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Political and Media Systems Matter

A Comparison of Election News Coverage in Sweden and the United States

Jesper Strömbäck and Daniela V. Dimitrova

This study compares the news coverage of election campaigns in three Swedish newspapers at the time of the 2002 national election and three U.S. newspapers at the time of the 2004 presidential election. The results from the content analysis show that the metaframe of politics as a strategic game was more common in the U.S. newspapers, while the metaframe of politics as issues was more common in the Swedish newspapers. U.S. articles were also more likely to use the horse-race and political strategy frames. While U.S. coverage was predominantly descriptive in focus, an interpretive journalistic style was more often dominant in the Swedish articles. The results also show that the U.S. news stories were triggered by the words and actions of the campaigns more often than the Swedish news stories.

Keywords: *comparative political communication; election news coverage; framing; Sweden*

Modern political communication processes are highly mediated, and the mass media play a crucial role as a main source of political information for most citizens (Norris 2000). Thus, current political campaigns must use mass media channels to reach the average voter. Even though other methods of direct communication exist, they have by no means replaced the mass media (Plasser and Plasser 2002).

In some countries, like the United States, paid political advertising is one of the most important means of electoral political communication (Kaid 2004; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 1995). Even in such countries, news coverage of election campaigns is essential for voters (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Gulati et al. 2004; Patterson 1993). Thus, it is only natural that the media coverage of politics during election campaigns attracts significant scholarly attention. The histories of political communication and election research have been closely

intertwined since World War II (Blumler and McQuail 2001). However, despite research accumulated during the past decades, there is still a troubling lack of comparative political communication research. Although there are important exceptions (Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Hallin and Mancini 2004), the number of comparative studies of political campaign communication (Kaid et al. 1991; Plasser and Plasser 2002) and election news coverage (De Vreese 2003; De Vreese et al. 2005; Semetko et al. 1991) is limited (Graber 2005). This is unfortunate since “election campaigns are highly amenable to cross-national political communication comparisons” (Blumler and McQuail 2001: 238). Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the framing of politics in newspaper election news coverage in the United States and Sweden.

United States and Sweden: Most Different Cases

According to Blumler and Gurevitch (1995: 75–76), there are several arguments in favor of comparative research. Such research enables expansion of the empirical database and can also serve as an antidote to “unwitting parochialism,” helping us become aware of other systems as well as the characteristics of our own.

There are two basic comparison strategies—the *most similar systems* design and the *most different systems* design (Wirth and Kolb 2004: 97–98). We chose to follow the most different systems design since we are interested in whether trends in election news coverage from previous research in the United States are found in other countries with different political and media systems.

One such country is Sweden. As noted by Granberg and Holmberg (1988: 3; cf. Åsard and Bennett 1997; Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2005), “Among the western democracies, Sweden and the United States are about as different as any two political systems.” The media systems also differ. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the United States is a prototypical example of the “Liberal Model,” whereas Sweden is a prototypical example of the “Democratic Corporatist Model.”

Different Political and Electoral Systems

The United States is a federal system with a Senate and a House of Representatives. Furthermore, it has a presidential system and a strict separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches. In contrast, Sweden is a unitary state with a parliamentary system. The prime minister is appointed by the party or parties that form(s) the government. The U.S. has only two major political parties, whereas seven parties are represented in Sweden’s parliament.

The electoral systems also differ. The Swedish electoral system is proportional and party centered. Citizens can express preference for a candidate, but

the parties decide who appears on the ballots. Split-ticket voting is possible and has become more common (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004). Even so, the parties are the main political actors and exhibit strong party discipline in parliament (Pettersson et al. 1999). In contrast, the electoral system in the United States is candidate-centered (Bartels 2002). This is due, in part, to the first-past-the-post electoral system. U.S. politics have become more polarized since the 1990s, and partisan yield as a share of the total vote was at its high during the 2004 elections (Ceaser and Busch 2005: 136). Candidates rather than parties continue to dominate political campaigning and media attention. While Swedish candidates must adjust to their parties, in the United States the parties must adjust to their candidates. As a consequence, the “empirical content” (Thies 2000) of the party labels is higher in Sweden than in the United States. The political parties in the U.S. have even been called “empty vessels” (Katz and Kolodny 1994).

The frequency of elections in the two countries also varies. Swedish citizens vote on the same day in local, regional, and national elections every fourth year, casting one ballot for each geographic level. Elections for the European Parliament are held every fifth year. Voters in the United States are called to the polls quite frequently. The frequency of elections has been cited as a reason for low voter turnout, although not all agree (cf. Franklin 2004: 98–105). In any case, voter turnout in the most recent national elections was much lower in the United States (61 percent) compared to Sweden (80.1 percent).

Different Media Systems

One important difference between the media systems is the degree of commercialization. The Swedish broadcast media system was deregulated in the beginning of the 1990s, but the public service broadcast sector is still very strong (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2001). In 2004, 50 percent of the population watched news on one of the public service TV channels at least five days a week, whereas the corresponding share for the largest commercial channel (TV4) was 32 percent (Holmberg and Weibull 2005: 28). The Swedish media system is a “dual system” of public service and commercial media (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2001; Pettersson et al. 2005). Consequently, the TV audience share of public service media in Sweden was 44 percent in 2000 compared to 2 percent in the United States (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 42).

Clearly, the media system in the United States is highly commercialized. The public service media sector is limited, private media organizations dominate the media landscape, and publicly traded media companies have become increasingly common (Bennett 2003; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Picard 2005). The U.S. media can be characterized as “market-driven” (McManus 1994) in the sense that a “market model” dominates over a “public sphere model” (Croteau and Hoynes 2001).

A difference in the degree of “political parallelism” in Sweden and the United States exists as well. Even though Fox News has changed the rules of the game, the U.S. media system has traditionally been characterized by internal pluralism (diversity in viewpoints achieved within each individual medium) rather than external pluralism (diversity through different media presenting different viewpoints) (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 67–68, 299). In Sweden, internal pluralism has dominated broadcast media while external pluralism has dominated the newspaper system. Until the 1960s, the party press was strong in Sweden. Though it has now mostly disappeared in news and current affairs reporting (Asp 2003), it still exists on the editorial pages (Nord 2001). Until the launch of Fox News, overtly partisan news reporting was not common in the United States.

In both countries, objective or impartial news reporting is the norm, and journalists are highly professionalized with systems for self-regulation (Hallin and Mancini 2004). However, Swedish and U.S. journalists have different understandings of the term *objectivity* (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Patterson 1998). According to a majority of Swedish journalists, objectivity means “going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute.” U.S. journalists tend to define it as “expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute” (Patterson 1998: 22). Donsbach and Patterson (2004) have also shown that some correlations exist between journalists’ partisan beliefs and their organizational affiliation in Sweden but not in the United States.

The Framing of Politics

During the past decades, framing has become one of the most widely used mass communication theories (Bryant and Miron 2004). It remains a rather “fractured paradigm” (Entman 1993), but there seems to be a growing consensus about the definition of framing. According to Entman (2004: 5), framing involves “selecting and highlighting some facets of events and issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.” Thus, framing is ultimately about choices of, for example, words, emphasis, sources, and organization of texts (Gitlin 1980; Reese 2001).

Two aspects of framing are especially important. First, framing is inescapable (Entman 2005: viii). It is at work each time anyone crafts a message. Journalists cannot choose not to frame their stories, even though the degree of consciousness and intention varies. Second, framing is consequential. As noted by Price et al. (1997: 483), “by activating some ideas, feelings and values rather than others, then, the news can encourage particular trains of thought about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions.”

It is now widely accepted that the framing of political phenomena gives media power (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar 1991; Schnell and Callaghan 2005). This process is similar to the second level of agenda setting (McCombs

2004; McCombs and Ghanem 2001; but see also Maher 2001). What might be particularly important with regard to the power of framing is whether the frames used are culturally congruent: “The more congruent the frame is with schemas that dominate the political culture, the more success it will enjoy” (Entman 2004: 14). Culturally congruent frames seem natural or self-evident. There is no cognitive or affective need to question them.

There are several kinds of frames. Entman (2004) makes a distinction between substantive and procedural frames, which is broadly similar to Callaghan and Schnell’s (2005) distinction between issue-specific and generic frames. They also add episodic versus thematic frames as a special category. This category might also be called “contextual framing” since it refers to the presence or absence of contexts in journalistic accounts of political phenomena.

Research on structural bias—the tendency to favor certain types of stories over others (Gulati et al. 2004)—has focused on procedural/generic and contextual frames. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have shown that the U.S. media tend to frame politics as a strategic game and encourage political cynicism among citizens. In a longitudinal analysis of the U.S. press, Benoit et al. (2005) found a heavy focus on horse-race framing. Iyengar (1991) has similarly shown that episodic framing is common in U.S. television network news coverage and that it affects the attribution of causal and treatment responsibility for issues such as racial inequality and crime.

Certainly, this does not mean the U.S. media frame politics as a strategic game with the intention of increasing political distrust or that they use episodic framing to shield politicians from the attribution of responsibility. Rather, news framing is the result of various factors at work, among them commercial imperatives, the political system and its configuration, political-cultural notions and values, and frames presented by powerful elites. Since several of these factors are culture- and nation-specific, the use of different frames is expected to vary between countries. The purpose of this study is to investigate the framing of politics in two countries that can be considered most different cases: the United States and Sweden.

Hypotheses and Research Question

As noted above, Iyengar (1991) has shown that episodic framing is common in U.S. news coverage. Episodic framing takes “the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances,” whereas thematic framing “places public issues in some more general or abstract context,” “directed at general outcomes or conditions” (p. 14). No research regarding contextual framing has been carried out in Sweden. However, it is reasonable to expect that episodic framing will be more common in U.S. election news coverage because of the results from prior research and because it fits with

the commercialized character of the media system. Episodic news reporting is less time consuming than thematic news reporting, and it demands less involvement from the audience. Thus, our first hypothesis is

Hypothesis 1: The use of episodic contextual framing in election news coverage will be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers.

A common structural bias in U.S. election news coverage is the tendency to frame politics as a strategic game in which political candidates compete for an advantage. These stories focus on “who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997: 33). The tendency to frame politics in this way occurs in other countries (Kaase 2000; Semetko 2000; Strömbäck 2004; Wahldal and Narud 2004) besides the United States. According to Patterson (2000b), this particular frame is a result of commercialism. Even though the evidence for such a chain of causality outside of the U.S. context is disputed (Strömbäck 2005), together with prior research on the U.S. media framing of politics, it informs our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The metaframing of politics as a strategic game will be more common in U.S. newspapers than in Swedish newspapers.

If contextual framing and metaframing are treated as mutually exclusive categories, another approach is investigating the frames used on a presence-absence basis. Given the commercialized, market-driven nature of the U.S. media system compared to the Swedish media system, we predict that several frames will be more common in U.S. articles than in Swedish ones. These frames include the sensationalism frame, horse-race frame, political strategy frame, news management frame, politicians as individuals frame, and conflict frame. If the metaframing of politics as a strategic game is more common in U.S. election coverage than Swedish election coverage, it is logical that the horse-race frame, political strategy frame, and news management frame will also be more common. While the use of the sensationalism frame is not clear, we predict this frame will appear more frequently in the commercialized U.S. media.

Expectations about the politicians as individuals and conflict frames emanate from the political systems in the United States and Sweden. Since Sweden is a parliamentary democracy where minority government is the rule, all the parties have an interest in electoral campaigns where the tone of the political debate does not become too negative. In the United States, the situation is quite different due to the first-past-the-post electoral system. The candidate-centeredness of U.S. politics is why we expect the politicians as individuals frame to be more common in the U.S. election news coverage. Furthermore, in recent years, U.S.

politics have become more polarized, a development that has no Swedish equivalent. Thus, we expect the conflict frame to be more present in the U.S. election news coverage than in the Swedish coverage:

Hypothesis 3: The sensationalism frame, horse-race frame, political strategy frame, news management frame, politicians as individuals frame, and conflict frame will be more common in U.S. newspapers than in Swedish newspapers.

As discussed above, Swedish and U.S. journalists have different perceptions of the term *objectivity* (Patterson 1998). Swedish journalists' focus on "going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute" may contribute to election coverage that seeks to be independent from the campaigns. In contrast, the conception favored among U.S. journalists—"expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute"—may lead to stronger dependence on events or statements triggered by political actors. Thus, our fourth hypothesis is

Hypothesis 4: U.S. news stories will originate from events, incidents, or statements triggered by political actors more often than Swedish news stories.

Finally, we are interested in the extent to which Swedish and U.S. newspapers follow an interpretative rather than a descriptive journalistic style. Research in both countries (Patterson 2000a; Strömbäck 2004) has shown that it is common for news stories to be interpretative rather than descriptive. However, it is not clear how differences in media systems relate to journalistic style. Thus, we pose this research question:

Research Question 1: To what extent do the U.S. and the Swedish newspapers follow an interpretative rather than descriptive journalistic style?

Method and Data

The study used quantitative content analysis methodology to test the hypotheses and answer the research question stated above. The focus for each country was on the leading elite newspapers and what Sparks (2000: 14–17) characterized as "serious-popular" or "news stand tabloid." We will use "popular" to describe this kind of paper. The unit of analysis was the individual news article.

Data Collection

Three national daily newspapers from each country were selected for analysis. In the United States, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were chosen as the leading elite newspapers. *USA Today* was chosen as the leading popular

newspaper. The respective publications in Sweden were *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* and the popular *Aftonbladet*. The time period for the study was three weeks before the most recent national elections: November 2, 2004, in the United States and September 15, 2002, in Sweden.

All articles were manually selected. The first selection criterion was placement. Only front-page stories, being the most prominent stories about the elections, were selected. Articles starting on the front page (including partial stories or those whose headlines were on the front page) and continued on later pages were also included. Second, the election had to be the main focus of the article. This criterion stated that front-page articles should refer explicitly to the election, the candidates, the party leaders, or the parties competing in the election within the first three paragraphs.

Coding Categories

The coding sheet included categories identified in prior research. First, we coded for country of origin, title of the publication, exact date of publication, and type of news story. Next, a number of predefined framing variables were incorporated in order to capture the political framing in each article.

The *metaframe of politics* presented in the articles was examined first. Coders chose from two possible values: game metaframe or issue metaframe. Coders were also given the option to choose "cannot be determined" if there was no clear indication of the metaframe. Briefly, "game frame" refers to news stories that frame politics in terms of a game, personality contest, strategy, or personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions. "Issue frame" includes stories that focus on issues and issue positions.

Second, we coded for the *contextual frame* of the news story, distinguishing between episodic and thematic framing. Episodic framing refers to isolated reporting removed from the context of a particular event. The story does not go much beyond the specific event and takes the form of a case study. Thematic framing positions the news story in a broader context that deals with its meaning or implications for society.

Furthermore, we included a number of issue-specific frames. These variables were coded on a presence/absence basis since it is possible to have multiple frames in a news story. These were the *sensationalism frame* (related to the "breathlessness" quality of a news story), the *horse-race frame* (news story focused on winning or losing in the battle for votes), the *politicians as individuals frame* (news story focused on politicians as persons with different attributes, characters, and behaviors rather than as spokespersons for certain policies), the *political strategy frame* (news story focused on why the parties or candidates act as they do with regard to electoral/opinion gains), the *news management frame* (news story focused on how parties or candidates act to achieve extensive and positive news coverage, or downplay negative stories), and the *conflict frame* (whether there was a substantial level of conflict in the news story).

Coders were also asked, "In your best judgment, does the news story originate from events, incidents, or statements triggered by political actors." They chose between "yes," "no," or "cannot be determined." Finally, a journalistic style variable was included. Coders distinguished between stories where the journalistic style was *descriptive*—told what happened in a rather straightforward style—and stories where the journalistic style was *interpretive*—analyzed, evaluated, or explained a situation while also describing it.

To conduct an intercoder reliability check, 10 percent of the articles from the U.S. newspapers were randomly selected to include news articles from all three newspapers. These articles were coded independently by the two coders. The intercoder reliability was .86 across all categories, using Holsti's formula, ranging from 1 to .67. The level of agreement was considered acceptable.

Results

A total of 290 articles were retrieved from the newspapers. The largest number of articles came from *Dagens Nyheter* (88), followed by 53 articles from *USA Today*, 46 from *Svenska Dagbladet*, 39 from *Aftonbladet*, 38 from the *New York Times*, and 26 from the *Washington Post*. The majority of the articles were straight news stories.

The first hypothesis predicted that episodic contextual framing would be more common in the U.S. articles than the Swedish articles. Cramer's V , a chi-square-based measure of association ideal for measuring nominal association between variables, was used to test this relationship, controlling for sample size. The results show there were no significant differences in episodic contextual framing between election coverage in the two countries. In fact, most election articles in each country contained more episodic than thematic coverage: episodic framing was dominant in 105 (62.9 percent) of the Swedish articles and in 68 (58.6 percent) of the U.S. articles.

The second hypothesis stated that the metaframing of politics as a strategic game would be more common in the U.S. articles than the Swedish articles. This hypothesis was supported (Cramer's $V = .16$, $p = .006$). The game metaframe was dominant in 67.2 percent of the U.S. articles compared to 50.9 percent of the Swedish articles. The Swedish newspapers were more likely to use issue metaframing in election news coverage, which was dominant in 49.1 percent of the Swedish articles (see Table 1).

The third hypothesis stated that the sensationalism frame, horse-race frame, political strategy frame, news management frame, politicians as individuals frame, and conflict frame would be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers. We had mixed results, as shown in Table 1.

There were not enough cases in the U.S. data set to test differences across the sensationalism frame. This frame was rare in all newspapers in the study,

Table 1

Framing of politics in Swedish and U.S. newspapers

Frame	Swedish Articles	U.S. Articles	All Articles
Game metaframe*	86 (50.9%)	78 (67.2%)	164 (57.5%)
Sensationalism frame ^a	14 (8.1%)	1 (0.9%)	15 (5.2%)
Horse-race frame*	90 (52.0%)	78 (66.7%)	168 (57.9%)
Political strategy frame**	52 (30.1%)	74 (63.2%)	126 (43.4%)
News management frame	16 (9.2%)	5 (4.3%)	21 (7.2%)
Politicians as individuals frame	48 (27.7%)	24 (20.5%)	72 (24.8%)
Conflict frame	77 (44.5%)	61 (52.1%)	138 (47.6%)
Number of articles	173	117	290

Note: Results are presented from three Swedish and three U.S. newspapers' election coverage. Articles where the meta frame could not be determined were eliminated.

a. Chi-square tests could not be performed due to the low number of observations.

*Statistically significant differences between Swedish and U.S. articles at the .01 level.

**Statistically significant differences between Swedish and U.S. articles at the .001 level.

suggesting that blatant sensationalism is not common in election coverage in either country.

Next, we compared the use of the horse-race frame. As predicted, this frame was more common in U.S. (66.7 percent) than Swedish election articles (52 percent). These differences were statistically significant (Cramer's $V = .15$, $p = .013$). The political strategy frame was also used more frequently in U.S. articles (63.2 percent) than in Swedish articles (30.1 percent). These differences were highly significant (Cramer's $V = .33$, $p = .000$). Less than one-third of the Swedish articles included the political strategy frame compared to almost two-third of the U.S. articles. The dominance of these frames in the U.S. articles is consistent with the metaframing of politics as a game. This was supported by hypothesis 1 and by prior studies showing that game framing is common in U.S. news media. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the two countries in the use of the politicians as individuals frame.

We also examined differences in the use of the news management frame. The chi-square comparisons showed no significant association between country of origin and the news management frame. Only sixteen of the Swedish articles and five of the U.S. articles contained this frame.

Comparing the use of the conflict frame yielded no statistically significant difference between the countries' newspapers. However, the frequency was higher in the U.S. newspapers: 52.1 percent of these articles contained the conflict frame compared to 44.5 percent of the Swedish articles.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that U.S. news stories would originate from events, incidents, or statements triggered by political actors more often than Swedish news stories. This hypothesis was strongly supported (Cramer's $V = .219$, $p = .000$). Almost half (47.9 percent) of the U.S. articles originated from these factors. The corresponding share of Swedish articles was only 26.9 percent.

Finally, we posed one research question about the extent to which U.S. and Swedish articles follow an interpretative rather than descriptive style. Journalistic style usage was significantly different (Cramer's $V = .42$, $p = .000$). The comparison shows that Swedish media used an interpretive style more than U.S. media. The descriptive style was more common in the U.S. articles: The majority of U.S. election coverage (94 percent of the U.S. articles) was descriptive. In contrast, 45.1 percent of the Swedish articles were classified as interpretive, and 54.9 percent were classified as descriptive.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to compare national election news coverage in Sweden and the United States, looking specifically at issue, contextual, and procedural frames. The results presented above show interesting differences as well as some similarities.

It is clear that the U.S. media was more likely to present the election campaign in terms of a strategic game. This was evident in the frequent use of the game metaframe in the examined U.S. newspapers. We can extrapolate that U.S. citizens were often presented with a picture of politicians strategically plotting for the presidency. Such framing has important implications. Heavily strategic horse-race framing, coupled with a descriptive style of reporting, may have impeded the ability of voters to analyze existing political alternatives and understand the broader implications of supporting either candidate in the election. It may also have activated or strengthened political cynicism among U.S. voters (cf. Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

In contrast, Swedish voters were exposed to more interpretive election coverage that focused on issues rather than political strategy. One reason may be that parties are very important in Swedish politics, and their electoral campaigning focuses on issues rather than strategies. Perhaps Swedish voters following the national press in the previous election were better equipped than U.S. voters to comprehend the main issues of the campaign and make informed decisions on election day. Unfortunately, this proposition could not be tested in our study. However, previous research has shown that the level of perceptual consensus with regard to an abstract ideological dimension and the issue positions of parties and candidates is higher in Sweden than the United States (Granberg and Holmberg 1998: 212–16). This indicates Swedish voters tend to be more informed about issue positions than U.S. voters.

Since Entman (2004) argued that frames congruent with the dominant political culture are more powerful, it is important to place framing within a national/cultural context. If framing of politics as a game is congruent with the schemas used by a society, it will be readily accepted because it fits with individual schemas. Culturally congruent frames reinforce and perpetuate the status quo, in this case supporting the idea of politics as a game and of politicians as strategically competing in a race. U.S. politics are candidate-centered, but candidates come and go. Political parties in Sweden stay highly visible between elections. This may contribute to U.S. media framing politics as a game and the perceptions among some voters of candidates winning or losing, rather than enacting policies and reshaping society.

No differences emerged in the contextual framing of election campaigns. It was surprising that the majority of articles in the countries were episodic in nature. This trend was more common in the Swedish coverage than the U.S. coverage, suggesting that contemporary political reporting is constrained by commercial pressures and that news articles do not provide as much context to political issues.

The study found that the Swedish newspapers followed an interpretative journalistic style more than the U.S. newspapers. Also, U.S. stories were often triggered by the campaigns, whereas Swedish stories displayed more independence from the parties and campaigns. These results might be a reflection of the different meanings of journalistic objectivity among Swedish and U.S. journalists and the heated debate in the United States over partisan bias. The combination of these factors may contribute to U.S. coverage that avoids issue interpretation in an effort to avoid being accused of bias yet equally describes the claims of each side in a dispute. In contrast, the understanding of journalistic objectivity favored among Swedish journalists might encourage an interpretive journalistic style and news coverage less dependent on campaigns. Thus, the Swedish conception of journalistic objectivity allows journalists to decide what the hard facts of a dispute really are and fosters a more independent role of the media in the agenda-setting processes during campaigns.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to compare the framing of politics in election news coverage in the United States and Sweden. The findings show significant differences. Most important, we found that "game was the name of the frame" in the U.S. articles, suggesting that U.S. citizens were exposed to highly fractured and episodic coverage. This is evident in the comparatively high frequencies of the politics as a game metaframe, horse-race frame, and political strategy frame in U.S. election news coverage. The Swedish coverage was more issue-oriented, providing more interpretive reporting on election issues. We

also found that U.S. newspapers were more dependent upon material from the campaigns than their Swedish counterparts.

The results indicate that the framing of politics seems to be informed by the political system, media system, journalistic norms and values, and strength and character of the party system. This highlights the importance of comparative political communication research and warns against making broad generalizations beyond the system where the empirical research took place. However, one important limitation was the number of articles and newspapers examined in this study. Future research should include a larger number of newspapers per country and incorporate analysis of broadcast/TV news.

Further research should also try to develop a framework for comparing election news coverage in different countries. The purpose of such a framework would be to develop theoretically as well as empirically grounded hypotheses that (1) take into consideration the political system, the party system, the media system, and journalistic norms and values as systematically as possible; and (2) allow cross-cultural comparisons including a large set of countries from around the world.

The road to such a framework is long, however. More studies need to be conducted that systematically compare election coverage in multiple countries. These would serve as extensions of the empirical database and lay the groundwork for further theorizing and development of a framework for comparing election coverage.

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Biographical Notes

Jesper Strömbäck (PhD, Stockholm University) is a professor at Mid-Sweden University. His research focuses on political communication, political news journalism, and political marketing.

Address: Mid-Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden; phone: (+46) 60 14 86 17; e-mail: jesper.stromback@miun.se.

Daniela V. Dimitrova (PhD, University of Florida) is an assistant professor in the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, Iowa State University. Her research focuses on new media technologies and political communication.

Address: Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, 117 Hamilton Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011; phone: 515-294-4435; e-mail: danielad@iastate.edu.