

Media Content Analysis

The correlation between coverage of political parties in TV news and trends in public opinion polls

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Television's Power in Shaping Public Opinion

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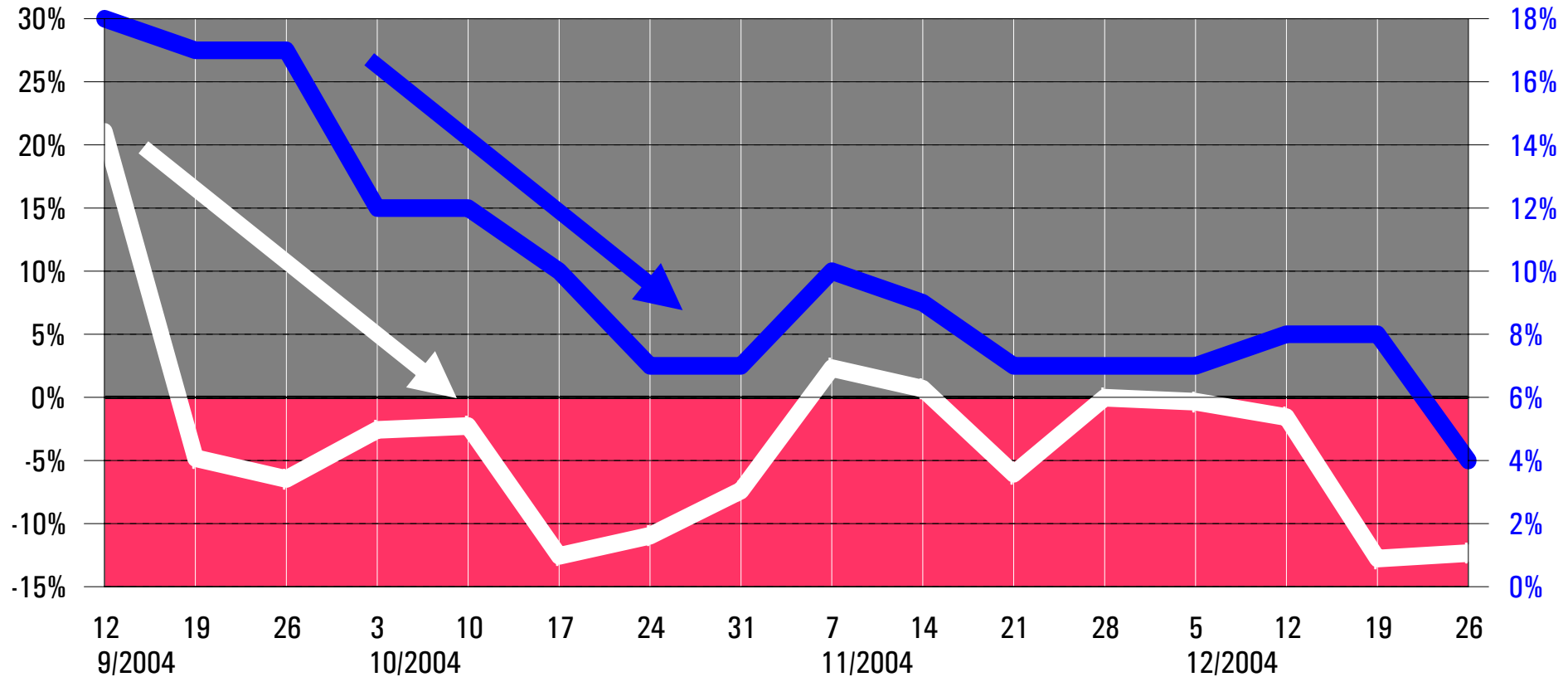
One thing can be observed more and more frequently in poll results: There is a relatively quick progression of ups and downs in the political climate in favor of one party or against another. This is due to the declining number of supporters of Germany's big parties. Politically unaffiliated voters are no longer making their decisions based on long-standing traditions, but as a reaction to current political events. One day, the scandal around donations leads to a dip in public opinion for the CDU, the next day the excess of five million unemployed sinks the SPD in opinion polls.



To the public, the development of such events, based on the news selection criteria journalists employ, are reflected in the daily media coverage. The analysis of TV news broadcasts thus offers a unique opportunity to predict swings in public opinion concerning preferences for any of the parties. The voting preferences that are accurately assessed in the so-called "Sunday Question" ("Who would you vote for if elections were to be held next Sunday?") can be predicted based on the knowledge of the big parties' traditional voting contingents coupled with an analysis of the preceding news coverage on TV. If the TV news coverage of any given issue concerning one of the parties surpasses the awareness threshold – which, for Germany's seven major TV news broadcasts, would be the case at more than 2,750 statements – this will have a measurable effect on the results of the Sunday Question.

Who the electorate would pick if parliamentary elections were to be held next Sunday thus depends in part on which party has been the most frequent target of criticism in TV news. In the Fall of 2004, for instance, the CDU's advantage over the other parties melted away first in the media and subsequently also in public opinion polls. Conversely, since the beginning of 2005, public opinion of the CDU once again improved. The opinion trend among the electorate followed the trend in the media coverage. The media trend – the tone of the coverage of the parties in the news – is based on the thematic emphases in the media coverage. Efforts on the part of all parties to influence what issues are covered in the news, using agenda setting, agenda cutting and agenda surfing, can thus be expected to increase.

2004 –TV news coverage eradicates CDU’s advantage ...

Rating of CDU and SPD – TV trend and Infratest dimap ‘Sunday Question’



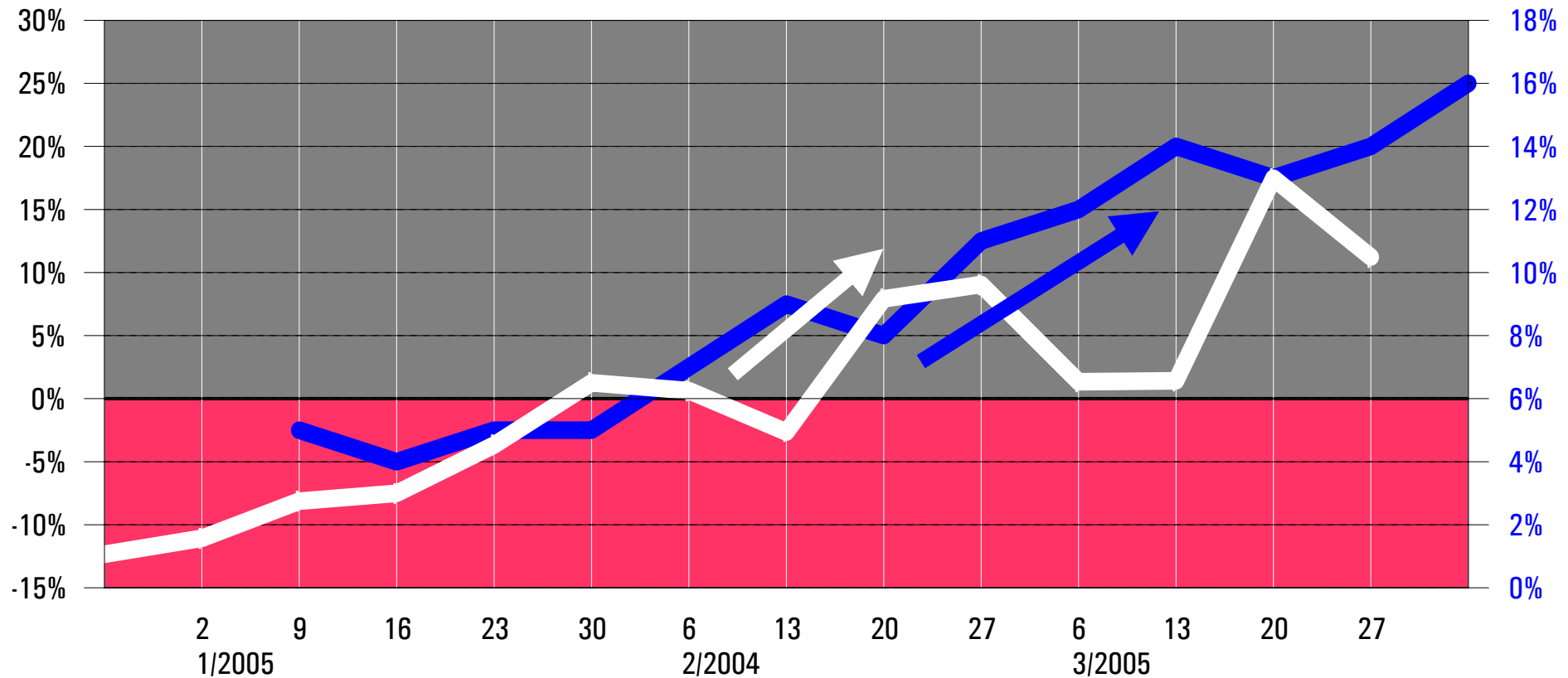
 TV news (2,750 total statements)
 Sunday Question (Infratest dimap)



Media trend: Difference between the share of positive and negative statements on the CDU and the SPD in 7 TV news broadcasts
 Polling trend: Difference between share of votes for CDU and SPD in the Sunday Question

Source: Media Tenor 9/1 – 12/31/2004
 Infratest dimap

... and subsequently fosters it again

Rating of CDU and SPD – TV trend and Infratest dimap 'Sunday Question'



 TV news (2,750 total statements)
 Sunday Question (Infratest dimap)

Source: Media Tenor 1/1 – 3/31/2005
Infratest dimap

Media trend: Difference between the share of positive and negative statements on the CDU and the SPD in 7 TV news broadcasts
 Polling trend: Difference between share of votes for CDU and SPD in the Sunday Question

Media set and basis

- **Media set: ARD Tageschau and Tagesthemen, ZDF heute and heute journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 news, ProSieben news**
- **Period of analysis: 9/1/2004 – 3/31/2005**
- **Basis: 2,750 total statements**