., 2002), those focused on the communication aspect of elections and votations have not been so numerous (Ladner & Pianzola, 2015; Hängli et al., 2009). The canton of Schaffhausen is particularly interesting as voting is mandatory.

We use an experiment-type approach based on two cantonal votings (Velo-Initiative and Hornkuh-Initiative). Experimental approaches have been shown to "...generate[s] not only research that is empirically credible, but also relates to the real world..." (Jilke et al., 2016: 69) We evaluate the impact of different political communication strategies on voters' choices to measure the impact of citizens' individual characteristics and voting habits.

Owing to their respective explanatory powers, their large-scale application and their feasibility for smaller n questionnaires, the Micro-Sociological Approach (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968) and the Psychological Concept (Campbell et al., 1964) have been used as theoretical groundings to formulate theory-based assumptions as well as hypotheses of citizen behavior. The 'Big Five of Long-

Term Characterization’ is subsequently used to structure the analysis. A standardized and anonymous online questionnaire was used to collect data. The study aims at delivering exploratory insight into the field of voting behavior in Schaffhausen.

2 Definitions and Main Concepts

The quality of the voter is janus-faced. One needs to have the right to take part in the political process and secondly, needs to make use of this right.

In this article, we shall use two types of voters as analytical units: ‘party voters’ and ‘swing voters’. A party voter, according to Ackermann and Freitag (2015) represents “[an] emotional, stable and non-formalized connection of a voter to a party.” Party voters do not have to be members of a party but have a “long-term stable affective connection to a political party that is acquired at an early stage of life and intensifies during the course of life” (Schoen & Weins, 2014: 262). In contrast, swing voters do not have a connection to a single party. Swing voters are defined by their changing loyalties (Hayes & McAllister, 1996), and their political independence (Mayer, 2008).

2.1 Main Concepts & Hypotheses

This study uses two main conceptualisations (Micro-Sociological Approach and Psychological Concept) and one instrument (Big Five of Long-Term Characterization) to structure the analysis. Each of these have served to formulate hypotheses and structure the development of the questionnaire and its analysis.

2.1.1 Micro-Sociological Approach

The Micro-Sociological Approach introduced by Lazarsfeld et al. in their study *The People’s Choice* (1968) is a key reference in electoral or voting centered studies (Behnke, 2001; Bühlmann & Gerber, 2015; Vatter & Nabholz, 1995). The approach can be summarized as follows: “[A] person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preference.” Those social characteristics include socio-economic status (measured by average income, among others), religion (e.g. protestant or catholic), residence (neighbourhood), occupation (e.g. white collar or labour) and age (e.g. being 45 years or over) (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968: 16–24).

2.1.2 Psychological Concept

Another central concept used in voting research is the Psychological Concept of Campbell et al. (1964). They integrated a citizen’s vote in a Funnel of Causality. (Campbell et al., 1964: 24). Since its first publication, this model has had a sustainable impact on voting behavior research (Wilder, 2015). The funnel of causality introduces multiple variables that may explain how a voting de-

cision is formed. These notably include party attachment, a central aspect in defining both party voters and swing voters.

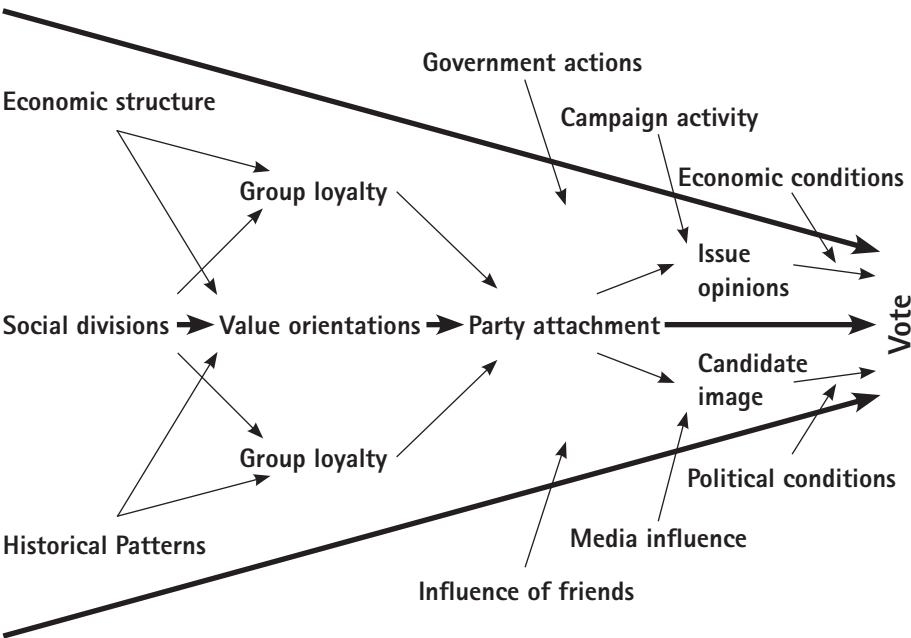


Figure 1: Dalton's (1988) depiction of the funnel of causality, inspired by Campbell et al. (1964)

From the mouth to the stem of the funnel, the model shown in figure 1 states that socio-economic conditions, social structures and historical patterns are the starting point for explaining how votes are constructed (Ackermann & Kijewski, 2015). These factors then have an influence on value orientations and group loyalty, which again influence party attachment.

The variable party attachment is described by a psychological, affective connection from the individual to a party, independent from peer pressure and acquired through a long-term process of socialisation (Ackermann & Kijewski, 2015). Issue orientation (or opinions) expresses the behaviour of citizens to vote according to their specific view on subjects under discussion (Ackermann & Kijewski, 2015), which are defined as “a societal problem or current subject, that needs handling or solving through political decision-makers.” In the Swiss context, Ackermann and Kijewski (2015) showed through an analysis of the 2011 national elections, that the variables ‘party identification’ and ‘issue orientation’ have an increasing influence on voting decisions.

2.1.3 The Big Five of Long-Term Characterization

In international psephology, it is customary to interview respondents not only regarding demographic characteristics, but also to classify them according to psychographic characteristics. A ubiquitously used concept is the Big Five of Long-Term Characterization (e.g. Schoen & Steinbrecher, 2013; Gerber et al., 2010; Gerber et al., 2011) indexing respondents alongside five personality dimensions:

- Openness to change: Readiness for change, positive and intellectual curiosity, sense for the fine arts and creativity;
- Conscientiousness: Reliability, tidiness, tenacity and performance;
- Emotional stability: Opposite of neuroticism, resistance to stress, emotional stability;
- Extraversion: Pursuit of social interaction and social dominance as well as attention;
- Agreeableness: Harmonic relationships, compassionate, sympathetic, cooperative and cordial. (ibid.)

Using this approach, an approximation of an individual's personality can be drawn. When it comes to the explanatory power of those personality traits, Gerber et al. (2010) posit: "[...] the size of the effects of these traits rival those of canonical predictors of political behavior that have been the subject of countless studies such as education and income." These personality traits will be analysed alongside socio-demographic characteristics in our analysis.

2.2 Hypotheses

We used the concepts presented above (Micro-Sociological Approach and the Psychological Concept) and the analytical tool of the 'Big Five of Long-Term Characterization' to formulate a series of hypotheses.

- 1) The Socio-economic status (income and education) correlates with acceptance/decline of proposal and with voting not changing after exposure to the fake campaign;
- 2) Age correlates with acceptance/decline of proposal and with voting not changing after exposure to the fake campaign;
- 3) Socio-economic status has a stronger correlation than age with acceptance/decline and with voting not changing after exposure to the fake campaign.
- 4) Swing voters and party voters have different psychographic personalities;
- 5) Different personality dimensions measured correlate with voting not changing after exposure to the fake campaign;
- 6) Depending on whether respondents are swing or party voters correlates with whether voting changes after exposure to the fake campaign;
- 7) Strong party attachment will trump exposure to the fake campaign in evaluation of changes in voting preference;

- 8) For swing or party voters, certain campaign styles have more appeal and a stronger correlation with whether respective intents of voting stay the same.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design and technique

A standardized online questionnaire¹ was used. The survey was open to anyone with voting rights in Schaffhausen. The questionnaire was disseminated using the email databases of the Regional Association of Industry and Commerce of the canton. The communication included a request to pass along the email to other cantonal residents. The sample at hand therefore has to be labelled as managed (in contrast to a randomized sample), which reduces the explanatory power of results obtained to a certain degree. In total the questionnaire was filled by a relatively limited number of respondents (n=53). All respondents affirmed having the right to vote.

The first part of the questionnaire addresses demographic and psychographic aspects as well as respondent's political interests, main sources of political information and their voting behaviour in general. Many of these questions were taken from the Swiss Electoral Studies (SELECTS) study (FORS, 2016). Data have also been collected with regard to psychographics. With this information it is possible to a) distinguish swing voters from party voters, b) identify how they inform themselves regarding political matters and c) identify potential clusters of specific demographic and psychographic traits in respondents.

A second section focuses on respondents' opinion regarding two initiatives (Velo-Initiative and Hornkuh-Initiative) and then confronted them with purpose-built posters on these two initiatives. Their reactions, both in terms of change or stability in their voting preference was measured, as well as a more qualitative evaluation of their impression on the various imageries presented (see details below).

In the analysis, the independent variables are the aspects that explain opinion change, before and after being exposed to the imagery of the fake campaign (socio-economic status, age, personality and categorisations as swing or party voters) and dependent variables therefore are initial acceptance/decline of said initiatives and potential opinion change.

3.2 Campaign message design

As noted by Longchamp (2016), trends in political communication develop in the direction of greater emotionality and personalization. For our analysis we developed two fake campaigns related to a popular votation issue ongoing at the time of the study (July 2016). It is assumed that using a real political issue,

¹ The questionnaire was set up using the online tool EFS Reporting.

a distinction can be made between respondents that know what they will vote and those still undecided.

The two selected initiatives are the **horn cow initiative (Hornkuh-Initiative)** and the **bicycle initiative (Velo-Initiative)**. The first initiative proposes that cow owners be financially subsidised as long as adult animals have horns. The idea being to introduce an incentive for farmers to maintain a more traditional approach to raising cows. The second campaign focuses on regulations regarding car and bicycle traffic, attempting to facilitate the 'mobilité douce'. The initiatives have been selected because the topics are likely to generate honest answers, minimizing issues of social desirability as might have been the case with other votings. In addition, the initiatives play on different aspects: while the horn cow initiative emanates from the right and from farmer lobbies and targets rural issues (Fumagalli, 2015), the Velo-Initiative comes from the left and is seen as more urban (Schöchli, 2016). Also, the respective topics are easy to understand, unlike corporate tax reform III (USR III) for example. Also, neither animal well-being and farmers' subsidies nor improvements of bike lanes and hiking trails belong to traditional core subjects of the big parties in Switzerland (Vatter, 2014).

3.2.1 Messages per campaign

For both campaigns, a series of purpose built posters were developed. To allow for maximum comparability between campaigns, similar imagery (application of a grayish filter) and structure (for each type of message) was used.

For each campaign, three versions were developed: Emotionalised (EMO), Personalised/Testimonial (TEST) and Neutral/Rational (RAT). The emotional imagery played on the idea of tradition for the Hornkuh-Initiative and on environmental deprecation for the Velo-Initiative. The personalised imagery proposed a quote from a farmer, shown with his cow and a similar montage with an image and quote from the President of Swiss Cycling. Respondents were also confronted with a Neutral/Rational model only consisting of a pro-saic version of the text to be voted on and a voting instruction.

After being shown the images (three per campaign) respondents were asked to disclose whether they would accept the initiative today, whether they would decline it, or if they still have not made up their minds. After being confronted with the messages in a randomized order, they had to answer the question again if they would accept, decline or if they are still unsure. A resulting delta shall then indicate the effect the respective images had on the individual. Difference has been counted as an opinion change.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey was filled in by a relatively limited number of respondents (n=53). As such the results presented must be taken as exploratory and with limited application outside the confine of the sample. Note that the sample over represented older more educated males as opposed to the average Schaffhausen citizen population (Statistik Schweiz, 2016a).

4.2 Identifying Swing Voters and Party Voters

Swing and party voters were defined using two different approaches. Firstly, by asking the respondents which party they voted for in the national elections of 2011 and 2015. In case of a change in party or if individuals could not remember which party they voted for, they were characterized as swing voters. Secondly, they were asked whether when making political decisions, they follow a party's/association's opinion or if they decide on their own. To make results more robust, test subjects have been asked to rate the following statements:

- 1) If the party I feel closest to supports a policy, I will accept it, too;
- 2) If the party I feel the least close to supports a policy, I will decline it;
- 3) I do not follow parties' or associations' views and make up my own mind.

On a Likert scale, they were asked to rate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Voters who agreed more on statement three than both statements one and two were defined as swing voters. This approach was selected because it solidifies possible findings used in the declarative first approach. Because someone voted for the same party in 2011 and 2015, does not necessarily mean that he or she always follows parties' and/or associations' views. In the sample, 53% of respondents were identified as swing voters, 28% as party voters and 19% gave mixed signals.

4.3 Testing Hypotheses

The first hypothesis was only partially verified. The data suggests a negative correlation between income and level of acceptance of the initiatives. Acceptance of the Hornkuh-Initiative is lowest at the highest income levels. The change in voting intention after having seen the fake campaign is minimal (5.7%) in that group. Similar results were obtained for the Velo-Initiative. In both cases the percentages of opinion change following the fake campaign diminished with increases in respondents' educational level.

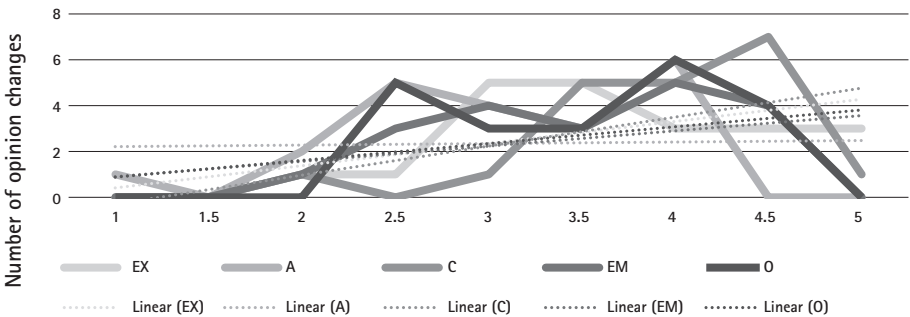
Hypothesis 2, linking age to voting decision and vote stability (pre and post fake campaign), was disproved in the sample, and this for both initiatives. In the case of the Hornkuh-Initiative, the initial pro-votes seem to rise with age but then go down for the highest age category. The ability of the fake posters to incite respondents to change their votes to a yes, dwindles with age.

Opinion change is more prevalent in younger voters. For the Velo-Initiative, we see a ‘U’ shaped relationship with the younger and the older voters more likely to be in favour initially. It is mostly the older respondents that change position following the fake campaign. Hypothesis 3 is only partially verified. Based on the preceding analysis, this hypothesis holds true only for education but not for income.

For hypothesis 4, swing and party voters seem to have slightly different personality traits to C, A and EM. O had to be ruled out because of contradictory results depending on the use of the first or second definition of swing/party voters and EX was almost identical in both views.² Hypothesis 4 can be verified to a certain extent.

Hypothesis 5 (See Graph 1), linking personality traits and the likelihood of not changing one’s position after viewing the fake campaign could be verified, but only to a certain extent. With the exception of agreeableness, a positive relation was identified. The higher the score for the four personality traits, the higher the probability of an opinion change.

Number of opinion changes per value per personality trait Hornkuh-Initiative



Graph 1: Number of opinion changes per value per personality trait Hornkuh-Initiative

Hypothesis 6 linked the type of voter (party or swing) with the change in voting behavior after having seen the fake campaign. Swing voters have, on average, a higher rate of change of opinion. This was found in both definitions of voter types and for both initiatives. The hypothesis is therefore confirmed. For hypothesis 7, it could not be confirmed that party attachment will trump exposure to the fake campaign in evaluation of changes in voting preference.

For hypothesis 8, respondents were asked to identify and explain which of the three types of messages had the most impact on their responses, Emotional (EMO), Personalised/Testimonial (TEST) and Neutral/Rational (RAT). In tables 1 below, VI: Velo-Initiative; HK: Hornkuh-Initiative.

² O = openness to change, C = conscientiousness, A = agreeableness, EM = emotional stability, EX = extroversion, consult page IX for definition.

	EMO	EMO %	TEST	TEST %	RAT	RAT %	N
HK, change	8	38.10 %	7	33.33 %	4	19.05 %	21
HK, no change	9	28.13 %	6	18.75 %	6	18.75 %	32
HK, delta		9.97 %		14.58 %		0.30 %	
VI, change	11	61.11 %	2	11.11 %	3	16.67 %	18
VI, no change	10	28.57 %	3	8.57 %	6	17.14 %	35
VI, delta		32.54 %		2.54 %		-0.48 %	

Table 1: Convincing message designs for opinion changers/non-changers

First, a comparison is made between test subjects that changed their opinion on the initiatives after seeing the fake campaign and those who did not. Analyzing the Hornkuh-Initiative, a difference in preference appears. Test subjects who changed their minds (change) evaluated all three message designs to be more convincing than people who did not change their opinion. With the exception of the RAT message design, this is found as well in the Velo-Initiative campaign. In general, it can be noted that the EMO message design (with a delta of 9.97 % or 32.54 % respectively) as well as the TEST message design in the Hornkuh-Initiative with a delta of 14.58 % seems most convincing. A stronger effect on test subjects who changed their minds can be found in the sample at hand.

	EMO	EMO %	TEST	TEST %	RAT	RAT %	N
Horn cow initiative							
PV, Ele	11	28.21 %	12	30.77 %	7	17.95 %	39
SV, Ele	6	42.86 %	1	7.14 %	3	21.43 %	14
Delta, Ele		14.65 %		-23.63 %		3.48 %	
PV, SA	6	40.00 %	5	33.33 %	4	26.67 %	15
SV, SA	10	35.71 %	6	21.43 %	5	17.86 %	28
Delta, SA		-4.29 %		-11.90 %		-8.81 %	
Uns., SA	1	10.00 %	2	20.00 %	1	10.00 %	10
Bicycle initiative							
PV, Ele	15	38.46 %	2	5.13 %	6	15.38 %	39
SV, Ele	6	42.86 %	3	21.43 %	3	21.43 %	14
Delta, Ele		4.40 %		16.30 %		6.04 %	
PV, SA	8	53.33 %	1	6.67 %	4	26.67 %	15
SV, SA	10	35.71 %	1	3.57 %	4	14.29 %	28
Delta, SA		-17.62 %		-3.10 %		-12.38 %	
Uns., SA	3	30.00 %	3	30.00 %	1	10.00 %	10

Table 2: Popularity of different message designs among swing and party voters

Table 2 analyses which impact message designs have according to respondents' classification as swing voters (SV), party voters (PV) or unsure (Uns.).

While certain peculiarities can be observed in the respective initiatives (emotional message design appears to be more popular with swing voters whereas a testimonial message design is preferred among party voters in the horn cow initiative), these observations do not hold across initiatives. Actually, the opposite seems to apply. For the Velo-Initiative, party voters seem to prefer an EMO message design and swing voters favor a TEST style. However, it can be noted that a RAT message design does not seem to meet with voters' approval except for party voters in the self-assessment definition (12.38%).

In summary, if there was a change caused by the message designs, the results in the Schaffhausen sample suggest an EMO or TEST style rather than a RAT one. Nevertheless, outcomes lead to the assumption that message designs in the setting at hand may have an impact and should not be underestimated.

5 Conclusion

This undertaking resulted in few verified hypotheses in the limited sample at hand. The dynamics observed in one initiative were often not identified in the other. Only hypotheses 4 and 5 (focussing on the five personality traits) could be verified, whereas the other hypotheses were confirmed only partially.

It was shown that the fake campaigns had an effect on the extent of uncertainty regarding the initiatives: a pre- and post-campaign comparison shows a drop of 19.2% of the number of respondents with no opinion. Secondly, all three different message designs Emotionalised (EMO), Personalised/Testimonial (TEST) and Neutral/Rational (RAT) seemed to convince individuals, even though they could not clearly be associated with either swing or party voters. Additionally, qualitative results showed that political information received through the media is the highest category used by respondents to inform themselves. This could indicate that several communication channels and message designs should be used in a campaign. It also showed that opinion changes, after being exposed to the fake campaigns, were twice as high in the youngest cluster (60%) than in the oldest cluster of respondents (29.4%). This could represent an interesting dynamic for political communication.

Swing voters are often presented as the most desirable target of political communication, but it may be worthwhile to focus on the explanations of opinion change due to specific realities, be they demographic or psychographic.

Even though several hypotheses only indicated a partial application, they may indicate areas of further research and the need for greater 'n' study focusing on the dynamics of voting behavior using experimental approaches. This would require, among other things, the testing of several channels of communication, and a more grounded accounting of the specificities of the initiatives under study.

Zusammenfassung

Im vorliegenden Artikel werden drei verschiedene Designs fingierter politischer Kommunikation verwendet und im Kontext zweier Volksabstimmungen im Kanton Schaffhausen positioniert (Velo- und Hornkuhinitiative). Ein Online-Fragebogen mit Fokus auf politische Upstream-Information und Downstream-Entscheidungsfindung wurde Bürgerinnen und Bürgern des Kantons zur Beantwortung zugestellt. Die Daten wurden mittels Gerbers Big Five of Long-Term Characterization (2011) analysiert. Die Analyse suggeriert, dass politische Kampagnen durchaus Unsicherheit reduzieren. Es konnte jedoch nicht bestätigt werden, dass eine spezifische Strategie mit einem Meinungswechsel von Partei- oder Wechselwählern korreliert.

Schlagworte: politische Kommunikation, Wahlverhalten

Résumé

Cette étude utilise trois designs fictifs de communication politique et les utilise dans le cadre de deux votations ayant eu lieu dans le canton de Schaffhouse (Initiative-vélo et Initiative-Hornkuh). Un questionnaire en ligne mettant l'accent sur l'information politique reçu en amont et sur le processus de vote en aval a été administré. Les données ont été analysés utilisant le «Big Five of Long-Term Characterization» de Gerber (2011). Cette analyse suggère que les campagnes politiques peuvent réduire l'incertitude mais n'ont pu confirmer si une stratégie était corrélée avec un changement d'opinion particulier chez les électeurs indécis ou à forte affiliation partisane.

Mots-clés : communication politique, comportement d'élection

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