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**The ‘missing link’ – Merging survey and content analysis data
for a multi-level approach in election research**

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**The ‘missing link’ – Merging survey and content analysis data
for a multi-level approach in election research**

The paper discusses the advantages and problems of merging survey and content analysis data in multi-level election studies. On the one hand, multi-level approach not only provides theoretical advantages for election studies, but also overcomes some disadvantages of conventional regression analysis and analysis of variance. On the other hand, there are several problems when merging survey and content analysis data when applying multi-level modeling to secondary data as known from election polls. The advantages and problems, as well as different solutions, will be discussed at the example of a selected national election in Germany.

The *theoretical* advantage of multi-level approach is the integration of different election approaches in the fields of political and communication science: (1) The micro perspective is represented e.g. by the sociological model of the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and by socio-psychological models (e.g., Asher, 1983) which focus on voters’ party affiliation and candidate images. Socio-psychological models also serve as a basic model for many election studies in communication research (e.g., Semetko & Schönbach, 1994; Kepplinger & Maurer, 2005). These studies prove that media coverage can alter voters’ images and opinions of candidates and parties. (2) The macro perspective on voters’ decisions is represented by the cleavage approach (e.g., Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) which explains party systems as well as voter alignments in accordance to socio-cultural conflict lines. (3) Recent studies in political science (e.g., Klein & Pötschke, 2000) examined the role of both, micro and macro determinants by applying multi-level modeling. These studies suggest that socio-cultural cleavages have lost quite a lot of their impact. Yet, these studies do not consider – neither theoretically nor empirically – the probably important role of media coverage. Thus the crucial question, whether media coverage has a stronger impact on voters’ decisions than cleavages nowadays, remains unanswered.

There are also *statistical* advantages of multi-level approach (e.g. Slater, Snyder, & Hayes, 2006): Like regression analysis, multi-level modeling considers several explanatory variables – yet, these are not only on the level of the individual voter, i.e. the micro level, but can also be attributes of a constituency (e.g. percentage of Catholics), i.e. context variables on higher levels. Like analysis of variance, multi-level modeling considers interactions between the explanatory variables – yet, not only between predictors on the individual level, but between predictors on different levels (‘cross-level interaction’). Therefore, multi-level modeling can answer the abovementioned question whether media impact beats cleavage impact.

In our *secondary analysis* we applied a multi-level approach to a selected national election in Germany.¹ By merging poll data and results from several content analyses, we examined whether television news watched by voters and newspaper coverage read by voters are better voting predictors than socio-cultural cleavages and other voters’ attributes (e.g. being a Catholic and worker). (1) The empirical study tested different *algorithms for merging* content analysis data into survey data. (2) Besides, it indicated several *problems* of merging such data for a multi-level approach – like the insufficient recording of media use in most election polls on the micro level and the insufficient sum of cases for some calculations on the macro level of constituencies. (3) Furthermore, we found different results for conventional regressions (with voting as a metric variable), for logistic regressions (with voting as a dummy variable) and for hierarchical linear models (i.e. multi level modeling). (4) Nevertheless, the statistical analyses prove that content analysis data can successfully be incorporated into survey data. (5) And the empirical results indicate, that media coverage has some influence on voters’ decisions compared to other impact factors on the micro and macro level.

¹ We used representative survey data from the ‘German national election studies 1949 to 2002/03’, provided by the ‘National Archive’ (Zentralarchiv, ZA) for our empirical study.

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