Opening the ‚black-box'

Exploring Immediate Audience Responses to Rhetorical Strategies in Televised Debates

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Research Interest

- Televised Debates – „TV-Duell" - most watched political tv program in Germany (Zubayr, Geese & Gerhard, 2009, S. 643)

What effects do different rhetorical strategies have on audience percpetions?

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Theoretical Framework

one

Rhetorical Strategies

- Distinction between substance and relational strategies (Martel, 1983)

Relational Strategies (Benoit, 2007)	Examples
Attacks	Criticizing opponent for failures or plans
Acclaims	Highlighting own achievements
Defenses	Reactions to previous attacks, justifying oneself

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Audience Perceptions

Evidence from campaign research: Attacks

Three effect-types revealed

- Intended effect: Lower evaluation of the target (e.g. Wadsworth et al., 1987)

- Backlash effect: Lower evaluation of the source (e.g. Garramone, 1984)

- Lower evaluation of both (e.g. Merrit, 1984)

→ Interaction with party-identification assumed (e.g. Maier, 2007)

→ Depends on quality of attacks (e.g. Fridkin & Kenney, 2004)

Evidence from campaign research: Defenses

Risky for three reasons (Benoit, 2007)

- Candidate appears reactive and inconfident

- Candidate may get off-message

- Defense shift the attention to the weak points of the candidate

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Object of Research and Hypotheses

H1: Effects of pre-debate attitudes: The more positive the attitudes toward a candidate´s in-group, the better her statements are rated.

H2a: Positive Polarization: The more positive the attitude towards a candidate's in-group the greater is the approval of attacks of the in-group candidate.

H2b: Negative Polarization: The more positive the attitude towards a candidate´s in-group, the greater is the refusal of attacks of the out-group candidate.

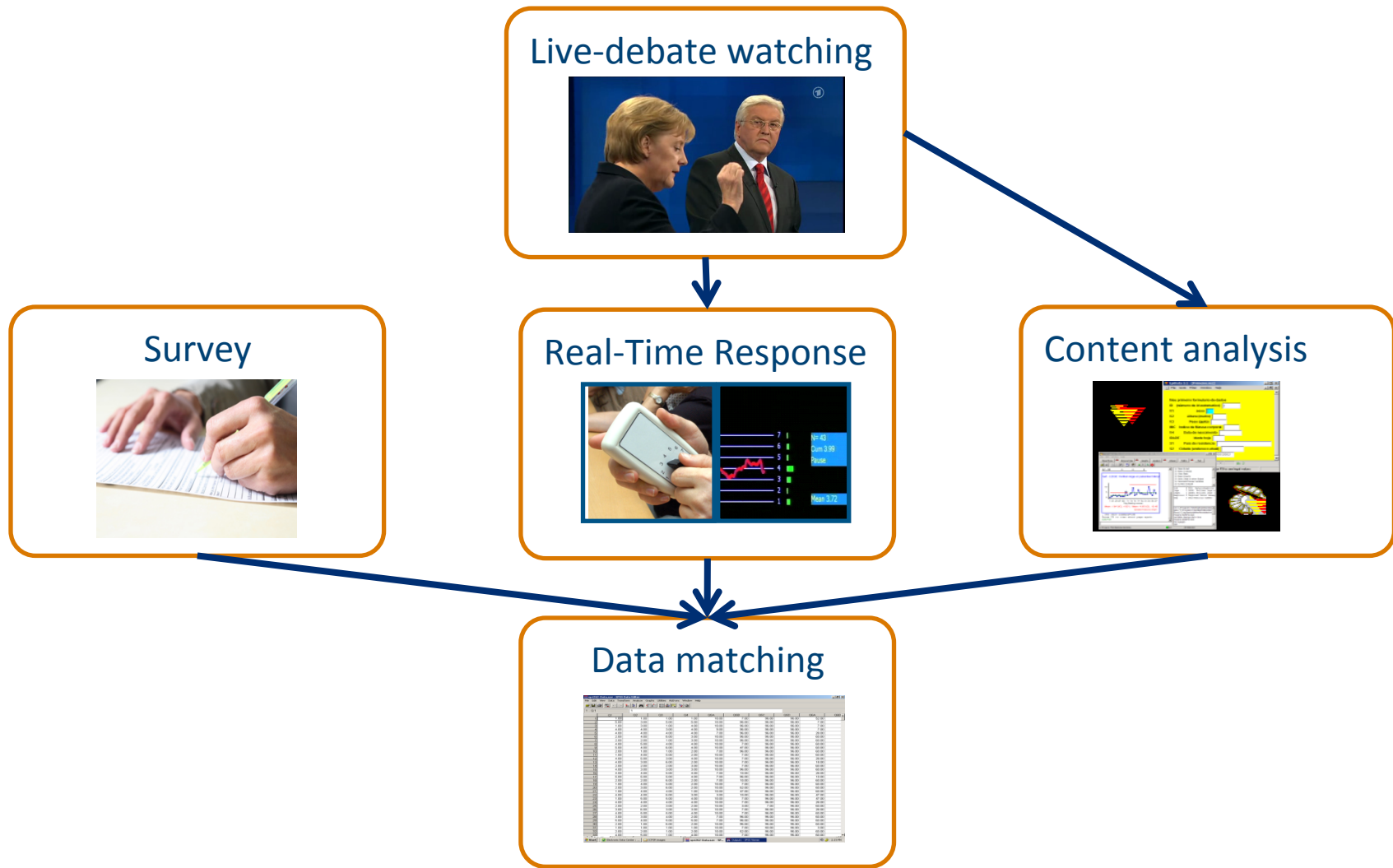H2c: Backlash effect on independents: Independents rate attacks worse than acclaims.

H3: Negative effects of defenses. All viewers rate defenses worse than acclaims.

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Research Design

two

Research design

Live-debate watching

Survey

Real-Time Response

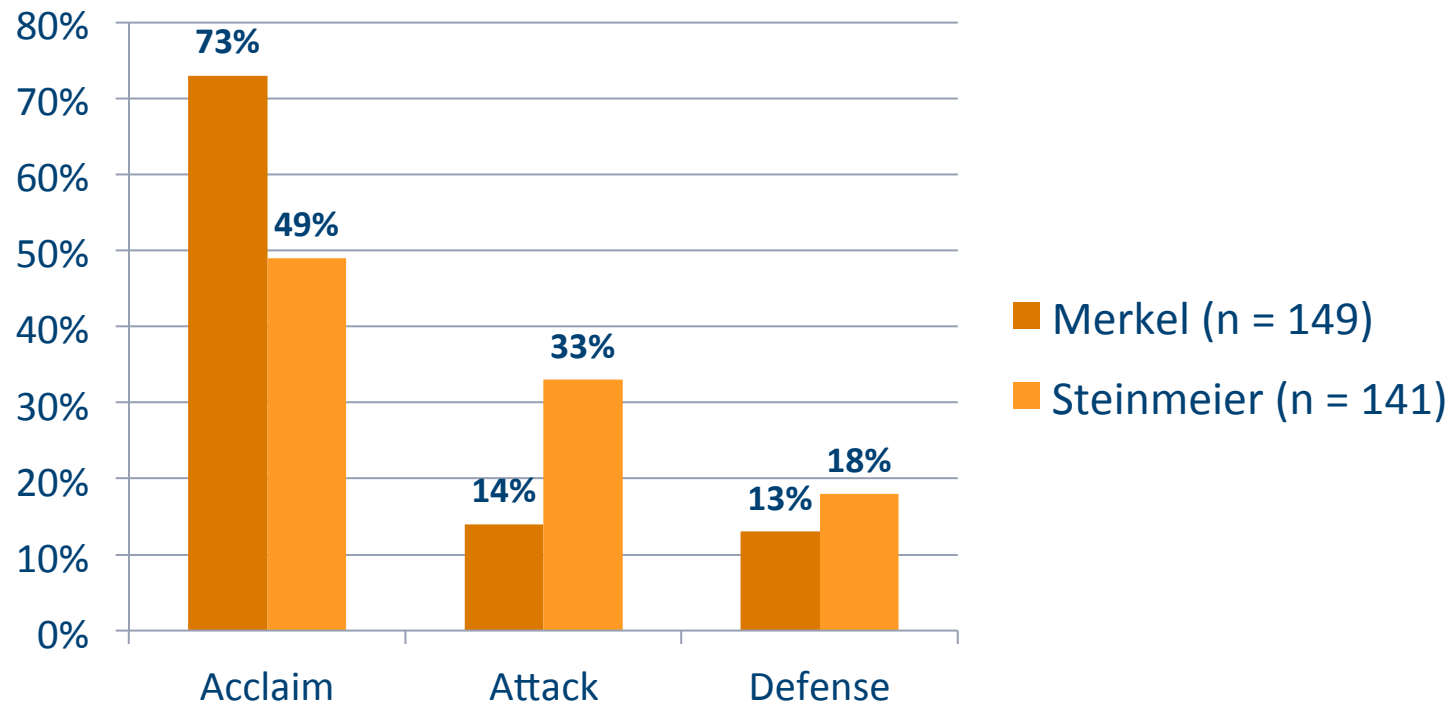
Content analysis

Data matching

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Results

three

Which strategies did the candidates use?

- Traditional incumbent-challenger-pattern: More attacks by Steinmeier
- Acclaims: predominant rhetorical strategy → Acclaims as benchmark

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Results

- H1: positive effects of the pre-debate attitudes towards the in-groups (M: .14*** | S: .09***)

- H2b: tendencies of negative polarization effects of attacks (M: -.01[+] | S: .01*)

- H2c: Steinmeier: weak backlash effect on independent voters (-.06[+])
- Merkel: weak backlash effect on participants leaning towards her cap (-.03**)

- H3: Clear evidence for negative effects of defenses (M: -.18*** | S: -.28***)

- H2a: No evidence for positive polarization of attacks

- **Pattern of results mostly in line with theoretical predictions**
- **But: Only small, partly only marginally significant effects**
- **Effects of rhetorical strategies with no meaningful extent?**

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Discussion

- Special circumstances of the 2009 election race:
  - Economic Crisis – Grand Coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD
  - Little suspenseful TV debate within the sitting government

- Methodological issues concerning the analysis of immediate audience reactions during a real debate
  - Mean aggregation of RTR ratings per statement reduces variance

- **Optimistic outlook: In a more suspenseful campaign and especially with a more adequate stimulus, we expect our findings to be supported in a clearer manner**
- → **Of course subject to further empirical investigations**

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