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Summary / Zusammenfassung
Public opinion polling – defined as the empirical investigation of representative cross-sections of the population by means of standardized surveys – is also a growth industry in Switzerland. The media act increasingly as demanders and give surveys a new visibility. Opinion polls clearly have news value – particularly in the sector of politics. However, their proliferation has also given rise to criticism. When the opinions of the population are recorded by demoscopic methods, published by the media and thus flow into the formation of public opinion, polling is no longer merely a matter of suppliers and demanders. In the nineties Swiss parliamentarians asked for prohibition or restriction of opinion polls in the run-up to referenda and elections. In justifying these initiatives, the assumption was made that the publication of opinion polls affects both the participation level and voting behavior of the voters – although this assumption has never been subject to empirical examination in Switzerland.

The project fits neatly into this empirical gap. It is certainly plausible to assume on the basis of the present state of research that no strong uniform mechanism exists in the sense of a simple stimulus-response model. At the same time, however, it may be objected that many of the studies conducted so far have not sufficiently come to grips with the complexity of the processes presumed to be at work. After all, the fact that no direct net effect is measurable may well be due to the fact that the effects cancel each other out. So there is a need not only to examine theoretically differentiated assumptions regarding such effects, but also to apply approaches which permit causality analyses to be performed for different groups and constellations. In this study, the various stages of information processing form the theoretical basis of the analysis: contact with opinion polls, attention to survey reports as well as understanding, recall and acceptance of the results of surveys are all recorded as basic requirements for impact. These are then investigated with a view to determining changes in attitude, intended or actual behavior of the voters and subsequently assigned to theoretical models. The focus is consequently directed at the predispositions and cognitive processing styles of the voters in addition to their differing media use. The question leading the research is not whether a general direct effect exists, but rather under what framework conditions and assumptions it may appear.

As the present state of research on the effects of published opinion polls is disparate and the methodology of impact analyses is highly demanding, a multi-stage procedure is indicated for the study: a distinction is thus made between a heuristic meta-analytical phase, an experimental phase and a representative field-experimental phase. The advantages of this step-wise approach are that the central parameters can be isolated, thus yielding a differentiated image of the empirical reality which is backed up in several ways, and that it makes good sense in terms of research outlay.

In theoretical terms, the project has a strongly interdisciplinary orientation. An attempt is made to create an integrative model from a political-science angle by combining the approaches developed by political-science research into public opinion and communications-science research into the impact of the media. This is done by applying the theses employed in social psychology relating to information processing, attitude change and the bandwagon effect. Seen from this perspective, this project yields insights into the processes of opinion forming by the voters which can also be of great interest in a media society beyond the limited domain of opinion polls.
Publications / Publikationen


Keywords / Suchbegriffe
Opinion polls, impact, bandwagon- and underdog-effect, experiments and surveys

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