

# “Election benchmarks” as an instrument to exert political influence for the benefit of archaeology – an opinion piece

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**Summary** – This article introduces a political ritual known as the “*compilation of election benchmarks*”, which are used by NGOs and stakeholders in the run-up to an election to sound out the positions and plans of the political parties standing for election. The parties’ responses to a set of questions from the NGO are collated and communicated to the voters before the election so that they can be included in their decision-making on whom to vote for. The self-commitment(s) of the future governing party/parties thus obtained can later be used to urge the government to stick to its election promises. Apart from the desired direct benefit of the process, indirect effects are also achieved, including those that have an impact on archaeology and its self-organization.

**Key words** – archaeology; cultural heritage; political influence; election benchmarks; public outreach; NGO; lobbying; self-organization

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**Titel** – „Wahlprüfsteine“ als Instrument politischer Einflussnahme für die Archäologie – ein Meinungsbeitrag

**Zusammenfassung** – Der Beitrag stellt ein politisches Ritual namens „Wahlprüfsteine“ vor, mit dessen Hilfe NGOs und Interessenvertreter im Vorfeld einer Wahl die Positionen und Pläne der zur Wahl stehenden politischen Parteien ausloten. Die Parteiantworten werden gesammelt und vor der Wahl den Wählern bekannt gemacht, damit sie in ihre Wahlentscheidung einfließen können. Die mit dem Verfahren gewonnenen Selbstfestlegung(en) der künftigen Regierungspartei(en) können später verwendet werden, um das Einhalten von Wahlversprechen anzumahnen. Neben dem erhofften direkten Nutzen des Verfahrens werden indirekte Effekte erzielt, auch solche, die in die Archäologie und ihre Selbstorganisation zurückwirken.

**Schlüsselwörter** – Archäologie; Kulturerbe; Politik; Wahlprüfsteine; Öffentlichkeit; NRO; Lobbyarbeit; Selbstorganisation

## Introduction: What are “election benchmarks”?

This is now the eighth time since 2009 that the German Society for Pre- and Protohistory (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte e.V., DGUF) has approached the pertinent parties with “*election benchmarks*” in the run-up to a political election in Germany. Election benchmarks are called “*Wahlprüfsteine*” in German.<sup>1</sup> The DGUF was and still is the only archaeological society to pursue this approach in Germany – with partner organizations, where applicable. The European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) for its part adopted this process for the European elections in May 2019 and is also using it in 2024, the DGUF again serving as the German partner.<sup>2</sup> What are election benchmarks, what purpose do they serve? Election benchmarks are non-party political and open-ended factual questions which NGOs and stakeholders put to the parties standing for election in the run-up to a political election. The parties are asked to supply information about their plans for specific issues in the next legislative period should they be elected by the voters, the priorities they are setting, and the decisions they aim to take. Previous election benchmarks from the DGUF have asked about the stance on treas-

ure trove or the legal implementation of the ‘*polluter pays principle*’, for example. Between three and five questions are usually put. The responses given by the parties are collated by the organization posing the questions and communicated to the public, i.e. the voters, before the election. The parties’ responses may also be categorized and commented on from the perspective of the organization posing the questions, and this must be done such that this aspect is clearly distinct from the party responses. This process allows voters for whom special issues such as archaeology and heritage protection are important to take account of the party responses as they cast their vote on election day. On the regional or local level, local heritage societies, for example, can use the party responses to take up the responses of a particular party with its local candidates and party activists during the (pre-) election campaign and praise or criticize its positions.

## How do “election benchmarks” work?

In archaeology, election benchmarks are largely unknown on the international level, but well established otherwise – at least in the Ger-

man-speaking countries. For German federal state elections in which the DGUF participated with election benchmarks, important parties answered the catalogues of questions from more than a hundred different organizations, including animal and environmental protection organizations; trade unions and business representatives; tenants' and landlords' associations; hunters and forest owners.<sup>3</sup>

The political ritual is a reaction to the fact that political parties usually have so-called election manifestos in which they themselves specify the issues and information they want to use to convince the electorate to vote for them, and their agenda for the next parliament. For obvious reasons, these election manifestos relate to largely well-known "big" issues which are of interest to as many voters as possible and which the parties hope will bring them a good response in the media and with voters. Such issues are preferably those whereby a party can bring out its difference to its political opponents in a particularly apt way. The question of whether to sign or implement the Faro Convention, legislation against unwelcome trade in ancient artefacts, or the complete funding of an absolutely essential central repository for federal state archaeology, for example, do not normally fall within this category. However, this does not mean that the parties do not have positions on or plans for such issues. Election benchmarks allow stakeholders to learn about and obtain a commitment in relation to the parties' positions on less major, lower-profile issues, and to bring their stance and plans on the issue to voters' attention.

It is obvious that parties do not always welcome election benchmarks in the quantity described, i.e. coming from the numerous stakeholders, because taken together they create a considerable amount of work for the respective experts in the parties, and this at a time when the parties have a great deal of work with the election campaign as a whole. It should not be forgotten that the election benchmarks as part of the election campaign are addressed to the parties and not to the parliamentary groups or the governments, for example. In Germany at least, this means that neither the state apparatus nor the (state-financed) parliamentary apparatus of the parliamentary groups may be used for these responses. Instead, the parties have to provide and find the necessary expertise from within their own ranks. When the facts are highly complex and the questions very specific, this can be a problem, especially for smaller parties. Given their scarce resources, the weight carried by an organization posing questions may therefore

also play a role in cases of doubt when parties are deciding whether to respond to the election benchmarks in the first place, and how much diligence to expend. In the DGUF's experience, for example, small parties on the right fringe of the political spectrum are less interested, presumably because they have not (yet?) amassed any expertise on these issues and do not expect any additional votes from their answers to the election benchmarks of the DGUF.

The parties generally have a greater vested interest in the process and are more prepared to respond when the questions are well put and reasoned, and can thus be answered to wide public effect. In other words: an electoral benchmark must be phrased such that the response resonates with a broad public interested in the issue; it is unrealistic to expect that a party will prepare responses which are solely of interest to the very small expert community. When it is clear in advance that the responses will be communicated to voters professionally and in good time, this provides a further motivation for the parties. A website which maybe offers more in-depth information from the organization posing the questions and explains the problem behind the question to the public in more detail and an understandable way is a useful instrument, also to get journalists interested in the issues, for example. The parties welcome questioners who clearly plan to distribute responses on a broad basis and have the requisite resources and know-how at their disposal to do this much more than they do silent and above all self-referential niche groups.

When selecting and phrasing election benchmarks, organizations should always – or better: above all – consider the viewpoints of the parties and the voters as well, including the question of how easy it is to communicate an issue. Election benchmarks which the public at large would perceive as being primarily clientelism to serve the self-interest of the questioners are not suitable; those whereby voters and parties immediately recognize the public interest and how it coincides with their own interests are suitable. It is unfortunately necessary to also consider ease of communication: facts are occasionally so complicated that they require a deep understanding of the topic. It is certainly also possible to prepare such topics and make them broadly understandable – but this requires more time and effort than usual as a rule, and this explanatory material has also to be disseminated well afterwards. The overall experience of the DGUF is that too extensive lists of questions are also counterproductive, because

from a technical point of view alone they are difficult to communicate and more likely to annoy both parties and voters. An organization posing questions must bear in mind that ultimately, it frequently must and wants to communicate six or more party responses per question asked, depending on the number of parties, for voters to then read and compare. Hence: a small number of election benchmarks which are easy to understand and underpinned by good supplementary material on the organization's own website, and are directed towards the common good, are a promising approach.

A key element of the election benchmark ritual is that the process must fit closely into the schedules and the time-frame of a political election. Election benchmarks must not be submitted to the parties too early, because they are not yet in election mode and therefore largely disinterested, or because as a governing party they possibly still want to use the current legislative period for some final achievements. The parties must then be afforded sufficient time to respond to the questions, and a short period of time for reminding tardy responders should also be factored in. The parties on the other hand must be able to expect that all their responses will then be made broadly available to the voters for the critical phase of an election campaign at the latest. In Germany, this is usually the last six weeks before election day, or the last four weeks for elections to the federal state parliaments and local elections – whereby public holidays, typical holiday and vacation times etc. must always be taken into consideration as well, i.e. the perceived interest of the voter and their personal timetable are paramount. Hence, the finished questions should be submitted to the parties roughly four to five months before the date of an election, together with a clear and mutually binding schedule and communication plan which is communicated to the parties. This plan commits the organization submitting the questions for around six months overall in a tight timetable of work with a strict tempo. When people work for the organization on an honorary basis, as is generally the case with archaeological NGOs and specialist associations, the term *"honorary post"* must never be taken to mean: *"we'll deal with it if and when it suits us"*. Rather, the procedure for election benchmarks has to be taken as seriously as an obligation with a full-time post. Parties will remember whose response to the effort they invested was serious and whose was unprofessional.

### **The direct impact of election benchmarks - a first glance**

The direct impact of the election benchmark system is evident: the positions of the parties standing for election are disclosed and voters can use them when deciding whom to vote for. However, an organization should not expect too much publicity from the election benchmarks and the parties' responses: in an election campaign, lots of issues are swirling around and competing for the public's attention. Nevertheless, the ritual also provides the organization posing the questions with an opportunity to venture with their concerns beyond the normally small circle of usually interested parties and to obtain a reaction from the political sphere.

The direct benefit of the election benchmark ritual endures far beyond the day of the election, however. After all, at least one of the parties will subsequently form the government. An NGO or stakeholder has thus obtained a self-commitment from the party/parties in the next government, and can come back to it when the occasion arises – in four or five years hence at the latest during the next election campaign – and remind members of parliament and the government of their election promises. The overall experience of the DGUF is that parties do not like to be caught out having failed to honour an earlier promise for no good reason.

A further direct impact of the process is that the policy area of archaeology and cultural heritage is brought to the attention of parties and members of parliament, and they are thus offered a new or additional profile-raising field of activity. And not least, an organization which poses questions makes itself known to politicians, which can result in the organization being asked for its opinion and advice in subsequent legislative processes as an independent expert/public representative which is not part of the state bureaucracy, for example. Election benchmarks are a profile-raising field of activity not only for the parties, but also for those asking the questions. It is important here that the questions have been put so as to be non-party political and open ended, i.e. that an organization has limited itself to its role as an expert on factual issues.

The fact that the impact of election benchmarks tends to come late, a long time after the election, is naturally also a weakness of the process, because the officials in NGOs and special interest groups also need to be able to show perceptible achievements for their efforts now and again. When elec-

tion benchmarks, a labour-intensive investment, take effect only slowly and their achievements possibly only become evident after several years, this can be problematic for those engaged in the NGOs, because they themselves are also measured by their success, and elected or rather not elected within their organizations. The concept of the “*sustainability*” of their involvement should also be considered: those who now ask questions in the political arena by way of election benchmarks for the current election should as a matter of principle be prepared and able to take stock at the end of a legislative period, and reintroduce their issues at the next election, if necessary, because there is otherwise a risk of being perceived as a nine days’ wonder and losing credibility. This may run contrary to the rules of an NGO which has electoral cycles of two years, for example. Organizations must then ensure that they create a position which allows the person responsible for election benchmarks to operate continuously. These responsible persons must for their part be willing to “*stay with*” the issue for the long haul. Those involved must also be aware of the limits of what they can do. Organizations, and the DGUF is no exception here, are thus not able to accompany all state parliament elections in the 16 German federal states — the effort far exceeds our means, neither do we have appropriately high-level expertise and local supporters available for every federal state.

### **The indirect impacts of election benchmarks – a second glance**

The authors consider the indirect impact of election benchmarks to be no less important — an impact which is by no means aimed solely at politicians but is also reflected back into archaeology. The “*current state*” of archaeology is not really a policy area. In Germany, solutions to problems, adequate financing and legislation are actually negotiated primarily between the specialist authorities of the federal states (as part of the federal state administration) on the one hand and the respective government or its ministries on the other. Hence in effect, the parties and the parliamentary opposition in particular do not play a large role from a political perspective, archaeology is de facto primarily a matter for the government. This also means that a politician vying for voters will only rarely make archaeology their profile-raising field of activity. Election benchmarks are suitable for changing this in the long term.

Above all, however, the current situation whereby archaeology is embedded into the administration means that when it comes to proposing and finding balanced solutions, archaeology has no powerful body independent of the federal state administration to represent its interests: the public, NGOs, specialist associations play no part in this. Since it is mainly federal state archaeology, i.e. archaeological site conservation, which is integrated into the administration, this system of stakeholders includes neither research, nor the whole universe of the museums, nor the field of private-sector archaeology, which is numerically not small; taken together these are important elements of that which makes up archaeology overall. In contrast, the system of election benchmarks enables all archaeological areas of operation and interest which are not closely associated with federal state archaeological site conservation to also ask specific questions of their own via an NGO for example, and this also means: introduce their specific interests and perspectives or at least draw attention to them. And when put into practice, this also means that election benchmarks can serve to nudge our own colleagues into reflecting, dragging themselves out of their often self-imposed lethargy, and giving self-initiated consideration to the form their very own field should take, instead of continuing to think that giving thought to the future development of archaeology was still the exclusive task of the heads of the federal state archaeology authorities — preferably accompanied by a very convenient sigh of “*can’t do anything anyway*”.

This also assumes, however, that there is collective reflection on the self-organization of archaeology and collective consideration of who actually — on the basis of which legitimation — represents which interests, speaks for the discipline (as a whole?) and really is an NGO. Because, in Germany at least, many specialist organizations consist chiefly of the heads and representatives of federal state archaeology or its institutions, who on account of their duties of loyalty to the government in question have hardly any credibility to act as an NGO at the same time. Some of these institutions even receive (part of) their funding from the federal state. It is out of the question that such state-dependent institutions serve as organizations posing questions for election benchmarks. Even among the archaeology and cultural heritage organizations operating at the European level, there are those which are more a collection of federal state employees, whereas others such as the EAA can also credibly act as an NGO.

The indirect impacts of election benchmarks, which have merely been outlined here, their supposed ancillary effects, could prove to be just as important as the direct impacts in the medium term. While the non-direct impacts probably take effect slowly, they could reform the self-image and the self-organization of archaeology for the long term, and do this quite regardless of whether specific decisions by the electorate go one way or another.

## Conclusions

Election benchmarks are an instrument still largely unknown on the European level whereby NGOs and special interest groups can introduce issues into the political arena which would not be familiar to the political parties or the voters without this ritual. They enable clarifications and self-commitments to be obtained from the parties, and organizations/voters can then insist they be implemented after an election.

Apart from the desired direct impacts, the system of election benchmarks can achieve indirect impacts, especially on the self-organization of a specialist and interest group, its internal clarification of its roles, and its effective representation of its interests. Organizations which are completely independent of the state and the government have a significant role to play here. Although every organization which submits questions takes a considerable and tightly scheduled workload and self-commitment upon itself when it commences the ritual of election benchmarks, and its credibility can suffer considerable damage if it fails to comply, the process described offers more opportunities than risks.

## Notes

\* This article is based on a lecture by Frank Siegmund which was given at Session "102: Campaigning Strategies for Archaeology and Cultural Heritage – Principles, Strategies, and Practical Experiences" of the 2022 EAA Annual Meeting in Budapest. The session was organized by Diane Scherzler and Frank Siegmund together with Gerry Wait (GWHeritage; ISDAf – Institute for Sustainable Development in Africa) and Lorenc Bejko (Univ. Tirana), and the lecture was followed by a lively debate.

<sup>1</sup> DGUF (2023). Previous election benchmarks: <https://dguf.de/ngo/wahlpruefsteine/bisherige-wahlpruefsteine> [12 Apr. 2024]. – The term "election benchmarks (*Wahlprüfsteine*)" is a familiar term in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, and is usually used in the plural. There is no link from the relevant article in the

German Wikipedia (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahlpr%C3%BCfstein>; [30 Jul. 2023]) to a Wikipedia article in another language, there appears to be no parallel article in another language. As far as we are aware, "election benchmarks" are so far known in the English-speaking world only in Australia, but their use is common there.

<sup>2</sup> Hüglin, S. et al. (2019). *Benchmarks for Archaeology and Heritage Protection 2019–2024*: [https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/Navigation\\_News/Benchmarks.aspx](https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/Navigation_News/Benchmarks.aspx) [30 Jul. 2023].

<sup>3</sup> After a particular election, the election benchmarks usually disappear again from the parties' websites, which makes it difficult to document these processes in the long term. Cf. Hochwind, H. (2009). Wahlprüfsteine: Lobby-Verbände bitten Parteien zum Themen-Check. *Spiegel online*, 2 Sep. 2009: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/wahlpruefsteine-lobby-verbaende-bitten-parteien-zum-themen-check-a-643679.html> [30 Jul. 2023].

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