

Christina Holtz-Bacha
Bengt Johansson *Editors*

Election Posters Around the Globe

Political Campaigning
in the Public Space



Springer

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Posters: From Announcements to Campaign Instruments

Christina Holtz-Bacha and Bengt Johansson

The emergence of political posters dates back to the revolutions of the outgoing eighteenth and the nineteenth century. The availability of lithographic flat printing at the end of the nineteenth century accelerated the production of posters. The new technology was also the step towards large-sized posters and a growing importance of pictorial posters and thus provided an impetus for their modernization. Electoral posters finally made their entrance with the emergence of political parties and the ensuing competition among them. Even though other media developed and became attractive for campaigners, electoral posters kept their role in many countries around the world and defended their position in the electoral advertising of parties and candidates.

1 The History of Posters

The history of posters is often traced back to ancient cities where laws were made public by setting up stone or wooden boards that showed the legal texts. Archeological excavations from Pompeii and Herculaneum have provided evidence for the existence of commercial and even some sort of political advertising in the Roman Empire. Beside announcements and recommendations for theaters and inns, many calls for votes and support for electoral candidates have been found. Those were usually painted on house walls. (Cf. Zur Westen 1914 , pp. 13–14)

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Posters on paper and in a form more similar to contemporary posters appeared soon after the invention of letterpress printing. In the fifteenth century, they were used first by merchants who did not produce on order but offered their products to an unknown market. Products that were not manufactured on order for a specific customer needed advertising to make known they were available. Book publishers were the first occupational group to use posters. In addition to having a product that had to find its readers once it was on the market, book publishers also had the machines available to print flyers and posters for their advertising. These were small-sized posters that were enclosed in the book or attached to trees or walls.

The other groups that used posters were travelling people and traders who had to announce their temporary appearance. Printed advertising thus replaced barkers who had been going around for announcing short-term offers and events. Since the main function of these early posters was information, they were rather text heavy and not intended for long-range effects.

The emergence of posters in the modern sense is usually attributed to the work of the Parisian lithographer Jules Chéret (Barnicoat 1972, p. 7; Hutchison 1968, p. 15; Seidman 2008, p. 5). Since the second half of the 1860s, Chéret created posters mainly for the world of art and culture but also for commercial products. Based on the new possibilities of color printing, his style became a model for modern poster design. (Cf. also Le Men and Bargiel 2011)

With the growing importance of commercial posters, the provision of space for sticking up posters and billposting itself became professionalized in the sense of authorities starting to regulate the business, billposters getting organized, and the emergence of agencies mediating between demand and supply of advertising space and thus handling the placement of posters. In 1722, France released regulation for billposters at the same time as an association of billposters was founded in England (Faulstich 2002, p. 48). The early posters appeared on walls, fences, lampposts, and trees. Thus, complaints about the disfigurement of sites and visual pollution of the cities are part of the history of billposting. In October 1824, George Samuel Harris, a merchant in London, applied for a patent for a rotatable and illuminated poster column (Faulstich 2002, p. 48). In late 1854, the print shop owner and book publisher Ernst Litfaß received a license for mounting advertising pillars which were soon named after him. The cylindrical Litfaß columns were first put up in Berlin and became common in other parts of Germany (Hagen 1987, p. 49) over the years. Similar columns appeared in Paris as of 1868, but in contrast to Litfaß columns they only carried cultural announcements such as theater posters (Klein 2004, p. 144). The Colonne Morris, named after printer Gabriel Morris who introduced them, remained restricted to Paris and became a characteristic of the French capital. The advertising pillars served to prevent unauthorized billposting and at the same time allowed for controlling of what was put up. In addition to these ordering measures, the professionalization of the poster business in Western Europe was also indicated by the founding of journals dedicated to advertising, propaganda, and specifically to posters. These journals were of various provenance and covered different aspects. They were published by art and poster collectors, associations of advertising experts, or trade organizations.

Political posters made their entrance with the revolutions. During the French Revolution (1789–1799), posters appeared as an instrument employed in the political battle. They were used to make announcements and inform about events. Small-format posters attached to walls helped to create public attention for the revolutionary goals and to mobilize the people (cf. Denscher 1999, p. 1012). The revolution of 1848 provided for a boost in the modernization of posters and the rise of political posters (Reinhardt 1993, p. 234). The spread of lithographic flat printing at the end of the nineteenth century finally allowed for fast and inexpensive production of large-sized posters (Hagen 1987, p. 49). It was also the step towards a growing importance of images making pictures an integral part of poster advertising and thus replacing the text-dominated posters.

It was the outbreak of World War I in 1914 that increased the importance of political posters and of pictorial posters in particular. As Hutchison explains, the main medium of government communication until then had been the press in a time when neither radio nor television was yet introduced: “It was thus that the poster was bound to realize its full potential—inevitably it became a powerful munition of war and an essential part of the machinery of government. Propaganda was soon to be issued in an endless flood, and the pictorial poster was to become one of the most potent new weapons for the propagandists” (Hutchison 1968, p. 70). Until the war, posters had been used mostly for advertising cultural events and selling commercial products. With their employment for political causes, they became “essential weapons of mass persuasion in the new science of psychological warfare” (1968, p. 70).

World War I is associated with the appearance of famous posters intended to recruit volunteers for the military and for the promotion of war bonds. In 1914, Alfred Leete designed a poster that found many copycats. It depicted the British secretary of state for war, Lord Kitchener, pointing his finger directly towards the observer saying “Britons. [Lord Kitchener] wants you. Join your country’s army! God save the king.” The motif was taken up by James Montgomery’s 1917 poster showing Uncle Sam addressing the observer with the request: “I want you for U.S. army” (Gervereau 1996, p. 54; Klein 2004, p. 149). Also in the United States, Howard Chandler Christy created a whole series of posters showing women promoting navy and army. One of his posters from about 1918 featured a jaunty young sailor together with the caption “Gee!! I wish I were a man I’d join the Navy” and the prompt “Be a man and do it” (Gervereau 1996, p. 51). Another poster showed a woman in a Jeanne d’Arc posture holding the American flag and advertising the third liberty loan with the request “Fight or buy bonds.” Posters in all involved countries promoted the purchase of war bonds in order to raise money for fighting the war. These posters mostly addressed the people but some were also directed at the soldiers thus appealing to them to donate their money (Zeller 1988, pp. 174–175). One of the German posters showed the head of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and underneath, in his own handwriting, the appeal: “Who signs war bonds, offers me the nicest birthday present! von Hindenburg” (Bohrmann 1987, pp. 123, 585). With making the purchase of bonds a personal matter, the poster is an example of an early personalization strategy and the emergence of

portrait posters (cf. Holtz-Bacha and Lessinger in this volume), which became a staple of election posters.

In contrast to the posters that directly sought people's support through enlisting in the military or signing loans, other posters followed a different strategy by depicting the atrocities of war and aiming at the demonization of the enemy. Images and appeals were to evoke anger and hatred and thus justify any restrictions caused by war. (Cf. Barnicoat 1972, p. 223; Hutchison 1968, pp. 70–85; Malhotra 1987, pp. 26–27; Medebach 1969, p. 17)

These early political posters showed elaborate and often colorful pictures in an expressionistic style combined with, if at all, short prompts or questions. They featured the symbols and allegories that became the visual language of the genre. Heroic men and women waving red flags or carrying torches, the rising sun, the royal eagle, the venomous snake, monsters (dragons, monkeys) seizing countries or attacking the symbols that stand for a specific country (Britannia, Italia, Germania), and country stereotypes (Malhotra 1987, p. 31). For instance, during World War I, posters from several countries depicted the Germans as Huns characterized by the spiked helmet (cf. Gervereau 1996, pp. 38, 40, 43). US posters symbolized "The Hun" by the mark of a bloody hand or by boots carrying the Imperial Eagle and drenched in blood Gervereau 1996, pp. 40, 41). Both sides emblemized the enemy as a fire-drake or hydra defeated by their own heroic fighters (Gervereau 1996, pp. 44, 45). This kind of symbolism was also present on election posters in countries not involved in the war. For instance, in Swedish posters, political enemies were sometimes illustrated as animals like snakes or octopuses (Håkansson et al. in this volume).

In Russia, posters experienced a remarkable development with the revolution in 1917 and the civil war. The revolutionary posters evolved from the World War I placards advertising war or, as they were finally called after the February Revolution, liberty bonds. Posters became an important propaganda instrument during the civil war that followed the October Revolution. Posters were used for making announcements, for consensus building, and for the demonization of the enemy. The White Guards used portrait posters showing their generals and made propaganda for a united Russia. The Bolsheviks tried to garner acceptance among the population and to that aim used posters to spread their ideas which, however, was quite a challenge in regard of the scarcity of paper and paint and the bad state of the transport infrastructure. They created daily and weekly wall newspapers and used agitation trains and steamers driving through the country as mobile boards. A phenomenon that became famous were the so-called ROSTA windows. These were propaganda posters edited by the Soviet news agency ROSTA and displayed in abandoned showcases. The instructive placards were designed by well-known artists and showed pictures and text almost in the form of comic strips. (Cf. Kämpfer 1985, pp. 184–213)

With the advent of radio in the 1920s, political communicators were provided with a new means to address the public. Nevertheless, posters remained an

important instrument in trying to influence the public. Posters once again achieved a central role in the propaganda activities before and during the Second World War. Posters were produced in large quantity and employed for mobilization but, as Gervereau (1996, p. 102) points out, did not generate much innovation and took up the patterns of the political battle of the preceding decades.

In Germany, Nazi propaganda relied very much on posters. They served to prepare referenda that were held to approve measures taken by the NS-regime as, for instance, the country's withdrawal from the League of Nations. Apart from votes, posters were employed by all NS-mass organizations for the mobilization and motivation of the people. Posters were also part of the propaganda against Jews and the church. During the war, posters campaigned for economic use of resources or warned of talk that might be overheard by traitors and spies. Combined with powerful slogans, pictorial and text posters played a particular role in promoting the cult around Hitler (Führerkult). (Cf. Medebach 1969, p. 25)

Towards the end of the war, posters were employed for moral mobilization of the people and for announcing military successes. With the liberation from the German occupiers, posters were put up to welcome the soldiers of the allied troops. (Cf. Gervereau 1996, pp. 116–119)

By the 1950s, television began its triumphal progress in the industrialized world. Advertisers enthusiastically embraced the audiovisual medium, but television remained closed for political and ideological goals in many countries and was open for election-related advertising only. Thus, the political poster mainly survived in its special form as electoral poster. However, posters experienced a new, albeit short revival with the anti-imperialistic and alternative movements of the 1960s. The pictures of Che Guevara, who was shot in 1967, are the prominent example of posters leaving the public space and entering the private sphere of the home (cf. Gervereau 1996, pp. 137–138). The image of Che Guevara and, similarly but less outlasting, of Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong, became an emblem and icon carried in demonstrations and at the same time adorning the walls of young people's bedrooms.

2 The Development of Electoral Posters and Their Functions

The emergence of political parties and party competition stimulated the rise of electoral posters. The establishment of universal franchise and the necessity to address and win over the electorate gave election posters a notable boost (cf. also Wring in this volume). In Europe, the franchise was first extended to all men independent of class or stand since the mid-nineteenth century; women suffrage emerged first in the early years of the twentieth century. In the United States, democratization of the right to vote developed since about 1830. Suffrage was granted to African Americans after the Civil War and extended by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Women suffrage came up in the United States in 1920, and the Indian Citizenship Act extended suffrage to the indigenous population (Rinke and Stüwe 2008, p. 37). Whereas New Zealand and Australia introduced women

suffrage already around 1900, many Latin American countries waited until the middle of the twentieth century to allow for women to participate in elections.

Thus, the emergence of electoral posters and their strategic refinement were very much associated with the democratization process. Universal franchise and electoral competition were decisive factors for the development of election posters. Posters provided electoral contenders with the possibility to reach a mass audience particularly in times when other mass media were not yet widespread or even introduced. With the advent of the broadcasting media, radio in the early 1920s and television mostly in the early 1950s, campaigners found new and attractive opportunities for addressing the electorate. With the popularity of television and its rising household coverage, campaigners more and more focused on the audiovisual medium for presenting themselves to the voters.

In the United States where television spread much faster than in other parts of the world, and in view of the challenge of campaigning in a vast country with many sparsely populated parts, television lend itself as an effective campaign instrument. Due to the commercial approach that dominated the US broadcasting system from the beginning, television was wide open for the advertising efforts of campaigners. In the United States, electoral advertising went on television for the first time in 1952, thus starting the decline of electoral posters.

The situation, however, was different in other countries which remained more restrictive with regard to electoral advertising in the broadcast media (cf. Holtz-Bacha 2014). Western Europe, for instance, not least because of its tradition of public service broadcasting, did not follow the no-limits model of the United States for political advertising on television. Many countries relied on free allocation of time for party broadcasts and did not allow for the purchase of advertising time on television thus restricting the possibilities of electoral advertising on television. Announcements of party broadcasts pointing to the responsibility of the parties destroy the surprise effect of electoral spots. The labeling as advertising may work as a further warning. The many restrictions that electoral advertising underlies outside the United States are one explanation for the lower relevance of television advertising during election campaigns in many parts of the world.

Apart from access to advertising time, campaigners worldwide seek the attention of television hoping to benefit from its credibility and effectiveness. However, in this case, the responsibility for the content lies with the journalists who apply their own selection and production criteria to political messages which may not always work in the interest of the political communicators and puts their electoral strategies at risk. Thus, whereas the free or earned media provide for greater credibility, paid media such as television and radio spots and posters allow for the spread of unaltered electoral messages according to the persuasion strategies of the campaigners.

In contrast to electoral spots on television and radio, the distribution of posters in times of electoral campaigns remains less regulated (cf. however Rodríguez-Andrés and Canel in this volume). The lower attention of regulators for posters than for television advertising can also explain the important role posters play in countries where the broadcast media are controlled by the state (cf. Anwar in this volume). As

the chapters in this volume show, regulation of posters mostly concerns the tidiness of public space and the avoidance of obstruction of traffic (for an overview concerning regulation in the EU member states see also Holtz-Bacha 2016). In fact, wild billposting still seems to be common in several countries where posters are put up in places not officially provided for the campaigners. Problems also arise from the coverage of the posters of one party or candidate by posters of other contestants as well as from anonymous defacement and destruction (cf. Dumitrescu in this volume). Another issue is the removal of the posters after Election Day and thus the cleaning up of the public space when the context is over (cf. Juárez-Gámiz in this volume).

In addition, the specific features and functions of posters make them an attractive medium for campaign advertising. Compared to other forms of electoral advertising and due to their ubiquitousness, posters are an obtrusive medium because they almost cannot be avoided. During election campaigns, posters are everywhere, adorning walls, billboards, lampposts, and trees, and those moving in the public space are necessarily confronted with posters.

Therefore, more than any other campaign instrument, posters can create attention for an upcoming election. First and foremost, posters fulfill a classical *announcement* function. They act as a kind of signal telling voters that an election is close. By drawing attention to the election and the date of the Election Day, posters also have a *mobilizing* function for the partisans and the general electorate which has become particularly important in times of declining voter turnout. At the same time, posters display what is on offer for an election: People walking or driving by are confronted with all kinds of candidates and parties, some of them they have not heard of before. In this way, posters not only remind people of an election approaching and that they will soon have to make up their mind about whom to vote for, but posters also have the potential to *overcome selective behavior* that often guides the use of electoral information in other media. The role of posters in exposing the whole range of parties and candidates that run for election is above all important for new or unknown contenders which have difficulties to reach the attention of the mass media. The comparatively inexpensive production of posters further corroborates the specific attraction that this campaign instrument has for smaller groups and their candidates.

Parties and candidates who do not use posters run the risk of not being noticed at all by the voters. They are simply not present. In contrast, posters being everywhere on the streets provide for high visibility of a certain party or candidate. As Dumitrescu (in this volume) argues, the public presence of posters is also taken as a *signal of campaign strength* giving voters the impression of a strong commitment.

In addition to directly speaking to the electorate, posters are also used for *attracting the attention of the press*. Holtz-Bacha and Lessinger (in this volume) mention so-called press posters that primarily target the media and in this way count on further distribution. These posters are only produced in small numbers and

strategically positioned hoping for an indirect effect on voters through the coverage of the other media and by being posted on the social networks sites.

In their chapter on Indian election campaigns, Willnat et al. (in this volume) point to yet another function of posters. With their emphasis on the visuals, posters are well suited to *reach illiterate parts* of the population and also *overcome linguistic diversity*. In the Indian case, this also explains the importance of the party symbols whose knowledge is reinforced by posters in order to allow for recognition of the symbols on the ballot. (For an overview of the posters' functions cf. also Smith in this volume)

3 The Challenges for the Design of Electoral Posters

All electoral advertising is conceived to influence the vote choice. Posters, in concert with the other forms of advertising, are to promote the party or candidate who produced them. Each form of advertising serves a specific function, but their individual effectiveness is difficult to isolate. In addition and just as any commercial advertising, electoral advertising will usually not affect the vote choice directly. If at all posters exert an influence on the voting decision, it will rather be indirectly through the formation, reinforcement, or change of attitudes and feelings towards the political actors and the issues they raise.

Posters, being displayed in the public space, have the advantage of reaching a high percentage of the mobile population within a short time span. Therefore, many people name posters first when asked where they saw or heard something about the ongoing election campaign. To increase the chance of the posters being further regarded, they must adapt to the situation in which they are perceived by the voters. In particular, posters have to be designed for a long-range effect. People walking or driving by only have a few seconds or even less for grasping the message and link it with its source. The images therefore should be unambiguous, and the text has to be big and short enough to be understood immediately. Visuals are particularly suited because they are comprehended faster than verbal messages. In addition, pictures are remembered better than texts. Therefore, Kroeber-Riel (1993, p. 53) has called pictures "fast shots into the brain."

Against this background, the design of posters is of high importance. In order to achieve their goal, that is entering into a "fast dialogue" (Prakke 1963, p. 21) with the recipient, a poster has to meet three conditions: It has to provide a powerful eye-catcher, it has to be directly comprehensible, and its content has to take root in the observer's memory (Prakke 1963, p. 30). The powerful eye-catcher is necessary in an environment that is overloaded with visual stimuli competing for the attention of the passers-by. The strategies to perform this task are the same for electoral as for commercial posters. Attention can be attracted through the size of the poster, its colors or its contents, and by pictures in particular. The gaze is drawn by those

visual elements that create an event either in form or content (Kroeber-Riel 1993, p. 60).

In order to increase the likelihood of a further processing of the poster's message, its design should aim at the activation of the observer by physically intensive, emotional, or surprising stimuli. The size or the colors of an advertisement have the potential for physically intensive stimuli. The size of posters is regulated in some countries, and there are different traditions, in particular the use of large billboards or small wooden boards put up specifically during election campaigns. Colors have emotional content, but it has to be kept in mind that colors also have a symbolic meaning, which can differ according to the cultural background (Kroeber-Riel 1993, pp. 101–103). In the political realm, colors are often associated with specific parties, as for instance red for the Socialist and Social Democratic parties. The choice of colors for posters therefore has to be made carefully to ensure it is not misleading as to the source of the message and does not strike the wrong chord in voters.

Emotional motifs are also among the proven strategies to get and keep the attention of the recipients (cf. Seidman in this volume). Key stimuli such as the classical schema of childlike characteristics or stimuli with a fixed cultural meaning are common motifs to address the emotions of recipients (Kroeber-Riel 1993, p. 106). Carlson (in this volume) points to the fact that electoral advertising and posters in particular often cue emotions with child imagery. In contrast to commercial advertising, political advertising also employs strategies that try to invoke negative feelings towards the political competitor by arousing anxiety or anger. Surprising stimuli as the third category to attract attention and increase the likelihood of recipients further processing the advertising are visual or verbal elements that contravene the perceptual expectations of the beholder (Kroeber-Riel 1993, p. 107). Dobek (in this volume) describes an example of a poster produced for the 1989 campaign of Solidarność that achieved such a surprise effect by taking over the motif of the movie *High Noon*.

The electoral slogans are an integral part of any advertising campaign. They can be regarded as the central electoral statement of the contenders and the condensation of the campaign's message (cf. Toman-Banke 1994, pp. 47, 55). Therefore, slogans are also an essential element of the electoral posters in support of their informing and activating function (Uribe et al. in this volume). In order to meet the specific challenges of posters that are mostly perceived from afar and just for seconds, slogans must be short, easy to read, and to comprehend.

4 Electoral Posters as Expressions of Political Culture

Due to the involvement of artists in the early development of posters and their origin in the world of commodities, the political functions of posters became a subject of research relatively late. Even then, political posters were often assessed

according to aesthetic standards but neglected the political contents, strategies, and functions of the posters. The fact that political posters, produced for ideological and electoral purposes, often do not meet those standards, and the seemingly unvarying candidate posters in particular, contributed to a negative image of election posters.

The overview of the theoretical approaches guiding the study of electoral posters (Geise in this volume) shows how and what the various academic disciplines contributed to the research on posters and how they inspired each other. This went along with the application of different methods (Geise and Vigsø in this volume) for the analysis of posters finally doing more and more justice to the functions of political posters.

Political posters and electoral posters in particular have received more and more scientific attention since about the 1990s. Several single country studies presented long-term analyses of the development of electoral posters. With the presentation of several hundred pictures, Bohrmann (1987) provided a history of German political posters supplemented by overview articles on the change of political posters over the course of a 100 years (Hagen 1987) and the artists who designed them (Malhotra 1987). Müller (1997) focused on the visual strategies of US campaign posters from 1828 until 1996. Kämpfer (1985) followed the history of political posters in Russia. Håkansson et al. (2014) tracked the 100-year development of Swedish election posters. The different contributions to the volume edited by Vico (2013) provide for a history of political posters in Chile under different political regimes. Vliegenthart (2012) draws on electoral posters to ascertain the professionalization of political communication in the Netherlands. Fourie (2008) analyzed election posters to determine to what extent they reflect the maturing of the South African democracy. Lewis and Masshardt (2002) assessed the differences among the election posters used by the two major Japanese parties. In a study covering 30 years, Kreuke and Beule (2011) compared the posters produced by German parties for the European election campaigns since the first direct election of the European Parliament until 2009.

Going beyond single-country studies, several authors followed the development of political posters in an international perspective. Already in 1996, Gervereau presented his world history of the political poster. With a particular focus on electoral posters, Seidman (2008) combined a global and a historical perspective. More recently, the studies compiled in Holtz-Bacha et al. (forthcoming) compared the posters produced in the EU member states for the 2014 European election campaign under different aspects (cf. also Rafter et al. 2016).

Single-country studies and those with a more international perspective and particularly if they go over time reveal national characteristics of the use of posters in general, of their significance for campaigns, and the visual and verbal strategies that are employed for addressing the electorate. The strategies depend on the political, electoral, and cultural background of each country at a certain time. Beyond the goal of addressing and possibly influencing voters, electoral posters

reflect how campaigners see themselves and want to be seen by the electorate. Since the decision about the use and the design of posters lies completely in the hands of the political actors, posters—just as the other unmediated campaign instruments—are a mirror of the surrounding political culture and of their time.

However, in spite of the differences, single-country studies taken together or comparative analyses also demonstrate that there are similar strategies, over time and across countries. These strategies seem to be generic and rather a characteristic of posters and thus independent of its background political culture (cf. Novelli in this volume). Electoral posters share some similarities with other unmediated campaign instruments as for instance electoral television spots, but since posters combine fixed textual and visual elements, appear in the open space, and have to be designed for a long-range effect, their strategies need to be adapted to these specific conditions thus providing for their own and distinct characteristics.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Visual Political Communication Through Election Posters

Stephanie Geise

Abstract

While posters have always been a medium of “flash communication” transferring textually and/or pictorially highly condensed information, and actualizing political issues and actors, they provide a vivid insight into historical as well as contemporary political culture and communication and their potential effects on audiences. Though, systematically analyzing and evaluating election posters should be informed by a profound theoretical grounding. Understanding the election poster as a specific, well-established medium of visual political communication, this chapter provides an overview of central theoretical approaches that can fruitfully be applied to the understanding and examination of election posters. Ranging from (1) historical/art historical, (2) political, (3) critical as well as (4) sociopsychological approaches to a (5) media-effect perspective, the latter chapter outlines a theoretical model for empirically analyzing the reception of visual political communication through election posters, translating central steps during poster perception, processing, and evaluation into a practical research framework.

1 Introduction

Posters have helped people to gain or to hold on to political power, to oppose entrenched interests, to protest against established norms, and advocate for special causes (Seidman 2008). However, the analysis of posters and their effects in election campaigning is characterized by a strange ambivalence: although posters and politics have been linked for almost five centuries (Seidman 2008), and in spite

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of political communication in election campaigns historically being a central research field, structures and effects of poster communication have not been a main road in scientific discourse. Additionally, many existing studies focus on campaign content in text form, rather than on the *visual* and *multimodal nature* of campaign messages on posters as well as on other media (Geise 2011a).

Already 30 years ago, Bohrmann (1984, p. 7) assumed that a potential reason for this situation might be the fact “that posters combine artistic and journalistic, aesthetic and political dimensions,” adding enormous complexity to the analysis of the medium, its structures, and effects. In fact, the contiguous integration of visual aesthetics, visual and textual content, its interplay, as well as the recipient’s generation of potential meaning of the entire message highly complicates poster research—making it especially challenging to generalize results.

This situation is particularly reflected by the limited set of empirical studies on election posters conducted in the context of communication and media science. Many studies concentrate on case-related questions, putting a focus on the description of content and communication strategies in election campaigning, and are closely linked to the individual poster or set of posters under investigation (Geise 2011a; Geise and Leidecker 2015). Likewise, studies on media effects of political posters often emphasize post-receptive, cognitive, and affective short-term effects of specific, preselected posters or poster campaigns, examining, for example, the influence of candidate depiction on election posters on candidate evaluation (Brosius et al. 1987) or the memorization and evaluation of election posters (Lessinger and Moke 1999).

Though, the current research desideratum has not only to be asserted from a communication science perspective, on a more general level a research gap can also be observed regarding the *medium* election poster as a communicative entity itself—researchers from historical, art historical, visual, or political disciplines as well have attributed only limited significance to election posters. At the same time, the diversity of disciplines and traditions involved in poster research has countervailed the development of shared theoretical approaches. Scholars therefore have repeatedly and critically reflected that research on posters lacks an established theoretical foundation (comp. as an overview on the “deficitary” theory of the poster: Kamps 1999, pp. 38–54).

It goes without saying that this chapter cannot overcome these shortcomings. However, against the background sketched out, it aims to contribute to the theoretical development of poster research, providing an overview of central theoretical perspectives of research on election posters. As a theoretical introduction, the paper will first define the election poster as a specific medium of political communication and further conceptualize its divergent forms providing a brief typology of election posters. The second part is devoted to summarizing research results regarding the functions of election posters. The third then presents subchapters on significant theoretical angles of research on election posters. A focus is put on a reception and media-effect perspective. Accordingly, aiming to motivate further research on the perception of election posters and their effects, an analytical framework is sketched

out that synthesizes important steps during poster reception. The chapter will conclude with a brief outlook on future challenges.

2 The Election Poster as a Specific Medium of Political Communication: A Brief Typology

Posters, in general, are characterized as persuasive, non-periodical, nonresponsive, usually printed visual mass media (Geise 2016). Traditionally, they are materially fixated in public space and serve a one-directional external communication with a disperse audience. Posters are thus a form of paid-media communication, offering communicators and political actors a public platform to communicate their messages directly to their targeted audiences, in a comparatively cheap and effortlessly adjustable manner.

In contrast to the commercial poster, the *political poster* carries a politically motivated message. With its communicative functions, the political poster thus is a specific, well-established medium rich in traditions and is still important in contemporary political discourses: Posters were the primary medium of political communication in the nineteenth century, and they maintained their significance in many countries up to today. This holds true for European countries such as Germany, France, England, or Switzerland, where the political poster traditionally is an integral part of election campaigns, and can also be observed in nations where legislation inhibits the use of other media to communicate political messages, where a majority of the political parties has limited budgets to obtain expansive television time, and where illiteracy is high (Seidman 2008). Likewise, the election poster is also seen as increasingly important in developing countries, which do not yet possess a fully established mass-media infrastructure.

As obvious in *election posters*, the production context of political posters usually refers to a specific political event. Political posters are, for example, used in public discourses around social movements (*protest posters*, *socio-critical posters*) or in the context of political ballots (*ballot posters*). From a historical perspective, political posters have also been repeatedly utilized in totalitarian systems and war situations to convey political ideologies (*propaganda posters*).

Nonetheless, the most common use of posters is in political campaigning, making the *election poster*—as an instrument of strategic communication of public actors competing for voters—the most frequent political poster type. Against this background, the election poster can be considered a *specific medium of (visual) political communication in political campaigns* (Geise 2011a): While election campaigns are a “favorite setting of communication science” (Holtz-Bacha 1996, p. 9), “no other medium symbolizes election campaigning as well as the poster” does (Lessinger et al. 2003, p. 216). Likewise, depending upon its country, its laws, the political circumstances, and its culture, political posters used in election campaigns have often significantly impacted voters (Seidman 2008).

In most cases, the intended target audience of political posters, and especially of election posters, can be considered the entirety of the voters of the political system.

However, as a type of direct communication, election posters also allow various degrees of target group adjustment. Especially in local campaigns, candidates and parties may also make use of target segmentation strategies and exhibit differentiated posters to differentiated target groups (e.g., election posters for the target group “immigrants as voters” that transport textual messages in the respective first languages).

From a formal, visual design perspective, three types of posters can be distinguished: (1) pure text respective *typographic posters*, which work completely without pictorial signs, (2) pure *iconic posters*, which work completely without written language, and (3) multimodal, *text-image posters* containing typographic elements as well as figurative devices. In the context of election campaigning, typographic posters are pretty common. Based on the assumption that typographic posters address the cognitive involvement of the electors more strongly, they are considered specifically advantageous in election campaigns that focus on differentiation strategies or the communication of political issues.

Nonetheless, text-image posters are dominating election campaigning. As Seidman (2008, p. 23) summarizes, “the most effective election poster seem to have been ‘a cut above’ the standard sales job, which has featured a photograph of the candidate and a slogan.” Among figurative posters such candidate posters show either primarily a visual portrait of the candidate (portrait posters) or visualize him/her in interactive contexts (candidate-image posters), mostly accompanied by a headline, slogan, and brand logo. Motif posters either condense a story visually to a concise narrative moment (story-telling posters) or focus on the depiction of individuals or objects (object poster). However, beside these prototypes, the operationalization of visualization types in specific election campaign strategies (e.g., image/negative campaigning, emotionalization, common-man strategy; cf. Müller 1997 for a detailed description) results in various subtypes (e.g., motionalizing story-telling posters, negative associations inducing candidate-image posters).

Though, pure iconic posters are an exception in the context of election campaigning and thus are only represented by a small number of outstanding examples (e.g., Coordt von Mannstein’s creation “Das Bad in der Menge,” depicting the former German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, during the unification festivities surrounded by a big group of citizens; cf. also Holtz-Bacha and Lessinger in this book). Nonetheless, the establishment of professional political marketing has been an important development affecting the design, the visual, and textual content as well as the implementation of posters in election campaigns (Sauer 2006; Seidman 2008). Advertising principles and communication strategies, often intended to simplify the political message, gain attention, evoke emotions, and differentiate it for specific target audiences, have been effectively put into practice.

However, as Sontag (1970) has observed, many posters exhibit already known ideas in terms of content and design—posters repeat, cite, parody, and otherwise represent conspicuous, memorable, and significant imagery: “The relation posters have to visual fashion is that of ‘quotation’,” but this “stylistically parasitic trend in the history of the poster is additional confirmation of the poster as an art form”

(Sontag 1970, n.p.). Moreover, repetition, quotation, and references in text and image can also work as strategic devices that support the communicative intention of election posters; they can ease the understanding and help to transfer and to anchor messages quickly and economically.

3 Theoretical Perspectives on Visual Political Communication Through Election Posters

3.1 Historical and Art Historical Perspectives on Posters

Historical approaches share the idea that election posters are historical sources that (at least in part) reflect their underlying historical setting. From this perspective, election posters document former opinions of political players, reveal their past programmatic messages, and display previous favorites and contenders as well as images they have tried to convey. By deduction from implemented communication and design strategies, election posters thus allow indirect insights into the communicators' former intentions (cf. Sauer 2006). However, election posters do not only reveal historical information on their producers and contractors but also on their production context and the political, economic, and social circumstances of their origin. Through their communication style—(visual) language, visual and typographical design, color scheme, and tonality—election posters provide an impression of the underlying political culture, strategies pursued to solve particular political problems or social conflicts, and transport a sense for the general political tone (Geise 2016).

Historical perspectives exhibit a comparatively strong research tradition in the analysis of election posters. However, the existing scholarship primarily focuses on particular periods in the history of nations; the majority of studies refer to the time of the two world wars and their propagandistic regimes, mainly focusing on the role of posters as propagandistic instruments and their political aspects and implications (compare *critical perspectives*; see below).

The idea that *images* in particular play a central role in history, that they hold specific potential to influence and shape historical processes, and that, on a third layer, they are an important player in the social construction of history is theoretically addressed in *visual history* as an emerging research field (Paul 2006). From the perspective of visual history, election posters are historic visual resources that mirror both, the transformation of cultural, historical, social, and mental concepts such as ideas, expectations, desires, general principles, and social norms as well as the change and development of visual language, visual stereotypes, symbolic forms, color expression, design, print, and photographic technique (Sauer 2006).

From an *art historical perspective*, election posters exhibit a distinct iconography. As Müller (1997) has shown, in the context of election campaigns the majority of election posters features portraits; for example, the depiction of a candidate's portrait is one of the most omnipresent motifs here. While with *iconography* in its traditional sense, a focus is put on the description and classification of visuals in an

intersubjective manner, the approach of *iconology* goes beyond that scope, aiming to understand the meaning of the depicted motifs. In that sense, iconology rather is “a method of interpretation which arises from synthesis rather than analysis” (Panofsky 1955/1982, p. 32; cf. Geise and Vigsø, chapter “Methodological Approaches to the Analysis of Visual Political Campaigns (1989–2013): The Same Ideas with Different Words”).

Based on the idea that typical, socially established depictions and pictorial motifs can be found in the visual material, the approach sensibilizes for processes of the construction and attribution of meaning throughout visualizations. An interesting question connected to this, is, for example, how individuals and societies make sense of election posters as cultural artifacts and how, in turn, the visuals shape and have shaped cultural belief systems (Müller 1997, p. 2160; compare *sociological and sociopsychological approaches*; see below). In this respect, Mitchell (1987 p. 1) has argued that iconology has to be seen as “a study of the ‘logos’ (the words, ideas, discourse, or ‘science’) and of ‘icons’ (images, pictures, or likenesses).” As iconography is both a theoretical approach and a method to analyze the content and meaning of visuals, iconography and iconology can enrich research on election posters not only from a theoretical but also from a methodological perspective (cf. Geise and Vigsø, chapter “Methodological Approaches to the Analysis of Visual Political Campaigns (1989–2013): The Same Ideas with Different Words”; Müller 1997).

Though, analyzing and interpreting historical posters from a contemporary standpoint always is a critical process. Researchers have to consider the context dependency of visual communication and its meaning: whereas the visual content of election posters in most cases has to be studied also taking its textual messages into account (cf. Müller 2007), simultaneously, the multimodal election poster has to be examined acknowledging its contemporaneous cultural, political, and social contexts as well as the former usage habits. Yet, historical posters can never be analyzed in the environment in which they were displayed once nor can their viewers be called to bear witness to them in any systematic way (James 2009). Moreover, there is no instrument for measuring past effectiveness, and even methodical strategies of “post hoc reasoning” might incorporate subjective perspectives. Researchers thus have to carefully reflect their conclusions and deductions, even when they are based on systematic (historical) interpretative research methods.

3.2 Political Perspectives on Posters as a Central Campaign Medium

As scientific resource, election posters offer insights into past and contemporary discourses of political communication, and that makes their analysis, including their functions and effects, highly enlightening in a variety of facets relevant to the political sphere. Besides evaluations that are inspired by a historical perspective on political communication, political research on election posters often puts a focus on