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ANJA KRUIKE, *Demoskopie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Meinungsforschung, Parteien und Medien 1949–1990*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien, 149 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2007), 562 pp. ISBN 978 3 7700 5281 3. €74.80

As could be observed in the news coverage of the recent US election campaign, opinion polls nowadays serve as a major instrument in the constant game of interpreting and predicting political change. Considering the predominance of opinion surveys today, it is worthwhile noting that polling and sampling are rather new techniques for monitoring society. Their infiltration of political life can be seen as part of a larger development that has caught the attention of historians only recently. Inspired mainly by Lutz Raphael's dictum of the 'scientization of the social' (*Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen*), a number of recent historical studies have investigated the advance of the social sciences and the diffusion of social scientific knowledge in the political realm. Using the notion of 'scientization' as a heuristic tool, they approach the government of modern society via the (scientific) knowledge informing it.

Anja Kruke's study of the role of public opinion polling in West German politics can be seen as an important contribution to this debate. In a lucid historical analysis based on her Ph.D. thesis, Kruke investigates the growing influence of public opinion research in the Federal Republic of Germany between 1949 and 1990. Situating her study within the triangle of opinion research, the political parties, and the media, she offers insight not so much into the production as into the diffusion of survey data. Her analysis focuses on the question of how opinion polls entered the public domain and shaped political processes. Politics is understood as a communicative event, an approach to the history of politics that has been termed New Political History (*Neue Politikgeschichte*) in German historiography. By asking how opinion polling entered the political field and how it transformed the very notion of politics, Kruke focuses on the 'how' of West German politics and historicizes it.

The study under review here is divided into two major parts. The first deals with the organizational aspect of opinion polling, analysing how surveys were commissioned and dealt with by the government and the two major political parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The

second part concentrates on changes in political discourse and the overall political setting. It describes how the growing influence of opinion polling affected political language and the understanding of the body politic, the electorate, and the public sphere. It then focuses on the media, investigating how the mass media dealt with opinion polls from the 1950s to the 1980s and analysing the changing relationship between politics and media coverage. The commentary that follows here summarizes Kruke's findings with regard to 1) how opinion polling was established in the political field, 2) how its rise affected political strategies, and 3) how its position in the public domain changed over time.

When the first opinion research institutes in West Germany began work in the late 1940s, they could draw on a sparse tradition of surveying reader interest and consumerism in German journalism and economics. Apart from that, they were influenced by US market and opinion research. With Gallup already synonymous with opinion polling in the 1930s, US research was regarded as pioneering in the field. As the study reveals, many of the theories and techniques employed in German opinion polling in the following decades were inspired by American research. The analysis traces the various stages by which opinion polling was established in the Federal Republic. During the early post-war years, the Western allies in particular advocated opinion surveys as an eminently democratic technique. They supported the emerging research institutes which often used personal connections in order to offer their services and establish themselves in the evolving field of policy advice.

Opinion polling slowly became part of political life in the 1950s, when the government – the Federal Press Office (*Bundespresseamt*) in particular – and the political parties began commissioning surveys. In this context, the major federal election campaigns structure Kruke's account, as they were a catalyst for closer cooperation between opinion pollsters and politicians. Next to the government, the CDU and SPD were foremost in commissioning polls. For a time, each party concentrated its support on one institute. The Social Democratic Infas and the Christian Democratic WIKAS conducted surveys for them and acted as policy advisers. But eventually the CDU and the SPD settled for a different strategy. By the 1980s the two parties were cooperating with various institutes and consulting competing surveys.

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As the study reveals, it was when both parties were losing their traditional clientele that the way they dealt with political polls changed. Opinion research confronted them with the image of voters who were not committed to vote for one party, but constantly changed their preferences. The rise of the swing voter engendered political change. The CDU and the SPD increasingly presented themselves as popular parties (*Volksparteien*) that could, in principle, claim to represent the whole population. At the same time, the idea of an election market gained currency. Considering themselves *Volksparteien* with no clearly defined traditional electorate, the two parties found themselves competing for the same voters. They began to formulate their political strategies with regard to constantly redefined target groups. Especially in the case of the SPD, which had traditionally considered itself a proletarian mass movement, this shift resulted from a rather slow process of examining and reformulating its own political agenda. Each party now attempted to shape its profile based on opinion polls, occupying specific policy fields in order to define its image. This development mirrored the growing influence of opinion research, and at the same time secured its further influence in the political field. While earlier assumptions about the electorate and the parties were dissolving, opinion pollsters successfully suggested that they could measure public opinion and help control it.

In the final part of her analysis, Kruke points to the growing influence of the media. In her view, the question of how the mass media covered political topics became increasingly important throughout the 1960s. In order to measure the success of an issue or an image, political actors paid more and more attention to its news coverage. At the same time, the way in which newspapers and TV dealt with opinion surveys was changing. Even though they repeatedly criticized opinion polling from the late 1950s, journalists did not refrain from using polls. On the contrary. By repeatedly quoting opinion polls, they put themselves in the position of seemingly neutral observers, who were merely stating the opinion of the common man, or rather, the people. While they originally just reproduced the survey data they received from various research institutes, the media now began to assume a pro-active role. They became major interpreters of political polls and increasingly commissioned surveys themselves. During the 1970s, newspapers and television stations replaced the political parties as the main clients of opinion research institutes.

### *Opinion Polling in the Federal Republic of Germany*

As a result of these developments, the data generated by opinion polling became more and more diffused. In the 1950s, the surveys commissioned by the government and the political parties had mostly been considered secret and had only been circulated to a limited extent. The government and the political parties wanted to choose what information was revealed to the public, with the aim of controlling public opinion. Step by step, opinion polls became increasingly up-to-date and were circulated among a wider public. Whereas in the 1950s individual survey projects had been seen as instruments of long-term planning, polls were soon conducted more frequently. And by the 1970s regular reports based on current opinion polls had become part of the everyday political routine. Political actors now saw themselves through the lens of second order observation and routinely turned to survey data before making decisions.

Kruke argues convincingly that the rise of opinion polling as a new observational technique transformed the political field profoundly. She also directs attention to the concept of 'scientization' and underlines its virtues as an analytical instrument. Her study illustrates the merits of this approach, as it offers an empirically well-founded and theoretically reflected insight into the changing conceptualization of politics in West Germany. At the same time, it also raises questions.

Kruke's tale is one of the almost unhindered expansion of social scientific data. Using the specific example of opinion polling, she describes its growing importance and mainly tells a success story of academic experts gaining influence. But such an account raises the question of whether this process also provoked backlashes. Could societies always process the growing amount of data produced by opinion research? Or, to put it differently, when and why was social data not used; when and where was it ignored? And what happened if belief in the measurability of social processes was undermined?

Kruke points out that a widespread belief in political planning helps to explain the success story of quantifiable public opinion in the mid twentieth century. During the 1960s in particular, political actors were inspired by cybernetics and hoped to organize and regulate political processes based on information. Kruke also notes that the planning euphoria of the late 1960s lost momentum during the 1970s. She emphasizes, however, that this did not put an end to scientization in West German politics. Indeed, academic experts were still

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consulted, and scientific terms continued to infiltrate political discourse, which points to an on-going process of scientization. Nevertheless, it seems relevant to ask whether the decreasing belief in the engineering of society in the late 1970s affected opinion polling in any way. Did the predicted limits of growth and the disturbed faith in progress affect the way in which empirical data was dealt with? With regard to these questions, it seems problematic that the 1980s are mostly absent from Kruke's analysis. They are merely referred to as a period of further stabilization, and might have deserved more attention.

This critique notwithstanding, it remains a merit of Kruke's study that it triggers such questions. Her inspiring book adds interesting aspects to the history of West German politics. It offers important insight into the history of opinion research, which in the case of Germany has so far been widely neglected – most undeservedly, as Anja Kruke's study successfully demonstrates.

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