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## **I know what you did last summer.**

### **How knowledge of possible election outcomes determines voting decisions**

Democratic elections are based on the principle of equality, i.e. that all voters can cast their vote under the same conditions and that any vote counts as much as any other. At the German general election in 2005, however, this fundamental principle was – as we will show – in danger of getting hurt. It is not the aim of the paper to condemn a situation which, analysed from the perspective of the theory of democracy, could certainly give cause for concern. Rather, we want to make use of these unusual circumstances to investigate under almost ideal conditions the phenomenon of tactical voting. This paper thus belongs to the field of research that analyses the effect of knowledge about the public opinion on voting decisions.

What made the 2005 election special was that in one East German constituency the election had to be postponed. A candidate had died so close to Election Day that no follow-up candidate could be nominated in time. According to German law, a by-election was held at a later date. At that time, all constituents knew about the outcome of the first ballot as a non-disclosure of the provisional result was regarded as not feasible. And a close run it was: The two major parties were separated by a tiny margin of three seats – exactly the number of seats which could theoretically be affected by the outcome of the outstanding by-election. This meant that the 219,000 voters had a tactical advantage over those 62 million people who had already voted.

The questions we want to investigate is (1) whether the knowledge of the provisional election result would have a (de-)mobilizing effect, (2) whether the late voters used their chance to vote tactically and (3) how tactical voters differed from those who refrained from voting strategically. In order to answer these research questions we conducted a multi-level analysis. On

the first or aggregate level we run a simulation and projected the outcome of the election in our special constituency had it voted on the same day as all other German voting districts. This was done by analysing outcomes and voter fluctuations of two previous elections in comparable constituencies. This technique had before been successfully tested for three other cases. We then compared our projection to the actual result. Differences must, at least to some extent, be due to tactical voting. However, such analyses can only help to investigate results for political parties. If we want to leave this aggregate level in order to find information on who it was who was prepared to vote tactically and who was not we have to gather data on an individual level. Thus we conducted a representative phone survey amongst 289 people who were eligible to vote in the by-election. The survey took place after the main election but prior to the by-election. Households were contacted using random digit dialing, the interviewees were selected using the last-birthday method. The response rate was 40 per cent. The data was weighted by sex, age, education and household size. The survey covered topics such as political preferences, voting intentions, the perceived importance of the up-coming by-election and the proneness to vote tactically. Additionally, we conducted a quantitative content analysis to find out to what extent the late voters were informed about options and possible consequences of strategic voting.

We found interesting results for our research questions. As one would expect, when looking at the close outcome of the first election, the majority of the late voters were convinced that casting their votes was still important. The demobilising effect was marginal. The simulation underlined this result: the difference between our projection and the actual turnout was only 7 per cent. Knowing that East Germans tend to be less politically active, it would have seemed legitimate to expect a greater decline. However, as previous research on influence of published opinion polls on voting decisions showed, participation rises when close outcomes are expected. This appears what was the case here. Despite the open race the willingness to alter

one's voting decision was limited. For nine out of ten voters (89 per cent) we found that they wanted to vote for the same party in the by-election as they would have voted for initially. For those who did change their voting preference we found that preferences for the Liberal Democrats (a party who traditionally relies on tactical votes), a swing-voting disposition and the belief in the ability to alter the election result were determining factors.

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