CONTEXT MATTERS
Interactions between news media, political actors and citizens in elections and crises

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ISSN 1652-893X
Mid Sweden University Doctoral Thesis 221
ISBN 978-91-88025-23-4
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Formgivare: Mathilda Wiklund
Printed by Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden, 2015
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This PhD project has been a journey with unexpected twists and turns along the way but looking back today it mostly feels like a fantastic journey. Working on a dissertation for 4 years could be compared to running a marathon. Sometimes you are flying ahead towards the goal and sometimes you must just focus all energy on taking the next step. This is something you do alone but the right support from a coach can really change your individual achievement. And when you reach the goal – nothing can beat the feeling of crossing the finishing line.

My journey could never have been accomplished without my inspiring supervisors and to you I am utterly thankful. Professor Lars Nord, thank you for a perfect mix of encouragement and challenges from start to finish. This dissertation would not have been written without your steadfast support. Professor Jesper Strömbäck, thank you for always challenging me to take a further step and reach the goal. Assistant Professor Adam Shehata, thank you for sharing your knowledge and experiences which encouraged me to actually keep up with this project.

A special thank you to my closest PhD colleges Christina Grandien and Solange Hamrin. For always being there to both share research interests and inspiring discussions as well as provide essential support along the way. I am also thankful to all my inspiring colleges at the department of Media and Communication. Thanks for creating such an inspiring workplace during these years.

I am especially thankful to Forum for Crisis Prepadness Economic Forum (FCP ES) for funding my PhD project. Great thanks to Rasmus Tue Pedersen from Københavns Universitet, for reading, commenting and contributing to a valuable discussion at my final seminar.

Academic input is crucial for a dissertation but I would not have made it through without all the support and encouragement from family and friends. Thanks for always believing in me and being there when I need you the most. At last but not least, my beautiful sons Noah and Enoch – thank you for being who you are and not letting me be to abstracted from life.

Sundsvall, April 2015
Kajsa Falasca
INTRODUCTION
Context matters - interactions between news media, political actors and citizens in elections and crises

ARTICLE I
Political news journalism: Mediatization across three news reporting contexts

ARTICLE II
Framing the financial crisis: An unexpected interaction between the government and the press
Observatorio (OBS*), 8(1), (2014).

ARTICLE III
Priming effects during the financial crisis: Accessibility and applicability mechanisms behind government approval

ARTICLE IV
Non-significant or difficult to measure: A panel study of agenda-setting effects in the contemporary media environment
Resubmitted to Scandinavian Political Studies.

ARTICLE V
Where you lead we will follow: A longitudinal study of strategic political communication and inter-party relations in election campaigning
Submitted to International Journal of Strategic Communication (with Christina Grandien).
Context matters
Interactions between news media, political actors and citizens in elections and crises

In a comprehensive review of the state-of-the-art of political communication in 2012, the editors Semetko and Scammell state two major developments that call for updated future studies: ‘the expanding field of political communication and the era of continuous connectivity’ (Semetko and Scammell, 2012: 1-5). Further they argue that due to the rapidly changing conditions scholars must constantly reassess their research priorities in the field of political communication. Many scholars in the field have addressed these developments concluding that the changing media environment and the expanding field of political communication affects media consumption, media content and political actors’ communication, all of which are important phenomenon in political communication research (Shehata and Strömbäck, 2011; Weeks and Holbert, 2013; Farrell, 2012; Neuman et al., 2014). However, the degree to which these developments affect political communication processes in society can be assumed to vary across time and space if they are regarded as dynamic rather than linear and deterministic. Ultimately, the expected transformation of the political communication field must be an empirical question requiring empirical research.

In general, the social sciences are concerned with finding the rules that guide processes in society (George and Bennett, 2005). Rules are the theoretical frameworks that guide our understanding of processes in society. It is important for theory building and validation to examine and add significant cases that fit theoretical expectations to the research agenda. In research we should find out the rules but it is equally important to look for pieces that do not fit the rules (disruptions) and identify when they occur in order to test theories. Examinations of deviant cases that run counter to theories are thus important for theoretical development. By focusing on such deviant cases, the rules can be updated, developed and even altered. Theories in social science can only be regarded as the
best explanation and understanding of reality at the moment. Thus, old theories can be surpassed by new theories as new scientific studies are conducted since social sciences are works in progress. However, in the pursuit of finding general theories that explains processes in society contextualization has sometimes suffered. For research in the social sciences, contextualization is important as it allows us to put data in a context in order to understand or explain. Research that is insensitive to context does not tell us much, or in other words context matters.

Context may matter and affect political communication in different ways and can be identified on different levels (individual, social) and as different types (nation, organization, situation) of context. It is relatively uncontroversial to argue that the political and media setting of different countries are important for political communication. Numerous comparative studies in political communication have concluded that national context is crucial for understanding the development of the news media (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), differences in election news coverage (Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008) and election campaigning (Negrine et al., 2007). Following the aforementioned statement by Scammel and Semetko I also consider it important to include various types of contexts in political communication research and not only focus on election studies. The political sphere is naturally larger than the election context of traditional political communication research. Electoral campaigns are important periods for political communication but at the same time, very specific periods. Conclusions about political communication in general should not be drawn exclusively from electoral research since communication and politics also intersect outside of the campaign context. Political communication research has thus increasingly come to include studies of political actors’ communication strategies, news coverage and media effects on public opinion outside of the election campaign (Ragas et al., 2014; Bennett et al., 2006; Boomgaard et al., 2011; Shehata, 2007).

Following these scholarly discussions, the starting point for this dissertation was to empirically test the relevance of some foundational political communication theories in the Swedish national context. The questions asked in political communication research about access and control, choice and content, and effects on opinion are thus also driving the studies in this dissertation (Semetko and Scammell, 2012; Graber and Smith, 2005). Additionally I wanted to empirically test some theories outside of the election context in order to investigate if specific contextual features are likely to influence or condition news content or media effects on citizens’ opinions. So, at the heart of this dissertation is an investigation of the importance of different contextual features for political communication processes.
PURPOSE OF DISSERTATION

This dissertation addresses some of the issues raised by political communications scholars concerning the relevance of foundational theories in the field. It revisits a number of classical theories of political communication in the Swedish media environment. Furthermore, the studies presented also investigate various contexts of an expanded field in political communication research.

All articles in this dissertation focus on the Swedish case and the different articles focus on different aspects of political communication and the relationship between political actors, the news media and citizens. The purpose is to investigate theoretical claims regarding the increased mediatization of news media, the influence of news media on citizens, and political actors’ interaction with news media and citizens. The theories in the studies thus apply to different areas of the political communication field.

The different articles focus on the importance of contextual features in research. The first article, Political news journalism: Mediatization across three news reporting contexts, empirically investigates the degree of mediatization of political news content and aims to answer the question of whether or not election news coverage is representative for non-election political news. This study tests the theoretically grounded claim of increased mediatization in a non-electoral context. The second article, Framing the Financial Crisis: An unexpected interaction between the government and the press, explores the interaction between the news media and the government in a frame-building process during the eruption of a crisis. The non-election context provides contextual features that can be important for the frame-building process. The two following articles analyse the influence of news media on citizens in two different contexts: first, Priming effects during the Financial Crisis: Accessibility and applicability mechanisms behind government approval, focusing on priming effects during the Financial Crisis; and second, Non-significant or difficult to measure: A panel study of agenda-setting effects in the contemporary media environment, focusing on agenda-setting effects during an election campaign. Both these studies also highlight the importance of a methodological approach and design when investigating media effects in a contemporary media environment. The final article, Where you lead we will follow: A longitudinal study of strategic political communication and inter-party relations in election campaigning, focuses on political parties and their election campaign communication. The study explores the development of strategic political communication and the role of the political party as it reflects on and strategically operates within the context in which it is embedded.
In sum, the separate articles of this dissertation empirically investigate and test theories that apply to different areas of the political communication field. It does not claim to be comprehensive and cover all interactions between news media, political actors and citizens neither in elections nor in crises. That would be far beyond the scope of a dissertation project. The dissertation consists of this introduction and five separate articles. Next, we will turn the attention to a description of the theories and concepts relevant to this dissertation. After that, the different studies will be summarized and discussed. Finally, the scope and methodological implications of the studies in this dissertation will be discussed.

MEDIATIZATION AND NEWS JOURNALISM FRAMING

Mediatization is an important theoretical concept for understanding the impact of media in modern society and is widely understood as a process of increased media influence at the expense of other actors in society (Asp, 1986; Altheide, 2013; Lundby, 2009; Meyer, 2002; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). In political communication, the concept of mediatization is defined as ‘a long-term process through which the importance and influence of media in political processes and over political institutions, organizations and actors has increased’ (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014b). Their conceptualization introduces four dimensions of mediatization: (1) the extent to which the media is the most important source of information and channel of communication, (2) the degree of the media’s independence from political institutions, (3) the degree to which media content is governed by political or media logic, (4) the degree to which political actors are governed by political or media logic (Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck and Esser, 2009; Strömbäck, 2011a). Specifically, the third dimension focusing on media content, links mediatization with one of the most popular concepts in the field of communication: framing. Journalistic news framing is a key indicator of mediatization, where media interventionism becomes an additional indicator of news that is actively shaped by media logic (De Vreese, 2014). In other words, journalistic news frames that translates politics into news stories.

Extensive framing research during election periods indicates increased mediatization since election news coverage increasingly frames politics as a strategic game, includes a conflict frame and turns journalists into interpreters of events and issues (Aalberg et al., 2012). The concept of increasing journalistic independence is thus widely recognized among political communication scholars. However, political news research outside of the election campaign indicates that the news media is less independent from political actors (Lawrence, 2010). Lawrence
(2010) presents a number of cases that do not fit theoretical expectations of mediatization where political actors are recognized as more dominant and influential in the framing of news content. What these contradicting findings indicate is that news framing might be moderated by different news dynamics depending on the context of an event such as an election, a crisis or routine political coverage.

The lack of understanding of framing as a process with contextual features is discussed as problematic in a review of current frame and framing research (Vliegenthart and van Zoonen, 2011). The authors call for more sociologically informed research where framing concerns processes of news production rather than traits of autonomous journalists or news media outlets. A model of news dynamics guiding media independence would move focus from the discussion of who dominates the politician-journalist relationship to a discussion of the contextual importance of this relationship. In other words, the relationship between politicians and journalists can still be described as semi-independent (Bennett and Livingston, 2003) but the variations between media independence and dependence can be explained by contextual features that guide the news process.

Increased mediatization during election periods might thus be moderated by one news dynamic created by the fact that elections are most often scheduled and coverage can thus be planned in advance. An election follows a predicted pattern that journalists can be more or less prepared for and control; the ‘know-how of covering an election’ can be passed along from journalist to journalist. Moreover news media outlets usually have a well-prepared strategy for how to cover an election (Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). On the other hand, normal periods, with continuous day-to-day routine coverage, can be moderated by another news dynamic. Outside of the special and recognizable election period, media content might be guided by political logic since political actors then have more control of the political process and can use the advantage of knowing ‘what is going on’ as well as newsworthy information (Shehata, 2010a; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). Finally, unexpected events can unleash another specific news dynamic where neither politicians nor journalists are prepared for how to make sense of or frame an event (Bennett et al., 2006; Tambini, 2010; Shehata, 2007). Both problem definitions and media access for different actors can be different during a crisis, since no one is prepared and there are no pre-planned strategies to follow. Thus, news production can be more or less guided by media or political logic depending on who first grasps the situation. Just as mediatization is viewed as a dynamic process (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Zeh and Hopmann, 2013), framing in political news could benefit
from such a perspective where the degree of mediatization is expected to vary across time and space. With a process perspective on news framing, specific news-contexts can entail different news dynamics with different independent norms for journalists and the news media.

The fourth dimension of mediatization focuses on the degree to which political actors are governed by political or media logic (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). The mediatization perspective suggests that political actors have to adapt to the norms and demands of news media and is often researched by analysing the news management strategies of political parties and their influence in election campaigns (Strömbäck, 2011b; Hopmann et al., 2012). Increased use and successful results of news management are part of strategic political communication – a concept referring to a political party’s purposeful use of information and communication as strategically and effectively as possible in order to reach its objectives (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2014).

Political parties’ communication and election campaigning are dynamic and shaped by various contextual conditions such as political system, media independence, political culture and the parties themselves. Adaption to media logic has been regarded as very influential for the development of strategic political communication as news media occupies a central position as both an arena and an actor for political communication (Esser and Strömbäck, 2012a; Negrine, 2008). However, while research has revealed country-differences related to national media differences, not many studies have been devoted to the role of the political party itself. Therefore, research on strategic political communication is lacking a party perspective on the contextual conditions that affect the development of strategic political communication and whether or not this development is mainly driven by the news media. It is important to identify macro-trends but it is also important to consider the local context of a political party.

**NEWS MEDIA EFFECTS**

As with any political communication research, this dissertation relies on the idea that news media plays an important role in how citizens understand and perceive politics (Lippmann, 1997). This idea is foundational in the media effect paradigm in political communication that concerns the influence on public opinion, perceptions and behaviours (Bryant and Oliver, 2009; Neuman and Guggenheim, 2011; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Potter, 2011). Nevertheless, the perception of the degree of the media’s influence on citizens has varied from minimal to strong and has circled back to a new discussion of minimal effects (Bryant and Zillmann, 2009). Furthermore, there is still a continuing discussion con-
cerning who is influenced based on the notion of an active citizen who weighs political news against existent values and beliefs (Hoffman and Goldthwaite Young, 2011; Potter, 2012). Societal changes combined with scholarly interest and new research approaches are of importance for these reconsiderations of media effects. The consequence of today’s fast evolving media landscape for media effects on public opinion, draws attention to the questions regarding degree of influence (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Holbert et al., 2010). However, and most importantly, it raises the question of how and who is influenced.

There are three important developments that challenge the idea and influence of the mass-mediated political communication. First, due to technological development, the media environment is distinguished by a proliferation of media channels and outlets. Second, this media environment offers a multitude of media content from different sources e.g., traditional news media, user-generated content and social media. Third, a segmentation of media content can increase the fragmentation of audiences as consumers increasingly choose and design their own media agenda. Due to these developments, the picture of media effects can change again. Chaffee and Metzger (2001), for example, argue that ‘The key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about’ (375). This idea not only challenges theory but also research methods since media effects might become increasingly difficult to measure. The discussion concerning research approaches in the media effects paradigm point out two crucial things. First, effects will be highly difficult to measure on an aggregate level and second, individual traits of citizens can increasingly mediate or reinforce media effects (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013; Fishbein and Hornik, 2008; Shehata, 2010b). It is thus important to consider both media variables, such as media use and media processing, as well as non-media variables such as individual difference variables, in media effects research.

Due to the proliferation of media and media-multitasking, one important challenge is to measure media use reliably and validly (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013). In media effects research, there are three broad approaches to measuring exposure, all with different merits as well as limitations. In experiments, exposure can be deliberately varied and controlled. The most common approach assigns individuals different levels of exposure based on survey self-reports. The third measures what is available in media content and focuses on the aggregate rather than individual levels of exposure (Fishbein and Hornik, 2008). Using experiments, exposure can be assured but the unnatural setting can affect the results. With self-reports of exposure in surveys, the actual expo-
sure compared to that reported is assumed to vary. However, according to Valkenburg and Peter (2013) media use measured by media diaries converge with self-report measures in surveys. Variations in media coverage of a specific issue, such as exposure, assumes that content makes its way to individuals either by direct exposure or indirectly through others. This is often assumed when a specific issue dominates the media agenda, as in traditional agenda-setting effects studies; however, it might be out of place in a contemporary media environment due to fragmentation. Nevertheless, despite proliferation of media channels, research has found overlapping patterns of attention rather than isolated individual media consumers (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012). Thus, exposure measures have different qualities and it is always difficult to know whether true media use is measured. It is thus important to consider if results of small and inconsistent media effects can be due to methodological weaknesses. Particularly those media use measures which can lead to attenuation of media effect sizes (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013).

The inclusion of individual difference variables in research approaches can also affect media effects research results. Susceptibility to media effects varies between individuals and is well documented in research (Potter, 2012; Neuman and Guggenheim, 2011; Bryant and Oliver, 2009). However, not all research regards individual susceptibility variables as having two roles, both as predictors and moderators of media use and responsiveness to media (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013). However, by including different individual non-media variables as both predictors and moderators we can explain why and how some individuals are more susceptible to media effects. First, individual variables are pre-existing and thus act as predictors of media use, e.g., interest, values, attitudes, beliefs, etc. Second, the same individual variables can also act as moderators for the effect of media use on media effects. In other words, individual predispositions such as political interest or values might influence individual media use (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). Furthermore, individual predispositions such as political values or attitudes might influence how the media content is interpreted or how it affects the individual (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009).

Finally, when researching media effects, in the increasingly digital media environment it is important to recognize that media content, to a varying extent, is constructed from interactions between audiences and media providers (Neuman et al., 2014). Media providers are able to see exactly what their audience is doing on digital platforms. Such media measures ensure that the media can adjust their content to audience preferences, in other words, the media can provide users with the content they are interested in based on previous consumption (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012). In this way, media providers and media use could
be regarded as involved in a recursive process producing media content.

THE ARTICLES

The first study of this dissertation, Political news journalism: Mediatization across three news reporting contexts (Article I), focuses on the question of whether or not election coverage is representative of other political journalism in terms of degree of mediatization. The study empirically investigates and compares news coverage of the Financial Crisis in 2008, the election campaign in 2010 and routine political news in 2012. A systematic comparison of news content from these three periods revealed substantial differences in news framing and thus, media independence strategies. The main conclusion is that mediatization along the third dimension, focusing of media content, is substantially influenced by the specific context of the news coverage. Election coverage is far more influenced by journalists in comparison to both crisis and routine political news in terms of framing. Media’s independence varies across different contexts, and points at varying conditions influencing whether a theoretical proposition of increased mediatization holds. It suggests that political news might be moderated by different news dynamics depending on the context of an event such as an election, a crisis or routine political coverage. Differing journalistic norms, routines and practices could be a function of the specific context of political journalism.

The second study, Framing the Financial Crisis: An unexpected interaction between the government and the press, (Article II) explores framing in a specific as well as non-electoral context, namely the Financial Crisis that erupted in 2008. It focuses on the interaction between political actors and news media on the process of constructing and shaping news frames (Zhou and Moy, 2007; Tuchman, 1978; Coombs, 2011). Frame-building involves both political influence and journalistic routines that affect news content and emphasizes the aforementioned key question in the literature on media framing: How independently from political actors do news media frame political events and issues? (Vliegenthart, 2012; Bennett et al., 2007; Entman, 2003; Sheafer and Gabay, 2009; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). As opposed to framing research that assumes that news media and journalists are relatively autonomous in news production (Patterson, 1994; Cappella and Jamieson, 1996; Althaus, 2003; Aalberg et al., 2012; H. De Vreese, 2001), the findings of this study indicate unexpected results as the government dominates the frame-building process. Hence, the findings align with the ‘older’ predicted pattern of indexing that proposes that news frames are likely to be driven by powerful political actors thus limiting press independence (Bennett, 1990). The results of this study thus seem confounding in the light of increased mediati-
zation with a proposed increase of news media independence and the importance of journalistic norms for news production (De Vreese, 2012; Strömbäck and Esser, 2009; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014a). However, the findings highlight the conclusion from the first study that the context of news production affects news framing. The frame-building article of this dissertation is an attempt to explore such a process with important contextual features.

The before mentioned challenges for media effects research are discussed and underlie the research designs of the two following articles, Priming effects during the Financial Crisis: Accessibility and applicability mechanisms behind government approval, (Article III) concerning priming effects and, Non-significant or difficult to measure: A panel study of agenda-setting effects in the contemporary media environment, (Article IV) concerning agenda setting effects. The global Financial Crisis erupted in September 2008 and rapidly came to dominate the political and media agenda across the world. The crisis contained several components that are considered conducive to strong priming effects. However, despite a dramatic increase in negative media coverage of economic issues, followed by growing public concern during the Financial Crisis, priming of economic considerations did not occur (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Peter, 2004). This deviant case offered us a puzzle that could be important to examine in order to further understand media effects. Research on media priming has shown that news media can influence the standards people use when evaluating political actors (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). The basic priming hypothesis suggests that economic considerations should become more important as evaluation criteria for government approval assessment, especially in light of the unfolding Financial Crisis that dominates the media agenda (Sheaffer, 2007; Noelle-Neumann and Mathes, 1987). Since such priming did not occur, we suggest in this study that priming is not only dependent on the salience of an issue but also on how citizens attribute responsibility. In other words, priming is a two-step process involving perceived applicability or perceived relevance and not just a function of heightened salience and accessibility (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Kimball, 2005; Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). We found that the interplay between personal political motivations and applicability was critical for priming to occur. The results of the study support the notion of priming as a more active process and highlight the importance of incorporating individual-level factors in media effects research. In sum, the most important merit of this article concerns the exploration of the mechanisms behind priming effects such as the role of individual perceptions for priming effects. For future research this entails the notion
context matters

that media effects models might be more complex and not as parsimoni-
ous as direct media effects.

Non-significant or difficult to measure: A panel study of agenda-setting ef-
fects in the contemporary media environment (Article IV) investigates an-
other important media effects research challenge and focuses on agenda
setting in the contemporary media landscape. Since the media environ-
ment is rather dissimilar to the mass-media environment that dominated
when the agenda-setting hypothesis originated, the impact of media
effects on public opinion has been questioned (Takeshita, 2006; Neuman
and Guggenheim, 2011). The impact of media content on public opinion
stated by traditional agenda-setting might be out of place in an environ-
ment of fast evolving digital media and online publics (Russell Neuman
et al., 2014). This study compares the agenda-setting effects of different
media consumption measures on individual issue perception during
the 2010 Swedish election campaign. The study is based on a four-wave
panel survey and uses measures of individual news media attention as
well as exposure to traditional news media, online news media and po-
litical social media. The panel data design enables stricter control over
the chain of causality and opens up the opportunity for making causal
inferences about agenda-setting effects at the individual level (Eveland
Jr and Morey, 2010; Finkel, 1995). Most importantly, the findings of the
autoregressive models in this study indicate the importance of the meth-
odological approach when investigating media effects. The findings
suggest that general news media attention is a significant measure for
news media consumption in a high-choice media environment rather
than exposure to specific media types. The main conclusion from this
study is that agenda-setting in a contemporary media environment is
not becoming non-significant but rather difficult to measure.

The final article of this dissertation Where you lead we will follow: A lon-
gitudinal study of strategic political communication and inter-party relations
in election campaigning (Article V) focuses on political actors’ strategic
communication during election campaigns. The article empirically illus-
trates how political parties lead and follow each other in the development
of strategic political communication. So far, most research has focused
on the importance of structural factors in the social, medial and politi-
cal environment of political parties when explaining developments and
differences in strategic political communication (Esser and Strömbäck,
2012b; Negrine, 2007; Farrell and Webb, 2000; Strömbäck and Kioussis,
2014). The departure point of this study is that it is important to explore
the role of the political party as there is also a process where political
parties reflect on and strategically operate within the context in which
they are embedded (Lawrence et al., 2009). This study highlights that
parallel to the process of adaption to macro changes and challenges such as increasing mediatization, the circulation of ideas and new practices of election campaigning between political parties additionally influences the development of strategic political communication.

**SCOPE AND IMPLICATIONS**

Finally, a discussion concerning the scope, the methodological approaches and implications of the studies in this dissertation is necessary. Even though the specific articles deal with questions concerning these issues in more detail, there are a few important and more general discussions on which I will focus.

The separate articles in this dissertation are all based on different research designs as well as different methodological approaches that consequently have different implications. The combination of different research designs is based on the perspective that a dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods is unproductive. The use of different methods should furthermore be considered and reflected upon in practice rather than relying on an unreflecting use of methods (Furlong and Marsh, 2010). The inclusion of individual-level factors or the use of different media consumption measurements were for example crucial for the priming and agenda-setting studies. Furthermore, I believe in the importance of using different social science methods that correspond to the different issues and needs of the particular research problem. By combining interviews with a comparative longitudinal analysis we could investigate election campaign strategies over time, which was crucial for the research problem of the study concerning development of strategic political communication. With respect to the various research problems, the weaknesses and strengths of the different designs and methods of each specific study in this dissertation are elaborated upon and discussed in more detail in the respective articles.

All articles in this dissertation focus on political communication in Sweden, which raises necessary questions concerning country selection and its implications for both internal and external validity. As most of the theoretical concepts of each specific study are international and their prior empirical evidence comes from international research, the question of applicability in the Swedish case is relevant. However, the theories were all developed in Western democracies that share some crucial traits, such as a parliamentary system, free elections, free media and freedom of speech, with Sweden. Furthermore, transnational trends of developments in political communication have been observed in many countries through comparative studies (Swanson, 2004). Comparative studies have also shown that there are, of course, variations between dif-
Different Western democracies that affect political communication in specific countries. The classic study by Hallin and Mancini (2004) focused on the relationship between media systems and political systems in Western democracies and identified three models of political media systems. According to this labelling, Sweden belongs to the group of democratic corporatist models characterized by the highly developed newspaper market, a tradition of political parallelism, a high degree of journalistic professionalism, and a rather extensive state intervention in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). However, there are signs that a shift is taking place in Sweden towards the Liberal model since newspapers have lost their party press character, press subsidies have been reduced and the deregulation of TV and radio has taken place (Strömbäck and Nord, 2008; Nord, 2007). Since Sweden represents a case of a Democratic Corporatist country with influences from the Liberal model, it is a relevant case for theories from a wider international research context.

However, the conclusions from the separate article are not assumed to be valid everywhere since contextual features on different levels and of different types affect the different political communication processes investigated. The research findings clearly point to the importance of regarding mediatization, framing, priming, agenda-setting and the development of election campaigning as processes that vary across time and space. If theories of social science are regarded as the best explanation and understanding of processes in society at the moment contextual features must be taken into consideration. This dissertation illustrates that context matters in political communication research. Contextual features on different levels such as national political and media setting matter for the media environment, specific contexts as in an election or a crisis matter for journalistic independence from political actors, and organizational context as for political parties matter when developing election campaigning. In sum this dissertation highlights the need for contextualization in political communication research before drawing conclusions that challenge the theoretical foundations of the field. The changing media environment and the expanding field of political communication might challenge foundational theories in the field but the empirical evidence from the studies in this dissertation tells us that the degree to which this is actually happening is dependent on context. This suggest the need for caution before drawing conclusions concerning the significance of theories in the field based on an idea of homogenization of media environments and media systems across the world.

This dissertation covers a range of topics related to the interaction between news media, political actors and citizens in contemporary society. Still, there are several other topics that are relevant to explore and
several other research designs and methods could have been used. As mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, the intention of this dissertation is to add empirical evidence and new knowledge in a cumulative research approach. However, the general conclusion is that in future research the importance of contextual features should be taken into consideration when studying other topics and theories of political communication. Future studies should therefore avoid naïve universalism due to the developments of a changing media environment and the expanding field of political communication.
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Peter J. (2004) Our long ‘return to the concept of powerful mass media’—a


ARTICLE I
Mediatization has become an important concept in political communication during the last decade, referring to a process in society where media have become increasingly influential (Meyer, 2002). The influence of media is described by the way news media independently process and present political information, employing media logic as opposed to political logic, and how political actors adapt to this media environment (Altheide, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008). A sign of increasing mediatization is thus political news journalism characterized by media interventionism that entails news shaped by journalists rather than by politicians (Esser, 2008). Contemporary election news coverage has a tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than to focus on political issues, to increase the role of the journalists as interpreters of political issues and events, and to include a conflict frame (Aalberg et al., 2012; Patterson, 1994). These patterns in election news coverage indicate increased mediatization of political journalism where media logic rather than political logic governs news media coverage. However, political news research outside of the election campaign indicates that news media is less independent from political actors and tend to rely heavily on official sources and perspectives (Althaus, 2003; Bennett et al., 2007; Entman, 2004; Lawrence, 2010; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006).

The degree to which news media content is mediatized can be indicated by the degree of media interventionism in news coverage and can be expected to vary across time and space (Esser, 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Zeh and Hopmann, 2013). It is thus conceivable that the degree of mediatization varies between election coverage and non-election coverage, and furthermore that assumptions made about the mediatization of political news based on election coverage research cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, the mediatization of political news should ultimately be regarded as an empirical question requiring empirical research.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to add nuance to political news journalism research by comparing election news coverage with other types of political journalism, focusing on how news media
cover politics and the degree of media interventionism. More specifically, this paper will conduct a comparative analysis of Swedish news coverage during three different time periods being: the Financial Crisis 2008, the Election Campaign in 2010 and a period of routine political news coverage in 2012. The study is based on a systematic comparison of three different content analyses using the same coding schedule and coding procedure. The study aims at answering the question if and to what degree election news coverage is representative for non-election political news. Or in other words if and to what extent election coverage differs from other types of political news coverage in terms of media interventionism and degree of mediatization.

**MEDIATIZATION AND MEDIA INTERVENTIONISM**

Mediatization has become an important concept for understanding the impact of media in modern society, widely defined as a process where the media increases their influence at the expense of other actors in society (Altheide, 2013; Meyer, 2002). A key aspect of mediatization in political communication is that news media constitutes the most important source of information and communication channel concerning politics in contemporary society. However, the process of mediatization should be understood as a multidimensional concept that takes place on different levels of analysis, according to Strömbäck (2008, 2011). Accordingly, four dimensions are identified where the first is concerned with the extent to which the media is the most important source of information and channel of communication, the second with the degree of the media’s independence from political institutions, the third dimension with the degree to which media content is governed by political or media logic, and the fourth with the degree to which political actors are governed by political or media logic (Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck and Esser 2009; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011).

The notion of media logic, important in the mediatization process, can be understood as the way media interpret and cover politics. It includes how news material is organized, style of presentation, focus or emphasis on behaviour etc. (Altheide, 2013). Essentially media logic is distinct from political logic since it entails that media is guided by their own logic and needs, and not by political actors’ logic and needs (Mazzoleni, 2008; Meyer, 2002). Thus, as the media becomes more independent of political actors and institutions news content and coverage of politics will be increasingly shaped by media’s own standards and newsworthiness. Focusing on the third dimension of mediatization, i.e. the degree to which media content is governed by media logic as opposed to political
logic, puts the notion of media interventionism at the centre. Research regarding the third dimension suggests that media logic trumps political logic through media interventionism, since media interventionism can shape and reshape politics as it is covered by news media (Esser, 2008). Media interventionism refers to the discretionary power of the media as they play a formative role in shaping news content (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). Political journalism can thus be increasingly active and independent of political actors when producing news, and journalists can be professionally motivated to increase their influence and control over news stories (Esser, 2008). For example, media interventionism is recognised in election campaigns when journalists act independently by setting the agenda and describing issues and events from their own perspective. News coverage reflecting journalistic independence limiting politicians’ influence thus implies media coverage governed by media logic. Hence, indicators of media interventionism in media coverage can act as an indicator of the degree to which media content is mediatized (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011). By analysing news media coverage of politics, changes along the third dimension of mediatization can be identified.

It is important to emphasize that mediatization, as a dynamic process of increasing media influence, cannot be regarded as a deterministic and linear development. Rather the degree of mediatization is expected to vary across time and space (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Zeh and Hopmann, 2013). Accordingly, the political and media setting of different countries is expected to affect the degree of media interventionism (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995) a proposition analysed in comparative election news coverage (see for example Esser 2008). Presumably there are a number of additional factors that shape the process and the degree of mediatization in a particular media and political setting. Notably, a growing body of literature argues that specific news-reporting contexts can entail different news dynamics (Lawrence, 2010; Shehata, 2010; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). Implicitly this literature suggests that different independence norms are a function of the conditions of the news context. Furthermore, some scholars argue that manifestations of media independence is not commonly recognised in non-election news especially during certain crisis, and that political journalism is characterized as compliant with political logic rather than media logic (Bennett et al., 2006; Entman, 2004). Thus the journalistic use of independence strategies as framing and selection of sources appears to be reflective of the news context. This leads us to ask whether different contexts of news coverage within one national news culture furthermore can affect the degree of media interventionism and thus media independence from
political actors. However, the degree of mediatization has so far mainly been researched in election news contexts. It is conceivable that the degree of media interventionism varies between election coverage and non-election coverage, and furthermore that assumptions made about the mediatization of political news based on election news research cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, the mediatization of political news should ultimately be regarded as an empirical question requiring empirical research.

INDICATORS OF MEDIATIZED POLITICAL NEWS

The mediatization of political news entails that media content is governed by media logic rather than political logic, and can be indicated by media interventionism where journalists are in control of news making (Esser, 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Zeh and Hopmann, 2013). Recent research on political news journalism hints at increasing media power where news media play an active and independent role in shaping election news content and coverage (Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). A vast body of literature in political communication suggest that election news coverage has an increasing tendency to frame politics as a strategic game, to elevate the role of journalists as interpreters of political issues and events, to include a conflict frame as well as to include a variety of voices limiting politicians’ dominance as sources. These characteristics in news framing and source use can thus act as indicators of mediatization of political news journalism. Hence, the next section will present these two dimensions of media independence, first framing and journalistic style and secondly source use in news stories.

First of all, the framing of politics as a strategic game is regarded as pervasive in election campaign coverage distinguished by game framing rather than issue framing (Aalberg et al., 2012; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). The increase of strategic framing indicates that news media has moved away from descriptive and issue-oriented coverage towards news stories focusing on the performance of politicians and parties, the competition and the tactics to win the political game. Journalists try to be in control of news stories by framing politics and the political game as strategic (game frame) rather than reporting on the political issues and events (issue frame) promoted by political actors. Instead of being spun by political strategists in the election campaign, journalists can uncover these strategies by reporting on them and “by focusing on the strategic aspects of the political game, political reporters maintain an apparent stance of both independence and objectivity” (Aalberg et al., 2012: 164). Consequently, news coverage dominated by strategic fram-
ing is regarded as a manifestation of media independence from political actors due to an alternative journalistic perspective in the news. On the other hand, news coverage dominated by issue framing is regarded as less independent media due to the straight reporting of political events, issues and policies.

Another key feature of election coverage is the use of the conflict frame that emphasises the conflict-related aspects of an issue or an event (Patterson, 1994). The conflict frame thus refers to the focus on disagreements and divergence between individuals, groups, institutions or other conflicting parties, in news stories. Conflict framing is consistent with most research on prominent news values in general since conflict is regarded as an important criterion for selection of news. It can also be expected that conflict framing is prevalent in election coverage in particular due to the conflicting nature of an election. The predominance of the conflict frame in political news is not only due to the news value factor but can furthermore be regarded as an independence strategy for journalists. By using the conflict frame, a journalist can stay objective while telling both sides of a story, as well as include oppositional voices and thus mark independence from different actors in the news.

Research regarding the prevalence of interpretative journalism has furthermore revealed that journalistic interpretation occurs frequently in election reporting and in some cases making issues secondary (Patterson, 1994; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). The increase of interpretative election coverage is argued to be a significant change in political news content over the last decades, since “interpretative journalism is conceptualized as entailing a greater emphasis on the ‘meaning’ of news beyond the facts and statements of sources” (Salgado and Strömbäck, 2012: 145). Interpretative styles of coverage are also linked to journalistic independence in the news process. In descriptive journalism, the journalists act as an observer whereas interpretative journalism requires journalists to also analyse. The rise of interpretative political news is thus believed to empower journalists as they acquire more control over the content. Furthermore, Patterson argues that interpretative election coverage increases strategic framing (Patterson, 1994). To sum up, strategic game framing, conflict framing and interpretative coverage characterize election news journalism governed by media logic rather than political logic and opens up the question whether this holds true for other types of political news coverage as well.

News sources and the information they provide journalists with are widely acknowledged as important in the shaping of news content (Cook, 2005; Gans, 1979). Based on Bennett’s indexing theory, that regards official voices as more newsworthy and also as main constructors
of news frames, there exist a considerable amount of research on which stories and voices receive most news coverage. According to this research, official political actors are the most prevalent voices in the news and political actors trigger most political coverage (Bennett et al., 2007; Entman, 2004; Lawrence, 2010; Shehata, 2010; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). It is also argued by Dimitrova & Strömbäck (2012, p 609) that “the impact of sources would be especially important during election campaigns when political actors compete even more intensely than usual for control over media messages”. The competitive nature of the election campaign does not only influence the use of politicians as sources but also the use of journalists as a source category in news stories. Research has pointed out the increased use of journalists’ own analysis and perspectives in election coverage (Patterson, 1994).

In addition to official political actors and journalists, experts in different topics are becoming another important source category used in election news coverage. The use of experts as sources can indicate an effort by journalists to include a wider range of voices in news framing since experts are often used to comment on current issues, events etc. (Lawrence, 2010). In other words, experts as campaign consultants or economic professionals can provide news stories with knowledge and a perspective that challenges political dominance. Ordinary citizens constitute an important part in the democratic process and a crucial audience for the news media. Hence, citizens are regarded as an important source category even though they are not as dominant since they do not have the same news value as official actors (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012). Journalists tend to include citizens as commentators to political issues, events, policies and performance of politicians in order to include the publics’ views and opinion in news coverage.

The use of different strategies to mark independence and integrity by journalists in the news production as expressed in election news reporting is regarded as a distinctive feature of modern and professional journalism (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Cook, 2005). However, empirical research of non-election news coverage has concluded that journalists tend to show less independence since they rely and report on official political actors’ perspectives (Bennett et al., 2006; Shehata, 2010; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). For example, the practice of using a game frame was not very common in routine press coverage (Shehata, 2010) the press displayed a surprising scarcity of source use in political debates outside of the election (Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006) and media declined to challenge government framing despite opposing evidence in the major political crisis of torture accusations in the Abu Graib Scandal (Bennett et al., 2006). In sum, these empirical results indicate that the proposition of
political news journalism characterized by media independence do not hold in news-reporting contexts different from the election campaign. Thus, systematic comparison of empirical evidence from routine coverage, crisis coverage and election coverage is required to add nuance to the proposition of mediatization of political news journalism.

**SWEDISH POLITICAL NEWS JOURNALISM**

From a media system perspective, Sweden is typically considered a democratic corporatist country with strong journalistic professionalism and high levels of newspaper circulation that attract large audiences from broad segments of the population (Shehata and Strömbäck, 2011). However, due to developments the present Swedish media system can generally be described as reflecting classical liberal ideas of the press as an independent and monitoring ‘fourth estate,’ (Nord, 2008; Strömbäck and Nord, 2008). The newspaper market historically developed as a party press but it is now independent from political parties and increasingly market-oriented. Accordingly, political journalism in Sweden has for a long time been guided by professional principles of objectivity and impartiality as well as strong general support for the watchdog function of the media.

The national media in Sweden pay a great deal of attention to political news, especially during election campaigns. Even though election news have become more strategic Swedish political news coverage is still regarded as rather serious and issue focused (Strömbäck and Nord, 2008). Due to increased media competition and 24-hours news production, political commentary such as news analysis and journalists interviewing journalists in coverage, has become more prevalent. Research studying election coverage in Sweden thus suggests that news stories are becoming increasingly game-framed and interpretive. At the same time, sources representing influential groups in society have a substantial influence over the media agenda and journalists rely heavily on trustworthy and powerful sources in the newsgathering processes (Shehata, 2010). Nevertheless, according to Strömbäck and Nord (2006) journalists tend to have the final say regarding the framing and presentation of news and therefore play a crucial role as editorial gatekeepers maintaining a strong position in the battle for the political agenda.

The differing empirical research findings concerning the journalistic style, the framing of political news and the use of different sources in different case studies in Sweden raises the question whether election news characteristics is representative for political news journalism outside of the election in terms of mediatization. This leads to the following research questions:
RQ1: In which way and to what extent do journalistic generic news framing in election news coverage differ from crisis coverage and routine coverage?

RQ2: In which way and to what extent do the prevalence of interpretative journalism in election news coverage differ from the prevalence in crisis coverage and routine coverage?

RQ3: In which way and to what extent do source use in election news coverage differ from crisis coverage and routine coverage?

METHODOLOGY AND DATA
Following the main research question, regarding the representativeness of election news coverage for other types of political news in terms of degree of mediatization, this study employs a comparative research design. By comparing the journalistic style, media framing and use of sources in different contexts in the same media setting we can investigate how and to what extent election coverage differs from crisis coverage and routine coverage. The different news contexts selected for analysis are three different cases of political news coverage: national election news coverage, crisis news coverage and routine news coverage. These three cases represent political news contexts that vary in comparison with election news.

The method used in each case of the study is a quantitative content analysis of four daily newspapers. The unit of analysis was full news stories, which is the most widely used methodology and approach in research on news content (Esser et al., 2012). The selection criteria in the content analyses were that the news story must make reference to political candidates, parties or institutions as well as the financial crisis (in the content analysis of the news coverage of the financial crisis). In order to obtain comparable data, all three content analyses were conducted in the same way using the same code schema. In terms of media outlets, the content is drawn from four main national newspapers, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet. The first two newspapers are daily tabloids and the second two are daily quality papers, all of them with large circulation. A time-period of three weeks was selected in all the cases.

The three different cases of news coverage selected for the study were; firstly the news coverage of the financial crisis as it erupted in 2008 cov-
er a three-week period from 15th September to 5th October 2008 including 382 news stories. Secondly, the national election news coverage in 2010 covering the last three weeks before the election from 30th August to 19th September including 860 news stories. Thirdly, a period of routine news coverage during a constructed three-week period consisting of randomly selected days in 2012 including 193 news stories. This period was constructed in order to avoid selecting a period with news coverage dominated by a crisis or an event with an important political impact and in order to grasp routine news coverage.

Measurements

Building on research for conceptual definition and previous empirical studies, the framing variables used in this study were generic frames rather than issue-specific news frames. The use of generic frames increases the possibility to compare framing in different contexts as well as in cross-national comparative settings (De Vreese, 2005). More specifically the news stories were coded as dominated by either a political game frame or issue frame (De Vreese, 2010; Dimitrova and Strömberg, 2012). If a news story was coded as dominated by a game frame depended on whether the story focused on the strategy or tactics of politics; winning or losing elections or politics in general; the battle for voters or the so-called horse-race; politicians or parties standing in polls; the images of politicians or the politician as persons rather than their political policies. The dominance of an issue frame was dependent on whether the news story focused on policy issues, problems and solutions; descriptions of politicians’ or parties’ stance or statements about substantive political issues; implications or impacts of political decisions and legislations or real-world problems with implications for politics. Furthermore, to investigate framing the news stories were coded as dominated by a conflict frame if they included a conflict between different opinions or if critics towards an opinion or a suggestion were explicitly covered. Finally all news articles were coded as either dominated by a descriptive or interpretive journalistic style.

When coding sources in the news stories, a number of different source categories were defined and included in the content analysis. The categories used in this study were as follows: politicians (elected officials or candidates running for election), ordinary citizens (those who get to speak as ordinary people and not due to any position in a party or organisation), journalists (people identified as working for the media except the reporter covering the story) and experts (people with comprehensive or authoritative knowledge in the subject of the story as political consultants, leaders of organisations/companies, and researchers). A
source was coded as present when defined as an individual with a directly attributed quote, statement or fact in the news story. The number of sources included in a news story was also coded.

Two trained coders completed the coding of the financial crisis news coverage and the national election news coverage. One trained coder coded the third dataset, the normal news coverage. To test for reliability one test for each content analysis was conducted. Ten percent of all the units were randomly selected and recoded. The intercoder test for the election news content displayed an overall reliability \((\text{Holsti}) 0.86\). Secondly, the financial crisis intercoder reliability test showed an overall reliability of \((\text{Holsti}) 0.92\). Thirdly, the intracoder reliability test of the routine news coverage showed an overall reliability of \((\text{Holsti}) 0.88\).

**RESULTS**

Before turning to the main question of election news characteristics and their representativeness of other political news in terms of degree of mediatization, some descriptive data will be presented. The three content analyses in this study included 193 news stories in the routine period, 860 stories in the election and 382 stories in the financial crisis coverage. Clearly, newspapers in Sweden pay a great deal of attention to the election, producing almost four times more news stories in comparison to the routine news period. It is also evident that the financial crisis received significant news coverage. While the tabloid press accounts for the increase in news stories during the election campaign, the quality press makes up the increase of news stories in the financial crisis when compared to the routine news coverage. These results are in line with previous research claiming that different types of newspapers cover political news in different ways. The results also expose differences between tabloid and quality press when it comes to framing of news, pervasiveness of interpretative journalism and use of sources in news coverage, see table 1 for results. However, the differences between tabloid and quality press are consistent over the three different contexts and should thus be regarded as an underlying factor influencing framing and source use and not in focus in this study.

The first research question concerns the framing of political news in media content. The results confirm that the strategic game frame is used more frequently than the issue frame in election coverage. Use of strategic game framing is significantly more common in election news, making up for 61 per cent of stories, than in routine news coverage with 30 per cent strategy framing. In comparison, financial crisis coverage displays the least amount of strategic framing. These findings support the notion that election news focuses on the game rather than the is-
sues in politics, but more importantly these findings clearly show that election news differ from other political news. Thus, election coverage is more likely to use strategic framing and is in this respect not representative for all types of political news reporting. In other settings there are still a dominance of issue framing. The results furthermore suggest that journalists to a greater extent exercise their independence in election contexts by introducing alternative perspectives in the news stories by focusing on the strategic aspect of the political game.

Turning to the frequency of conflict framing in political news coverage, results reveal a rather consistent use of the conflict frame. Here the results show that election news include a conflict frame in 47 per cent of stories, routine coverage in 48 per cent and financial crisis coverage in 30 per cent of stories. The frequent use of conflict framing in election and routine news stories indicate that journalists use independence strategies to stay objective by telling different sides of a story in political news.

Next, attention is directed at the second research question regarding journalistic style. The prevalence of interpretative versus descriptive journalism in election news coverage is consistent with expectations of issues almost becoming secondary in election news. The results show that 45 per cent of stories are interpretative in election news. Financial crisis coverage displays 36 per cent interpretative coverage. In contrast, routine news coverage only includes as little as 12 per cent interpretative news stories. Thus, the prevalence of interpretative journalism characterizing election news coverage is not representative for all political news as it is distinctly less frequent in routine coverage. The findings point at journalists acting as observers when covering routine news whereas journalists in election coverage and financial crisis coverage additionally are required to analyse. The analytical freedom for journalists presupposed in interpretative news content is also perceived as empowering journalist.

Focusing on the third research question concerning use of different sources, the frequency of source categories will be examined in the three different cases of news coverage. The source categories included in the study are politicians, journalists, experts and ordinary citizens. Examining the inclusion of different sources is also a way of investigating whether news media reflect various voices in their coverage. The expected dominance of political actors is supported in election news as well as in routine news but not in financial crisis coverage. Political actors are present in 66 per cent of election stories, 67 per cent of routine and 20 per cent of financial crisis stories. The paucity of politicians in financial crisis content is predictable since news coverage deals with both politics and finances.
The expectation of journalists as an important source category was not supported in the election news context and neither in any of the other news contexts. On the contrary, media practitioners was the least used sources in all types of news stories ranging from 8% in election coverage to 9% in routine coverage and only 3% in financial crisis coverage. Thus, the expectation of a high frequency of journalists interviewing other journalists is not observable in the media. When examining journalists as sources the results show that election coverage is rather similar to other political news. Furthermore, the use of experts in election coverage is surprisingly low with 13 per cent in comparison to routine coverage with 42 per cent of the stories including experts. Inclusion of experts is regarded as a strategy for journalists to include knowledge and perspectives challenging political dominance and expected in election news. Financial crisis coverage includes experts in 19 per cent of the stories making politicians and experts equally frequent in that case. Hence, election news differs from other political news due to the least inclusion of experts as voices in the news stories. The results for inclusion of ordinary citizens were as follows; 10% in routine news, 13% in election news and 6% in financial crisis news. The lack of variance between the contexts suggests that ordinary citizens are included in news stories as part of a journalistic practice not influenced by the context.

In summation, election news coverage clearly differs from other types of political news coverage in terms of media independence and thus degree of mediatization. The findings suggest that political news coverage is influenced by the political context and different events are character-
ized as follows. Firstly, election news coverage is characterized by predominately game-framed news, a high frequency of journalistic interpretative style and also high frequency of conflict. Secondly, financial crisis coverage is characterized by predominantly issue-framed news, low levels of conflict framing and focus on descriptive style of news. Thirdly, routine news coverage is characterized by a journalistic descriptive style, dominated by issue-framed news but with a high frequency of conflict framing. Thus, the results suggest that different contexts entail differences in the use of independence strategies by journalists.

However, the use of different sources is rather similar across the different contexts, only the use of politicians in financial crisis news and the use of experts in routine news diverge. These results indicate that journalists’ raw material as source information, is much the same in different contexts and most probably based on journalistic routines and decisions on who to include in the news making process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of this study was to add nuance to political news journalism by comparing election news coverage with other types of political news in terms of journalistic interventionism and the degree of mediatization in news media coverage. The study carried out a comparative analysis of news coverage in three different contexts within the same media system namely; the Financial Crisis 2008, the Election Campaign 2010 and a period of routine political news coverage 2012 in Sweden. Based on previous research, election news coverage indicates political news journalism characterised by increasing mediatization where media logic rather than political logic governs media content (for an overview see Kaid and Strömbäck, 2008: 424). However, non-election news research often claims that news media is less independent from political actors and actually tend to rely heavily on official sources and perspectives (Althaus, 2003; Bennett et al., 2006; Entman, 2004; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). The take of this study is thus that it is conceivable that the degree of mediatization varies between election and non-election coverage and that assumptions made about mediatization of political news based on election news cannot be taken for granted.

The cross-contextual perspective revealed differences and similarities across the different political news contexts concerning framing and source use in Swedish news media. The study demonstrates that election news coverage is notably different from other political news coverage especially in terms of framing. In summary, the results display that election journalism is more likely to frame politics as a strategic game and to allow journalists to use an analytical voice due to an interpreta-
POLITICAL NEWS JOURNALISM

TABLE 2: News sources in three news reporting contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEWS COVERAGE</th>
<th>ROUTINE</th>
<th>ELECTION</th>
<th>FINANCIAL CRISIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>Q&amp;T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
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<td>84</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>85</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

tive style. Conversely, financial crisis coverage and routine coverage is significantly more likely to focus substantive issues and be much more descriptive in journalistic style. Overall, the results clearly indicate that different contexts entail differences in the use of independence strategies by journalists and different opportunities for political dominance. However, the use of different sources is rather similar across the different contexts with political actors as the most dominant source category in all three contexts. These results indicate that journalists’ raw material for news, as sources, is similar in different contexts and probably explained by journalistic selection routines and decisions.

Nevertheless, these findings definitely indicate that election news coverage in Sweden isn’t representative for all political news journalism in terms of media interventionism and the degree of mediatization. The proposition of increased media independence based on election news research is thus limited by empirical evidence of a more reactive journalism in non-election news coverage. Non-election coverage is considerably more focused on political issues and provides a more descriptive style of news indicating media content governed by political logic rather than by media logic. The empirical findings of this study are thus in line with the process-oriented description of mediatization suggesting that the degree of mediatization is dependent on a variety of factors and varies over time and space (Zeh and Hopmann, 2013). Accordingly, this study proposes a more nuanced picture of the mediatization of political
news journalism in which the degree of mediatization is dependent on the context of news reporting and the use of independence strategies varies between different events.

The results furthermore suggest that news reporting is guided by different dynamics in different contexts. Differing journalistic norms, routines and practices could be a function of specific circumstances of political journalism. News reporting in the election context suggests journalism guided by independence ideal that plays out in coverage (Esser, 2008). The election as an important democratic process may emphasize the expected role of journalists as being politically unbiased and non-partisan. It can also be argued that election reporting is a portable and transferable concept with independence strategies ready to be used by any journalist or media (Lawrence, 2010). The pattern of increasingly mediatized election coverage across various political and media settings (for an overview see Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008) hint at journalism guided by a specific election dynamic. In contrast, every-day routine political coverage suggests journalism highly influenced by political actors. Journalists are less inclined to present interpretations and to use the game frame indicating the use of independence strategies in news reporting. Thus, routine coverage of politics seems to reflect a common news reporting dynamic where journalists tends to be more reactive than proactive (Shehata, 2010). Finally, news reporting during a crisis suggests journalism trying to make sense of an event and thus allowing various voices to be heard in news stories. However, the dynamic of an unexpected crisis also entails that journalists’ independence manifested in framing can be heavily limited as there are no predetermined reporting patterns or concepts to follow (Bennett et al., 2007).

The main conclusion from this study is thus that mediatization along the third dimension, focusing mediatization of media content, is substantially influenced by the specific context of the news coverage. Mediatization of political news journalism may be moderated not only by national journalism cultures or national political communication cultures but also by different news reporting contexts as the election campaign. Future research should further investigate how different circumstances

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Game framing</th>
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</thead>
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can result in different dynamics guiding news reporting. This type of research would necessitate different combinations of research designs and methods focusing on journalistic norms and practices as well as “behind-the-scenes” interactions between journalists and different sources.
REFERENCES


ARTICLE II
Framing the financial crisis:  
An unexpected interaction between the government and the press

Research has yielded strong support for the argument that political actors have influence over how issues and events are framed in the news media (Bennett, 1996; W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Entman, 2004; Gans, 1979). At the same time research supports the claim that media independence entails that journalists have the final say regarding the framing of issues and events (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012; Cook, 2005; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Due to these conflicting findings the relationship between political actors and news media is often characterized by interdependence where influence on news content work both ways (Bennett and Livingston 2003; Lawrence 2010). Frame-building, the process of shaping news media frames, accordingly involves an interaction between political actors and news media (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003; Zhou & Moy, 2007). However, the process of frame-building addresses a central question in news framing research concerning how independently news media frame issues and events. Previous research claim that political actors can dominate the frame building process by being one of the most important sources in news promoting their preferred frames (Bennett 1996; Entman 2004; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006) but that this dominance is dependent on the context of news coverage. The dominance of official political actors can sometimes be limited by the dynamic of unforeseen events encouraging independent news framing (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007).

Occasionally an unexpected event challenges established patterns in the news process and opens up opportunities as well as challenges for political actors, other issue advocates and journalists in the frame-building process (Lawrence, 2000; Wolfsfeld, 2004; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). In 2008 the dramatic event of the financial crisis received significant news coverage worldwide and journalists had to make sense of, explain and thus frame the unconventional phenomenon of a financial crisis. Based on the theorizing of event-driven news (Lawrence, 2010), the unexpected character of the financial crisis could create dynamics that challenged journalists’ dependence on powerful political actors and national
FRAMING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

governments by opening up the news gate wider to various voices and perspectives. In other words, the financial crisis could limit official dominance and provide room for independent news framing.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to study the interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process during the 2008 financial crisis in Sweden. Since the crisis affected not only the financial sector but also the economy as a whole, it became an important political issue as well. It was thus important for the government to frame the crisis in order to explain what happened, why it happened, the repercussions and how they would handle the ensuing financial and economic crisis. Empirically, the study combines two content analyses, one of the government’s and the opposition’s communication and the other of news media coverage during a three-month period of the 2008 financial crisis in Sweden. By investigating the news media’s use of powerful political sources the study explores whether the indexing norm is challenged by this unexpected event. To explore frame-building the paper employs framing theory to analyse political actors’ messages and news media content. Furthermore it analyses the politician journalist interaction in the frame-building process by examining the salience of different political actors’ frames in comparison with media frames during different phases of the financial crisis. Before presenting the research design of the study, its findings and conclusions, the literature on news framing will be examined.

FRAME-BUILDING, INDEXING AND EVENT-DRIVEN NEWS

The concept of framing is closely related to the notion of problem definition and framing research is concerned with the selection and emphasis of different perspectives on an issue or an event (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Entman, 1993; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001; Schaffner & Sellers, 2009; Sellers, 2010; Zhou & Moy, 2007). According to Entman’s (1993: p. 52) classical definition, framing is ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text’. Entman (1993) also identifies four important functions of frames: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies. The central dimension of a frame involves the selection, organization and emphasis of particular aspects of reality as well as the exclusion of other aspects (De Vreese, 2010). Frames can be regarded as patterns of presentation offering a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events, actors and actions. Thus, the potential power and consequences of frames relate to their function of defining reality, judging actions and setting the terms of political debate.
The tradition of framing research is usually concerned with framing in the news media and framing effects on public opinion (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Reese et al., 2001; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). However, more than a decade ago Scheufele stated, ‘This research, however, has not determined how media frames are formed or the types of frames that result from this process’ (1999: p. 115) and further argued that research should address the process of frame-building and the potential sources of influence on the framing of news content. Following this call, research on framing has over the last decade produced several studies examining news media framing of political issues and events with a focal question concerning to what extent the news media is independent in framing or whether powerful political actors dominate the news media with their preferred frames (Althaus, 2003; D’angelo, 2006; Entman, 2004; Lawrence, 2010). The question of ‘where frames derive from’ has been approached from different perspectives based on the idea of different types of politician journalist interactions (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) as the construction of news and frames in news stories is regarded as a joint production (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006).

Frame building involves interaction between different political actors and the news media in a dynamic process (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999; Zhou & Moy, 2007), where both access to media and independence norms are influential. One important theoretical explanation for official dominance in news media is provided by the indexing hypothesis, which predicts how journalists index the range of viewpoints expressed in political debate (Bennett, 1990). Based on Bennett’s indexing theory, research has concluded that official voices are the main constructors of news frames since official political actors are the most prevalent voices and political actors trigger most political news stories (Entman, 2003; Shehata, 2010; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Despite that indexing attempts to explain what stories and voices will receive the greatest news coverage and thus is analytically distinct from news framing which is concerned with the selection and emphasis of different perspectives in news, sources undoubtedly influence frame-building (Lawrence, 2010). Because the dominant voices in news media are likely to be the ones with power over issues and the views presented, the news is more likely to reflect their perspectives and understanding. In other words: sources promote their frames (Lawrence, 2010). Numerous studies have observed how political actors construct frames and actively attempt to influence media coverage (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Schaffner & Sellers, 2009; Sellers, 2010; Sheafer & Gabay, 2009).

Nevertheless, contemporary research argues that different conditions and contexts impact whether news frames are predominantly influenced
by external or internal factors of the news media (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Shehata, 2007; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Lawrence (2000) distinguishes between event-driven news and institutionally-driven news and argues that depending on what drives the news coverage there exists different challenges for journalistic norms and routines as well as source dominance in news framing. Event-driven news initiated by the appearance of dramatic and unexpected events challenge indexing norms by opening up possibilities for actors other than official politicians to influence news coverage. Unexpected events also challenge journalistic framing norms and routines by offering greater framing freedom as viewpoints and frames are expected to proliferate (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006; Lawrence, 2010; Shehata, 2007).

The notion that an unexpected event questions the indexing norm and the frame-building process is important in crisis events. As a crisis emerges both political actors and media actors can initially be overwhelmed since no plans or routines for how to deal with the situation or make sense of it exist (Bennett et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2003). Thus, an unexpected event opens up opportunities and challenges for both various actors and journalists to influence the frame-building process since there are no established frames to follow. According to these theoretical expectations the financial crisis should have created the dynamics that could encourage journalists to include various voices and perspectives in news coverage that opposes the top-down news framing proposed by the original indexing hypothesis. Thus, allowing the news media to be independent and critical of government news management in the frame-building process. The eruption of the financial crisis in 2008 presents an opportunity to assess these expectations on the frame-building process.

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The eruption of the financial crisis in 2008 affected financial markets and economic systems all over the world. Substantial efforts were made and large amounts of economic aid were given by various governments to prevent a financial collapse and an economic crisis impacting societies worldwide, turning the crisis into an important political issue. As the crisis evolved it is reasonable to describe the financial crisis as a complex, multi-faceted and multi-layered process involving numerous actors. Initially the financial crisis was a dramatic event that received significant attention in news coverage worldwide and the news media needed to make sense of this complex and unexpected event. As explained by Schifferes and Coulter (2012: p. 19) ‘the role of journalists in framing
news coverage and interpreting events to the general public was crucial’. The amount of coverage also raises the question of journalistic routines and the complexity of the crisis raises questions of journalistic knowledge of financial issues and its effect on framing as general journalists were thrown into financial reporting (Manning, 2012; Schifferes & Coulter, 2012; Tambini, 2010). Furthermore, some research highlights the dominance of elite financial sources in news media coverage of the crisis with the consequence of financial experts gaining a monopoly for defining the issues absent of critical debate (Berry, 2012).

Turning to the Swedish case we first take a look at the norm of routine political journalism and source use in news media that affect frame-building. From a media system perspective, Sweden is considered a democratic corporatist country with strong journalistic professionalism, high levels of newspaper circulation and strong public service broadcasting institutions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Nord, 2008). Political journalism is guided by professional principles of objectivity and impartiality as well as strong general support for the watchdog function of the media. At the same time, sources representing influential groups in society have substantial influence over the media agenda and journalists rely heavily on trustworthy and powerful sources in newsgathering processes. Despite that, according to Strömbäck and Nord (2006) journalists tend to have the final say regarding the framing and presentation of news.

The framing of the financial crisis in Swedish news media offers a test of the interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process during an unexpected event, based on a number of elements. The news coverage was event-driven since the fall of the American bank Lehman Brothers triggered the massive attention to financial crisis news in Swedish media. News media initially focused the American bank crisis and its repercussions with dramatic images of banks collapsing on Wall Street. As the financial crisis developed and also came to affect Swedish banks, the economy and its citizens, the crisis was clearly reflected in Swedish news media by a significant and negative news coverage (Färm et al. 2012). The massive attention to financial and economic consequences threatening the Swedish system demanded interpretations by the government and explanations on how the government would handle the ensuing crisis. Thus, the financial crisis became an important political issue supporting the characterization of an event-driven news prediction of various and critical voices competing with powerful political actors’ explanations of the crisis. According to the event-driven model these sources might lead to critical and independent news framing challenging the governments preferred framing
of the crisis. This leads to the first research question concerning news media coverage:

RQ 1: Which sources did journalists turn to most frequently in news media coverage during the financial crisis?

In order to study the frame-building process one must go beyond just analysing the actual framing of an event and the source used in the news media. Certainly, it is important to study the interpretations offered to journalists by various actors and the government and its political opposition as well. Thus, complementing a news frame analysis this study also includes the analysis of interpretations and explanations of the crisis presented by the government and the opposition in press conferences, press releases and political debates. The event-driven model predicts the emergence of critical counter frames competing with official explanations. As the financial crisis developed into the main news story in Sweden we could thus expect the political opposition to offer interpretations critical of government. So when the news gates open up for more voices to be heard, the frames presented by political oppositions are predicted to influence news framing. Furthermore, the event-driven model suggests that the frame-building function of oppositional voices is more likely for new events where no established frames exist to follow for neither sources nor journalists. However, the absence of political opposition supports the indexing norm allowing governmental framing a dominant position in news media. Research has indicated that the existence of a consistent and organized political opposition is crucial for critical news framing independent of government news management (Bennett et al, 2007; Entman, 2004). As outlined in the theoretical framework, political actors exert most influence on frame-building when presenting their viewpoint as influential sources whereas journalists exert most influence when selecting sources and writing their stories. By comparing the salience of political actors’ frames and news media frames it is possible to explore the influence of the opposition and the government on the framing of the crisis and evaluation of different actors handling of the crisis in news coverage. The next research question thus deals with the influence of political actors on journalistic news frames during the financial crisis.

RQ 2: How was the financial crisis framed in news media coverage and did the news media reflect the frames presented by political elites?
METHOD AND DATA
This study of frame-building during the 2008 financial crisis combines two content analyses, one of the news media content and another of the political messages from governmental and oppositional political actors during the financial crisis. The time period, 15th September 2008 until 31th December 2008, is divided into three phases corresponding to the different phases of the financial crisis and its development in Sweden. Phase 1 (September 15th - October 15th) is the initial phase of the financial crisis with the international bank crisis, Phase 2 (October 16th - November 15th) corresponds to the following economic downturn and Phase 3 (November 16th - December 30th) is distinguished by the escalation of unemployment. By comparing the salience of different political actors’ frames with that of different news media frames in the different phases it is possible to study the influence and interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process. Thus, the research design with time phases enables a longitudinal comparison in order to examine the interaction between politicians and journalists during an unexpected event.

Data
Two sets of data were used to test the relationship between frames presented by political actors and frames used in the news media. One set of data includes material available from the government web archive of official documents. This set of data consists of press conferences, press releases, official statements, and debate articles as well as parliamentary debates involving both the government and the opposition during the above mentioned time period. The criterion for selecting the material was that it must deal with the financial crisis. The following set of search words was used; economic crisis, financial crisis, economic depression, financial downturn and bank crisis. This dataset consists of 161 units from the period 15th September 2008 until 31th December 2008. It includes 91 messages from the government and 70 messages from the opposition.

The second set of data is the media content in the form of newspaper articles and newscasts on national TV and radio collected during the same time period as the previous one. The media data is drawn from four main national newspapers namely, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet. The first two newspapers are daily tabloids and the second two are daily quality papers. The television news programmes are Aktuellt, Rapport and TV4 Nyheter. The first two are part of the public service broadcasting company Sveriges Television (SVT),
whereas the third programme belongs to a commercial station (TV4). The national radio news programmes are *Kvart i fem ekot* and *Ekonomi-kot* which are the main news programmes on the public service radio *Sveriges Radio* (SR). The content analysis included 3019 news stories from the following outlets; *Aftonbladet* 134 (4.4%), *Expressen* 112 (3.7%), *Dagens Nyheter* 621 (20.6%), *Svenska Dagbladet* 813 (26.9%), *Aktuellt* 364 (12.2%), *Rapport* 226 (7.5%), *TV4 Nyheterna* 388 (12.8%) and *Sveriges Radio* 361 (11.9%). The criterion for selecting the material was that it must deal with the financial crisis and the same set of search words used for the first dataset; economic crisis, financial crisis, economic depression, financial downturn and bank crisis.

**Content analysis**

In this study the unit of analysis in the media data set was full news articles and individual news stories, which was defined as a single news story focusing on a particular event or theme. In the political data set the unit of analysis was full press conferences, press releases, official statements, and debate articles as well as individual contributions in parliamentary debates, which was defined as a single message with a particular focus. The unit of analysis varies in many framing studies but full and single news stories are the most widely used methodology and approach in research on news content (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). By using the full news story as unit of analysis it is possible to identify frames embedded in the longer text. Thus, this study also treats different political messages as full and single stories in order to make the political material comparable to news content.

A code sheet with code rules was developed specifically for this study drawing on measures and procedures from previous framing studies of the research team. The same code sheet and rules were used for the content analysis of both sets of data. Every unit was analysed for the presence of a number of different frames as well as the use of different sources. The coders were asked to first determine which specific frame was used to fulfil the function of the dominant definition of the financial crisis. Secondly to determine the dominant evaluative frame used to judge different actors management of the crisis. And finally to identify the use of different sources in news stories. Two trained coders coded the media data set and the author performed the coding of the political data set. To test for reliability two tests were done, one for each data set. First an intercoder reliability test was conducted where two coders recoded ten per cent of all the units in the media data set. 302 news stories were randomly selected and recoded. A reliability test showed an overall intercoder reliability (Holsti) of .80. Second an intracoder reliability check
was conducted by recoding ten per cent of all the units in the political data set. 16 units were randomly selected and recoded. The result for the reliability test revealed an overall intracoder reliability (Holsti) of .83.

Measurements

Frames defining the financial crisis
Because problem definition is the central function of a frame (R. M. Entman, 2004) it is important for actors to influence the problem definition of an issue at a specific time in order to influence the interpretation and set the terms of the political debate. In this study we identified six different issue-specific frames to define the dominant characteristic of the financial crisis and its effects on society. A subsample of the political data set was read and coded by the author using a qualitative content analysis in order to capture the range of definitions of the financial crisis circulating at the time. A total of 20 political messages were coded to identify the range of problem definitions. The six different frame identified and then used in the quantitative content analysis were: (1) a labour market crisis with effects on the labour market, the Labour market frame, (2) a state finance crisis effecting the finances of the state, the Finances of the state frame, (3) a bank crisis effecting the private banks, the Bank crisis frame, (4) a business crisis effecting the business market, the Business frame (5) an economic crisis effecting economic growth, the Economic growth frame and (6) an economic crisis with effects on private economy, the Private economy frame.

Evaluative frames
Another important and central function of a frame, in addition to the problem definition function, is the ability to make moral judgements by judging actors and thus influence interpretations and evaluations of these actors (R. Entman, 1993). Therefore, we also identified evaluative framing of different actors by asking whether the evaluative tone of an actor’s management of the crisis was positive, neutral or negative. In every unit where the actors; government, opposition and/or banks appear, the evaluative frame was also identified. Thus, the evaluative frame depicting how different actors managed the crisis was coded as neutral, positive or negative. The coding instructions based on previous research clearly instructed that an evaluative frame must express a moral judgement of actors’ ability to handle the financial crisis.

Sources
A news source was coded as present when defined as an individual with a directly attributed quote, statement or fact in the news story. The num-
number of sources included in a news story was also coded. When coding sources in the news stories, a number of different source categories were defined and included in the content analysis. The source categories used in this study were as follows: politicians (elected officials), ordinary citizens (those who get to speak as ordinary people and not due to any position in a party or organisation), journalists (people identified as working for the media exempt the reporter covering the story) and experts (people with comprehensive or authoritative knowledge in the subject).

**FINDINGS**

News media coverage of the financial crisis in Sweden during the fall of 2008 was extensive. Overall, a maelstrom of negative news characterized Swedish media coverage. The fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 marks a starting point for the substantial increase in attention devoted to economic issues. Initially Swedish news media focused on the international repercussions of the crisis painting a dark picture of the worldwide socio-economic future. As the crisis developed and came to effect the Swedish economy and society the focus in news coverage turned to negative consequences for Swedish banks, economy, labour market and business. As illustrated in Figure 1, the crisis coverage exploded in the first phase of the crisis but remained as an important issue on the news agenda during the following phases.

The massive attention to the financial crisis in news media, with increasing focus on socioeconomic consequences for Sweden, turned the financial crisis into a dominant political issue as well. However, political actors’ initial response to the crisis was not as intensive as the news media. The government was moderate in their communication concerning the financial crisis initially, the first official press conference was held on 22th September and subsequent press conferences were held as late as 13th October. As the financial crisis developed, the government stepped up their communication efforts focusing on the international characterization of the crisis and asserting their safe and responsible handling of the crisis in Sweden. The opposition, on the other hand, did not officially initiate any communication concerning the crisis during the first phase.

Even though major differences in source use and framing of stories could be expected in different media, the content analysis did not reveal significant differences. The small variances found was that: tabloid newspapers more frequently used citizens as sources and focused more on issues concerning private economy; quality newspapers included experts more often as sources as they focused on more in-depth news stories in the supplement sections; and in broadcast as well as radio news programme journalists were more frequently used as sources. Overall,
the attention to the crisis in the main news sections, the source use and the framing pattern indicates concordant coverage across different news outlets indicating that the national news media behaved as a relatively homogenous institution.

News media’s source use
The first research question concerned the use of sources in news media during the financial crisis. Given the nature of the crisis as an unexpected event and the substantial increase in news coverage, we could expect a pattern of source use in news media challenging the indexing norm. The content analysis reveals that journalists did turn to various sources in the news coverage and included politicians in 35% of news stories, experts in 19%, citizens in 13% and journalists in 7%. Nevertheless, contrary to expectations, powerful politicians were the most frequently used source category in financial crisis coverage. Due to the dominant position of politicians as sources the following results will focus these political sources. Surprisingly government politicians dominated as sources in news coverage. The government significantly increased its presence as a source gaining its dominant position as the news coverage increased in the first phase of the crisis (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the news content analysis revealed that journalists did not include the political opposition in most news stories featuring government politicians.

At the individual level, the most frequent politicians in news media coverage were: first the Finance Minister, secondly the Prime Minister, and thirdly the Financial Market Minister, three political positions regarded as the most important in government. These findings furthermore indicate that journalists turned to the most powerful political actors in the newsgathering process during all phases of the crisis. The absence of the political opposition in crisis news opposes the expectations of the event-driven model challenging indexing norms. Even though the news gates opened wide as the crisis erupted, powerful Ministers were the most dominant voices in news media.

Framing the crisis
With reference to the second research question Table 1 and 2 display the prominence of different frames presented by news media, the government and the opposition during the financial crisis. Due to the significant increase in news coverage and the event driven news dynamic, we could expect a challenge for both news media and political actors to make sense of the situation. As illustrated in Table 1, government framing of the financial crisis was initially scattered across different frames whereas the following phases display a clear focus on specific frames.
Two major governmental frames emerged, the *bank crisis frame* in the second phase and the crisis of *economic growth frame* in the third phase emphasising the financial rather than the political dimension of the crisis. The remarkable increase in communication from one phase to the next demonstrates how the government stepped up their news management as the crisis developed.

A surprisingly uncommunicative political opposition is revealed in Table 1. Clearly, the opposition did not use the opportunity of the crisis to influence news framing in the initial phase. Contrary to all expectations, the political opposition did not present opposing or critical frames as it started communicating in the second phase. The findings illustrate a frame agreement with the government when the bank crisis frame emerged and dominated oppositional communication. However, as communication efforts increased in the third phase the opposition started criticising the government and emphasised the labour marked dimension of the financial crisis. Thus, counter frames failed to arise during the initial phases of the crisis as the event-driven model predicts. The opposition did not introduce counter-frames in their communication until the third phase when the crisis was actually waning from the media agenda. As we will see the absence of critical viewpoints also affects the evaluative framing in news media content.

As Table 2 illustrates, the news media coverage is distinguished by the presentation of a large variety of frames defining the financial cri-
FRAMING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

The presentation of different frames indicates that news content included diverse problem definitions of the financial crisis and its effects. Even though the government and the opposition came to a consensus on how to frame the crisis and stepped up their communication efforts in the second phase, journalists continued to include different perspectives in media coverage. The dynamics created by the unexpected event, in line with expectations, would thus have encouraged journalists to include various viewpoints and sustain independent framing.

Turning to the question of the relationship between the salience of political frames and media frames, the findings indicate that financial crisis frames presented by the government and the opposition were reflected in media coverage; however, these frames did not dominate. Thus, the unexpected event of the financial crisis opened up the possibility for different perspectives in news media framing of the crisis in addition to salient political frames.

Evaluative framing during the financial crisis

Considering the evaluative function of frames, the findings clearly illustrate that the government was positively evaluated and banks were negatively evaluated as their management of the crisis was depicted in political actors’ messages. These findings are graphically displayed in Figure 3. The content analysis of political messages also illustrates how the government initially could communicate their preferred frames without challenge from a disagreeing political opposition. As the government increased their communication efforts in the initial phase two

Figure 2: The presence of sources from the government and the opposition in news coverage during the different phases of the financial crisis.

Note: N=840
Influential frames were promoted; firstly, the government was monitoring the crisis and had taken the required precautions making sure state finances were standing strong against the economic turbulence in the world and secondly, the banks’ irresponsible management of credits and economic bonuses was responsible for the financial crisis. These frames, evaluating the government’s management of the crisis as very positive and the banks’ handling as very negative, were both salient across the following phases.

The content analysis of news stories also showed how the government’s management of the crisis was more positively framed than the opposition and how the banks’ management received a mostly negative framing in news content across all phases. As graphically illustrated in Figure 4, the initial negative framing of government turned into a less negative framing as government news management was established in the initial phase of the financial crisis. Media coverage thus came to be dominated by the more positive evaluation of the government and the more negative evaluation of the banks. The evaluative frames promoted by government portraying government as responsible and banks as irresponsible became a dominant media frame describing the different actors in the financial crisis coverage across all the phases.

These findings indicate that salient government frames influenced news media frames. Thus, the government was successful in influencing the evaluative framing in news media in contrast to the event-driven news model predicting various and divergent views in news coverage. Considering the dominance of governmental politicians as sources in news coverage these findings are not surprising as sources promote their own frames. Furthermore, the absence of an active political opposition left journalists with little critical evaluative frames to include in their news stories.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Frame-building research has hitherto not fully examined different actors’ ability to influence the frame-building process in news media (Zhou & Moy, 2007) and neither fully examined various dynamics that affects the frame-building process (Lawrence, 2010). This study departs from previous framing studies that examine journalistic routines and norms as source use in news coverage to integrate analyses of the implementation of frames by both political actors and news media during the 2008 financial crisis. By utilizing this dramatic and unexpected event, the present study furthermore explores whether the context of event-driven news challenges political influence and journalistic routines in the frame-building process. However, the present study in contrast to expectations indicates that the government gained a dominant role in the
Table 1: Government and opposition frames defining the financial crisis during the different phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>Opp</td>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>Opp</td>
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<td>Labour market</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Bank crisis</td>
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<td>95</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Private economy</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers of messages are displayed in percentage rather than (n) as it makes comparison easier.

Table 2: News media frames defining the dominant character of the financial crisis during the different phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>N</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>395</td>
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Note: Numbers of messages are displayed in percentage rather than (n) as it makes comparison easier.
frame-building process. By focusing on the Swedish case, which was characterized by a rapid growth of intense and negative news coverage (Färm, Jendel, & Nord, 2012) this study thus explores the interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process during an unexpected event.

The dramatic increase in media coverage in Sweden during the eruption of the financial crisis coincided with the fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. The crisis quickly became the major news story on the media agenda making it an important political issue as well. With no predetermined frames to interpret the situation the eruption of the financial crisis set off a scramble for sense making. The event-driven dynamic could thus challenge journalistic dependence on powerful political sources by opening up the news gates to various actors and viewpoints with subsequent influence on frame-building. The findings of this study display this initial uncertainty of sense making as the news included a wide range of frames and political actors were slow in responding to the intense and negative news coverage. However, as the crisis developed in the initial phase, the Swedish government stepped up their communication efforts and the Finance Minister gained the dominant role of the most frequently used source in news coverage. Even though the news gates opened up for other actors, the most powerful political actors quickly regained their position as dominant sources following the predictable pattern of indexing.

Figure 3: Evaluative framing of central actors in political messages during the different phases of the financial crisis.

Note: This figure is based on a balance measurement where every positive unit is calculated as +1 and every negative unit is calculated as -1, this was then recalculated into percentages.

N=161
Clearly, journalists turned to the most powerful political actors in the newsgathering process scarcely including divergent or oppositional voices. Generally journalists include different sides of every story (Tuchman, 1972) but in this case political oppositional voices were initially absent and the opposition itself was reluctant to initiate their own communication efforts. Furthermore, the frame agreement between the opposition and the government in the second phase, defining the crisis as a bank crisis caused by the irresponsible management of credits and bonuses by banks, seriously constrained journalists access to different perspectives in the frame-building process. As the crisis continued and developed into a serious economic downturn the political opposition presented counter frames but the crisis was then waning from the media agenda. The dominance of governmental sources and lack of opposition in news coverage was thus evident in financial crisis coverage in Sweden. Turning to the evaluative framing, the findings illustrate how the government’s perspectives of their own and other important actors’ management of the crisis was reflected in news media. As dominant sources, governmental politicians and high-ranking ministers were able to influence framing of different actors’ management of the crisis. Despite the unexpected character of the crisis and expected event-driven dynamics encouraging journalistic autonomy, government potency in the relationship to journalists was not challenged neither limited.

Given the wide range of frames presented in the initial phase of the financial crisis, the evaluative framing of central actors in news coverage during the different phases of the financial crisis is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Evaluative framing of central actors in news coverage during the different phases of the financial crisis.

Note: This figure is based on a balance measurement where every positive unit is calculated as +1 and every negative unit is calculated as -1, this was then recalculated into percentages.

N=1711
nancial crisis by journalists we could expect the press to sustain alternative framing driven by the dynamic of the unexpected event. However, it is difficult to reconcile the notion of an independent press due to news framing of the crisis in the following phases. The interaction between government and press in this case resembles the relationship described as “characterized by moments of relative independence within a more general pattern of compliance with government news management” (Bennett et al, 2006: p. 469), a semi-independent relationship. Thus, a relationship that also plays out in the interaction between government and press in the frame-building process. In conclusion, the framing of the financial in Swedish news media did not present us with the dynamics of an unexpected event challenging journalistic dependence on powerful political actors. Communication efforts of the government ensured access to the news and potency to frame the crisis in order to explain what had happened, why it happened and how they handled the situation.

It is however important to note that one major limitation of this study is the lack of observations of the micro-processes contained in the government press relationship. But it is not within reach of this study to research the private contacts and relationships between politicians and journalists that undoubtedly are part of news making. These findings adds empirical evidence of political actors dominance in the interaction with news media when shaping news frames during an unexpected event but are unlikely to be generalizable as they come from a case study based on a single country during one specific event. Thus, more research is required in order to test if these findings are valid for other issues and events. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the on-going debate concerning the interaction between political actors and news media in the production of news frames.
REFERENCES:


ARTICLE III
The influence of the mass media on public opinion is widely documented in political communication research. Apart from learning and information acquisition, important and well-researched media effects include agenda setting, priming and framing – whereby news coverage influences cognitive and attitudinal aspects of public opinion (McCombs, 2004; Schaffner and Sellers, 2009; Shah et al., 2009). While documenting and analysing instances of significant media impact on public opinion is important for theory building and validation, close examination of deviant cases that run counter to what is predicted by media effect theories can be equally important for understanding public opinion formation. The present study of priming effects during the financial crisis focuses on such a puzzle: despite a dramatic increase in negative media coverage of economic issues, followed by growing public concern, priming of economic considerations did not occur. Stated differently, several of the most important ingredients that create information environments conducive to substantial priming effects were present during the financial crisis – providing a most-likely case for strong media effects on public opinion (Noelle-Neumann and Mathes, 1987; Peter, 2004; George and Bennett, 2005). Still, priming did not take place. This study documents these trends and seeks to explain the absence of priming based on the social psychological distinction between accessibility and applicability effects.

In essence, research on media priming has shown that the news media can influence the standards people use when evaluating political actors (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). With respect to the financial crisis, the basic priming hypothesis suggests that sociotropic economic considerations should become more important evaluation criteria for government approval assessments as the economic crisis unfolds and dominates the media agenda (Mutz, 1992; Sheafer, 2007). In this study we show, using longitudinal survey data collected in Sweden between 2007 and 2010, employing a variety of economic assessment indicators, that such priming did not occur. In a second analysis based on
panel data gathered during the ‘second phase’ of the economic crisis in May 2010, our results suggest that priming of economic considerations depends on whether citizens see national economic trends as caused by international factors beyond government control, or whether responsibility is actually attributed to government actors. We conclude that these findings support the notion of priming as a two-step process, whereby heavy news coverage of the financial crisis increases the accessibility of economic considerations among the audience, but whether these considerations are used in government approval assessments depends on their perceived applicability as well (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). Accordingly, the absence of priming effects during the initial phase of the economic crisis, we argue, reflects the fact that news coverage was characterized by a combined focus on the international origins of the economic crisis and negative assessments of its impact on economic growth and unemployment domestically.

The article is organized as follows. The first section discusses priming effects, with a specific focus on the distinction between accessibility and applicability as two mechanisms behind priming. Based on research on economic voting we discuss attributions of responsibility as a potential individual-level applicability variable moderating priming (Rudolph and Grant, 2002; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007). The second section briefly presents Sweden as the case, provides an empirical background on Swedish media coverage of the financial crisis, and presents the hypotheses tested in the study. After discussing methodology and data sources in the third section, the results are presented in the fourth section. In the conclusion, we discuss the broader and theoretical implications of our findings.

MEDIA PRIMING

Research on media priming has shifted from documenting the existence of priming effects on the audience (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Mendelsohn, 1996; Domke et al., 1998; Holbrook and Hill, 2005) to studying how priming actually works, including the processes that drive priming (Scheufele, 2000; Althaus and Kim, 2006; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Sheafer, 2007). As defined in the political communication literature, priming refers to the effects of media content on people’s later evaluation of political actors. The classic definition focuses on how the amount of news coverage affects the assessment criteria used by members of the public: ‘by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies and candidates for public office are judged’ (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Twenty-five years of
priming research has demonstrated that news coverage can influence what attitudes and considerations people use to make political judgements (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Krosnick and Brannon, 1993; Miller and Krosnick, 2000). More recently, however, empirical research has focused on the mechanisms producing priming effects, suggesting that such effects are not a function of the salience of different topics in the news media alone, but of the applicability – or perceived relevance – of various considerations among the audience as well. There is thus still no consensus on the role of different individual-level mechanisms in the priming process. In other words, researchers disagree on whether priming effects are explained exclusively by salience and accessibility, that is, whether people think about something, or by applicability, that is, how they think about something, as well.

**Priming as an accessibility effect**

Many scholars consider priming an accessibility effect, arguing that priming is a function of the salience of certain issues in the news media, and that increased coverage influences the criteria people use to evaluate the performance of political actors (Price and Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). From this perspective, priming is seen as an extension of agenda setting whereby issue salience in the media is transferred to the public, making these considerations more accessible for retrieval in subsequent judgemental tasks. As argued by Scheufele and Tewksbury, ‘[p]riming and agenda setting [...] are accessibility effects; that is, they are based on memory-based models of information processing. The temporal sequence of agenda setting and priming assumes that media can make certain issues or aspects of issues more accessible (i.e. easily recalled) for people and thereby influence the standards they use when forming attitudes about candidates and political issues’ (2007: 15). Thus, the focus is not on how people think about certain issues, but rather on what information they use as criteria when forming judgements about political actors (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Ansolabehere et al., 1993). The information provided by the news media is processed and stored in memory, and salient issues become more accessible and easily retrieved when forming global assessments, evaluations and opinions (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Higgins, 1996; Price and Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Accordingly, heightened accessibility due to issue salience in the news media is the core explanation and the primary mechanism behind the priming effect.

According to this logic, one should expect priming of economic considerations during the financial crisis to occur as a function of increases
in media coverage and growing public concern about the state of the national economy. As economic issues come to dominate the media agenda following the eruption of the financial crisis in 2008, citizens will become increasingly concerned about the economy (Sheafer, 2007; Boomgaarden et al., 2011), thereby affecting the weight attached to these issues in government approval evaluations (Hetherington, 1996).

**Priming as an applicability effect**

Drawing on social psychological literature, however, other researchers argue that priming effects are, in fact, not only a function of accessibility, but of applicability mechanisms as well (Higgins, 1996; Althaus and Kim, 2006). This accentuates the question of whether accessibility alone drives priming effects. According to Althaus and Kim (2006), the focus on accessibility in many priming studies is a notable theoretical and empirical limitation. They argue that it is insufficient to analyse priming effects as a result exclusively of increased accessibility, since salience in itself does not ensure that specific information is used as criteria for evaluating political actors. Applicability, as it is used here, refers to the extent to which a certain knowledge construct or consideration is considered relevant – or applicable – to a given judgemental task (Price and Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Althaus and Kim describe priming as a two-step process whereby ‘accessibility is one of two primary factors moderating the activation of stored knowledge: the other is the degree to which a stimulus and a stored knowledge construct are perceived as applicable to one another’ (2006: 962; see also Higgins and Brendl, 1995; Carpentier et al., 2008). Similarly, Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2009) refer to applicability as ‘deliberate judgements of the relevance of information to the current situation’ (p. 184). Therefore, whether economic considerations – as in the case of the financial crisis – are not only activated by increased media coverage, but also increasingly used as evaluation criteria by citizens, depends on the perceived relevance of these considerations for government approval assessments. Describing priming as a two-step process expresses the notion that priming effects are moderated by applicability as well as accessibility mechanisms (Althaus and Kim, 2006).

With respect to public opinion during the financial crisis, the applicability argument suggests that increased salience of economic issues in the media and growing public concern are not sufficient conditions for generating priming effects. In addition, citizens need to consider these economic considerations as relevant for their government approval evaluations. Inspired by research on economic voting (Anderson, 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Hellwig, 2007; Sheafer, 2008), we con-
sider *attribution of responsibility* for economic developments as a key applicability mechanism behind priming of economic issues. As several of these studies have noted, the reward–punishment hypothesis that underlies economic voting depends on the clarity of political responsibility (Hellwig, 2007; Sheafer, 2008) – a finding that seems highly relevant for priming effects during the financial crisis. As argued by Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2007): ‘[b]ecause of globalization, that is, international economic integration, governments are less able to manage their national economies. Therefore, as electorates perceive this, we should expect less economic voting’ (p. 529). In one of the most extensive studies on the relationship between perceptions of responsibility for current economic trends and economic voting, Rudolph and Grant (2002) found that ‘attributions of responsibility moderate the effects of national economic perceptions on actual voting decisions’ (p. 819; see also Rudolph, 2003; Rudolph, 2006). Given the global scope of the financial crisis, it is far from obvious that growing public concern over the national economic situation translates into priming effects. According to an applicability argument, priming of economic perceptions should depend on whether citizens see national economic trends as caused by international factors beyond government control, or whether responsibility is actually attributed to government actors.

**CASE SELECTION, EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

The present study of priming effects during the financial crisis focuses on opinion dynamics in Sweden – a small country strongly dependent on international trade and global economic activities. From a media system perspective, Sweden is typically considered a democratic corporatist country with strong journalistic professionalism, high levels of newspaper circulation and strong public service broadcasting institutions that attract large audiences from broad segments of the population (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Aalberg and Curran, 2011; Shehata and Strömbäck, 2011).

The Swedish economy was heavily affected by the financial crisis that erupted in September 2008, as well as the subsequent global economic recession (Lybeck, 2009). The macroeconomic downturn that followed was clearly reflected in all major Swedish news media, as shown by two previous studies analysing media coverage of the financial crisis (Asp, 2011; Färm *et al.*, 2012). In addition, these studies suggest that the Swedish experience of the global economic crisis could be divided into two phases – as illustrated by Figure 1, which displays the amount of news coverage of the economic crisis in four leading Swedish dailies from
January 2008 to December 2010 (Färm et al., 2012). The fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 marks a starting point of the initial phase of the economic crisis, with a substantial increase in attention devoted to economic issues in the Swedish media. From the graph it is obvious that news coverage was most extensive in the second half of 2008 and the first 6 months of 2009, but the economy remained a key issue on the media agenda throughout the entire period. News coverage during the initial phase in 2008 was characterized both by a strong focus on developments abroad and very negative assessments of the impact on economic growth and unemployment domestically (Färm et al., 2012). According to the extensive content analysis by Asp (2011), media coverage of the state of the economy and unemployment was extremely negative in the fall of 2008 but gradually improved during 2009. Negative media coverage of the Swedish economy dominated until late spring 2010, however, at which point the total amount of positive stories of economic development and unemployment rates outnumbered the negative – a tipping point that coincided with increasingly negative coverage of the economic situation in the euro zone (Asp, 2011: 112). This tipping point in April–May 2010 marks what we consider the ‘second phase’ of the economic crisis, illustrated in Figure 1 by a second wave of economic news coverage focusing on worrying economic developments in the euro zone in general, and in the Greek economy in particular. At the

Figure 1 The number of articles about the economic crisis published in Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet between 2008 and 2010.

Note: N = 8904 (number of articles).
Source: Färm et al., 2012.
same time, however, media framing of the Swedish economy and unemployment trends became increasingly positive in the following months (Asp, 2011).

The extensive news coverage devoted to the economy by the Swedish media following the eruption of the financial crisis in 2008 provides an excellent opportunity to study priming effects on government approval. Building upon research on opinion formation and economic voting, we focus on how citizens’ sociotropic economic assessments – that is, perceptions of the national rather than personal economic situation – influence government approval (Mutz, 1992; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007; Boomgarden et al., 2011). In terms of priming, we contrast two partly competing explanations as to how and why priming effects occur. Following the original priming hypothesis based on an accessibility mechanism, we should expect the substantial increase in negative media coverage of the economy to increase public concern over economic issues which, in turn, influences the weight attached to these considerations in government approval evaluations. According to the applicability argument outlined previously, on the other hand, we expect priming of economic considerations to depend not only on the accessibility (or salience) of economic considerations, but also on how citizens attribute responsibility to current economic trends during the financial crisis. More formally, we formulate and test the following three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Increased negative news coverage of the economy, following the eruption of the financial crisis in 2008, leads to growing public concern about the state of the national economy (salience effect).

Hypothesis 2: Growing public concern about the national economy leads citizens to attach greater weight to economic considerations when evaluating government performance (accessibility mechanism).

Hypothesis 3: Priming effects during the financial crisis depend both on issue salience and attributions of responsibility for current economic trends (applicability mechanism).
PRIMING EFFECTS DURING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

METHODOLOGY AND DATA
This study of priming effects during the financial crisis is based on two public opinion data sources. First, economic perceptions and government approval in the period 2007–2010 are analysed using an annual representative survey, which has been administered by the Swedish Society, Opinion, Media (SOM) institute at the University of Gothenburg since 1986. These cross-sectional surveys are conducted each fall during a fieldwork period of ~ 3 months, and provide one of the most extensive longitudinal representative databases on public opinion and behaviour available in Sweden. The SOM surveys utilized here were conducted between September and December in the years 2007–2010, thereby covering public opinion dynamics before (2007), during (2008) and in the aftermath (2009 and 2010) of the financial crisis. As data for the 2008 survey were gathered immediately after the fall of Lehman Brothers on 15 September, we will further track public opinion dynamics week-by-week following the eruption of the initial phase of the crisis. Second, to investigate the role of attributions of responsibility in the priming process a separate four-wave panel study was conducted during the 2010 Swedish election campaign, with the first wave in field at the start of the ‘second phase’ of the financial crisis in May 2010, when the economic problems in Greece and the euro zone quickly became the dominant issue. While the panel survey does not allow for an analysis of public opinion at the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, it provides an opportunity to study the role of responsibility attributions at a time when the global economic crisis entered a new phase, and media coverage as well as public perceptions of the current Swedish economic situation shifted.

The annual SOM survey
The cross-sectional SOM surveys are distributed by mail annually to a national probability sample of the Swedish population. While the overall research design and sampling procedure have remained the same since the surveys were launched in 1986, some minor amendments have been made. In 2007 and 2008 the sample included citizens aged 15–85, while the 2009 and 2010 surveys covered an age span of 16–85 years. The fieldwork starts at the end of September and continues over the following months. The majority of the questionnaires are returned before the end of October. The final response rates for the surveys used here range from 58% (2008) to 63% (2010).
The four-wave panel study

The panel study was conducted in four waves during the 2010 Swedish election campaign. The study was conducted by the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University in cooperation with the polling institute Synovate in Sweden. The sample was drawn using stratified probability sampling from a database of ~ 28,000 citizens from Synovate’s pool of Web survey participants. The participants included were recruited continuously using both random digit dialling and mail surveys based on random probability samples. Approximately 5% of those who are initially contacted and invited agreed to be part of this pool of respondents. As the invitations were not carried out for this specific study, but rather for the purpose of doing market research, the common bias towards politically interested citizens is avoided.

The survey is based on a sample of 4010 respondents aged 18–74 from this pool, stratified by gender, age, county size, political interest and Internet use, in order to be as representative of the Swedish population aged 18–74 as possible. Respondents were asked to complete a Web survey four times during a period of ~ 5 months leading up to the election. Wave 1 of the panel took place in May (3–20 May); Wave 2 in mid-June (14–23 June); Wave 3 in mid-August (16–23 August) and Wave 4 immediately after Election Day (20–27 September). In order to utilize the strength of the panel data, most analyses will be based on respondents who completed all four questionnaires, resulting in a cooperation rate of 35% (COOP2, AAPOR).

Measures

All the main variables used in our study of priming effects were measured either identically or similarly in the SOM and panel surveys.

Government approval. The dependent variable is based on the following two survey items posed in the SOM survey: (1) ‘To what extent do you approve of the way the government is doing its job?’ (2) ‘To what extent do you trust how the following institutions or groups [the government] are doing their job?’ These two five-point scales were added (Pearson’s $r = 0.76$) to form a government approval index ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 8 (Strongly approve). From the panel survey, the following item was used to tap government approval: ‘Overall, how do you think the government has handled its job in the past four years?’, ranging from 1 (Very bad) to 7 (Very good).

Sociotropic economic perceptions. Following research on economic voting, we are primarily interested in the priming of sociotropic economic perceptions. These were measured identically in both the SOM and the
panel surveys, using the following item: ‘How has, according to you, the following economic situation [the Swedish economy] changed during the past 12 months?’, ranging between 0 (Improved), 1 (Remained the same) and 2 (Gotten worse). While this retrospective item is the main priming variable used in the analysis, we will validate some findings using alternative measures of sociotropic perceptions. First, a measure of prospective economic perceptions is based on the following item: ‘How do you believe the [Swedish] economy will change in the coming 12 months?’, ranging between 0 (Improve), 1 (Remain the same) and 2 (Get worse). Furthermore, the SOM survey includes the following question on the problems citizens are worried about: ‘If you consider the situation today, what do you consider most worrying for the future?’, with two items focusing on a future (1) economic crisis and future (2) widespread unemployment. Response categories range from 1 (Not worried at all) to 4 (Very worried). Finally, a classic open-ended agenda-setting item was included in the SOM survey: ‘What issues or problems do you consider most important for Sweden today?’. Respondents who named either the financial crisis, the Swedish economy, the economic recession or unemployment were combined.

Attributions of responsibility. To address the distinction between accessibility and applicability effects, the panel study included an item to capture the extent to which citizens perceive the current economic situation as a result of the international economic downturn on the one hand, or as a result of government policy on the other. The item was worded in the following way: ‘In public discourse some argue that the financial crisis is the main cause of economic developments in Sweden in the last couple of years. Others argue that government policy is the main cause of these economic developments. What do you consider to be the main cause?’, with responses ranging from 1 (The financial crisis is the main cause of the economic development) to 7 (Government policy is the main cause of the economic development).

Salience of economic issues. To fully test the applicability argument – that economic considerations should be both accessible and applicable to influence government approval assessments – the panel study also included a measure of the salience of the national economy as a political issue. Following previous agenda-setting research, salience was measured by asking respondents to rate how important they considered a number of political issues to be, using a scale from 1 (Not important at all) to 7 (Very important). A relative economic issues salience index was computed by dividing the importance attached to ‘economic growth’ by the importance attached to nine other political issues. By focusing on the relative salience of economic issues, our measure better reflects the per-
ceived importance of, or concern for, economic issues compared with the salience of other issues. Finally, this index was recoded to range between 1 (low relative salience) and 7 (high relative salience).

Control variables. In addition to the main variables described above, our analysis of priming effects includes a number of key political and socio-demographic background characteristics. As both government approval and sociotropic economic perceptions are heavily influenced by partisan preferences, respondents’ left–right ideological predispositions are included as a control variable measured on a five-point scale in the SOM survey, and on an 11-point scale in the panel survey. Other control variables are personal economic situation, political interest, education, age and gender. Changes in respondents’ personal economic situation (egocentric perceptions) is included as a control variable in order to distinguish the influence of sociotropic perceptions of the economy from personal experiences of the financial crisis on public opinion.

RESULTS
The analysis of priming effects during the financial crisis will be presented in two steps. In the first section we document, using a variety of indicators, that priming did not occur despite a substantial increase in media coverage and growing public concern about the economy in the fall of 2008 – results that run counter to the basic priming hypothesis. Second, we focus on the distinction between accessibility and applicability mechanisms as one potential explanation for this outcome. In particular, the analysis addresses the role of individual-level attributions of responsibility as a moderator of priming effects.

Increases in media coverage and public concern
Given the substantial increase in negative media coverage documented by Asp (2011) as well as Färm et al. (2012), it is no surprise that public concern about the economy followed a predicted pattern. Table 1 displays the development of retrospective economic perceptions about the Swedish economy (sociotropic) between 2007 and 2010, thereby covering public opinion before (2007), during (2008) and in the aftermath of the initial financial crisis (2009 and 2010). As expected, economic perceptions became more negative following the financial crisis. In autumn 2007, 43% believed the Swedish economy had improved in the past 12 months. One year later – in the midst of the financial crisis – this number was down to 11%. Two years later it was down even more, when only 3% believed the Swedish economy had improved. The percentage having negative sociotropic perceptions of the economy followed an op-
posite trend, from 12% to 76% between 2007 and 2009. In 2010, however, economic perceptions had improved, following trends of more optimistic media accounts of economic developments in Sweden.

Figure 2 provides another way of looking at public economic perceptions in response to the financial crisis by zooming in on opinion dynamics in the fall of 2008, immediately following the intense surge in media reporting after the break-down of Lehman Brothers. The numbers are broken down based on the time at which completed questionnaires were received from the respondents. The first questionnaires were returned on 25 September – 10 days after the fall of Lehman Brothers – with a majority (62%) received within the first 2 weeks. Due to the skewness of this distribution, and in order to secure fairly reliable estimates, we constructed a time variable so as to avoid categories with fewer than 200 observations. Despite these data limitations, Figure 2 reveals opinion trends that are expected, given the dramatic surge in negative media coverage of the economy. From week 1 to weeks 11–18, the share of citizens with negative retrospective perceptions of the Swedish economy increases from 44% to 72%; the percentage naming the economy, the financial crisis, the recession or unemployment as the most important problem increases from 16% to 23%; and the share saying they are either rather or very worried about a future economic crisis or future widespread unemployment grows from 21 to 30 and from 36% to 50%, respectively. Thus, irrespective of what indicators are used, there is a clear growth in public concern over economic issues in autumn 2008, lending strong support for hypothesis 1.

A stronger test of the trends in Figure 2 was conducted by regressing each indicator on the time variable, controlling for individual-level differences in education, political interest, partisan predispositions, age and gender (regressions not displayed). We also controlled for changes in the personal economic situation to account for the possibility that respondents’ own economic experiences coloured their sociotropic economy assessments. In all cases, however, the time factor had a statistically significant effect beyond the variance accounted for by the other variables.

In sum, the heightened media attention and growing economic concern among the public that followed the eruption of the economic crisis in 2008 should provide fertile ground for priming effects to occur. As the economic crisis came to dominate the political and media agenda for several years, the basic priming hypothesis suggests that economic considerations should become more important when citizens evaluate the performance of political actors. More precisely, we expect government approval to depend more on economic perceptions as the financial crisis unfolds and pervades the political, media and public agenda.
In all cases, however, the time factor had a statistically significant effect on approval. Our priming effects during the autumn 2008, lending strong support for hypothesis 1. A stronger test of the trends in Figure 2 was conducted by regressing each indicator on the time variable, controlling for individual-level differences in education, political interest, partisan predispositions, age and gender (regressions not displayed). We also controlled for changes in the personal economic situation to account for the possibility that respondents perceive the economic situation in ways that are different from what they experienced personally. Despite these data limitations, Figure 2 reveals opinion trends that are expected, and pervades the political, media and public agenda. The numbers are broken down based on the time at which the survey questionnaires were returned on 25 September 2008, immediately following the intense surge in media reporting after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers. The numbers are broken down based on the time at which respondents were surveyed, with the number of respondents for each time period ranging from 200 to 3000, with a total of 12,000 respondents. The survey was conducted by the Swedish Social Research Institute (SOM) in the autumn of 2008 to assess the impact of the global financial crisis on public opinion in Sweden.

Figure 2 Sociotropic economic perceptions during autumn 2008 (%).

Table 1. Retrospective economic perceptions during the financial crisis (%)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gotten better</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stayed the same</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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</table>

SOM = Society, Opinion, Media.

Note: Estimates based on the survey question: How has, in your opinion, the following (the Swedish economy) economic situation developed during the past 12 months?

Priming effects during the financial crisis

Our first tests of the priming hypothesis are presented in Table 2, where government approval is regressed on retrospective economic perceptions before (2007), during (2008) and in the aftermath (2009 and 2010) of the financial crisis, controlling for several background variables – including changes in personal economic situation, education, political interest, ideological predispositions, age and gender. Egocentric economic perceptions refer to development of the personal economic situation, a variable constructed identically to sociotropic perceptions. As documented extensively by previous studies, the results show that negative sociotropic economic perceptions are consistently related to lower government approval – and the effect of sociotropic economy perceptions is substantially stronger than personal economic developments. More importantly, however, no evidence of a priming effect is found as we compare the coefficient for sociotropic economic perceptions over time. On the contrary, sociotropic economic perceptions exert the strongest impact on government approval prior to the financial crisis (b = −0.61), and lose weight as a predictor in the following 2 years. In 2010, 2 years after the eruption of the financial crisis and in a situation of growing optimism over the Swedish economy, order seems to have been restored. The last column provides a more robust statistical test of the priming hypothesis by including interaction terms between year dummies and sociotropic economic perceptions. This model confirms the pattern found in the separate year-by-year models, showing one statistically significant deviation from the 2007 effect of economic perceptions on government approval: in 2009 the impact of economic considerations weigh significantly less (b = 0.40) than in 2007.

To further validate the findings in Table 2, each model was estimated using three alternative indicators of economic perceptions: prospective economic evaluations, worries about a future economic crisis and worries about widespread unemployment. None of these tests produced a significant priming effect over time, which substantially strengthens the findings in Table 2.

As a final test of the basic priming hypothesis, we again zoom in on opinion dynamics during autumn 2008. Figure 2 clearly illustrated how public concern over economic issues and unemployment rapidly grew in the weeks following the eruption of the financial crisis. Table 3 presents results from three regression models testing whether there is a corresponding increase in the weight given to economic considerations as the financial crisis unfolds in the weeks following the fall of Lehman Brothers. The stand-alone coefficients for retrospective perceptions (model 1), worries about a future economic crisis (model 2) and worries
Table 2. The effect of retrospective economic perceptions on government approval, 2007–2010 (ols)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociotropic economic perceptions</td>
<td>-0.61***</td>
<td>-0.46***</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.56***</td>
<td>-0.57***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egocentric economic perceptions</td>
<td>-0.35***</td>
<td>-0.23***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>-0.24***</td>
<td>-0.32***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right predispositions</td>
<td>0.86***</td>
<td>0.84***</td>
<td>0.92***</td>
<td>0.79***</td>
<td>0.85***</td>
</tr>
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<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.30*</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.65****</td>
<td>0.68***</td>
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<td>0.49***</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.01***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
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<td>Year dummies</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.27**</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.53***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction terms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP × 2008</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP × 2009</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP × 2010</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ adjusted</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2872</td>
<td>1359</td>
<td>1379</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>7010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SP = sociotropic economic perceptions; SOM = Society, Opinion, Media.

Note: Estimates are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001.

More importantly, however, no evidence of a priming effect is found as we compare the coefficient for sociotropic economic perceptions over time. On the contrary, sociotropic economic perceptions exert the strongest impact on government approval prior to the financial crisis ($b = -0.61$), and lose weight as a predictor in the following 2 years. In 2010, 2 years after the eruption of the financial crisis and in a situation of growing optimism over the Swedish economy, order seems to have been restored. The last column provides a more robust statistical test of the priming hypothesis by including interaction terms between year dummies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. The effect of sociotropic economic perceptions on government approval, 2008 (ols)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WWU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egocentric economic perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week × SP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week × WEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week × WWU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left–right predispositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ adjusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Model 2                                                                                       |
| SP                                                                                           |          |
| (0.09)                                                                                        |
| WEC                                                                                            | -17*     |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| WWU                                                                                            |          |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| Egocentric economic perceptions                                                              | -26***   |
| (0.07)                                                                                        |
| Week                                                                                          | -0.09    |
| (0.07)                                                                                        |
| Week × SP                                                                                      |          |
| (0.07)                                                                                        |
| Week × WEC                                                                                     | 0.07     |
| (0.03)                                                                                        |
| Week × WWU                                                                                     |          |
| (0.03)                                                                                        |
| Political interest                                                                             | 0.31*** |
| (0.06)                                                                                        |
| Left–right predispositions                                                                     | 0.88*** |
| (0.04)                                                                                        |
| Education                                                                                      | 0.20*** |
| (0.06)                                                                                        |
| Age                                                                                           | 0.01*   |
| (0.00)                                                                                        |
| Gender                                                                                        | 0.02     |
| (0.09)                                                                                        |
| $R^2$ adjusted                                                                                 | 0.31     |
| N                                                                                             | 1414     |

| Model 3                                                                                       |
| SP                                                                                           |          |
| (0.09)                                                                                        |
| WEC                                                                                            | -0.30*** |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| WWU                                                                                            |          |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| Egocentric economic perceptions                                                              | -0.27*** |
| (0.06)                                                                                        |
| Week                                                                                          | -0.03    |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| Week × SP                                                                                      |          |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| Week × WEC                                                                                     |          |
| (0.08)                                                                                        |
| Week × WWU                                                                                     | 0.04     |
| (0.03)                                                                                        |
| Political interest                                                                             | 0.30*** |
| (0.06)                                                                                        |
| Left–right predispositions                                                                     | 0.86*** |
| (0.04)                                                                                        |
| Education                                                                                      | 0.18*** |
| (0.04)                                                                                        |
| Age                                                                                           | 0.01*   |
| (0.00)                                                                                        |
| Gender                                                                                        | -0.01    |
| (0.09)                                                                                        |
| $R^2$ adjusted                                                                                 | 0.32     |
| N                                                                                             | 1419     |

SP = sociotropic economic perceptions; WEC = worried about economic crisis; WWU = worried about widespread unemployment; SOM = Society, Opinion, Media.

Note: Estimates are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001.

about widespread unemployment (model 3) each represent the effect of these perceptions on government approval at the outset of the financial crisis, that is, in the period 25 September–1 October. The corresponding interaction terms between sociotropic perceptions and time captures changes in the weight given to these economic considerations over time. Again, none of these interaction terms are significant, suggesting that, despite growing public concern, sociotropic economic perceptions do not weigh heavier for government approval assessments.

In sum, then, contrary to the basic priming hypothesis, there is no evidence that dramatically increasing media coverage and growing public concern about the economy results in a corresponding increase in the weight given to these issues for government approval assessments – lending no support to hypothesis 2. How can we understand these opinion dynamics in light of priming theory? In the next section, we address this question by incorporating ideas from research on economic voting.

Attributions of responsibility as a moderator of priming effects
Our basic idea – borrowed from the literature on economic voting – holds that the influence of economic considerations on government approval is dependent on attributions of responsibility (Rudolph and Grant, 2002; Rudolph, 2006; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007). A potential reason for the absence of priming effects documented above is the global character of the financial crisis and how the crisis was framed by the Swedish media. To the extent that citizens perceive the economic downturn primarily as a result of international forces, they are less likely to either reward or punish the domestic government – despite growing public concern over the economy. Compared with most economic voting studies, however, we treat attributions of responsibility as a factor partly shaped by the communication environment in general, and frames used by political actors and the media to make sense of ongoing current events and developments. To test these ideas we turn to opinion dynamics during the second phase of the financial crisis. Starting in spring 2010, this is a time characterized by growing concerns over several economies in the euro zone, and Greece in particular, while media framing of the Swedish economy became increasingly positive (Asp, 2011).

These trends are clearly evident in our four-wave panel study, which covers opinion dynamics between May and September 2010. As can be seen from Table 4, perceptions of the development of the Swedish economy improve significantly in the 5-month period. The percentage seeing retrospective improvements grows from 49% to 59%, while the number of citizens perceiving economic deterioration goes down from 22% to 11%. As noted in the final column, these changes are statistically sig-
Improvement domestically to the government – while leftwing citizens, in particular, rightwing citizens, who strongly attribute signs of economic variation between leftwing and rightwing citizens in this regard. In fact, gradually seen as more important. Although these are general trends, economic situation, the actions taken by the Swedish government are the main cause of the current economic situation in Sweden. Overall there is a clear – and statistically significant – trend of growing government responsibility for economic developments according to Swedish citizens. While perceptions of the economic situation are substantially more optimistic among rightwing citizens, the overall changes uncovered in Table 4 occur among leftwing voters as well. Table 4 also reveals parallel trends in two other critical public opinion indicators. First, despite growing economic optimism, there is no change in the relative importance of economic issues in the eyes of Swedish citizens. In terms of perceived importance as a political issue, then, the Swedish economy remains as salient among the electorate in May as in September.

More important given our main hypothesis, however, is the change in attributions of responsibility for the current economic situation in Sweden that occur during the same period of time. Table 4 displays these changes as mean values on the seven-point (0–6) attribution of responsibility scale, indicating the extent to which the financial crisis (low values) or domestic government policy (high values) is considered the main cause of the current economic situation in Sweden. Overall there is a clear – and statistically significant – trend of growing government responsibility for economic developments according to Swedish citizens. While the financial crisis becomes a weaker explanation for the current economic situation, the actions taken by the Swedish government are gradually seen as more important. Although these are general trends, additional analysis (not displayed) reveals that these changes occur independently of partisan preferences. While perceptions of the economic situation are substantially more optimistic among rightwing citizens, the overall changes uncovered in Table 4 occur among leftwing voters as well. Table 4 also reveals parallel trends in two other critical public opinion indicators. First, despite growing economic optimism, there is no change in the relative importance of economic issues in the eyes of Swedish citizens. In terms of perceived importance as a political issue, then, the Swedish economy remains as salient among the electorate in May as in September.

More important given our main hypothesis, however, is the change in attributions of responsibility for the current economic situation in Sweden that occur during the same period of time. Table 4 displays these changes as mean values on the seven-point (0–6) attribution of responsibility scale, indicating the extent to which the financial crisis (low values) or domestic government policy (high values) is considered the main cause of the current economic situation in Sweden. Overall there is a clear – and statistically significant – trend of growing government responsibility for economic developments according to Swedish citizens. While the financial crisis becomes a weaker explanation for the current economic situation, the actions taken by the Swedish government are gradually seen as more important. Although these are general trends, additional analysis (not displayed) also shows that there is substantial variation between leftwing and rightwing citizens in this regard. In fact, the general trend is driven primarily by changes among centrist and, in particular, rightwing citizens, who strongly attribute signs of economic improvement domestically to the government – while leftwing citizens

---

Table 4. Sociotropic economic perceptions, attributions of responsibility and government approval during the election campaign (% and mean values)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gotten better</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>+10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed the same</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gotten worse</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of economic issues (0–6)</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>+0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of responsibility (0–6)</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>+0.22***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N (unweighted) 1413 1382 1413 1413

Note: Tests of significance were conducted using a pooled dataset containing data from each panel wave. Regression models including three wave-specific dummy variables and robust standard errors were estimated in order test the significance of time trends in each of the variables. Stars in the last column denote significant changes between May and September.

Sociotropic economic perceptions

- Gotten better
- Stayed the same
- Gotten worse

Importance of economic issues (0–6)

- Mean values on the seven-point (0–6) attribution of responsibility scale, indicating the extent to which the financial crisis (low values) or domestic government policy (high values) is considered the main cause of the current economic situation in Sweden. Overall there is a clear – and statistically significant – trend of growing government responsibility for economic developments according to Swedish citizens. While the financial crisis becomes a weaker explanation for the current economic situation, the actions taken by the Swedish government are gradually seen as more important. Although these are general trends, additional analysis (not displayed) also shows that there is substantial variation between leftwing and rightwing citizens in this regard. In fact, the general trend is driven primarily by changes among centrist and, in particular, rightwing citizens, who strongly attribute signs of economic improvement domestically to the government – while leftwing citizens
move in the opposite direction by increasingly pointing to the financial crisis as the main source behind current economic developments.

Thus, as perceptions of the current economic situation in Sweden improve among the public, the Swedish government is increasingly seen as responsible for these developments among all but leftwing citizens. Furthermore, if attribution of responsibility is a key mechanism behind priming, two observable implications should follow from these trends. First, the impact of economic considerations on government approval should increase over time following aggregate changes in responsibility attributions. Second, attribution of responsibility should moderate the impact of economic considerations on government approval on the individual level. Both these implications are tested in a series of regression models presented in Table 5.

Before turning to a more robust test of these ideas, it is worth noting that comparisons of the bivariate effect of economic considerations on government approval across panel waves lend initial support to the general argument. The unstandardized bivariate regression coefficient capturing the effect of sociotropic economic perceptions on government approval increases from $b=-1.26$ in May, to $b=-1.38$ in June, to $b=-1.41$ in August and finally to $b=-1.60$ in September – which is a statistically significant change.¹

The four-wave-specific models in Table 5 replicate these bivariate analyses in a much stronger test including several control variables. Each of the focal variables was measured in each of the four panel waves.² Again, these models focus on the change in the weight given to economic considerations over time, following the changes in responsibility attributions documented above. As the public increasingly perceives the Swedish government as responsible for the current economic situation, we expect the impact of sociotropic perceptions to gain importance as

¹ We tested the significance of differences between slope using a pooled data set containing data from each panel wave. A regression model included three wave-specific dummy variables as well as corresponding interaction terms between these dummies and sociotropic economic considerations, using robust standard errors. These analyses revealed a statistically significant increase over time in the weight given to economic considerations.

² Unlike the regression models presented in Tables 2 and 3 based on SOM data, these models also include personal income as a control variable. The fact that this variable has no influence on government approval beyond what is accounted for by the other variables in the models strongly suggests that its inclusion would have little impact on the results presented in Tables 2 and 3. We also tested whether excluding personal income from the models in Table 5 influenced the focal relationship between sociotropic perceptions and government approval, but this was not the case.
Table 5. The effect of retrospective economic perceptions on government approval, May–September (ols)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociotropic economic perceptions</td>
<td>−0.56***</td>
<td>−0.62***</td>
<td>−0.61***</td>
<td>−0.79***</td>
<td>−0.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egocentric economic perceptions</td>
<td>−0.12**</td>
<td>−0.13**</td>
<td>−0.12**</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>−0.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td>0.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left–right predispositions</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.37***</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td>0.41***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>−0.19</td>
<td>−0.18</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td>−0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>−0.17**</td>
<td>−0.16*</td>
<td>−0.18*</td>
<td>−0.14*</td>
<td>0.33***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
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<td>SP × IS × AR</td>
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SP = sociotropic economic perceptions; IS = issue salience; AR = attributions of responsibility. Note: Estimates are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models 1–4 are identical when it comes to model specification. Government approval, sociotropic economic perceptions, egocentric economic perceptions, political interest and relative issue salience were measured in each specific wave, while the other background variables were considered time-invariant and measured in the first wave only. The final interaction model is a hierarchical linear model estimated using a pooled data set containing data from all four waves. Information from all level-2 units (individuals) was used in estimating this model.

*P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001.
a predictor of government approval. This is exactly what happens. In May the effect of sociotropic perceptions is $-0.56$, controlling for a host of socioeconomic and political background variables. In September this effect has grown to $-0.79$, using the same control variables, which reveals the heavier weight given to sociotropic economic perceptions by the end of the campaign. Again, a separate significance test of differences between slopes revealed that the increase in the effect of economic considerations from May to September is statistically significant.

The final column of Table 5 tests the second implication of the applicability argument. On the individual level, we expect the inclination to punish or reward the government for current economic trends to be stronger among citizens who see the government – rather than the financial crisis – as responsible for these trends. Furthermore, the argument that priming of economic considerations depends on construct accessibility as well as applicability suggests a three-way interaction effect. Not only should citizens who increasingly see government as responsible for economic developments be more inclined to let their sociotropic perceptions influence assessments of government approval (applicability), but this pattern should be particularly pronounced among citizens who also are concerned about economic issues (accessibility). Stated differently, both attribution of responsibility and issue salience should jointly moderate the impact of economic considerations on government approval. We tested this idea using a hierarchical linear model on a pooled dataset including all four panel waves, with observations from each wave nested within individuals (Hox, 2002). The three-way interaction between sociotropic perceptions, attributions of responsibility and issue salience is displayed graphically in Figure 3 in order to facilitate interpretation of the main finding. Following suggestions by Brambor et al. (2006), the graph displays how the marginal effect of sociotropic perceptions depends on attributions of responsibility and issue salience. More specifically, the lines illustrate how the negative effect of sociotropic perceptions on government approval (y-axis) changes along the attribution of responsibility scale (x-axis) for different values of issue salience (represented by three separate lines). The stars mark regions of statistical significance of the marginal effect of sociotropic perceptions on government approval.

Overall, the pattern revealed in Figure 3 lends additional support for the critical role of responsibility attributions in the priming process. The effect of sociotropic economic perceptions on government approval is weakest when issue salience is low. With growing salience of the economy, however, attributions of responsibility become more important as a moderator of economic perceptions. For medium levels of issue sa-
PRIMING EFFECTS DURING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

Figure 3 The marginal effect of economic perceptions on government approval.

![Graph showing the marginal effect of economic perceptions on government approval. The graph illustrates the impact on approval as a function of attributions of responsibility and issue salience. The x-axis represents attributions of responsibility (0 to 6), and the y-axis shows the marginal effect of economic perceptions. Three lines are depicted: one for issue salience = 0 (Low), another for issue salience = 3 (Medium), and the third for issue salience = 6 (High).]

Consequence (as 3 on the 0–6 salience scale) the negative impact of economic perceptions is substantially weaker among citizens who see the current economic situation mainly as a result of the financial crisis – corresponding to low values on the attributions of responsibility scale – than those who perceive government policy as the primary cause. This pattern is even more pronounced among citizens who are very concerned about the economy (issue salience = 6). When issue salience is at its highest value, the effect of economic considerations on government approval is close! to zero and non-significant among citizens who primarily see current macroeconomic trends as caused by the financial crisis – but this effect increases rather dramatically as we move along the attributions of responsibility scale. In sum, the impact of sociotropic perceptions on government approval is by far strongest when issue salience is high and responsibility for economic trends is attributed to the government.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The global financial crisis erupted in September 2008 and rapidly came to dominate the political and media agenda across the world. Its immediate consequences included the fall of major banks, growing financial uncertainty and a major economic recession with a profound impact on trade and unemployment in western democracies – sometimes described as the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.
present study utilized the dramatic increase in media coverage devoted to economic issues to study public opinion formation in general, and to analyse the mechanisms behind priming effects in particular, focusing on the Swedish case. The information environment following the financial crisis contained several of the ingredients that are usually considered conducive for strong media effects, including a rapid growth of intense, consonant and negative news coverage of a single issue that came to dominate the media agenda for several years (Noelle-Neumann and Mathes, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Peter, 2004; Sheafer, 2007; Boomgarden et al., 2011) – thereby resembling a most-likely case for many media effect theories (George and Bennett, 2005).

Despite these favourable conditions, however, this study showed, using a variety of economic assessment indicators, that priming did not occur – at least not in its most basic form. While public opinion dynamics followed the expected agenda-setting pattern, in the sense that the intense surge of negative economic news led to growing public concern over economic issues, citizens did not attach greater weight to economic considerations in their government approval assessments following the outbreak of the economic crisis. In a second analysis focusing on the ‘second phase’ of the financial crisis, we found that the extent to which respondents attached weight to economic considerations in their assessment of government approval depended heavily on their attribution of responsibility for current economic developments in the country. Citizens who were concerned about the economy but primarily considered the ups and downs of the Swedish economy as a result of the financial crisis were substantially less inclined to let their economic perceptions influence government approval than those who viewed economic developments as caused by government action. Importantly, these findings reflect broader patterns of Swedish media coverage of the economy during the financial crisis. In the initial phase – when public concern over economic issues grew substantially – news coverage was characterized by extremely negative assessments of economic trends as well as a heavy focus on events and developments abroad, hence contributing to the international character of the crisis. During the second phase, however, media coverage provided a contrasting frame of positive developments in the Swedish economy and heightened concern about the economic situation in the euro zone and Greece.

These results are important as they shine light on the mechanisms and contingencies behind priming effects. In particular, the analyses strongly indicate that priming is not a function of heightened salience and accessibility alone (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Substantial increases in negative me-
PRIMING EFFECTS DURING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

dia coverage and growing public concern were not enough to generate priming effects. Rather, the findings support the notion of priming as a two-step process, whereby heavy news coverage of the financial crisis increases the accessibility of economic considerations among the audience, but whether these considerations are used in government approval assessments also depends on their perceived applicability or perceived relevance (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Roskos- Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). It is noteworthy that what changed in public opinion during the second phase of the crisis was not issue salience or perceived importance of economic issues, which remained remarkably stable during these months, but perceptions of responsibility for current national economic trends. With high issue salience and changing responsibility perceptions, economic considerations came to weigh more heavily in government approval assessments – offering support for the two-step process of priming. Compared with the Althaus and Kim study, which contained ‘no direct means of measuring construct applicability’ (2006: 974), the present study aimed at measuring and modelling applicability more explicitly by using individual variations in attributions of responsibility for economic trends as a modifying variable in the priming process.

Furthermore, the results of the present study indicate that priming may be a more active process than is commonly suggested by a pure accessibility account of media effects. Not only was attribution of responsibility a critical applicability mechanism, but we also found that shifts in responsibility attributions – following the dominant media frame during the second phase of the financial crisis – were strongly influenced by ideological predispositions. The interplay between personal political motivations and applicability seems to be critical here, as implied by research on priming (Kim, 2005) and motivated reasoning (Druckman, 2012). As Kim (2005) argues, ‘[i]ndividuals must feel the inappropriateness or appropriateness of the primed concept and select a concept, either consciously or unconsciously, that is relevant to their judgments. This might be the place where individuals’ motivations can play a role in priming effects’ (p. 752). We consider these issues to be important to future research on priming.

Thus, the findings of this study contribute with empirical evidence to the discussion about mechanisms behind the priming process and highlight the importance of incorporating individual-level factors in priming research. It is nevertheless important to highlight some limitations of this study. One relevant objection relates to the lack of direct measures of media exposure in the study. To be sure, news exposure could be considered a necessary condition for priming. However, measures of news
exposure are not without problems in situations of extensive and consonant media coverage, or information saturation, such as during the financial crisis. We know from previous studies that news coverage of the financial crisis was not only extensive – the economy dominated the media agenda – but also that this coverage was consonant across different news outlets (Asp, 2011; Färm et al., 2012; Falasca, 2013). As noted by Druckman (2005), focusing on widely available information such as major national or international events makes it very hard to detect media effects from exposure to individual outlets, since such mediated information can reach citizens in multiple ways. Attempts to separate the influence of a specific news media are, therefore, plagued by methodological problems in situations of major events such as the financial crisis.

The extent to which these results are valid for other issues and in other countries is of course an open question that needs to be addressed by further research. We believe that the findings in this paper hold promise for future research on the mechanisms behind priming effects and that further work in different contexts and cases as well as multi-case studies can clarify the role of individual perceptions for priming effects.
REFERENCES


Noelle-Neumann, E. and R. Mathes (1987), ‘The event as “event” and the event as news: the significance of “consonance” for media effects research’,


ARTICLE IV
One of the most important media effect theories is agenda-setting theory. Hundreds of studies across different countries and issues over the last decades have shown that the media can exert significant influence on what issues the public consider to be important (M. McCombs, 2004; M.E. McCombs & Shaw, 1972; M.E. McCombs et al., 2011). However, changes in media markets combined with developments of key communication technologies have resulted in an ever-increasing number of media outlets and channels competing for audiences, as well as increasingly individualized media exposure (Blumler, 2001; Metzger, 2009; Semetko & Scammell, 2012; Ragas, Tran, & Martin, 2014). This transformation from low choice to high choice media environments has raised new questions about the impact of traditional mass media on public opinion (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, & Bae, 2014; Takeshita, 2006).

In essence, contemporary media environments are quite dissimilar to the mass media environment that dominated the world when the basic agenda-setting hypothesis originated, and some scholars thus argue that mass media effects as we know them might become weaker or even reduced to non-significance (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Other scholars disagree. However, Shehata and Strömbäck (2013) instead suggest that a distinction has to be made between actual agenda-setting effects and the ease with which they can be measured (Fishbein & Hornik, 2008; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Nevertheless, most observers appear to agree that contemporary media environments accentuate three challenges for agenda-setting effect studies. First, media consumption and, by extension, media effects have become increasingly difficult to measure. Second, individual traits among news consumers might increasingly mediate or reinforce media effects and third, it cannot be assumed that people are exposed to or pay attention to issues dominating media content.

The third challenge is particularly problematic for agenda-setting studies investigating the correlation between aggregate media agendas and aggregate public agendas, known as content-based agenda-setting
studies. An alternative approach is so-called attention-based agenda-setting studies, that investigate the linkage between media exposure or media attention and what issues the public (on the aggregate or individual level) consider salient (Strömnbäck & Kiousis, 2010). A benefit of that approach is that it allows for investigating agenda-setting effects at the individual level and for testing alternative measures of media exposure and attention, and the linkages with issue salience.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measures on individual issue salience. By using panel data, we will not only be able to compare different measures of media consumption in terms of their contributions to issue salience, but also to examine multiple variables simultaneously rather than just the impact from a general media agenda. Panel data also enables us to make causal inferences about agenda-setting effects at the individual level. Empirically, the study is based on a four-wave panel survey carried out before, during, and after the 2010 Swedish election campaign.

This article is organized as follows. First, we will discuss agenda-setting effects in the contemporary media environment and secondly, the challenges for agenda-setting effect studies. Thirdly, the research design as well as the empirical case of the 2010 Swedish election will be presented. The fourth section will discuss the methodology and results. Finally, the implications of the findings will be discussed.

AGENDA-SETTING IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The general and basic idea of agenda-setting is that the mass media has influence over which issues citizens perceive as important in society. The temporal sequence of agenda-setting assumes that the media can make certain issues more accessible; news coverage influences what people rank as important issues in society, and there is a transfer of issue importance from one agenda to another (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This core proposition has received extensive empirical support in research and in hundreds of published studies of political communication (Shah, 2009). The theoretical model has been refined by multiple studies but has retained its causal relationship between media use and issue perception throughout the years (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007).

However, neither the media environment nor media consumption in today’s society can be equated with the media environment of the time when the foundations for agenda-setting theory were set. As communi-
cation preconditions continue to change, media theories as agenda-setting effects on public opinion should be revisited and empirically studied in current social and media contexts, and most importantly, with contemporary methods complementing traditional methods in the field (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). Two important communication preconditions for agenda-setting effects are individual demand for and media environmental factors or supply of news and information. Let us turn to the individual level factor first and, secondly, to media environmental or contextual factors before discussing different methodological approaches.

In the contemporary media environment there has been an exceptional increase in the supply of information and news, and thus a transformation from historically low choice to high choice media environments (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). Today, individual media consumers in most western democracies can exercise substantial choice over both media sources and content. Individual preferences can guide selection of certain information over others but also allows people to avoid information of no interest to them (Prior, 2007; Aalberg, Blekesaune, & Elvestad, 2013). A recent study on news consumption in Sweden found that ‘political interest has become a more important determinant of news consumption in today’s high-choice media environment’ (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2012, p. 414). Furthermore, citizens with high political interest are more likely to use multiple online news sources that are readily available in an evolving Swedish media environment (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014). In other words, when people can choose what media and content to be exposed to, their preferences can be important for explaining media consumption. Media consumption could, thus, be increasingly dependent on individual motivation and predispositions, such as interest in politics or specific issues rather than the existence of an inadvertent mass audience as in the old media environment.

The development from the concept of a homogenous mass audience to an increasingly individualised media audience thus entails that media effects on public opinion should be investigated on an individual level. It is also important to note that the agenda-setting process on an individual level can occur with little effort among some people or be more intended and deliberate for others (Bulkow, Urban, & Schweiger, 2013). Thus, the question is, do people get cues from media on issue importance, or do they seek out information on issues of importance to them? The contemporary media environment allows individuals both to be cued and to reinforce predispositions, since media users can ‘range widely across media outlets’ looking for news and information that are
either salient in society or of personal interest (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, p. 52). For that reason, individual attention to specific media and individual predispositions are important—but so far often ignored—factors in the agenda-setting process. This study addresses these limitations by including both general attention to news media and exposure to specific media types as well as individual predispositions in the analysis of agenda-setting effects.

The media environment is significant in general for how citizens can obtain information and news of important issues in society, and in particular, during elections. It has been well documented in political communication research that most people turn to the media for political news in western democracies, and that news media constitutes the most important source of political information in elections (see for example Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). Furthermore, it is well documented that the media landscape has changed dramatically due to technological developments and changes on the media market contributing to a proliferation of media channels with regard to both traditional and online news channels (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert et al., 2010). The Swedish media environment is no exception and is characterized by fast digital development of different media platforms such as web-TV and online newspapers (Carlsson, 2012). This ‘new’ media environment at the time of elections includes diverse news and information outlets, varying from traditional news media and online news, to political social media such as blogs, campaign websites, and political content on social media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. (Dimitrova et al., 2014; Metzger, 2009), thus challenging the idea of one uniform mass media influencing people’s opinions. Hence, the diverse and decentralised characteristics of the contemporary media landscape raise questions of importance to agenda-setting.

In sum, many researchers argue that the idea of a unified media agenda influencing a common issue agenda among citizens has become less reasonable in a modern high choice media environment. However, digital and online media are regarded by others as complementary to traditional media since traditional news media still dominate the media landscape in terms of news consumption and agenda-setting power (Karlsen, 2011; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). Certainly, the emergence and growth of digital media has changed the media environment that people are faced with, offering more and more choices for news and information consumption. During an election, the internet alone provides citizens with an abundance of information and news about politics and society. It is important, though, to underline that both changing media consumption and media environment are processes of development that
take place alongside the traditional media and consumption. Thus, these processes vary over time and across communities and countries and should be regarded as empirical questions requiring empirical research.

**MEASURING AGENDA-SETTING EFFECTS**

As noted before, scholars disagree concerning the weakening of media effects due to the new media environment. Some argue that agenda-setting effects have been reduced to non-significance (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Others argue that fragmentation of the public agenda is probable but not inevitable (Takeshita, 2006) and some recent research undermines the fragmentation thesis (Karlsen, 2011; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). However, many observers appear to agree that the challenge for media effects studies is the ease with which they can be measured (Fishbein & Hornik, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Valkenburg and Peter (2013) argue that small and inconsistent effects are not unique to media effects research and can be due to methodological weaknesses that can lead to the attenuation of effects. There are three important and crucial challenges for agenda-setting effect studies in the contemporary media environment. First, media consumption and media effects have become increasingly difficult to measure. Second, individual traits among news consumers might increasingly mediate or reinforce media effects. Third, it cannot be assumed that people are exposed to or pay attention to issues dominating media content.

Thus, in media effects research there exists the challenge to measure media consumption reliably and validly. Most agenda-setting studies have been based on three different approaches to measure media use with different limitations and merits. When using experiments, exposure can be assured (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) but the unnatural setting can affect results since experiments often represent a low choice media environment. Using media content and variations in media coverage (M.E. McCombs et al., 2011) focuses on aggregate rather than individual levels of consumption and can be problematic since it assumes respondents’ exposure and attention to content. Measuring consumption based on survey self reports is related to problems of variations between actual and reported consumption but has the merit of individual level measurements. Turning to the second challenge, the inclusion of individual differences variables as well as media use is crucial for media effects research since it is well documented that susceptibility to media effects varies between individuals (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). Furthermore, individual non-media variables can work as both predictors and moderators of responsiveness to media (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The third challenge is closely related to research design and problematic
for most content-based agenda-setting studies that focus on the correlation between aggregate media and public agendas (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2010). The merit of content-based studies is that they measure what media focuses on but, as mentioned before, might be out of place in a high-choice environment since exposure and attention is assumed rather than measured. Alternative, attention-based studies focus on linkages between media exposure or attention and perceived issue importance among the public. They also allow us to explore stricter multivariate analyses on an individual level (McCombs et al., 2011). In addition, this approach can also address the issue of different media consumption measures and their contribution to issue salience (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This study contributes to the literature focusing on a number of these challenges by using panel data to include multiple variables simultaneously and we will be able to compare different measures of media consumption in terms of their contribution to issue salience at an individual level.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Empirically, this study is based on a representative panel study carried out during the 2010 Swedish national elections. The rationale for choosing Sweden is that Sweden is a post-industrial democracy with a changing media market combined with highly developed communication technology. This has resulted in a high-choice media environment with an abundance of media.

From a media system perspective, Sweden is considered a democratic corporatist country with strong journalistic professionalism, high levels of newspaper circulation, and strong public service broadcasting institutions that attract large audiences from broad segments of the population (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011). Furthermore, the Swedish broadcasting system provides extensive political information opportunities, as it is shaped by two public service channels (SVT1 and SVT2) and one commercial channel (TV4), through news and current affairs programmes at prime time (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). Since newspaper reading and a large audience for news broadcasts distinguish media consumption, the news should still exert agenda-setting effects. However, media habits are changing in Sweden with the rapid development of internet access; internet penetration is among the highest in the world and 87% of the population uses the internet regularly (Carlsson, 2012). Media development is characterized by fast digital development of different media platforms such as web-TV and online newspapers. However, it is an oversimplification to state that new media replaces old media, but the media landscape is definitely becoming more diverse (Falasca &
Furthermore, political social media is established and continuously expanding, as different political actors are present and active on the web, especially during election campaigns (Karlsson, Clerwall, & Buskqvist, 2013). Consequently, the existence of political social media such as blogs, parties’ websites, politicians’ Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube channels, is noticeable. Hence, Swedish contemporary media with multiple channels gives people the prerequisites to engage in a high-choice environment for news consumption. This diverse and evolving media environment makes the Swedish case especially interesting to study in terms of agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measures on issue salience.

Previous research has suggested that media attention rather than media exposure is a better indicator for estimating media effects since it measures general attention rather than specific exposure and, thus, is less likely to be associated with methodological weaknesses (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2010). People tend to use a wide variety of news media that can be correlated (Karlsen, 2011) and due to intermedia agenda-setting news diversity might not have decreased. Thus, if the media agenda is uniform it is difficult to detect agenda-setting effects of specific media. Therefore, the comparison between different measures in the same study can inform the discussion on whether agenda-setting effects are becoming non-significant or just difficult to measure. In this study, we will compare the media consumption measures of general attention to political news and exposure to the three following media types: traditional news media, online news media, and political social media.

**Traditional news media.** Traditional mass media has been regarded as strongly conductive for news media effects such as agenda-setting on public opinion (McCombs, 2004; Shah, 2009). The presentation of news content with front-page news or the top story of the night in broadcast news programmes that indicate issue importance, are factors of great importance to agenda-setting effects of news media. Research has continued to explain aspects of the agenda-setting theory in the context of traditional news and election campaigns confirming the original concept (McCombs et al., 2011). Even though most research has focused on an aggregate level of public opinion, media agenda-setting effects should also be visible at the individual level that is the focus of this study. Individual exposure to traditional media, as in press and broadcast should, therefore, still be conductive for media effects in the contemporary media landscape.

**Online news media.** Developments of media technologies have resulted in the presence of multiple news channels online. Even though research has shown that online content is rather similar to traditional news con-
online exposure might be important for agenda-setting effects since the presentation and organization of content is quite different (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000; Lee, 2007). Online newspapers, for example, are usually organized in a way that the top stories receive the same amount of space on the page, stories are ranked according to which ones are the most recent and receive the most interest, rather than journalistic decisions about importance; and finally, online newspapers are constantly updated, and thus, change in presentation (Eveland, Marton, & Seo, 2004; Schönbach, de Waal, & Lauf, 2005). The online environment gives the consumer increased control over channel and story selection, which can have consequences for exposure to and knowledge of political and social issues (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). The online media environment allows us to self-select not only the medium, but also which headline we click on and what content we are exposed to, without the classical cues of importance such as the front page story in newspapers or the main story on TV news programmes. The agenda-setting effects of online media might be weaker than the effects of traditional media and previous issue importance might be more important for contribution to issue salience.

**Political social media.** In today’s internet-saturated media environment, individuals have ample possibilities to make an active choice to consume and select whatever content they want to interact with during elections (Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Trent & Friedenberg, 2008). Political social media such as blogs, parties’ websites, politicians’ Facebook, Twitter, or You Tube channels, generate optimal opportunities for selective exposure of media content (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Thus, social media consumers can act as their own gatekeepers and are definitely not a classical inadvertent audience for news. Furthermore, politics and elections can be more likely to inspire selective exposure when citizens actively look for political information (Stroud, 2008). The massive increase in internet access and usage has also opened up the opportunity for politicians, parties, organizations, and other actors interested in politics to communicate directly with citizens (Bimber & Davis, 2003). This direct communication with citizens certainly opens up the opportunity for political actors to define their agenda and perception of issue importance in elections. Furthermore, it allows responsive communication that increasingly takes an audience’s interests into account (Enli & Moe, 2013). These rapid changes during the last decade make the assessment of social media consumption and its impact on opinion in elections a precarious undertaking. Consequently, people’s exposure to political social media is important to investigate since the selective nature of con-
sumption might substantially weaken agenda-setting effects and rather reinforce predispositions.

To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to empirically investigate and compare the agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measures on individual issue salience. Against this background, and based on the literature review, the first two hypotheses are straightforward and expect that agenda-setting theory still holds true:

*Hypothesis 1:* General political news attention will contribute to increased issue salience on an individual level.

*Hypothesis 2:* Traditional news media exposure will contribute to increased issue salience on an individual level.

However, the measurement of attention to general political news could be expected to contribute more to issue salience than media exposure measurements:

*Hypothesis 3:* General political news attention will contribute more to increased issue salience on an individual level than traditional news media exposure.

Expecting that exposure to media types might involve increasingly selective media consumption and, therefore, will not contribute to issue salience, finally we expect:

*Hypothesis 4:* Online news media exposure will not contribute to increased issue salience on an individual level when controlling for prior individual issue importance.

*Hypothesis 5:* Political social media exposure will not contribute to increased issue salience on an individual level when controlling for prior individual issue importance.
DATA AND METHOD
This study investigates and compares the agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measures on individual issue salience in a new media landscape, controlling for several key political and socio-demographic background characteristics. To test the posed hypotheses, this study uses a four-wave panel survey conducted during the Swedish election campaign in 2010. The most important strength of the panel survey is the ability to analyze the agenda-setting effects of different media consumption at the individual level. Basically, the panel data opens the opportunity to study changes in opinions and attitudes, as well as behaviour at the individual level over time (Finkel, 1995; Eveland Jr & Morey, 2010). Furthermore, different measures of media consumption were included in the survey allowing us to compare these different measures in terms of their contribution to issue salience. The panel survey was conducted by the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid-Sweden University, in cooperation with the polling institute Synovate. The sample for the survey was drawn using stratified probability sampling from a database of approximately 28,000 citizens from Synovate’s pool of Web-survey participants. The participants included in this pool are recruited continuously using both random digit dialling and mail surveys, based on random probability samples. Approximately, 5% of those who are initially contacted and invited agree to be part of this pool of respondents.

The panel survey is based on a stratified probability sample of 4,760 respondents from this pool aged 18 to 74 years, stratified by gender, age, county size, political interest, and internet use, so as to be as representative as possible of the Swedish population aged 18 to 74 years. Respondents were asked to complete a Web survey four times during a period of approximately five months leading up to the election. Wave 1 of the panel took place in May (May 3–20), Wave 2 in mid-June (June 14–23), Wave 3 in mid-August (August 16–23), and Wave 4 immediately after Election Day (September 20–27). The regression models are based on respondents who completed all four questionnaires, resulting in a cooperation rate of 35% (COOP2, AAPOR).

Measures
Perceived issue importance. The dependent variable in this study is perceived issue salience. The measure of issue importance is based on the respondents’ evaluation of the importance of a series of political issues based on the question, ‘How important do you consider the following political issues?’ The list contained ten issues, including unemployment,
health care, education, environment, taxes, health insurance, crime, and immigration. Respondents rated their importance on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important). The three most important issues at the end of the election campaign were selected for analysis: unemployment, health insurance, and immigration.

Attention to news media. The survey questionnaire included two items regarding general news attention and respondents were asked how much attention they would give in general to political news on TV or in newspapers. The response alternatives ranged from 1 (very little attention) to 5 (very great attention), creating an index ranging from 0 to 10.

Traditional news media exposure. The measures for traditional news media exposure were based on a number of survey questions concerning each respondent’s frequency of consumption of several news media outlets during the campaign. Respondents were asked how often they had read or watched several leading newspapers or news television programmes during the past week, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (daily). The different measures for traditional news media were then constructed based on a principal components analysis. The analysis grouped traditional news media usage into four categories as follows. The first measure captured exposure to five TV news programmes (SVT1, SVT2, SVT regional, TV4 national and regional) forming an index from 0 to 30 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .90). The second measure captured exposure to two leading national newspapers (DN and SVD) forming an index from 0 to 12 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .43). The third measure captured exposure to two dailies (Aftonbladet and Expressen), forming an index from 0 to 12 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .58). Finally, the fourth measure captured respondents’ exposure to a local newspaper.

Online news media exposure. The consumption of online news was measured based on a set of survey questions concerning exposure to news media on the internet. Respondents were asked how often they had read or watched several leading newspapers or news television programmes online during the past week, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (daily). Seven online news outlets were grouped into three categories, following the underlying dimensionality revealed by the principal components analysis. The first measure tapped the exposure to three online national television news programmes summed to form an index ranging from 0 to 18 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .89). The second measure tapped exposure to two leading online national newspapers, forming an index ranging from 0 to 12 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .77). Finally, the third measure tapped exposure to two online dailies, creating an index ranging from 0 to 12 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .70).

Political social media exposure. The consumption of political social me-
dia was measured using six survey items. Respondents were asked how often they had engaged in a number of political social media activities during the last month, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). The activities included: visiting a political party website; following a politician or political party on Facebook, You Tube, or Twitter; commenting on or discussing current affairs issues or politics on the internet; and reading a blog about current affairs or politics. The result of the principal component analysis showed that these six activities all loaded on a single dimension. They were summed to form an index ranging from 0 to 30 (Cronbach’s Alpha = .79).

Control variables. Each of the models included a number of key control variables such as gender, age, and education. Furthermore, political interest is a potentially important factor related to media use during the election campaign. Political interest is based on two items measured in the third wave of the panel, tapping the respondents’ level of interest in politics as well as in the election campaign, measured by two four-level variables ranging from 1 (not interested at all) to 4 (very interested), forming an index from 1 to 8 (Cronbach’s alpha = .85). By including this lagged independent variable from the third wave, we can control for political interest at the start of the election campaign.

Finally, the panel design allows us to control for prior levels of issue importance when estimating the agenda-setting effects of different media use. Controlling for lagged values of the dependent variable in the models estimates the effect on changes in issue importance between panel waves, and is one of the advantages with panel data (Finkel, 1995). This design substantially increases the ability to make causal inferences at the individual level when testing the hypotheses in the study.

RESULTS

The investigation and comparison of agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measurements in terms of their contribution to issue salience will be presented as follows. First we focus on the three issues that people perceived as the most important political issues facing the country during the 2010 Swedish national elections. Secondly, we address the hypotheses and discuss the contributions of different media consumption measures on individual issue perception.

Table 1 displays the three most important issues on the public’s agenda in all the waves of the panel survey, evaluated on seven-point scales from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important). The top three issues, unemployment, health insurance, and immigration are also the three issues that are perceived as more important at the end of the campaign (wave four) than at the beginning of the election campaign (wave three).
The results show that unemployment was at the top of the public’s agenda from the first panel wave in May until the last wave just after Election Day in September. However, even though unemployment is the dominant issue on the agenda, there is actually a dip in the mean value between wave one and wave four. The issue of health insurance is the second most important issue on the public’s agenda from the first to last waves in the panel study. This particular issue also has a dip in mean value in the third wave, but returns to the same value in September as in May. Finally, the issue of immigration similarly stays as the third most important issue during the whole period, however, the last wave displays a higher mean value than the first wave. The changes in issue perception of unemployment and immigration are statistically significant.

Given that the perception of importance for these three issues increased between waves three and four, this indicates that there is a clear change in evaluation of issue importance during the intense three-week election campaign leading up to Election Day. Even though pre-dispositions from the first wave clearly are important for issue perception, the change in evaluation from wave three to immediately after the election points to an evident reinforcement of predisposition rather than attitude conversion.

Next we turn to the main focus of this study - the investigation and comparison of agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measurements in terms of their contribution to issue salience. The agenda-setting effects are tested in a series of regression models for each issue predicting changes in perceived importance at the individual level, presented in Table 2.

Before discussing the results of the present study it is crucial to note two things in this panel data study. First of all, the inclusion of the lagged dependent variable (for each issue) in the autoregressive panel models gives us the opportunity to estimate how individual level factors are related to changes in the perceived issue importance (Eveland Jr & Morey, 2010). So, by including the lagged variable of perceived issue importance from the third panel wave, the effect of individual predispositions prior to the intense election campaign of the last three weeks before Election Day is included in the models. As argued before, this feature of panel data allows a stronger test for individual level effects than cross-sectional data (Finkel, 1995).

The first regression model, for each issue, is a baseline model including the control variables of the study, but no media attention or exposure variables. The control variables in Model 1 show that gender has a statistically significant effect on the unemployment issue and the health insurance issue and women’s perception of the issues salience increases.
Model 1 also reveals that higher education (university) decreases the importance of the health insurance issue on the individual level. Political interest has a small but significant effect on the perception of unemployment; higher political interest leads to individuals attaching more importance to this issue. Finally, and most important, the lagged dependent variable in the model has a positive and statistically significant effect on the three issues.

The second regression model includes all the control variables from the baseline model and the news consumption measurement of general political news attention. The data presented in Model 2 largely support Hypothesis 1 that expected general political news attention to contribute to increased issue salience on the individual level. As predicted, general political news attention has significant effects on perceived issue importance of unemployment and immigration issues. However, general news attention is unimportant in contributing to increased salience of the health insurance issue at the individual level. Overall, the effect of general news attention does not increase the amount of explained variance when compared with the baseline model that accounts for 38-39 percentage points.

Hypothesis 2 predicted the contribution of traditional news exposure on perceived issue importance. This hypothesis is only partially supported by the results in Model 3 for each issue. Individual exposure to traditional news media, such as TV news programmes, has positive and statistically significant effects on perception of unemployment and immigration as important issues, whereas newspaper reading has a negative and statistically significant effect on the health insurance issue. However, exposure to tabloids and local newspapers show no discernible impact or any significant effect on the individual level. The differential effects of different measures of traditional news exposure on perceived

Table 1. Perception of importance of issues during the election campaign (mean values and standard deviation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wave 1 May</th>
<th>Wave 2 June</th>
<th>Wave 3 August</th>
<th>Wave 4 September</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (0-7)</td>
<td>6.28 (1.01)</td>
<td>6.20 (1.04)</td>
<td>6.15 (1.16)</td>
<td>6.18 (1.03)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Insurance (0-7)</td>
<td>5.44 (1.32)</td>
<td>5.42 (1.38)</td>
<td>5.19 (1.42)</td>
<td>5.44 (1.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration (0-7)</td>
<td>4.83 (1.66)</td>
<td>4.83 (1.57)</td>
<td>4.73 (1.63)</td>
<td>4.95 (1.51)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>1,307</td>
<td>1,307</td>
<td>1,307</td>
<td>1,307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The sample is weighted on gender, age, type of residence, education, political interest, general internet use and vote choice in the 2010 national election.

Test of significance: paired-samples t-tests (between first and last waves).

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001.
issue importance also support Hypothesis 3, which predicted that general news attention would contribute more to the dependent variable. In terms of measuring agenda-setting effects, general attention to political news appears to be a more significant measurement for capturing contribution to individual issue importance in line with expectations.

Finally, when investigating and exploring the media types that might involve increasingly selective media consumption, and therefore have no significant contribution to issue salience, there are some disparate results in Model 3. Hypothesis 4 predicted no contribution of online news media when controlling for prior individual issue importance and there are no significant effects of online news exposure on the perception of unemployment and health insurance. However, the statistically significant results of the regression models are mixed concerning immigration and online TV and tabloids have a positive effect whereas online newspapers have a negative effect. Thus, there is no consistency across different issues. Finally, political social media exposure in Model 3 has no statistically significant impact whatsoever on perceptions of any of the three issues. In other words, attention to social media does not contribute to increased issue salience at the individual level and the prediction of Hypothesis 5 is supported.

In sum, the results point to the existence of agenda-setting effects in terms of contribution of general political news media attention to issue salience on the individual level. The increase in issue salience for unemployment and immigration on the individual level presented in Table 2 are also in line with the significant increases on an aggregate level displayed in Table 1. The disparate and differential results concerning the significant contributions of specific measurements of media exposure, on the other hand, point to the difficulty of measuring agenda-setting effects due to the use of different media consumption measurements.

**DISCUSSION**

Traditional media effect theories are questioned due to the development of the contemporary media environment with media fragmentation and individualized media consumption (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Takeshita, 2006; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Other scholars disagree and suggest that a distinction has to be made between actual agenda-setting effects and the ease with which they can be measured (Fishbein & Hornik, 2008; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2010; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Given this scholarly discussion the purpose of this study was to investigate and compare the agenda-setting effects of different media consumption measures on individual issue salience. The basic idea of agenda-setting as transfer from a media agenda to a public
Table 2. Effects on perceived issue importance (OLS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.04**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue importance</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News attention</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.05**</td>
<td>-0.05**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional news</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
<td>0.04**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R2 adjusted: 0.39, 0.38, 0.39, 0.39, 0.39, 0.40, 0.37, 0.39


Note: Estimates are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

The sample is weighted on gender, age, type of residence, education, political interest, general internet use and vote choice in the 2010 national election.
agenda also implies that agenda-setting effects should be visible on an individual level. By using a panel data design, this study tests causal agenda-setting effects at the individual level by controlling for changes in individual predispositions (i.e., the lagged dependent variable). Furthermore, the study is attention-based and investigates the linkages between self-reported media consumption and the issues that the public regard as important. The analysis is thus built on rigorous tests and controls for multiple variables simultaneously.

The results do reveal significant media effects in line with agenda-setting theory as media consumption contributes to increased issue salience on the individual level. There was also a correspondence between opinion dynamics at the aggregate and the individual level as changes in issue salience at the aggregate level mirrored individual level effects of media consumption. Political news attention contributed significantly to the perception of unemployment and immigration as important issues, results in line with the general perception of issue importance by the public over the same time period. However, it is important to note some differential results of consequence for this study as well. Even though general attention to political news increased issue salience, the results were mixed regarding different media exposure and their influence on issue salience. When measuring media consumption with specific media exposure there was no consistency in findings across different media types. However, there is one issue though that stands out. Immigration is perceived as increasingly important by people exposing themselves to online TV and tabloids. The inconsistency does not mean that these specific media types are unimportant for media effects but it does suggest that agenda-setting effects can be difficult to detect and measure depending on methodological approach and research design. These findings are in line with the scholarly discussion concerning challenges of measuring media effects in the contemporary media environment (Fishbein & Hornik, 2008; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

In summary, the findings of this study confirm the proposed challenges for media effect studies. Media consumption and thus media effects are difficult to measure in a high-choice media environment. Individual traits can reinforce and mediate media effects and it is thus important to include individual media as well as non-media variables in research design (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). It cannot be assumed that people are exposed to the same issues that dominate media content but neither can it be assumed that people avoid dominating issues by selectively consuming specific media (Karlsen, 2011). Outside of an experimental setting people’s exposure to different issues is difficult to measure (Strömbäck
& Kiousis, 2010), not perhaps because of selectivity and fragmentation but due to an ever-increasing number of media outlets and channels that are hard to measure. Thus, the findings are important since they suggest that general news attention might be a more significant measure for media consumption in a high-choice media environment when investigating media effects. In essence, this study suggests that media effects such as agenda-setting are not becoming non-significant but rather difficult to measure in the contemporary media environment.

However, the autoregressive models in this study also indicate the importance of individual predispositions during the election campaign for perception of issue importance. The panel data clearly revealed that unemployment, health insurance, and immigration were perceived as important issues in the first panel wave, and thus, were important long before the intense election campaign coverage. Naturally, different things that exist before attention is directed to media in the election campaign influence peoples’ perceptions of important issues in the election. The reinforcement of predisposition during the election campaign rather than attitude conversion displayed in this study, supports the proposal that it is crucial to consider what people do with media rather than just to ask what the media does to people (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). The internet and other media-technology developments are not the first information revolutions to influence political communication (Bimber, 2003) and theory of media effects (Metzger, 2009). The development of the contemporary media landscape is ongoing and its implications are therefore open to question, which calls for more research that can complement and expand traditional media effects research.

Naturally, there are limitations to this study as a single country case study, with consequences for selected research design, as well as methodological problems encountered when using panel data. Only further research can answer the question regarding the extent to which these findings are valid in other contexts. Obviously, the use of different measures tapping media consumption has different consequences when designing a study. Finally, the use of the same measures of the same individuals can increase the risk of sensitizing participants to the questions when conducting panel surveys. Despite these problems, the importance of this study is the test of a classical political communication theory that might serve to refine how we formulate our research designs in a contemporary environment.
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ARTICLE V
Where you lead we will follow: 
A longitudinal study of strategic political communication and inter-party relations in election campaigning

Over the years, the ways in which election campaigns are planned, organized and conducted have changed considerably and political parties employ new ideas and practices in order to communicate as strategically and effectively as possible (Negrine, 2008; Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Strömbäck, 2009; Tenscher et al., 2012; Vliegenthart, 2012). Political parties have incorporated more ideas, practices and tools for strategic communication in their campaigns (Hallahan et al., 2007; Sandhu, 2009). Political parties’ increased use of strategic political communication in election campaigning is often referred to as an ongoing process of adaption to changing social, political and media environments (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012; Farrell & Webb, 2000; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014).

Most research on election campaigning has therefore focused on the importance of different structural factors to explain how election campaigns are conducted in different countries (Negrine, 2007; Strömbäck, 2009; Vliegenthart, 2012). Considerably less attention has been paid to developments of strategic political communication in election campaigns within countries and across time (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014) and scant attention has been paid to the role of the individual political party and inter-party relations in developing election campaigning. In other words, we know little about if and how political parties reflect on and strategically operate within the organizational context that they are embedded (Hallahan et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2013).

We conceptualize the political party as a social actor that intentionally responds to and acts on its environment (King, Felin, & Whetten 2010). Accordingly, political parties do not operate in a vacuum but relate to environmental changes on different levels in the process of developing strategic political communication. In this process, both the parties themselves and their relations to other parties might have an impact on how they plan, organize and conduct election campaigns.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to explore the role of party agency and inter-party relations for the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns. Along theses lines, the present study explores the ways in which political parties pick
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up, adopt and incorporate new ideas and practices of election campaigning. The empirical material covers the 2002, 2006 and 2010 Swedish national election campaigns which allows us to make comparisons within the same national context, in order to explore the development over time (George & Bennett, 2005). The material consists of interviews with the leading party official of each of the seven political parties represented in the Swedish national Parliament Riksdagen between 2002 and 2010. This material is also rare in the sense that political parties as organizations are unusual as research objects in the field of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007; Sandhu, 2009).

POINT OF DEPARTURE

The concept of strategic political communication basically refers to an organization’s purposeful management of information and communication to achieve certain political goals (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014) for example within an election campaign. According to this conceptualization, the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns implies the intentional action of political parties to achieve goals through the management of information and communication. Nevertheless, in the literature the developments of strategic political communication in election campaigns has mostly focused a process where political parties adapt to changes in their social, media and political environments (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Negrine et al., 2007; Plasser & Plasser, 2002). Over time, “practices are continually revised and updated in order to make them more ‘rational’ and more ‘appropriate’ for the conduct of politics at any time” (Negrine, 2008: 2). The conformation to existing rules and norms can thus be seen as a way for an organization to achieve legitimacy and success (Scott, 2013).

Accordingly, research on election campaign development has so far focused on how macro environmental change elicits adjustments of strategic political communication management. However, research also shows that there are differences in the use of strategic political communication between countries. Cross-national research on election campaigning shows that political parties and candidates operate differently depending on structural factors (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004) such as social structures and regulations, and the nature of the political system with regard to the number of parties and electoral rules (Plasser & Plasser, 2002). On a national level, the degree of media independence and mediatization is assumed to pressurize political parties to conform to media logic in their campaigns (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012). In order to achieve media coverage and attention during election campaigns, the adjustment to media logic can be seen as a normative expectation that the
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parties need to oblige to (Donges & Jarren, 2014). Furthermore, political parties of today are faced with a volatile electorate where party identification has decreased and voters have become less habitual. As a result, the interaction between politicians and voters has changed making election campaign communication more uncertain and important (Negrine et al., 2007). Thus, the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns is mediated by both institutional and cultural circumstances, both at systemic and party level (Farrell & Webb, 2000).

One major challenge for a political party is the capacity to relate to the multiple and sometimes conflicting institutional environments (Donges & Jarren, 2014). When a political organization faces uncertainty in their institutional environment it tends to incorporate the most legitimate practice, often modeled on the practice of other organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Hence, when facing uncertainties about how to relate to changing institutional environments, the political party can turn their attention to other political parties in their immediate vicinity. In that sense, the organizational context of a political party as well as the ways in which the party relates to other parties may affect the development of strategic political communication, but little research is devoted to developing this perspective.

For the most part, the case of Sweden is no exception when it comes to the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns but is has been regarded as evolving in more modest ways than in other comparable countries (Nord, 2006; Nord, 2007; Nord, 2013; Strömbäck, 2009). In Sweden, more traditional campaign practices exist alongside with features of modern strategic communication practices and tactics. (Nord, 2006; Plasser & Plasser, 2002). Research suggests that national political traditions have restricted the importance political parties attach to modern communication strategies and that the major obstacles for fully implementing modern practices are negative attitudes toward development among party members and the public, i.e., the political culture. (Nord, 2006; Nord, 2013). However, the negative attitudes are gradually changing as strategic campaign communication practices and tactics become more accepted over time (Strömbäck et al., 2013; Strömbäck & Nord, 2008). There are two interesting trends in the expansion of strategic political communication in Sweden. Firstly, the process of developing strategic political communication in election campaigning is dynamic since parties increasingly engage in new ideas and practices. Secondly, the process is static since the varying degrees of engagement in new practices between parties remains (Nord, 2013). This observation implies that the development of strategic political communication is a culturally bound process of both interdependence and interaction be-
tween political parties and their institutional environments.

The modest development of strategic political communication in Sweden points toward the importance of party agency and inter-party relations for how and why political parties engage new ideas and practices of election campaigning. Nevertheless, little attention has so far been given to political parties as part of inter-organizational change where parties as organizations relate to the action of other parties in the development of strategic political communication. The application of institutional theory on strategic communication is suggested as useful to research strategic communication since it stresses the importance of the cultural and social embeddedness of organizations and thus the relationship between an organization and its environment (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Fredriksson et al., 2013; Sandhu, 2009). Organizational institutionalism opens up the notion of inter-party imitation and from that theoretical perspective we can explore political parties within the same context of strategic political communication ideas and practices in election campaigning. By integrating a perspective of inter-organizational relations in research on strategic political communication the impression that political parties act in a local void is evaded. Hence, organizational institutionalism focuses on the process of political parties operating as organizations in relation to other parties and furthermore in a local context influencing their usage of new ideas and practices in strategic political communication.

AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON STRATEGIC POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The development of strategic political communication can be seen as a permanently ongoing relationship between institutions and action. In this relationship, institutions provide frameworks for action as well as regulative mechanisms that enforce these frameworks. But also, the action of organizations can affect the frameworks and regulative mechanisms provided by the institutional environment (Lawrence et al., 2009). In that sense, the development of strategic political communication can be seen as a set of practices that evolve over time and are enacted in the everyday life of political parties.

Institutional work, defined as “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence et al., 2009: 1), reorients the more traditional concerns about how institutions govern processes of action into a focus on the intentional actions taken in relation to institutions. In many cases these actions are part of day-to-day adjustments, adoptions and compromises of actors trying to maintain institutional arrangements. Both traditional
institutional theory and institutional work consider all actions as embedded in institutional structures (Battilana & D’aunno, 2009) but institutional work regards the relationship between agency and institutions as a permanently ongoing dialectic interaction in which actors reflect on and strategically operate within the institutional context in which they are embedded (Lawrence et al., 2013), thus regarding organizations as being neither dominated by their institutional arrangement nor being hyper muscular figures able to dramatically change institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Within the scope of institutional work lies an assumption of some degree of conscious intentionality or purposive action that places a focus on the actions or practices that were aimed at creating or transforming institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011). When an actor experiences a problem in the present situation, some sort of change in the shape of a new idea or practice is often sought (Lawrence et al., 2011). In the case of a political party, election loss or a receding confidence often, but not always, leads to a renewal of campaign communication strategies. The notion that a political party as an organization compares itself with others in the cause of seeking legitimacy can be analyzed as a process of inter-party imitation, where organizations imitate ideas and practices of other organizations that are regarded as effective. Imitation can be defined as a process in which something is created and transformed by chains of translators (Sevón, 1996) and the suggestion that organizations frequently imitate the ideas and practices of each other is widely accepted and circulated (Barreto & Baden-Fuller, 2006; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Haunschild & Miner, 1997; Ordanini et al., 2008).

So, what leads organizations to imitate each other? According to Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) fashions draw attention to specific ideas and practices as well as identifying what is regarded as appropriate and desirable at a given time and place. The concept of fashions is borrowed from management research, where it is used to analyze the emergence of popular management ideas and practices. In this study, we will use the concept of fashions as referring to patterns of ideas and practices of strategic communication that at some point in time are regarded as popular, important and widely applicable (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008). Strategic communication fashions are manifested when new ideas and practices of strategic political communication are picked up by some political parties and later imitated by other parties if regarded as appropriate and desirable at that time and place. Before a new idea and practice becomes institutionalized, it emerges as a fashion, is experimented with by different organizations and later becomes institutionalized in some form or disappears (Czarniawska, 2011). Paradoxically, fashion is
both an expression of conformism in terms of social adaptation but also of anti-conformism, and therefore it can be followed for different reasons (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005).

Research shows that fashions often move in a recognizable cycle that typically follows a bell-shaped curve. Early adoption is followed by a more widespread uptake among organizations characterized by enthusiasm that eventually shifts to a downturn. In the downturn part of the cycle, the novelty factor of a fashion is replaced with rationality as it becomes a normalized part of everyday practices or criticism if it does not deliver what it has promised (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Perkmann & Spicer, 2008). Accordingly, a fashion that comes and goes describes a process where certain ideas and practices become legitimate, popular and regarded as effective through inter-organizational imitation (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Haunschild & Miner, 1997). Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) suggests that studies of fashion need to be firmly situated in order to capture the ways in which fashion develops permitting a better understanding across time and space. Accordingly, fashion should to be studied as a process, instead of focusing on the results of it.

However, the development of strategic political communication from the actor’s perspective is also affected by the institutional work undertaken locally by individual actors (Lawrence et al., 2009). Actors, affected by their local environment, imitate ideas or practices, to which they ascribe new meanings and combine with existing working models in order to fit the local context of the organization (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). In that sense, the ideas that are spread through fashions are not unchangeable goods but rather subject to multiple translations or re-contextualization in the local setting of the organization (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). According to Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen “translation occurs when an idea that seems promising for alleviating an organizational problem is selected and then objectified and materialized” (2009: 191). Further, the notion of translation and re-contextualization in the local setting highlights the strategic opportunities associated with different interpretations. There is always more than one way in which an actor can interpret and translate an idea and practice within a given organizational context. An actor may then deliberately try to translate the idea or practice in a manner that aligns with their own interests (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). This makes it possible for individual actors to mold ideas and practices according to local purposes (Borum, 2004).

We focus on the ways in which new ideas and practices of strategic political communication are picked up, imitated and incorporated by political parties in election campaigning. Thus, the purpose of this paper
WHERE YOU LEAD WE WILL FOLLOW

is to explore the role of party agency and inter-party relations for the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns. Therefore we pose the following two research questions:

RQ 1: What distinctive fashions of strategic political communication emerge in Swedish election campaigns over the time period 2002–2010?

RQ 2: How do Swedish political parties act and interact in the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns?

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHOD AND MATERIAL

In order to answer the posed research questions about 1) describing the most distinctive fashions of strategic political communication over time and 2) exploring how Swedish political parties act and interact in the development of strategic political communication, the present study employs a comparative case study design by analyzing interviews with party elites from three consecutive national elections in Sweden. We believe that an understanding of strategic political communication would benefit from a comparative longitudinal analysis. One of the most important merits of a comparative design is that we can analyze the process of election campaign development across time rather than just focusing on one election (George & Bennett, 2005).

We base our study on interviews with party elites that are responsible for the organization and running of the election campaigns as well as party organization in Swedish political parties. Thus, the focus in the present study is on the political parties and their campaigns. The study is explorative in nature and aimed at stimulating further theoretical development on the role of political parties as actors and inter-party relations in the development of election campaign communication.

Sample and material

The primary sample and material of the present study consists of interviews with the party secretaries of each of the seven political parties represented in the Swedish national Parliament (Riksdagen). The party secretaries in Swedish political parties traditionally manage political campaigns and the party organization. They are responsible for the development of the structures, strategies and tactics of the election campaign and are therefore the most knowledgeable persons in the parties concerning election campaigning. See Appendix 1 for details of the re-
spondents in the interviews from the elections of 2002, 2006 and 2010.

All interviews were conducted in person following the national Swedish elections in 2002, 2006 and 2010. In total 21 interviews were conducted by two experienced researchers at the research center Demicom, as part of a larger research program about Swedish election campaigns. The interviews followed a semi-structured template with a set of questions that also allowed for the respondent to elaborate and for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. The structured template was designed to address party campaign strategies and campaign philosophy including questions focusing on general election campaign strategies, communication strategies, media strategies, use of marketing tactics, practice of opinion polling, use of specific campaign tools, employment of external consultants, budget for the campaign, personal resources etc. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, totaling 321 single-spaced A4 pages.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed in three steps (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The first readings of the material rendered both summaries of the characteristics of each year, but also general themes from each year, based on fashions of strategic political communication expressed or manifested through for example best practices or templates over the time period. In the next step of the analysis, we undertook a closer reading of the material looking to further understand how the political parties imitated and translated new ideas of strategic political communication into their local context or setting. Third, we analyzed how different parties picked up, imitated and incorporated different ideas and practices of strategic political communication by identifying ideas and practices of strategic communication that were recurrent in the transcriptions. Further, we looked at these recurrences in order to map patterns of development over time.

RESULTS

The results of this longitudinal study indicate that some ideas and practices of strategic political communication emerge at the same time in most of the political parties in Sweden. These ideas and practices are regarded as effective and appropriate at a given time and place and consequently picked up by the parties and incorporated into their existing models of election campaigning. By illustrating the uptake of different fashions in strategic political communication by the political parties over time we want to empirically illustrate how a process of imitation in-between the parties takes place in dialectic with changes in the in-
stitutional environment. We will illustrate this process by highlighting three examples. The first example focuses on news management, the second on the use of marketing techniques and the third on the emergence of political TV commercials.

1st example: news management is crucial for successful campaign communication

The general view of the seven parties in 2002 is that the news media is of the utmost importance as an arena as well as an actor in campaign communication. News management strategies are regarded as crucial and essential for strategic political communication and political parties must relate to the increasingly independent media in order to succeed. The idea of strategic news management is thus regarded as legitimate and effective at this time and place in the development of Swedish election campaigns. One party secretary puts his conviction into words in an interview:

> Everyone working within the party organization has to know how news media works as mediated communication is decisive in political communication today.
> (Social Democrats, 2002)

As the political parties relate to the increasing importance of news management, some specific practices of strategic political communication seem to be popular at the time. All parties engage consultants to manage media relations and they all train their top candidates in media performance. There is also a strong focus on press-related activities that can be seen as a way for the parties to take purposive action in order to take control of the present situation.

> The most usual tactic is to present a political proposal in line with media logic, to make a proposal interesting for the media in well formulated press releases and interesting press conferences. We try to act according to media dramaturgy in order to make it into the news. (Christian Democrats, 2002)

According to the interview from 2002, the Liberal Party had previously identified a need for more efforts in order to win the attention of the media. The strategy before the 2002 election was to adjust the election campaign to media logic through strategically profiling certain candidates, create a clear conflict line in the political communication and focusing on few political issues. The 2002 Liberal Party campaign was a success, both in terms of media attention and election results. In many respects,
the Liberal party was the first mover in developing a new perspective on strategic news management that other parties later followed. In the interviews, references to the strategy of the liberal party are present. The reoccurring references to the campaign of the Liberal party are however of an evaluative character in the interviews from 2002, and the actual impact on the campaign strategies of other parties is first noticeable in the interviews from 2006. Going back to the interviews from 2002, a number of parties mention the Liberal Party and their strategy as a good example of effective and innovative media relations. References to the success of the Liberal Party are made in terms of both the campaign and the election results.

In the election the Liberal Party succeeded by focusing and profiling Björklund with the school issue. That was basically their campaign, focus on one issue and one politician. I see that as their winning strategy for success. (Christian Democrats, 2002)

The quote below illustrates a more reluctant stance to the impact of the news management strategy of the Liberal Party.

I think the Liberal Party was favored. They worked their way to their own success, but then they were carried by the media. I think success bred success in this case. (Left Party, 2002)

The party secretary of the Social Democrats regards the success as being dependent on media favoritism where success or defeat is reinforced by the media, downplaying the importance of the strategy of news management. For this party it is important to highlight the traditions of the party as a popular political movement connected to the members rather than dancing to the pipe of the media.

The media does not control us. Our party is well established and we have multiple channels for communication. We can afford to ignore media attention. (Social Democrats, 2002)

In contrast to the earlier quote where the Social democrats emphasize the importance of news media, the quote above conveys a more presumptuous stance towards the media. These somewhat contradictory quotes illustrate a clash between a party culture that is characterized by traditional values and the need adjusting to modern news management strategies.

In 2006, news management is manifest through adjustments of everyday practices and part of the standard campaign toolbox. Carefully craft-
ed plans for releasing news to the press in general or exclusive material to individual journalists are common tactics for news management in 2006. Most political parties also pick up the need to adjust their messages to the media logic in order to achieve press coverage. One example is from the party secretary of the Center Party who discusses the need for focusing on fewer political issues.

We have built our campaign on the analysis of the election of 2002 and what led up to the success of the Liberal Party. Already back then we identified that we needed to become more focused, and not keep doing everything. If you want to be seen, you have to be as consistent and distinct as possible. (Center Party, 2006)

The party secretary from the Christian Democrats discusses the election campaign of 2006 as more extensively focused on strategically profiling certain candidates.

We planned an election campaign that was very focused on top candidates at the expense of the party program or the political issues. (Christian Democrats, 2010)

On a general level, the parties perceive strategic news management as a practice that they can control as well as a practice that strengthens their position in relation to the news media. The press secretary from the Green Party exemplifies the news management strategies of the party:

We arranged some special activities and events to attract media. One morning I served coffee to commuters at the train station while handing out flyers just to get attention. And the media did cover some of these happenings. (Green Party, 2006)

By 2010 strategic news management practices have gone through the process of uptake, enthusiasm and a following downturn as news management has become part and parcel of a contemporary election campaign. In the interviews from 2002, the need for adapting to a changing media environment is widely identified by the parties. Furthermore, one party makes an explicit move in trying to meet these expectations and it pays off with media attention. Later on, other parties relate to the news management strategies of that successful party, imitate practices that have been evaluated as legitimate and effective, but also adjust or translate these practices to the conditions set by the individual party. Some parties are more explicit about their use of news management strategies whereas others incorporate practices into their campaigns but down-
play their importance in order for the strategy to fit the image of what kind of party they are. Finally, strategic news management becomes an everyday practice that is carried out without much explicit discussion about why and how.

2nd example: marketing tactics and external expertise – from suspect practice to a must

In 2002, all parties discuss the use of different marketing techniques and the use of both in-house and external communication professionals. Party secretaries however stress that for example ideological identification and political content is significantly more important than marketing techniques both for party democracy and electoral support. Negative attitudes among party members and voters are acknowledged as a reason to downplay the use of marketing techniques in the planning, organizing and running of election campaigns.

Following the worst election results in history in 1998 and the introduction of a new party leader in 2001 the Center Party is an exception to this pattern since they explicitly decide to develop their communication in a more strategic direction. Their campaign communication strategy is expressed in a progressive acceptance and increased focus and use of marketing techniques and external professional resources in the 2002 election campaign. The party is not very successful in terms of election results but the development of marketing practices continues. In 2006, the change is fully implemented and is expressed by the use of message strategies, micro targeting, opinion polls, testing message interpretation and reception before implementation of the campaign etc. The press secretary explains:

Our target groups were defined and outlined, based on people’s opinions and values, at least one year ahead of the election campaign. We ran a test-campaign six months before the national election to test layout, political issues and our campaign organization. After that we fine-tuned the focus on specific issues and the expression of these issues in the election campaign.

(Center Party, 2006)

The increased acceptance and thus practice of marketing techniques is visible in all the other parties in 2006. The most noticeable development concerning campaign practices is the increased use of marketing tools and opinion polls by all parties. Formulating and testing political slogans, closely following public opinion and tracking media coverage became the distinguishing marketing tactics of the 2006 election cam-
campaign toolbox. Most parties still highlight the importance of ideological policies and party democracy but still deploy as many resources as possible into the use of professional marketing tools in their campaigns. Differences in the degree of use between the parties could be related to the size of campaign budgets rather than to differences in the perception of marketing practices as effective or legitimate in election campaigning.

We worked with a PR company for a period, planning parts of the campaign, but the costs for marketing in this type of campaign are enormous for us. We would basically have had to spend our whole budget on one campaign. So the collaboration ended.
(Left Party, 2006)

The example of an increased use of marketing techniques can also be seen as related to a changing institutional environment on a general level. Nevertheless, the adoption of marketing techniques is enabled by both an increased perceived acceptance of marketing techniques as legitimate practice and limited by the internal interests of the individual party. Hence, the use of specific marketing techniques by one party paves the way for other parties to use similar techniques. In this example, the innovative ways in which the Center Party used marketing techniques paved the way for others to try out similar solutions. At the same time, the individual parties need to balance the perceived effectiveness of certain marketing techniques with the party culture. Consequently, the use of marketing techniques is counter-balanced by the preconditions of the individual party. Nonetheless, growing partisan de-alignment compels the parties to find new strategies to engage voters. For example, in the interviews from 2010, some parties express some hesitance to for example micro targeting.

I am very sceptical toward micro targeting. We try not to work in that way, because people do not define themselves as part of a target group. Political parties cannot treat voters as consumers.
(Moderate Party, 2010)

In these interviews, micro targeting is part of the toolbox of most parties, but, as the quote above illustrates, the fashion has reached the stage of downturn characterized by rationality and criticism.

3rd example: political TV commercials, from no one to everyone
An important feature of the Swedish system, up until 2009, is that political advertising or party political broadcasts are not allowed on either public service or commercial channels. The political majority in Parlia-
ment regards political advertising as a potentially negative element in election campaigns. Political advertising is believed to challenge the quality of public discourse by introducing increasingly emotional, personal and negative messages without political substance. All the political parties in Parliament historically expressed this fear. But in the 2010 election, political TV commercials are for the first time allowed in a national election due to legal changes. Before the 2010 election there is a clear dividing line of opinion toward TV commercials: the right-wing parties in power are positive and the left-wing parties in opposition are negative. A right-wing party secretary explains their standpoint and also their way of working with the new practice of TV commercials:

We decided to focus on political issues such as schools, elder care, and I think this is the way we must work with TV commercials in Sweden. We invested a lot in TV commercials and I think that was the right decision. (Liberal Party, 2010)

Whereas a left-wing party secretary briefly stated his view of the role and importance of TV commercials in election campaign communication:

It was extremely expensive and it made absolutely no difference. (Social Democrats, 2010)

Nevertheless, most parties add TV commercials to their campaigns in 2010. All parties use commercials in the election either as an individual party or as part of a political group. But this development is explained in different ways:

We had to do it. But it didn’t dominate as a channel for communication as in the US it was more marginal here. But I think we must question how many resources we should put into TV commercials in the future. (Social Democrats, 2010)

I think it was good. I like when we get more channels to communicate with our voters through, and we certainly used them. Overall, I think this was a good development. (Moderates, 2010)

After the introduction of political TV-advertising in the national election, many parties reflect on the historical fear of negative and unsubstantial commercials concluding that these fears were not substantiated in Sweden. Swedish political parties pick up the practice of TV advertising but repackage it to fit the local settings of the parties and their polit-
ical culture. And political TV ads become legitimate in strategic political communication as expressed by this party secretary commenting on the role of commercials in Sweden:

TV commercials create enthusiasm among our members who can say “Yey, we are also visible” or “What a great message” and so on. It can mobilize our voters. It can raise the electoral turnout. (Green Party, 2010)

To summarize, these results from the interviews with party secretaries from three executive election campaigns illustrate how fashions for strategic political communication are picked up, adapted and incorporated by the political parties. This development can be regarded as a process of inter-organizational imitation where parties imitate practices that are regarded as legitimate and effective at a specific time and place. It is furthermore a process where parties have to relate to different environments on different levels due to factors such as changes in regulation, development of a more independent media or a more volatile electorate.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This article empirically illustrates how political parties lead and follow each other in the development of strategic political communication. Most research has so far focused on the importance of structural factors in the social, medial and political environment of political parties when explaining developments and differences in strategic political communication (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012; Farrell & Webb, 2000; Negrine, 2007; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). In this study we want to highlight that parallel to the process of adaption to macro developments and challenges, there is also a process where the political parties reflects on and strategically operate within the context in which they are embedded (Lawrence et al., 2009). To understand the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns we believe it is important to explore the role of the political party in this process.

The concept of strategic political communication defined as an organization’s purposeful management of information and communication to achieve certain political goals (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014) entails intentional action. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of party agency and inter-party relations for the development of strategic political communication in election campaigns. By exploring party agency and party relations we can contribute to the understanding of how ideas and practices of strategic political communication emerge and develop over time in election campaigning.
Given the longitudinal design of this study and its focus on which ways political parties pick up, adopt and incorporates new ideas and practices, the present study contributes to the literature on political strategic communication in three ways. First, the results highlight the importance of studying the actions and interactions of political parties in their local environment. When adopting new ideas and practices of strategic political communication the parties have to consider their own image of ‘what kind of party they are’ and if the ideas and practices could be perceived as legitimate within the party and among its voters. In other words, the parties do not only adjust to the changing macro environment but must also consider their local context before incorporating new campaign tactics. Furthermore, what practices that are perceived as legitimate and effective is highly influenced by other parties. Political parties in this study imitate and model their new campaign practices on the practices of other parties, often parties perceived as successful and innovative. Inter-party relations appear to be of importance for making new practices legitimate and accepted based on the rationale of ‘if they do it, maybe we should do it?’ Thus, the development of strategic political communication in election campaigning is evolving over time in tune with the local setting of the party and not only as an adaption to macro environments such as increasingly independent media and a volatile electorate.

Secondly, this study illustrates how certain ideas and practices of strategic political communication are picked up and adopted by most of the parties at about the same time. The uptake of new ideas and practices in Swedish election campaigns follow the suggested lifecycle of a fashion where early adoption is followed by a widespread uptake among organizations characterized by enthusiasm that eventually shifts to a downturn (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). In this process new ideas and practices are added into the campaign toolbox. The emergence of different fashions in strategic political communication between the elections highlights that what is perceived as appropriate and desirable changes over time (Czarniawska, 2011). Thus, the development of strategic political communication can be perceived as conformism in terms of social adaption where political parties follow the practices of one another.

Thirdly, the study focuses on a process of translation before the adoption of new ideas and strategic political communication practices. Translation entails that the political party molds an idea or practice to fit their own organizational context (Lawrence et al., 2011). Different parties have different political traditions and cultures that have to be taken into consideration when developing campaign strategies. When adopting new ideas and practices the parties ascribe them different meanings in order
to fit the local setting of the party. The adoption of TV commercials by all the parties is an example of such a process. Once the legal regulations are changed to allow political advertising the former negative attitudes toward TV commercials are replaced by acceptance. This occurs after the parties have repackaged the practice to fit the local setting of the party and its culture. Translation of ideas and practices can thus be perceived of as crucial when parties develop their election campaign strategies.

In summary, by accounting for imitation between political parties and translation within political parties we can further our understanding of ways in which practices of strategic political communication emerge and develop over time. This study highlights that parallel to or as dialectic to the process of adaption to macro changes and challenges, the circulation of ideas and new practices of election campaigning between political parties also influences the development of strategic political communication. On a more general level, our contribution also points towards the importance of viewing the strategic work of political parties as an example of the presence of agent powers in complex and ungraspable situations of changing institutional environments. In order to handle these complexities political parties imitate ideas and practices of other political parties in the close vicinity and translate them into comprehensible ideas and practices of strategic political communication.

There are naturally limitations to most studies due to the selected research design as well as methodological implications and we will discuss some limitations of this study. The empirical material of this study comes from interviews conducted after an election and the interviews reflect the evaluations of each party secretary regarding how the election campaign played out. In consequence, we cannot draw conclusions about the actual practices of the parties, only about recounts of the practices. The explorative and single country design limits the generalizability of the results and only further research can answer the question whether our conclusions are valid in other countries. Because the specific context of a political party is so far relatively unexplored within the field of strategic political communication we encourage more scholars to engage in the investigation of the specific conditions that govern the development of strategic political communication. We suggest further qualitative exploration as well as additional empirical investigations of how practices evolve over time and are enacted in the everyday life of political parties. On that account, we recommend further studies that trace the process of what mechanisms generate new practices of strategic political communication and what type of contexts certain mechanisms operate (Bennett & Elman, 2006).

In conclusion, we want to highlight the potential importance of an
international perspective when analyzing the actions of individual parties by illustrating political parties as leaders and followers of strategic political communication development. The results of this study indicate that leaders of development are parties that in some regard experience an uncertain or new situation, be it election defeat, an image problem or an identity crisis. The party that initiates new practices of strategic political communication then paves the way for others to follow. However, all new practices will not take the shape of a fashion or be picked up by other parties. The perceived legitimacy and efficiency of new practices is also evaluated against the local context of the imitating party. And in a globalized world the leaders and followers of new strategic political communication ideas and practices probably also walk on international paths.
REFERENCES


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