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**Audience Reactions to Negative Campaigns Spots in the 2005 German National Elections:
The Case of Two Ads Called “The Ball”**

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Abstract

For the 2005 German national elections the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) each produced a TV-ad called “The Ball” (“Die Kugel”). Both ads were unusual for German campaigns for two reasons: they explicitly attacked the political opponent, and one ad referred to the other. The question this paper focuses on is: How did German voters react to these negative spots. In order to test the impact of the spots, an experiment was conducted with 51 citizens using written pretest- and posttest-questionnaires as well as real-time response measurement. The major finding of this paper is that both spots received negative evaluations; they were not able to damage the image of the political opponent but instead led to a negative backlash for the own party respectively the own candidate.

**Audience Reactions to Negative Campaigns Spots in the 2005 German National Elections:
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After the senior partner of the governing coalition in Berlin, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), had lost nine state elections between 2003 and 2005, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder announced on May 22nd, 2005, that he was seeking a re-election of the German national parliament (“Bundestag”) in order to receive a new electoral mandate for his politics. On July 1st, he asked the parliament for a vote of confidence (“Vertrauensfrage”) – the only (but a highly controversial) possibility provided by the German constitution to call for early elections ahead of schedule. As intended, Schröder lost the role-call vote; only 151 of 600 representatives voted for him. Three weeks later, Federal President Horst Köhler announced that the early election would be held on September 18th, 2005.

As demanded by the constitution, a very short election campaign of a maximum of 60 days followed the dissolution of the parliament. Although the parties already started to campaign on the day of Köhler’s decision on July 21st, last doubts about the scheduling of the election day were not resolved until the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court on August 25th (i.e. 25 days before election day), dismissing an action of two members of the parliament. But aside from the tight schedule and the fact that for the very first time a woman and an East German politician in the person of Angela Merkel was running for chancellor, the course of the campaign was quite normal and included the traditional spectrum of political advertisement (i.e. interpersonal communication with voters in public places or public events, posters, television advertising) as well as one televised debate.

In order to promote their top candidates, the campaign teams of the two major parties, the SPD and the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), each produced an ad called “The Ball” (“Die Kugel”) in a television format. Both ads were exceptional for German election campaigns. On the one hand, the spots were remarkable because they referred to each other: The SPD spot was a parody of the CDU spot. Interaction between campaign spots is not common in Germany because of the specifics of the television system. In 1984, the broadcasting system was split up into public and private channels. According to a series of decisions by the Federal Constitutional Court, the two public TV channels (ARD and ZDF) have to fulfill the task to inform the public. To do so in the context of elections, public television does not only cover the campaign but also provides free airtime for the campaign spots of every political party allowed to participate in an election. In national and European elections, each channel provides air time for eight spots with a maximum length of 90 seconds for the two major parties CDU and SPD, four spots for all other parties represented in the national parliament, and two spots for small parties not represented in the national parliament (see Holtz-Bacha, 2000). Because the number of free spots is strictly limited, the number of spots produced for the campaigns is very small – usually, the parties produce only a single spot. As a consequence, televised campaign ads do not refer to each other. Parties are also allowed to air campaign spots on private TV channels, where they have to buy commercial time at regular market prices. Because this is very expensive, only the two major parties regularly make use of this opportunity. But in order to keep the costs within reasonable limits, they usually shorten the spots produced for public TV.

On the other hand, the two spots were extraordinary for German campaigns because of their degree of negativity. German campaign spots generally have a positive tone. Long-term studies show that criticizing statements or attacks against the political opponent appear only in about three out of ten spots aired in the context of national elections (see Holtz-Bacha, 2000; Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 1995). Critical statements are very seldom found in the spots of the two major parties. Between 1957 and 1998, the CDU and SPD expressed critique

in only 15 respectively 23 percent of the sequences in their campaign spots. Of course, the number of critical statements was even lower at the times when the CDU or respectively SPD were in government and above average when they were in opposition (see Holtz-Bacha, 2000). In contrast, the CDU version of “The Ball” contains 13 verbal statements, eight of which (62 percent) are critical of or attack the government. The rebuttal of the SPD consists of six verbal statements; five of them (83 percent) were a direct attack on Angela Merkel.

The unusualness of both versions of “The Ball” raises the question how voters reacted to these commercials. This paper focuses on the perception, evaluation, and impact of these spots on attitudes towards parties and candidates which are analyzed on the basis of an experimental study conducted with a sample of German citizens. To do this, we start with a brief review of the research on the impact of televised ads in Germany. After a description of the data and the stimuli shown to the participants of our study, we analyze the perception and evaluation of the two spots. Finally, we focus on the impact of the campaign spots on party and candidate evaluation.

Research on Televised Ads in German Elections

For German voters, televised campaign spots are one of the sources of information used most frequently in the course of election campaigns (see, e.g., Holtz-Bacha, 2000; Kliment, 1994; Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Semetko & Schönbach, 1994). Because campaign spots are broadcasted directly before or after the major evening newscasts as well as in between entertainment programs they usually draw a large audience. Generally speaking, the reception of political television advertising is not related very strongly with voters, demographic or political characteristics (see Holtz-Bacha, 1990). Although there is a greater probability that people with a high level of political interest will watch campaign ads, a major part of the reached audiences consists of voters with low levels of political interest (see Holtz-Bacha, 2000). Müller (2002) shows that about two thirds of the electorate saw at least one spot aired at prime time on public TV during the last four weeks of the 2002 German national election campaign; the average number of spots seen by the voters was 4.4. Compared to other countries like, e.g., the United States, this number is rather small. In fact, it is only about one quarter to one half as many contacts per ad as recommended by American campaign managers in order to have effects on political attitudes (e.g., Filzmaier & Plasser, 2001). As a consequence, in Germany it is unrealistic to expect any great changes of opinions by watching campaign spots. Maybe this is the reason why most of the German campaign managers think that televised ads are not a very important type of advertising (see Müller, 2002).

The low expectations concerning the impact of campaign spots might be an explanation why only few studies have focused on this particular topic within the context of German election campaigns. Research on the effects of televised political advertising in Germany started with a study of Holtz-Bacha (1990) on the European Union parliamentary elections in 1984 and 1989. Based on survey data, her findings suggested that exposure to campaign ads had a substantial positive impact on the attitudes toward the EU as well as toward the European integration process. In addition, voters who frequently watched campaign spots had a more favorable opinion about the campaign than voters who were not exposed to that kind of advertising. Experimental research on the 2004 European Union parliamentary election conducted with a student sample showed that the reception of campaign spots negatively affected the evaluation of the political parties as well as the attitudes toward EU membership (see Esser, Holtz-Bacha, & Lessinger, 2005). In contrast, watching campaign spots had no impact on political involvement, on most of the attitudes toward the EU and the European integration process, as well as on voting intentions. Esser, Holtz-Bacha, and Lessinger (2005) concluded that campaign spots do not change but reinforce political attitudes. Based on an experiment with a citizen sample, Maier and Maier

(2005) observed that watching campaign spots increased the knowledge about the top candidates and changed the perception of the parties' position toward the European integration process. Although no effects were found on the voters' agenda of the most important problems, the reasons for voting for a particular party (but not the voting decision itself) changed after the respondents had watched the spots. In addition, Maier and Maier (2005) found that exposure to campaign ads tended to decrease political involvement. In another experiment with a student sample, they showed that especially for politically unaffiliated voters the impact of political ads on interest in the campaign depends on the evaluation of the spots (see Maier & Maier, 2006). In general, the studies on the impact of European election campaign spots made clear that televised political advertising can alter political attitudes but those effects are – all in all – rather small.

The very first studies on the impact of televised ads aired during German national elections campaigns were conducted in 1990. Based on a panel study of West German voters, Semetko and Schönbach (1994) found only weak evidence that exposure to televised ads increased interest in the election. In addition, effects of TV spots on attitudes toward the political parties and their top candidates only occurred for the post-communists, the PDS (see Schönbach & Semetko, 1994; Semetko & Schönbach, 1994). In contrast to this, experimental studies with student samples showed that watching campaign ads caused only minor changes of the overall evaluation but had larger effects on the image of the chancellor candidates. The direction and the size of the effects depended on gender as well as on the fact if the students lived in East or West Germany (see Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 1995; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1993a, 1993b). In addition, Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (1993a) showed that watching televised ads evoked feelings about the spot. Those feelings moderated the impact of the party commercials: While positive feelings, like optimism, or excitement caused positive changes of the candidates' images, negative feelings, like concernment, resulted in the deterioration of the images of the top candidates.

In the context of the 2005 German national election, Kaid and Postelnicu (2006) realized an online experiment with German students who watched either the CDU or the SPD version of "The Ball" or both spots. They showed that the CDU spot had a significant, negative impact on the evaluation of Gerhard Schröder. In contrast, neither watching the SPD ad nor exposure to both spots significantly changed candidate orientations. Kaid and Postelnicu (2006) concluded that the SPD spot obviously cancelled out the negative effect of the CDU ad. In addition, they could not prove an impact of the spots on political cynicism but were able to show that the CDU spot substantially increased internal efficacy.

In summary, research has generated some evidence that campaign ads aired in the context of German national elections can affect attitudes toward the top candidates. In addition, the only study published so far on the impact of the two versions of "The Ball" indicates that negative ads seem to work in the intended way, i.e. they damage the image of the political opponent.

Data and Stimuli

In order to test the impact of televised campaign spots on political attitudes and behavior, on August 31st (i.e. one week after the launch of the campaign ads and 19 days before the election for the German parliament) an experiment was conducted among 51 citizens from Landau, a small city in Rhineland-Palatinate.¹ In addition, a control group of 20

¹ Recruitment of subjects took place according to a previously set up sampling plan which controlled for sex, age, and education. Whereas men and women were represented almost equally among the participants (49 vs. 51 percent), there were some divergences in reference to participants' age (18-29: 43 percent; 30-44: 28 percent; 45-59: 22 percent; 60 and above: 8 percent) and education (elementary education: 10 percent; modern secondary school

citizens was recruited.² Six campaign spots from the parties represented in the national parliament were shown to the participants of the experiment. The second last spot shown was the CDU version, the last spot the SPD version of “The Ball”. After each spot, the subjects were asked to fill out a short questionnaire regarding their impressions of the particular ad, specific political attitudes, as well as their voting intentions. In addition, before the reception of the very first spot and after the last spot participants had to fill out an extensive questionnaire about their political involvement, their attitudes towards the political parties, the candidates, and the political issues relevant in this campaign, about their voting behavior, media diet, and demographics. Finally, 50 participants were able to place second-by-second responses to the spots *during* the reception (“real-time response measurement”). To do so, they were provided with 7-point dials with a scale from -3 (“very bad impression of the spot”) to +3 (“very good impression of the spot”) which transmitted the ratings by the respondents to a central computer every second.

The content of the CDU spot shown to the participants of the study may be summarized as follows: A man drops a metal billiard ball on a conference table located in a dusky room. The ball rolls over the table, hits several objects like, e.g., pencils and a glass of water, and leaves them in disorder or broken. As the ball moves, a male voice from the off speaks about the poor economic performance of the government during the last seven years. Shortly before the ball falls from the table, Angela Merkel stops it with her hand, talks about leadership and her political goals, and asks for political support in the upcoming election.

The spot of the SPD was only provided in the internet and not aired on television.³ This spot was a rebuttal to the CDU spot and shows a woman juggling with a metal billiard ball similar to the one in the CDU spot. Although the face of the woman is not shown, it is obvious from the clothes that she wears that this woman is supposed to represent Angela Merkel. The spot starts when the woman catches the ball falling from the table and begins to toss the ball back and forth between her hands. From the off, a male voice describes Merkel

education: 22 percent; A levels/high school: 55 percent, still in school: 14 percent). In reference to party affiliation, which was not assessed beforehand, it was found that government supporters participated in the survey significantly more often than supporters of the opposition parties (CDU/CSU: 33 percent; SPD: 22 percent; FDP: 0 percent; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen: 26 percent; PDS: 2 percent; no party identification: 14 percent, no answer to this question: 4 percent). All participants applied for the study in response to ads published in the daily newspaper “Die Rheinpfalz” as well as in a free weekly local newspaper and received an incentive of 15 Euros. For further details about the design of the study see Maier, Maier, & Klietsch (2006).

² The control group was recruited from visitors of a movie theatre, while the experimental study was conducted at the University. The composition of this group is as follows: men: 50 percent; 18-29 years: 70 percent, 30-44 years: 25 percent, 45-59 years: 5 percent, 60 years and older: 0 percent; elementary education: 20 percent; modern secondary school education: 30 percent; A levels/high school: 45 percent, still in school: 5 percent; identification with CDU/CSU: 40 percent, SPD: 15 percent, FDP: 5 percent, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen: 20 percent, Die Linkspartei. PDS: 0 percent, no party identification: 20 percent. None of the differences between experimental and control group are statistically significant on the level of $p < .05$. All participants of the control group received an incentive of 10 Euros.

³ The SPD spot can still be downloaded (e.g., http://www.spd.de/prj-spdwkportal05/mediabrowser/html/tv_spot03.html).

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as a flip-flopper, who cannot decide about her political goals. Finally, the woman loses control over the ball, it falls down and the voice states that Merkel is not able to decide what to do, but the voters can.

Perception of the Spots

In the sample of West German citizens, both versions of “The Ball” left unfavorable impressions.⁴ Immediately after having watched each spot, the participants of the study were asked how they liked the particular ad. Most people did not like them: 26 percent enjoyed the CDU spot and 38 percent disapproved of it. On average, the spot received a negative rating of -.20 on a 5-point scale from -2 (“did not like the spot at all”) to +2 (“liked the spot very much”). The evaluation of the SPD ad was, on average, even worse. 38 percent rated this spot positively, but 50 percent had negative feelings; the average evaluation was -.30.

More detailed information about the impressions that both spots evoked was provided by the real-time response measurement applied in this study. As Figure 1 shows, the

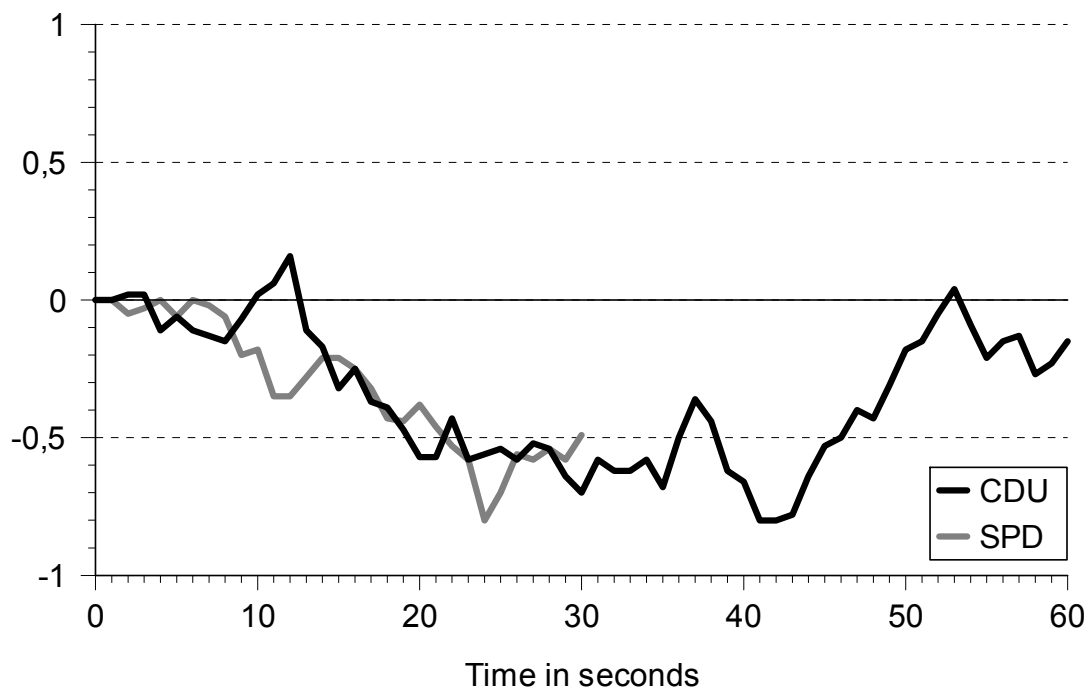


Figure 1. Perception of the Spots: Data from Real-time response measurement (7-point scale from -3 to +3).

evaluation of the CDU as well as the SPD version of “The Ball” continuously dropped during the course of the spot. At the end of the 30-second spot of the SPD, the average rating was -.49. The CDU spot, which was twice as long as the SPD ad, showed an almost similar trend up to the moment when Angela Merkel stopped the ball (second 31) and started to talk about what would have to be done in Germany by the future government. After that, the spot

⁴ It is unlikely that a larger number of participants of the study had had the chance to develop an attitude toward the spots beforehand because the CDU as well as the SPD ad were largely unknown in the sample. Only 14 percent of the participants of the study had seen the CDU version of “The Ball”. Eight percent had taken a look at the parody of this ad provided on the web site of the SPD. Only one person had watched both spots.

evaluation went up and down. The most negative average rating the spot received was -.80. During the last 20 seconds, the spot rating dramatically improved. At its end, the average rating of the spot was -.15. Obviously, the participants of the experiment did not appreciate the attacking parts of the ads, but when the CDU spot started to talk about what would have to be done in the future and the Christian Democrats claimed that they could solve the problems, the average spot evaluation sharply increased. The explanation for this reaction is that there is no culture of negative or comparative advertising in Germany. This is not only true for political advertising but also for regular consumer products for which comparative advertising was forbidden by German law and regarded ethically condemnable until European law allowed it in 1997.⁵ First attempts to introduce comparative and therewith negative advertising in Germany only caused negative reactions in the public and thus were abandoned. Having this in mind, it's easy to understand why the participants in the study did not like this way of advertising.

Even if the CDU spot created somewhat more favorable (but on average still negative) impressions toward its end, Table 1 shows that the mean score measured with help of the real-time response technique was almost the same for both spots (-.34 vs. -.31). This result supports the findings of the spot evaluation by the questionnaires.⁶ Females perceived both spots more negatively than males. While in the case of the CDU spot, younger participants had the most negative impressions, the SPD received its worst evaluations from older persons. In both cases, subjects with a medium level of education gave the most

Table 1: Mean Value of Real-time Response Measurement by Social and Political Groups

	CDU spot	SPD spot	N
Total sample	-.34	-.31	50
Male	-.25	-.01	24
Female	-.43	-.59	26
18-29 years	-.45	.14*	21
30-44 years	-.48	-.38	14
45-59 years	-.01	-.98	11
60+ years	-.25	-.66	4
Low education	.12	-.68**	5
Medium education	-.58	-1.06	11
High education	-.34	-.02	34
Identification SPD or Green Party	-1.12***	-.07*	24
Identification CDU/CSU or FDP	.96	-.78	16
No/other party identification	-.58	-.50	10

Note. Data from Real-time response measurement; 7-point scale from -3 to +3.

Level of significance: * p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

negative ratings. Finally, spot evaluation heavily depended on party attachment in the expected direction (i.e. supporters of the governing parties had a positive impression of the SPD and a negative impression of the CDU spot, while the evaluations by supporters of the opposition were opposite). Persons without party identification perceived both ads as clearly negative.

⁵ For the European law see EU-Richtlinie 97/55/EG from October 9th 1997. For the German implementation see UWG (2004).

⁶ The mean values of the real-time responses measurement were strongly correlated with the general spot evaluation reported in the questionnaires. For the CDU the correlation was .78 (p<.001), for the SPD .66 (p<.001).

The all in all negative evaluations of the two ads are not only to be seen as a function of social or political characteristics of the respondents of the study but also a consequence of the strong deviation of the spots from the German notion of an “ideal” campaign spot (Table 2). Such an ideal spot, according to the statements of the test persons, should provide credible and convincing information presented in an interesting (but serious) way. In addition, it should cast a favourable light on politicians. The last thing what a campaign spot in Germany should do is to be provoking, aggressive, or to attack the political opponent. Both, the CDU and the SPD spot, differed significantly from the ideal televised ad on almost all dimensions. In the case of the CDU, the difference was especially large with respect to attacking the political opponent. For the SPD spot (which in sum showed a significantly stronger deviation from the ideal spot than the CDU ad), the most salient differences were the lack of credibility and the high amount of aggression.

Table 2: Characteristics of an ideal campaign spot, the CDU spot, and the SPD spot

An ideal campaign spot.../ the CDU (SPD) spot... ^a	Ideal spot	CDU spot	SPD spot
...should be/was credible	1.70	-.08***	-.90***
...should be/was convincing	1.51	-.33***	-.66***
...should/did provide information	1.50	-.02***	-.78***
...should be/was interesting	1.22	-.00***	-.60***
...should be/was not boring	1.16	-.52***	-.58***
...should/did show responsible politicians	.96	-.12***	-
...should have/had style	.88	-.16***	-.86***
...should/did show competent politicians	.78	-.42***	-
...should/did show energetic politicians	.38	-.30***	-
...should show/showed congenial politicians	.36	-.53***	-
...should show/showed no pessimism	.34	.65	-.30***
...should/did show appealing pictures	.32	-.22***	-.84***
...should be/was imaginative	.24	-.02	.04
...should be/was entertaining	.04	-.14	.02
...should have/had good music	-.04	-	-
...should be/was not worrying	-.13	-.42	-.86***
...should be/was funny	-.22	1.18***	-.04
...should be/was provoking	-.76	.78***	1.50** *
...should be/was aggressive	-1.04	.63***	1.36** *
...should/did attack the political opponent	-1.14	1.24** *	-
Mean squared difference to ideal spot		3.92** *	5.26
N	50	50	50

Note. ^a 5-point scales from -2 (“does not apply at all”) to +2 (“fully applies”). - = Item was not asked for the SPD spot.

Levels of significance: * p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

Party identification and the perceived difference of the ads from an ideal spot were the most powerful variables explaining the general spot evaluation (Table 3). In both cases, the impact of the discrepancy between the spots shown to the participants of the study and their notion of an ideal campaign spot was clearly stronger than the effect of their party attachment. All other variables (i.e. sex, age, education) had no statistically significant effects on spot evaluation.

Table 3: Determinants of the evaluation of the CDU and the SPD spot

	CDU spot	SPD spot
Adjusted R ²	.39	.42
Sex	.17	-.16
Age	-.06	-.14
Education	-.04	.10
Strength of party identification	.32**	.33***
Mean squared difference to ideal spot	-.51***	-.41***
N	50	50

Note. Presented are the results of an OLS-regression analysis, standardized regression coefficients.

Levels of significance: * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Impact of the Spots

As the final aspect of this paper, the impact of the campaign spots on the attitudes towards parties and candidates will be analyzed. The impact of the spots on the evaluation of the two parties CDU/CSU and SPD was rather small and always insignificant (Table 4). Both the CDU and the SPD spot had slightly negative consequences for the evaluation of the Social Democrats. After having watched both versions of “The Ball”, the evaluation of the

Table 4: Impact of the CDU and the SPD spot on party and candidate evaluation

	CDU spot	SPD spot	After both spots
<i>SPD^a</i>			
Pretest	.30	.22	.30
Posttest	.22	.12	.12
Difference	-.08	-.10	-.18
<i>CDU/CSU^a</i>			
Pretest	.26	.18	.26
Posttest	.18	.22	.22
Difference	-.08	+.04	-.04
<i>Schröder^a</i>			
Pretest	.02	.10	.02
Posttest	.10	.06	.06
Difference	+.08	-.04	+.04
<i>Merkel^a</i>			
Pretest	.10	-.16	.10
Posttest	-.16	-.06	-.06
Difference	-.26*	+.10	-.16
N	50	50	50

Note. ^a Scales from -5 (“does not like [party, politician] at all”) to +5 (“like the [party, politician] very much”).

Levels of significance: * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

SPD dropped about -.18 scale points. In the case of the CDU, the original spot had a small negative impact, while the rebuttal had a small positive effect. After the reception of both spots, the participants had only a slightly more positive feeling about the CDU (+.04).

Looking at the evaluations of the two chancellor candidates, the picture of the limited impact of the two spots does not change very much. In the case of Schröder, the CDU spot had a small positive effect, while the SPD spot had a minor negative influence. After subjects had watched both ads, Schröder received slightly better evaluations from the participants of the experiment (+.04). The CDU spot had a significantly negative impact on Merkel, while the SPD had a small positive effect. After having watched both spots, Merkel’s image had suffered (-.16) instead of improved.

All in all, it appears that the CDU spot damaged the image of the Christian Democrats and their top candidate Angela Merkel instead of improving her standing before the elections. At the same time, the SPD spot had a negative impact on the Social Democrats as well as on Schröder. Considering this backlash effect, the main intention of both spots – namely to damage the image of the political opponent – did not work very well. Only in one case (the impact of the CDU spot on the evaluation of the SPD), an ad was successful in this respect.

Reactions to the campaign spots, of course, were not uniform, but the responses of the participants depended on their spot evaluation. At the same time, the reactions did not always follow a common, clearly visible pattern. Again, there were only few significant effects of the two campaign spots (Table 5): First, for those respondents who liked the CDU spot an

Table 5: Impact of the CDU and the SPD spot on party and candidate evaluation by spot evaluation

	CDU spot	SPD spot
<i>SPD^a</i>		
Total sample	-.08	-.10
Negative evaluation	-.09	-.15
Neutral evaluation	-.17	-.50
Positive evaluation	.00	+.11
<i>CDU/CSU^a</i>		
Total sample	-.08	+.04
Negative evaluation	-.11	+.03
Neutral evaluation	-.11	-.17
Positive evaluation	+.23*	-.11
<i>Schröder^a</i>		
Total sample	+.08	-.04
Negative evaluation	+.09	-.05
Neutral evaluation	+.06	-.50
Positive evaluation	-.08	+.05
<i>Merkel^a</i>		
Total sample	-.26*	+.10
Negative evaluation	-.31*	.00
Neutral evaluation	-.06	+.33
Positive evaluation	+.08	+.16
N	50	50

Note. ^a Scales from -5 (“does not like [party, politician] at all”) to +5 (“like the [party, politician] very much”).

Levels of significance: * p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

increase of +.23 for the sympathy rating for the CDU/CSU occurred. Second, for those who had negative impressions from the CDU ad, a strong backlash effect for Angela Merkel can

be observed (-.31). In addition, there are two interesting relationships between spot evaluation and the direction of their effects: On the one hand, attacking the political opponent generally did not have the intended consequences. In three out of four cases, a positive evaluation of a spot did not lead to poorer evaluation of the attacked party or person. On the other hand, there is a tendency that unfavorably rated televised ads damaged the image of parties and politicians – of those who were target of the attack and of those who produced the spot.

Some studies in the field of political communication argue that negative campaign ads increase the voter's skepticism about the political system and its representatives. In the context of this analysis, this would mean that the acceptance of both parties, respectively both candidates, should suffer from the reception of the spots. In order to measure those effects, an composite measure based on the score of the best-rated party (and in analogy to this, an index based on the score of the best-rated candidate) was created (see, e.g., Rattinger, 1993; Maier, 2000). This indicator is very common in Germany to measure dissatisfaction with political parties. The logic behind this index is that the evaluation of political parties largely depends on individual party attachments. Persons who have a specific party identification usually evaluate "their" party more favorably than other parties. Although those people have negative feelings toward many other parties, they are not dissatisfied with the political parties because they have a clear-cut picture of the political world. Because of the selective perception and processing of information, it would be no surprise if watching campaign spots would increase the positive image of the party a voter is attached to and at the same time lead to more negative evaluations of other parties. If, in contrast to this, the reception of negative campaign spots would be followed by a decline of the created composite measures that would be a strong indicator for political cynicism caused by negative campaign spots.

After watching the two versions of "The Ball", none of the six possible effects analyzed here were statistically significant (Table 6). Nevertheless, after the exposure to the

Table 6: Impact of the CDU and the SPD spot on best party/best candidate evaluation

	CDU spot	SPD spot	After both spots
<i>Best party evaluation^a</i>			
Pretest	2.56	2.44	2.56
Posttest	2.44	2.46	2.46
Difference	-.12	+.02	-.10
<i>Best candidate evaluation^b</i>			
Pretest	2.12	2.16	2.12
Posttest	2.16	2.20	2.20
Difference	+.04	+.04	+.08
N	50	50	50

Note: ^a Index based on the best evaluation for CDU/CSU and SPD; index ranges from -5 ("does not like both parties at all") to +5 ("likes at least one of the parties very much"). ^b

Index based on the best evaluation for Schröder and Merkel; index ranges from -5 ("does not like both candidates at all") to +5 ("likes at least one of the candidates very much").

Levels of significance: * p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01.

CDU spot, the index score dropped somewhat (-.12) and rose negligibly after the reception of the rebuttal (+.02). In sum, both spots slightly weakened the positive feelings toward the two parties (-.10). In the case of candidate evaluation, the opposite effect occurred. Both spots caused a small, but uniform increase of candidate evaluations (each +.04). In sum, watching the two negative campaign ads strengthened the feelings toward the candidates (+.08).

When we, once again, put aside the assumption that all participants of the experiment reacted in the same way to the campaign spots and analyze the effects of the ads by spot evaluation, the effects of the campaign spots on citizens' satisfaction with the major political parties and the chancellor candidates became stronger. Interestingly, the effects on the index of best party evaluation for the single spots are not very strong and not consistent (Table 7).

Table 7: Impact of the CDU and the SPD spot on best party/best candidate evaluation by spot evaluation

	CDU spot	SPD spot	After both spots ^c
<i>Best party evaluation^a</i>			
Total sample	-.12	+.02	-.10
Negative evaluation	-.37	+.04	-.89
Neutral evaluation	-.11	-.17	-.07
Positive evaluation	+.23*	+.05	+.15*
<i>Best candidate evaluation^b</i>			
Total sample	+.04	+.04	+.08
Negative evaluation	+.05	-.08	-.44
Neutral evaluation	.00	+.50	+.29
Positive evaluation	+.08	+.05	+.15
N	50	50	50

Note. ^aIndex includes the best evaluation for CDU/CSU and SPD; index ranges from -5 (“does not like both parties at all”) to +5 (“likes at least one of the parties very much”).

^bIndex includes the best evaluation for Schröder and Merkel; index ranges from -5 (“does not like both candidates at all”) to +5 (“likes at least one of the candidates very much”). ^cIndex of best spot evaluation, includes the best evaluation for the CDU and the SPD spot; index ranges from -2 (“does not like both spots at all”) to +2 (“likes at least one of the spots very much”). Levels of significance: * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

The only exception from this is the impact of the CDU spot: After watching this ad, persons with a positive spot evaluation showed a significant increase of the best party evaluation. In contrast to this, participants who passed a negative sentence about the spot evaluated the party more negatively after than before watching the ad. However, this picture changes considerably if we analyze the impact of the campaign ads after the reception of *both* spots. For participants who had a positive impression about at least one of the spots, the image of the two major parties as well as of the chancellor candidates somewhat improved (+.15). In the case of the parties, this increase is statistically significant. Those subjects who evaluated both spots negatively also rated parties and candidates more negatively after watching the ads (-.89 and -.44, respectively). Although both effects are not statistically significant, this seems to be a clear indication that negative campaign spots can foster political dissatisfaction.

Summary and Conclusion

The two campaign spots examined in this paper were exceptional for Germany because of their explicit attacks on the political opponent and the fact that one referred to the other. German campaign spots primarily have a positive valence and due to the small numbers of spots produced and aired in the course of a campaign, rebuttals are unfamiliar to German voters. Thus, the question in focus of this paper was how German voters reacted to these spots. The short answer is: not very favorably. Both spots received, on average, negative evaluations by a sample of German citizens who watched the ads in an experimental setting. In addition, real-time response measurement showed that negative feelings toward the spots occurred as long as the political opponent was being directly attacked.

Although the average ratings of the two spots were negative, the impact of the ads on party and candidate orientations was quite limited and only in few cases statistically significant. Nevertheless, it was obvious that both, the CDU and the SPD spot, were not able to damage the image of the particular political opponent but rather caused a negative backlash on the evaluation of the own party respectively the own candidate. This pattern is, of course, the opposite of the results reported by Kaid and Postelnicu (2006) for young German voters. A differentiation of the impact of the two ads by positive, neutral, and negative spot evaluations made clear that even in the case of positive assessments of the ads, negative campaigning did not work in the intended way (i.e. damaging the image of the political opponent). Moreover, in the case of negative evaluation the ads tended to belittle the reputation of both parties and both chancellor candidates.

This observation leads to the question whether negative campaign spots foster dissatisfaction with parties and politicians in general. The results of the simple pretest-posttest comparison yielded no effects. Again, after analyzing the effects for those participants who liked the spots and for those who did not, a much clearer pattern emerged – especially if we take a look at the changes of party and candidate evaluations after the reception of both spots. For those persons who liked at least one of the ads, the image of the parties as well as of their top candidates slightly improved. In contrast to this, for those participants who rejected both spots, dissatisfaction with parties and politicians increased. This result also differs from the findings of Kaid and Postelnicu (2006) reporting that the two negative ads did not create political cynicism among young voters.

This study (like most of the other studies in this field, too) has, of course, its limitations – limitations which are typical of experimental research. In addition, we have to admit that the subsequent viewing of both versions of “The Ball” was highly unlikely for German voters, as the SPD spot was only available in the internet. Although the reception situation created in this experiment was not very realistic, the results presented in this paper confirm other analyses reporting that campaign spots are able to influence German voters. As the findings of previous studies on the impact of televised advertising in the course of German election campaigns are very mixed, further research on this topic is strongly recommended.

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