

**Title:**

“What is predictive modelling?”

Restrictions for data-driven political micro-targeting in Germany using the example of door-to-door campaigning

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**Abstract:** The revitalization of canvassing in recent elections is deeply related to campaigns' growing possibilities of analyzing voter data to gain knowledge about their constituents, identify their most likely voters and serve up personalized messages through individual conversations. The research literature about political micro-targeting focusses hardly on campaigns in parliamentary democracies with strict data protection laws. Based on in-depth expert interviews we introduce a framework of constraints in strategic political communication and reveal several restriction on the macro, meso and micro level which hinder the implementation of sophisticated data strategies in Germany. We argue, that political micro-targeting depends highly on system-level contextual factors, budgetary and legal restraints, party structures and even individual decisions and knowledge of campaign's leaderships.

**Short teaser:** This article reveals restrictions of micro-targeting and data-driven canvassing in parliamentary democracies with strict data protection laws.

**Keywords:** micro-targeting, canvassing, campaigning, qualitative, data

**Declaration of novelty and no competing interests**

By submitting this manuscript we declare that this manuscript and its essential content has not been published elsewhere or that it is considered for publication in another outlet.

No competing interests exist that have influenced or can be perceived to have influenced the text.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the manifold opportunities presented by online campaign tools and multimedia channels nowadays, political parties in the U.S. and Europe seem to have built a resurgent interest in an originally 'premodern' campaign tool to mobilize voters and ultimately generate votes: door-to-door canvassing.

This revitalization is deeply related to campaigns' growing possibilities of analyzing voter data to gain knowledge about their constituents, identify their most likely voters and serve up personalized messages through face-to-face conversations. A look at the extensive research literature about data-driven canvassing reveals a sharp contrast of the number of studies conducted in the U.S. to research in European countries and especially Germany. Therefore, the variation in the institutional frameworks, social and legislative conditions is almost limited to the one-country case and reveals the existence of a research gap regarding data-driven canvassing in parliamentary democracies with strict data protection laws.

However, the Obama and Trump campaigns made data-driven campaigning and micro-targeting known in a broader public – also in Germany, where data-driven efforts are subject of controversial public discussion: Critics fear manipulations of voters and violations against national privacy laws. On the opposite, supporters hope for a mobilisation of specific target-groups like swing voters or infrequently voting partisans who often abstain from voting.

Based on a political actor's perspective, we discuss data-driven political micro-targeting against the backdrop of canvassing in the German social, legal, media and electoral context. Three central research questions structure our arguments:

**RQ1)** What importance do contemporary German campaigns and parties attribute to the use of data for targeting voters?

**RQ2)** How do German campaigns use data-driven canvassing?

**RQ3)** What are the restrictions of political micro-targeting in Germany?

To address these questions, we present findings from in-depth expert interviews with nine campaign coordinators of parties running in the state parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate in 2016 (Christian Democrats [CDU]; Social Democrats [SPD]; the Green Party [B90/Green Party]; the Left Party; the Liberals [FDP]; the populist right-wing party Alternative for Germany [AfD]) and a comprehensive review of literature on data-driven campaigning and data protection laws in Germany.

Based on these insights, we introduce a framework of constraints in strategic political communication and reveal several restrictions on the macro, meso and micro level which hinder the implementation of sophisticated data strategies. We argue, that data-driven political micro-targeting in Germany depends highly on system-level contextual factors, budgetary and legal restraints, specific campaign contexts, organisational party structures and even individual decisions and knowledge of campaign's leaderships.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Data-driven Canvassing

With few exceptions (i.e. Anstead, 2017; Pons, 2013) the majority of literature on the use of data and technology in political campaigning discusses U.S.-presidential campaigns (i.e. Kreiss, 2016; Nielsen, 2012). Besides broader discussions about modes of professional campaigning in Europe (Tenscher, Mykkänen & Moring, 2012) the literature on the role of data and technology for political parties in countries with strict national privacy laws has not been systematically reviewed yet. Therefore, we present a literature review of data-driven campaigning in Germany, particularly in the context of

canvassing. In this process, we highlight and define crucial terms, give insights into the emergence of modern campaigns' communication channels and the influence of data.

## 2.1 Data and Micro-targeting in political campaigning

In the context of political communication, we understand micro-targeting as a strategic process, which is geared towards addressing persuadable or mobilizable voters with tailor-made messages while ignoring others. Castleman (2016) distinguishes two terms which are often used interchangeably: "modeling" and "micro-targeting".

*Modeling* describes the practice of using algorithms and observed data to build statistical or machine learning models to mine users with similar attitudes and behaviors (clustering) or predict unobserved actions or preferences (predictive modeling). For political campaign communication, models are often built at the individual level using survey data or relevant voter information. On the one hand, compiled information by local and state election authorities (e.g. voter files, structural data sets) contain voters' addresses, sociodemographic characteristics, voter turnout records or voting histories for specific districts or states. On the other hand, more individual (behavioral) information from campaign's own data or commercial data vendors include donation activity, campaign contact histories, consumer records or digital trace data.

*Micro-targeting* is a commercial direct marketing practice and refers to the process of making strategic decisions at the individual level about which customer to target with what campaign message. In sophisticated campaigns, these decisions are informed by algorithm-based models. Therefore, *modeling* and *micro-targeting* are clearly intertwined, but they are not inseparable as modeling can still be done on other types of data, and micro-targeting can be done in the absence of models. Therefore, different approaches of political targeting can be distinguished: *Geographical targeting* is the oldest approach and very coarse. It is based on the analysis of precinct-level results from past elections to identify auspicious electoral constituencies. Another approach is targeting *groups with shared demographical characteristics* such as income, religion or occupation. Reliable data about a series of demographics is needed to build algorithmic models for distinguishing individuals for each targeted voter group. Sophisticated targeting-approaches are based on the *analysis of individual attitudes, behavior and values* of the electorate. Building on the assumption that these characteristics are more coherent with the voting decision, they promise satisfactory targeting results if reliable data is used.

Postmodern election campaigns use modeling and micro-targeting to improve the *efficiency* of how campaigns with limited resources are run and how campaigners *communicate with voters*. They get insights into how different populations view issues and help to find voters who can be persuaded or mobilized with different campaign messages through direct communication channels like phone calls, social media or canvassing. Furthermore, the use of digital platforms or apps can improve these communication attempts and also support the organisation and evaluation of a campaign.

## 2.2 Implementing Data into German Campaigning

Although the roots of data-driven campaigning in Germany can be dated back to the times when public opinion polls were on the rise in the early 1950s (Noelle-Neumann, 1955) tentative attempts with more sophisticated practices took place in the context of the federal election 2005 with grassroots campaigns from CDU ("teAM Zukunft"), SPD ("wirkaempfen.de") and the Greens ("Mach Mit!") (Jucknat & Römmele, 2008). These campaigns were carried out "completely isolated from other campaign activities" (Hennewig, 2013, p. 160) in distinct constituencies and lacked a "proper communication and entrenchment in the main campaign organisation" (Heinrich, 2013, p. 176). As a

result, only widely scattered campaign aides and party sympathizers were reached and could not be used as strategic communication multipliers. In the federal election 2009 various improvements were made: Both CDU and SPD connected their organisation platforms (CDU: teAM2009.de; SPD: meineSPD.net) with databases to build up a central organisation structure and implement the grassroots campaign into the main campaign activities. But the level of interactivity, dynamic and participation clearly lagged the MyBO platform of the Obama campaign (Lilleker & Jackson, 2009), resulting in a more or less ineffective mobilization of volunteers throughout Germany. Although first attempts were made at targeting voters in geographical regions and demographic groups with so called “mobilization indices”, target specific communication channels were only perceived marginally by the voters. Only two percent of voters perceived email, social media or SMS contacts while a majority was aware of posters (75%) or tv ads (50%) (Schmitt-Beck & Wolsing, 2009, p. 51). While the Obama campaigns used reliable data, experimental findings and sophisticated data modeling to identify individual voter targets and messages, German parties in the federal election 2013 still lacked staff, time, expertise and money to establish this kind of a high-tech driven hunt for individual voters. Though German parties started to build databases and experiment with data, strict data protection regulations hampered the possibilities of micro-targeting. Therefore, the targeting efforts in the federal state election 2013 were more a grope about in the dark instead of a target-oriented campaigning strategy.

This development goes hand in hand with social, political and technological changes, which ultimately result in a political actor’s need for an enhancement of electoral communication strategies mostly described as “professionalization” or “modernization” (see Kamps, 2000). The evolution of data-driven campaigning can best be described along the adapted model of ideal campaign types by Magin et al. (2016) (see Table 1). It focuses on four ideal campaign types, which emerged within a certain timeframe when the essential technological possibilities became available: 1) *Partisan-centered campaigns* address the core party members and partisans with face-to-face interactions, partisan press, newspaper ads, radio broadcasts and posters. Thus, campaigning was rather based on local and decentralized strategies.

	Partisan-Centered Campaigns	Mass-Centered Campaigns	Target-group-Centered Campaigns	Individual-Centered Campaigns
<b>First possible in the</b>	First phase (~1850 to 1960)	Second phase (~1960 to 1990)	Third phase (~1990 to 2008)	Fourth phase (~ since 2008)
<b>Prime communication channels</b>	Printed press, face-to-face/canvassing	Limited-channel television	Multi-channel television, internet	Multi-channel television, Web 2.0, canvassing 2.0
<b>Key target audiences</b>	Partisans, party members	Masses	Target-groups	Individuals
<b>Newly added campaigning tools</b>	Print media, rallies, meetings, foot soldiers	Broadcast television news, polls, news advertisements	Internet, direct mail, phone calls, area-based targeting	Web 2.0 platforms, canvassing 2.0, micro-targeting, A/B-Testing

Table 1: Model of ideal campaign types (adapted after Magin et al., 2016).

2) With the establishment of nonpartisan media and limited-channel television, the range of mass media coverage expanded drastically. *Mass-centered campaigns* emerged and provided the opportunity to address disperse masses by unidirectional messages while also being supplemented by partisan-centered campaigning tools. As a result, campaigning was increasingly based on national strategies. 3) *Target-group-centered campaigns* developed while technological progress and historic events led to increasing importance of individualism and modernism within civil-society echoing in an increasingly fluid electorate. Campaigns started to address voter segments with similar interests via multi-channel television ads and the internet. These campaigns are characterized by “top-down, centralized communication and supplement the previous campaigning tools with party and candidate websites, banner ads and direct mailing by e-mail” (Magin et al., 2016, p. 1702). 4) The establishment of new multimedia technologies and developments in social structures resulted in an erosion of traditional milieus, reducing commitment of voters to political parties and a fragmentation of media use among the electorate. Thus, political parties needed to mobilize not only hardcore partisans but potential or wavering voters as well, refining the target-group orientation to *individual-centered-campaigns* with database technology, voter segmentation and micro-targeting as its key features. Data-driven canvassing and the manifold Web 2.0 platforms provide ideal channels to address individual voters with tested tailor-made messages directly while bypassing the mass media threshold.

However, real campaigns will hardly ever meet these ideal types but rather use a mixture of all campaigning tools depending on the strategic direction campaigns choose, who it wants to address with what message and what restrictions.

## **2.2 Executing Data in German Campaigning using the example of canvassing 2.0**

We showed, that improved capability to target individual voters offers campaigns an opportunity to concentrate their resources where they will be most effective. As Nickerson and Rodgers (2014, p. 71) put it, “[o]ne could argue that the growing impact of data analytics in campaigns has amplified the importance of traditional campaign work”. Thus, door-to-door canvassing is currently experiencing a renaissance among parties and election campaign strategists in diverse political systems. It was primarily during the 2004 presidential elections that data-driven canvassing emerged as one of the key instruments in the Howard Dean and George W. Bush campaigns (Kreiss, 2016) and sparked worldwide attention as decisive factor behind Barack Obama’s successful presidential bid in 2008 and 2012 (Nielsen, 2012; Kreiss, 2014; 2016).

However, canvassing is by no means an invention of modern election campaigns. On the contrary, modern canvassing traces back to the rise of contested elections in the UK and was also used by the National Socialist Workers’ Party (NSDAP) during the rise of Nazi-Germany (Mühlberger, 2004). After World War II, canvassing was almost suspended until the 1960s, where German parties used it in local elections and switched their canvassing resources away from persuading voters, focusing only on identifying their supporters and mobilize them. With the rise of television, resources were shifted from the ground to mass market advertising, with canvassing seen as a relic of the past and an “elaborate ritual bringing some sense of gratification to the participants, but making no difference to election results” (Denver, 2000). With the decline of electoral turnout, an increasing diversification of electronic media and the corresponding fragmentation of media use among the electorate, the generic mass media’s one-way scattergun approach of campaigning became increasingly unsuccessful in reaching, let alone mobilizing or persuading specific target-groups. Therefore, door-to-door campaigning attracts attention from campaign strategists. It allows for unique contacts that stand out from the media torrent, reaches a clearly defined universe of individual targets, and has measurable effects (see, among others, Green & Gerber, 2008; Michelson & Nickerson, 2011). After Barack

Obama's re-election campaign in 2012 was lauded for its sophistication in ground organisation, data analyzation and micro-targeting, German parties are trying to find ways to translate door-to-door canvassing into the German electoral setting. First attempts with data-driven canvassing were made at the federal election 2013. The aim of these canvassing campaigns was to reach out to the voters, get votes from the undecided and draw those back to the party who deflected in the last election in 2009. The sentiment of going to the people instead of them coming to the party to get information about the election is a big shift in the German campaign philosophy. Usually, most voters contact party members at a rally or stop by an party information booth in a public area.

### 2.3 Framework of constraints in strategic political communication

Against the backdrop that strategic political communication underlies certain social, political, legal, technical and cultural contexts, we adapted the analytical framework by Vowe and Wolling (2000) to explain constraints of decision making in campaign communication in different contexts. A key statement condenses the underpinning theory in one sentence: "Every strategist risks the success of his venture if he neglects the conditions which determine his actions." (Vowe & Wolling, 2000, p. 58). Drawing on this, we argue that there are three constraint dimensions for the strategic use of certain campaigning strategies and tools: 1) external dimensions (Macro Level), 2) internal-organisational dimensions (Meso Level) and 3) individual dimensions (Micro Level) (see Table 2).

1) Macro Level	2) Meso Level	3) Micro Level
1a) Electoral and 1b) Party System	2a) Party Culture	3a) Politicians
1c) Political Culture	2b) Technology and Infrastructure	3b) Campaign Managers
1d) Legal Foundations	2c) Databases	3c) Volunteers / Party Members
	2d) Personnel and Financial Resources	3d) Voters

Table 2: Dimensions of constraints in strategic communication (adapted after Vowe & Wolling, 2000)

The model can be either used to explain a particular case, for example a campaign in one country, or to compare campaign cases in different nations. In this paper, we present empirical findings of data-driven canvassing in Germany and therefore use the framework as leading categories in the data collection and presentation. In the following we present each dimension along specific subdimensions:

#### 1) Macro Level of constraints

1a) *The electoral system*: According to Esser and Strömbäck (2012, p. 296) presidential government systems offer more incentives for strategies of individual-centered-campaigns than parliamentary systems which are characterized by party-focused styles of campaigning. This is especially the case for the German electoral system, where Germans cast two votes on election day: one for a candidate and one for a political party. To make sure the Bundestag (federal elections) or Landtag (state legislature elections) reflects the party preferences of the overall electorate, the votes for individual candidates determine who will represent each constituency in the parliament. Although personalized appeals can also be seen developing over the last 20 years in Germany (Maurer & Engelmann, 2014), especially state legislature election campaigns tend to focus not on leader personalities. Furthermore, the

German electoral systems doesn't foster individualized and decentralized campaign styles that concentrate on heavily contested key districts or battleground states.

*1b) The party system:* While parties in multi-party systems need to put more distance between themselves and their opponents with distinct ideological profiles and issue agendas, they enjoy more flexibility in how to address non-affiliated voters in two-party systems, which is better suited to the logic of individual-centered-campaigns. There are also differences between party types: "Leader platform parties" are not as deeply rooted within society as tradition-rich "programmatic parties" and are therefore much more dependent on targeted practices. Furthermore, countries with high levels of party identification and high numbers of enrolled party members can potentially rely on stronger support for party-driven campaign operations than other countries (Plasser & Plasser, 2002). German parties are mostly financed by membership fees and state funds which derive from the outcomes of the elections (statistics can be found in Deutscher Bundestag, 2017). Donations by private persons and organisations are also allowed but are far more lower than in the U.S. Also, state legislature elections are characterised by the fact that parties only have very limited electoral budgets at their disposal (Lewandowsky, 2013, p. 322). Thus, direct methods of addressing voters constitute an important alternative to the costly advertising campaigns.

*1c) The media system:* Drawing on Esser and Strömbäck (2012, p.297), media-saturated, multi-channel environments with higher degrees of television, newspaper, and internet penetration will make sophisticated strategies of targeted communication more likely than narrow media environments. This is very relevant for Germany, where more than three quarters of its population uses television, almost half uses newspapers or radio and close to one third use the internet to inform oneself of political news (Engel & Breunig, 2015). Furthermore, technology infrastructure is increasingly relevant for the use of target-oriented campaigning practices (Kreiss 2016). This is more the case for the U.S. but is also relevant for Germany, which ranks at the 15<sup>th</sup> place of the Networked Readiness Index (GITR, 2016).

*1d) Political culture:* In comparison to the U.S., Germany can rely on comparatively high turnout cultures and constituents with political beliefs that are more or less intact. However, recent studies observed a general process of partisan de-alignment also in Germany (Dalton, 2004), meaning fewer people have fixed attachments to political parties and fewer are now members of the same. This leads to a decline in voter turnout and an increased electoral volatility (ebd.) and makes elements of individual-centered-campaigns more likely to emerge. Also, historical divisions between the former East and West still play a role in modern German politics, so that party loyalties are often defined by old borders and party associations also reflect economic divides, like they do in the U.S. Deriving from history, there is a great sensitivity among the German public about their political views, accompanied with a general distrust of the intrusive political marketing techniques.

*1e) Legal Foundations:* In contrast to U.S. campaigns, where privacy laws are comparatively weak and fragmented (Bennett, 2016), Germany is covered by very strong data protection rules. Although it is allowed to get information on voters by administrative offices these data remain on a basic level. There is particularly a lack of information on more valuable information like individual participation in past elections and registrations in a party. Additionally, German data protection laws do not allow to combine individual data with further information from other databases. The legal source important for data use in political campaigning is the Federal Data Protection Act (BDSG). The law determines fundamental principles for data collection and processing by public authorities and private institutions: Public and private institutions shall avoid unnecessary data collection (data avoidance) and regard data economy (§3a BDSG). The collection of data is only allowed to fulfill a specific purpose (§28 (1) BDSG). Political parties can gather data if they are necessary for their organisational activities. However, this is limited to the personal data of party members or persons who have regular contact to the

organisation (§28 (9) BDSG). Furthermore, data can only be collected when affected persons explicitly agree (§4a BDSG). People also have the right to have their data rectified, cancelled and blocked (§6 (1) BDSG). In contrast to the USA, where political databases are updated regularly, the German law forbids a storage of personal data for the long-term. Data has to be deleted when the purpose is fulfilled (§35 (1) BDSG). In addition to that, political parties are not allowed to store data on racial or ethnic origin and political, religious or philosophical beliefs (§35 (2) BDSG). This leads to the problem that German campaigners cannot build larger databases for micro-targeting. Lastly, German data protection is integrated in a larger legal framework: In the Charta of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union the protection of personal data is declared (Article 8).

## 2) Meso Level of constraints

2a) *Party Culture*: As we've already pointed out in the chapter about restrictions of *the party system*, German parties differ in specific ways. But there are also differences within the party, meaning the party's organisational structure or party culture. The SPD is an example for a highly *democratic internal organisation structure* which also extends to its processes (Conrad, 2008). More than 12.000 local associations (Ortsvereine) are the core of it, which are grouped into subdistrict, district, state and youth organisations. The subdivisions determine SPD's policy and elect their party leader and the members of several committees, like the Executive Committee, which in turn elects SPD's 13-member presidium. The democratic structure is vertically and horizontally intertwined, making the SPD a highly democratic but also slow working apparatus. This can pose a problem in time of elections, in which fast and sometimes disagreeable or policy dissenting decisions must be taken. As the archetypal 'catch-all party' that is pragmatic and office-seeking, the CDU is an example for a *decentralized party organisation structure* (Conrad, 2008). The state, district, county and local organizations together with other auxiliary groupings, are mostly independent of any national or central control. This party culture can constrain election campaigns in two ways: success hinges on the question if the subnational and auxiliary groups can be mobilised at the national level and if a national campaign strategy can be applied throughout all subdivisions.

2b) *Technology and Infrastructure*: From rather mundane tools (like e-mail, campaign websites), communication tools (like social networking sites) through to organizational tools (like apps, online platforms), the internet emerged as hub for digital technologies, revolutionising the organisational 'back-end coordination' of political campaigns (see Hindman, 2005). Especially individual-centered-campaigns need innovative fast ways to connect volunteers, supporters and political staffers and to help to process data, develop strategies and guide messages across platforms and voters. Therefore, specialists and consultants with expertise in the use of digital tools have become ever more important for developing new strategies for resource allocation, evaluation and organisation of political campaigning (Kreiss, 2012). Lacking the resources (time, money, specialized staff) to adapt or integrate modern technologies into political campaigns, can lead to great disadvantages.

2c) *Databases*: Databases serve as the backbone of individual-centered-campaigns. Vast amounts of voter information can be easily accessed, managed and updated. Therefore, building, maintaining, and supplementing databases shape all aspects of a campaign's electoral and communication strategy. To have recourse to maintained databases and integrate them into the campaign makes for huge advantages in target-oriented communication efforts.

2d) *Personnel and Financial Resources*: Sophisticated data-driven canvassing is money intensive and requires trained personnel and staff. As mentioned in the chapter about restrictions of *the party system*, German parties rather have a small budget at their disposal. In nowadays convergent media environment German parties must make strategic decisions about the channels and tools they want



to invest in without neglecting others. For a data-based canvassing campaign, parties must invest in modern technologies, data, analytics, skilled staffers and a nationwide field infrastructure. Moreover, canvassing needs trained campaigners and volunteers. In comparison to the U.S., German parties can rely on established party structures with paying party members. While the SPD and CDU has close to 430.000 members, the smaller parties have around 60.000 (The Greens) to 55.000 members (FDP; the Left), whereas the 2013 founded AfD has 26.000. With regards to canvassing, this means an advantage for the bigger parties.

### *3) Micro Level of constraints*

*3a) Politicians:* Politicians are, as personifications of party ideologies, in the centre of the campaigning process and have the power to decide over every aspect in a campaign. If politicians refuse to use data-driven tools, the whole campaign organisation is affected by that decision.

*3b) Campaign Managers:* Individual-centered campaigns need highly professionalized campaign organisations coordinated by central headquarters and subordinated offices. Therefore, campaign managers bear responsibility for the strategies as well as for the tactics in the campaign. Constraints can occur when managers do not have the skills to implement data-driven methods or refuse to do so for other reasons, like a political background without experience in practical campaigning (Maarek, 2011, p. 183).

*3c) External Consultants:* The evolution of campaigning shows an increasing number of outside consultants in PR, advertising and other areas (Norris, 2007). External consulting fulfills special tasks which cannot be done by the campaigning team itself. It introduces new skills and measures into a campaign. However, this advantage can turn into a disadvantage when consultants try to change strategies and tactics based on their expertise.

*3d) Volunteers / Party Members:* Canvassers are crucial in door-to-door campaigns. Constraints can derive from the fact that most volunteers have little access to the campaign headquarters and do not have the competence in postmodern political marketing. Missing professionalization can then lead to a false implementation of the campaign plan or even to a breakdown of door-to-door activities in one region. Hence, in highly professionalized campaign assemblages the main tasks of the field coordinator are to keep contact with volunteers and to organize activities (Maarek, 2011, p. 183).

*3e) Voters:* Even if data-driven canvassing is working from the planning to the organisation of volunteers, there is a last constraint dimension, namely the voter. Constraints reach from temporal aspects, like the moment of the visit, to attitudinal factors, like the political mindset of a targeted person.

### **3. Methodology**

Research on political campaigning means difficult access to the field in most cases. During and before political campaigns, campaign officials and staffers try to hide their strategies from the contestants and public (Jungherr, 2017, p.11). Works on political campaigning either use theoretical or qualitative and ethnographic approaches (Jungherr, 2016; Nielsen, 2012). However, the studies of Jungherr (2016) and Nielsen (2012) provide impressive proof that research on strategy, organisation and tools during campaigns are possible. This study is also qualitatively oriented and uses six in-depth expert interviews with nine campaign coordinators of the most promising parties running for state parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate in 2016 (CDU; SPD; B90/Green Party; the Left Party; FDP; AfD). The use of this methodology can be justified with reference to the objective pursued: by those means, election campaign experts should allow for systematic and comprehensive acquisition of information concerning data-driven canvassing in the German social, legal, media and electoral context. The study

of statewide campaigns provides two major benefits: First, there is still less research on state elections, particularly in the “new” states of the former eastern part of Germany. Hence, this study can contribute to close a research gap in political communication research in Germany. Second, state elections can be highly instructive for canvassing research: It can be assumed that all parties in statewide campaigns are doing canvassing. This is also due to the fact that state elections have a lower turnout and are seen as an electoral sideshow. In addition to that, smaller and more extreme parties have higher chances as more voters want to teach a lesson to the established parties (Bräuninger, Debus & Müller, 2012). Consequently, also powerful parties like the CDU and SPD have to use mobilisation techniques such as canvassing. Additionally, state elections take place in a limited regional environment which means that door-to-door campaigning is more useful.

The theoretical part shows external and internal factors which influence data-driven campaigning. These dimensions are used as leading categories for the empirical study of canvassing in Germany. We used a semi-standardised guideline separated into the topics campaign organisation, communication strategies, data use and canvassing. The guideline followed the suggestion of Bogner et al. (2002) to provide an open conversation to let the respondents add further information when necessary. The first section of the interview contained open questions about the organisation and basic strategies of the parties to contact, mobilise or persuade voters. The experts could explain leading ideological principles, issues, persons and programs. The second interview block was about specific questions on data-driven canvassing. All interviews were protocolled, transcribed (Mayring, 2010, p. 55) and analysed with the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

#### **4. Empirical Findings**

To answer the leading questions about the importance, use and restrictions for micro-targeting and canvassing in Germany, we will present our findings along the framework of constraints’ macro, meso and micro level.

##### *1) Macro Level: Systemic Restrictions*

##### *1a) Electoral and 1b) Party System 1c) Political Culture*

All German campaign managers agreed, that data-driven campaigning has arisen during an era of partisan de-alignment and declining vote share. Therefore, parties “must find newer methods to engage with the electorate in a more complex, multiparty system” (SPD). Contrary to the U.S. or UK electoral system, which incentivizes parties to use their resources to target voters in battleground states, the German electoral system is characterised by proportional representation, long-established party strongholds and rare competitive constituencies. Therefore, German campaigns need other data sources to decide which constituencies should be targeted by canvassing efforts. The Green campaign managers mention an “urban-rural-gap” which gives their Party advantages in cities, particularly those with universities. The other experts say that party associations also reflect economic divides (The Left), and that some parties tend to fare better in one region or the other because of “historic ties” (CDU) to the area or “persistent socio-economic differences between them” (SPD). Another finding is that new and smaller parties do not have good chances because the political landscape is more oriented towards the bigger parties due to stable electorate milieus. The right-wing party manager additionally mentions social marginalisation of the party because of its controversial standpoints (AfD Interview).

In the German parliamentary system, campaigns also must decide if the canvassing campaign should get the first or second vote. This impacts if a candidate has to join the canvassers at the doorsteps (the Left, CDU) and how to talk to the voters at the door. Summarized, the German political culture,

electoral and party system makes the organisation of data-driven canvassing campaigns especially challenging. Because German parties lack other data sources and more detailed information, they use geographical targeting and focus on “constituencies that had been party strongholds in the past, but saw lower voter turnout in former elections” (CDU, SPD, The Greens).

#### *1d) Legal Foundations*

All campaign managers show a great caution in regards to data protection standards in Germany. Exemplarily the SPD manager says that “Data is a high sensitive topic. There are literally millions of data provider on the market and it was clear to us that only somebody serious is eligible for us.” The interviewee also named a main reason for that, namely that the party must be trustworthy and transparent because there is great distrust among the public about persuasive political campaigning techniques. This also applies to targeting technologies which differ noticeably from U.S. techniques, which according to the Left campaign manager “could never migrate to Europe because the sensitivity of data concerning political affiliation is rooted in a German political culture”. Therefore “the smallest target units are streets and constituencies not households” (SPD). Although, all parties attribute a high relevance of data for their campaigns, only some have experimented with different data sources to find the ideal way for the strategic organisation (SPD, CDU). Because of that, the SPD manager stresses the importance of focusing on a few constituencies with high potentials and low wastage of advertising. To ‘circumvent’ the strict data laws, German parties started to collect data with apps (CDU) or clipboards (SPD) at the voters’ doorsteps, which are computerised in a database. In terms of law-abidance, this also needs explicit declarations of consent.

#### *2) Meso Level: Organisational Conditions*

##### *2a) Technology and Infrastructure*

Contrary to U.S. campaigns, digital tools are not fully established in German federal and state elections. However, the interviews with the CDU, SPD and FDP revealed attempts to professionalise campaign infrastructures in Rhineland-Palatinate: The SPD and FDP tried to mobilise volunteers by using a digital platform where party members can connect and stay up-to-date. This site can also be used to coordinate canvassing operations. While the FDP experts see a value of the platform for organisation, SPD’s campaign managers didn’t see great benefits because the platform lacks usability, more detailed information about constituencies or streets and possibilities to interact. The SPD managers even put more emphasis on analogue channels of internal communication: “We are using stuff which suits best for our members and that are papers. I think we had most information in a final document, brought it to the trainings and distributed it by our offices” (SPD). This finding is also documented in the Green Party Interview. The Greens suggest the use of notes and maps to their volunteers: “The people should use lists to document where they did their visit. Maps can be used to coordinate ‘Team A’ and ‘Team B’.” (B90/Green Party Interview). The CDU could have used an app for the organisation and data gathering during canvassing activities but personal opinions of leading personnel opposed this idea. All in all, ‘offline technologies’ like clipboards (SPD) and excessive phone calls (The Left Party) prevailed in the campaigns’ infrastructure.

##### *2b) Databases*

The use of databases to store voter information varies from party to party. Overall, legal foundations were often mentioned in the interviews and an equivalent of the U.S. vote files are completely missing due to legal restrictions. Therefore, German parties rely on data from in-house distribution lists (CDU), past election results in single constituencies (CDU; SPD) and free available data on turnout and

demographic factors (SPD). In practice, the SPD, CDU and Greens build a so called 'mobilization index' revealing constituencies with a high probability of ringing on doors of former Social Democrat voters, meaning former partisans who abstained from voting in former elections. Although these data can be helpful to identify auspicious areas, because of strict data rules the campaigns don't have access to household information. For this reason, the SPD bought data from an external data vendor which was not really satisfying: "The company only has data for districts in a particular city. We ask them how it is in other districts, then they calculated something with their data. [...] In the end there are just some minor differences which do not have a statistical correlation to the election results - and that's it." (SPD). The manager of the Liberals added that external data by the German Post is not that significant and therefore not reliable for their campaign. Nevertheless, the German Post service called 'Post Direct' is used to exclude partisans of other parties: "The German Post knows exactly if membership magazines of the AfD or the Green Party are distributed to households. Then you know that a FDP invitation is not suitable in these households." (FDP). Also, the Green Party uses the service of the German Post but only for direct mailings. Past election outcomes cannot be seen as reliable data for three further reasons: First, there are different lists existing in the municipalities and the state election commissioner. Additionally, some local authorities outsource their system of registration. Second, political gerrymandering changes the data of past elections which can then not be compared with older data. Third, data from municipalities is processed differently than the party's dataset which complicates analysis (SPD). In contrary to the U.S., German parties do not have full access to useful datasets - a fact which can mislead campaign managers and is known in political communication literature: "[...] the quality of the outcome is no better than the quality of the input: Garbage in - garbage out." (Burton & Shea, 2010, p. 91).

### *2c) Personnel and Financial Resources*

Generally, the campaign experts stated that the campaign funding is based on their local savings without any financial help of the national party. The logic behind this system assumes an institutional separation between the two. Unlike PR methods and the use of social media, data-driven canvassing is a highly resource intensive instrument. As we've mentioned above, German parties don't have high budgets at their disposal and have to "make a smart mixture" (SPD) of possible communication channels limited by a tense budget situation. Although there are attempts to send out paid staff, financial restrictions are a key constraint: "We cannot afford to pay everybody at any place for canvassing." (SPD). Missing money also affects feedback from voluntary canvassers as they do not have the obligation to report to campaign headquarters (SPD). In addition to that, investments to external consultants (FDP, SPD), data vendors (FDP, The Greens) and the purchase of data (SPD) are further positions in the budget. Particularly the data service by German Post Direct is "really expensive" (FDP). Especially smaller parties struggle with financial constraints, which could consolidate power in the larger and more financed parties and make it more difficult for smaller parties to be nationally competitive. Therefore, concerning the organisation of campaigns, the AfD and Left manager "listen to their gut feeling".

### *2d) Party Culture*

Drawing on the interviews, party cultures within political parties played a significant role in shaping their use of data and canvassing efforts. Members of party divisions with a long history tend to be very self-confident and often refuse to follow the headquarters' rules for canvassing (SPD). So, the campaign managers are only able to declare focal points for canvassing but "cannot instruct the local chairman to do canvassing in a particular area." (SPD). "Nevertheless I don't want such a structure like

in the U.S. as the German thing with traditional local committees is fantastic (SPD). Contrary to U.S. campaigns, where “campaign assemblages” (Nielsen, 2012) get together before elections, German parties are working throughout the year. This means local party committees are additionally planning and carrying out campaign measures (SPD; FDP; Left Party) which is useful for the campaign headquarters as they are “dependent on the local structures” (SPD) to save resources and to carry out the campaign exhaustive. According to the interviews, German party culture is characterised by top-down as well as bottom-up communication which can be used to produce a better understanding of new campaign strategies (CDU; SPD; FDP; Left Party). Especially the Green Party tries to empower its members to become a part of the opinion-forming process and the planning of the campaign. Furthermore, the Green’s party ideology limits the use of data in campaigns because it’s a “question of faith” whether the party should purchase information on voters. Still, they assign the Deutsche Post for direct marketing efforts.

### *3) Micro Level: Individual Constraints*

#### *3a) Politicians, Candidates and 3b) Campaign Managers*

One crucial limitation on the micro level are individuals. If a frontrunner feels uncomfortable with the idea of walking from door to door or a campaign manager focuses other channels, a canvassing campaign is not a good idea (CDU). Furthermore, in some canvassing campaigns frontrunners are supposed to be part of if there are no other appointments (CDU, The Left). The experts refer to their advantage in getting in contact with voters. However, frontrunners take part in major events as well as media meetings and other statewide campaign activities which limits the time budget for canvassing. Hence, the interviews revealed that local politicians are more important for canvassing. Well-known candidates in their home regions and towns play a significant role as opinion leaders (FDP; Left Party, CDU). “There are some single cities or towns where we do have some very good outcomes. This is because of the persons on the ground. There are always persons who are very prominent and who are active for many years.” (Green Party). The CDU expert also stated, that if the general secretary of the local party walks from door to door, people would automatically come out and talk to her. Another result of our interviews are the various levels of knowledge about canvassing or data technologies, like predictive modelling. Two of our interviewees even responded with the question “What is predictive modelling?” (The Green Party; The Left Party) and after explaining reacted with the sentence “I barely passed my statistic course. [...] You don’t need such skills when you are working in a party. No matter what anyone tells you, it is not true.”. Therefore, we could find a lack of knowledge about new technological and statistical instruments.

#### *3c) Volunteers and Party Members*

Members are described as “the centrepiece” (SPD), “the backbone of the campaign” (The Green Party) and as “very engaged” (AfD). However, party members and sympathisers are not professional and paid agents using elaborated techniques in their campaign activities, although there are attempts to integrate low-paid persons (SPD). Therefore, the major challenge is to mobilise and manage party activists to engage in the campaign. People must be convinced (The Green Party; SPD) of the campaign before they get involved: “I think the great age of party soldiers is over except from few cases. You have to grip people and they have to be keen on campaigning.” (Left Party). The first crucial limitation of voluntary action is time: “The biggest problem is the reconciliation of family life, job and political engagement.” (SPD). There is also a risk that an excessive use of volunteers in campaigns could lead to a weariness for upcoming elections (SPD). The second limitation are the skills of canvassers (Left Party; CDU): “You need openness, sympathy, eloquence and warmth if you want to talk to people at their

doorsteps. These skills have to be transmitted.” (CDU). Furthermore, the SPD expert said, that it is hard to run a modern data-driven canvassing campaign when your canvassers are mostly retirees (SPD), drawing on the average age of the German party members. Therefore, parties (CDU, SPD, The Greens) developed systems to train their activists in how canvassing works. However, the all campaign managers gave examples that there are limits to what could be achieved, as political parties are still voluntary organizations.

### 3d) Voters

Even if a door-to-door campaign is planned strategically and shouldered by many volunteers, success is only obtained if targeted voters are open to visits. One limitation concerns the timing of the visit. While most of the party experts recommended visits from 16.30 on during the week the Left Party campaign manager is against Sunday visits. Also, special working hours of shift workers and especially commuters (SPD) or religious habits (CDU) have to be kept in mind. The SPD manager emphasised the meaning of being honest concerning the reason of the visit and of showing the canvasser’s motivation to walk for the party (SPD). Another issue are negative reactions at the door (AfD; Left Party; SPD). Particularly, the AfD manager named social desirability as a huge problem because the party is widely seen as a right-wing party: “People are afraid to profess themselves to the AfD. [...] Many want to keep distance to the party in public.” (AfD). Also, the Left Party expert mentioned the problem of getting negative reactions, especially in rural areas. Age and sex are further dimensions with impact for canvassing campaigns. Young voters in university cities must be addressed differently than older people from rural regions (The Green Party) and the AfD interview revealed difficulties with female voters who are more likely to reject the party. Again, parties (CDU, SPD, The Greens) developed special trainings to teach canvassers these basic sources of failure and how to react. But even if canvassers are well prepared and contacts are seen as successful there is no guarantee for a desired voting behaviour: “Voters are still humans and not computers which react to a formula you type in” (CDU). In summary: “It is no easy to mobilise people.” (SPD).

## 5. Summary

We showed that German campaigns make first attempts at targeting voters with direct contact at their doorsteps based on data analysis. Although all German parties show wide interest in the use of data and canvassing for voter targeting, only the *Volksparteien* (CDU, SPD) attribute high relevance for their actual campaigns and invest time, money, know-how and staff. However, our findings show that German ‘data-driven’ canvassing cannot be compared with the highly sophisticated U.S. campaigns which use reliable data, experimental findings and data modeling to identify individual voter targets like swing voters or infrequently voting partisans – “many of whom pay little attention to news and who frequently are not interested in (or even decidedly disenchanted with) electoral politics” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 18). By contrast, German parties use geographical targeting based on the analysis of precinct-level results from past elections to identify auspicious electoral constituencies for their canvassing efforts. According to Nickerson and Rogers (2014, p. 51f.) those techniques were used “as recently as a decade or two ago [...] and appear extremely rudimentary by current standards”.

Based on findings from in-depth expert interviews with campaign coordinators of parties running in the state parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate in 2016 we found several restrictions for the use of data-driven canvassing on the external, internal-organisational and individual dimension. On the macro level, the use of individual-centered campaigning techniques like micro-targeting and canvassing are rooted in the electoral process, the political culture, the fragmentation of political parties, the rules for campaign financing and the legal foundations especially the information privacy

laws. On the meso level the use of these instruments can be restricted by the organisational culture of a party, the technology infrastructure, and personnel and financial resources. And on the micro level individual selection processes, knowledge, autonomy and time of local candidates, campaign managers, canvassers and the attitudes of voters decide over the implementation of data-driven canvassing into a political campaign.

Although this study is limited because it focuses on a single case state legislature election, it provides a good starting point for more research on the relationship between these structures and processes and the development of different campaigning techniques. This research is needed, because parties are eagerly interested in the implementation of individual-based campaigning techniques, without thinking about implications for personal privacy, civil liberties and democratic values.

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