

# **Is Game the Name of the Frame?**

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

### **Introduction**

Modern political communication processes are highly mediated. The mass media play a crucial role in these processes since the media have become the main source for political information for citizens (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). This means that political parties, candidates and campaigns who need to communicate with the citizenry have to do it through the mass media (Powell & Cowart, 2003; Norris, 2000), at least on the national and regional levels. Even though direct mail, Internet websites and other means of direct communication exist, they have by no means replaced the mass media (Plasser & Plasser, 2002).

In some countries, including the United States, paid political advertising is one of the most important means of electoral political communication (Kaid, 2004; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). However, even in countries where paid political advertising is important, the news coverage of election campaigns is essential for voters (Gulati, Just & Crigler, 2004; Patterson, 1993; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006; Strömbäck, 2004). Thus, it is only natural that the media coverage of politics during election campaigns attracts significant scholarly attention. In fact, the history of political communication research and election research been closely intertwined ever since the publication of “The People’s Choice” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948) over fifty years ago (Blumler & McQuail, 2001). Looking at political communication scholarship at the beginning of the 21st century, Graber (2005a) has also shown that election campaigns remain one of the most common themes in published journal articles.

However, even if political communication research has expanded during the past decades, and even though election campaigns remain in the center of political communication research, there is still a troubling lack of comparative political communication research. As Graber (2005a, p. 496) notes, “truly comparative studies are especially scarce”. Even though there are some important exceptions (Esser & Pfetsch eds., 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the number of comparative studies of political campaign communication (Kaid, Gestlé & Sanders eds., 1991; Plasser & Plasser, 2002)

and news coverage during political campaigning (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch & Weaver, 1991; De Vreese, 2003; De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko & Boomgaarden, 2005) is very limited. This is unfortunate, since “election campaigns are highly amenable to cross-national political communication comparisons” (Blumler & McQuail, 2001, p. 238), and because, as noted by Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, p. 75), “comparative research is an essential antidote to naive universalism”.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the framing of politics in election news coverage in two countries that are highly different from each other: the United States and Sweden.

### **United States and Sweden: Most different cases**

According to Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, p. 75-76), there are several arguments in favor of comparative research, besides the ones noted above. First, such research enables an expansion of the empirical database, which facilitates greater understanding of the degree to which generalizations are valid. Second, it might serve as an antidote to “unwitting parochialism” (p. 76), helping us to become aware both of other systems and of the characteristics of our own system. By doing so, it has the “capacity to render the invisible visible” (p. 76).

In choosing cases to compare, there are two basic strategies one can pursue: the *most similar systems* design and the *most different systems* design (Wirth & Kolb, 2004, p. 97-98). This study follows the most different systems design, since we are interested in the extent to which the election news coverage shares similar characteristics in widely different countries. More specifically, we are interested in whether trends in news coverage of politics in general, and elections in particular, found in previous research in the United States (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Patterson, 1993) are to be found also in other countries with different political and media systems.

Within the framework of advanced postindustrial democracies, one country that is markedly different from the United States is Sweden. As noted by Granberg and Holmberg (1988, p. 3), “Among the western democracies, Sweden and the United States are about as different as any two political systems” (see also Åsard & Bennett, 1997; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). The differences are not restricted to the political system,

however. The media system, including the journalistic norms and values, are also different. Consequently, according to the typology of media and political systems developed by Hallin and Mancini in their seminal book “Comparing Media Systems”, the United States is a prototypical example of the “Liberal Model”, whereas Sweden is a prototypical example of the “Democratic Corporatist Model”.

## **Different political and electoral systems**

In this section we will present a brief comparison between the political and electoral systems in the United States and Sweden, before we turn to the media systems.

Regarding the political system, the United States is a federal system with both a senate, representing the states, and a House of Representatives, representing the citizens. Furthermore, the United States has a presidential system and a strict separation of power between the legislative branch (the Congress), the executive branch (the President) and the judiciary branch (the Courts). In contrast, Sweden is a unitary state with a parliamentary system, where the Prime Minister is not elected by the people but instead appointed by the party or the parties that form(s) the government. In the United States there are only two major political parties, whereas in Sweden, seven parties are represented in the parliament. Since the 1970s, no single party has formed a majority government in Sweden; instead, most of the time since the second World War Sweden has had minority governments formed by the Social Democrats, with the exception of 1976-1982 and 1991-1994, when the bourgeois parties formed coalition governments.

The electoral systems are also very different. In Sweden, people vote for the local and the regional municipalities as well as the national parliament every fourth year, and on the same day. The Swedish electoral system is proportional and also very party-centered. Even though people have the opportunity to express preference for a certain candidate, the parties decide who gets on the ballots and people have to choose between party ballots. Split-ticket voting is possible and has become more common (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004), but even so, the parties are the main political actors in the Swedish system. As organizations, the parties are also very strong, and the same is true of the party discipline in parliament (Petersson et al., 1999). An elected politician who votes against his or her party would not survive as a politician after the next election.

In contrast, the electoral system in the United States is very candidate-centered (Bartels, 2002). This is due, in part, to the plurality (or first past the post) electoral system. Even though American politics have become much more polarized since the 1990s, and partisan yield as a share of the total vote was at its high point in the 2004 elections (Ceaser & Busch, 2005, p. 136), the candidates rather than the parties continue to be in charge of the political campaigning and the media attention, especially at the presidential level. While in Sweden candidates have to adjust to their parties, in the United States it is the parties that have to adjust to their candidates. As a consequence, the “empirical content” (Thies, 2000) of the party labels is higher in Sweden than in the United States. The party organizations in the U.S. have even been called “empty vessels” (Katz & Kolodny, 1994).

Another difference can be found with regards to the frequency of elections. In Sweden, people vote at the same day in local, regional and national elections every fourth year, and they cast one ballot for each geographic level. Besides that, people vote for the European Parliament every fifth year. Occasionally, a national referendum may be held; the last ones were in 2003 (about adopting the euro) and 1994 (about joining the EU). The United States, on the other hand, is one of the countries in the world where people are called to the polls most frequently. Besides the presidential election and elections in some states and districts to the Senate or the House of Representatives every fourth year, there are mid-term elections to the Senate and the House of Representatives and a huge number of local and state elections. The high frequency of elections in the U.S. has also been cited as one of the reasons for low voter turnout, even though not all scholars in the field agree (cf. Franklin, 2004, p. 98-105). Whatever the reasons explaining voter turnout, it is a fact that turnout is much lower in the United States compared to Sweden. Voter turnout in the last national election in Sweden was 80 percent whereas it was 61 percent in the 2004 US presidential election.

### **Different Media Systems**

If there are major differences between the political and electoral systems in Sweden and the United States, the same is true for the media systems. Perhaps the differences have decreased during the last 10-15 years (Hvitfelt, 1996), but they are still significant.

One important difference concerns the degree of commercialization. Even though the Swedish broadcast media system was deregulated in the beginning of the 1990s, the public service broadcast sector is still very strong (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001). In 2004, 50% of the population watched news in one of the public service TV channels at least five days a week, whereas the corresponding share for the largest commercial channel (TV4) was 32% (Holmberg & Weibull, 2005, p. 28). On a general level, the Swedish media system can be characterized as a “dual system” of public service and commercial media (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001; Jönsson, 2004; Peterson, Djerf-Pierre, Strömbäck & Weibull, 2005). Consequently, the TV audience share of public service media in Sweden was 44% in 2000, whereas it was only 2% in the United States (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 42).

Clearly, the media system in the United States is highly commercialized; the public service part of the media is limited, commercial broadcast companies and newspapers dominate the media landscape, and publicly traded media companies have become increasingly common during the last decades (Bennett, 2003; Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). As noted by Picard (2005, p. 343), “Today the primary holders of stock in media companies are banks, investment houses, and pension funds, and these investors are primarily interested in the financial performance of the firms, rather than content quality and the meeting of social and democratic goals”. Thus, the media in the United States can be characterized as “market-driven” (McManus, 1994), in the sense that a “market model” dominates over a “public sphere model” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001).

There are important differences in media consumption as well. Sweden is a newspaper-centric country, with newspaper sales of 541.1 per 1000 adult citizens. In contrast, the corresponding number is 263.3 per 1,000 in the United States (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 23). U.S citizens watch television 4.4 hours per day (Media InfoCenter, 2004), compared with approximately two hours per day in Sweden (Mediebarometer, 2004).

With regard to the media system and its relationship to political and social cleavages, there is also a difference in the degree of “political parallelism” in Sweden and the United States. Even though *Fox News* has changed the rules of the game in the U.S.,

traditionally, the U.S. media system has been characterized by internal pluralism (diversity in viewpoints achieved within each individual media) rather than external pluralism (diversity through different media presenting different viewpoints) (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 67-68, 299). In Sweden, internal pluralism has dominated the broadcast media whereas external pluralism has dominated the newspaper system. Until the 1960s, the party press was very strong in Sweden, and even though it has now mostly disappeared when it comes to the news and current affairs reporting, it still exists on the editorial pages, and some newspapers are still owned by political parties or foundations close to the parties (Hadenius & Weibull, 2003; Nord, 2001). Until the launching and success of *Fox News*, overtly partisan news reporting was very uncommon in the United States, in contrast with the Swedish broadcast media. Thus, comparing the degree of political parallelism in Sweden and the United States over the last 30-40 years, the media systems seem to be converging, if only in this regard.

In both countries, the norm of objective and impartial news reporting is generally strong, and in both countries, journalists are highly professionalized with systems for self-regulation rather than state regulation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, it is also important to note that Swedish and U.S. journalists have different understanding of the term “objectivity” (Patterson, 1998; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). According to a majority of Swedish journalists, objectivity means “going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute”, whereas the understanding most favored among U.S. journalists focuses on “Expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute” (Patterson, 1998, p. 22). Donsbach and Patterson (2004) have also shown that there are some correlations between the journalists’ partisan beliefs and their organizational affiliation in the Swedish case, but none in the U.S. case.

### **Bias in Swedish and U.S. news coverage**

Perhaps surprisingly, the discussion about partisan bias in the news coverage that is so lively in the U.S. media debate is hardly ever an issue in the Swedish media. With regard to the election news reporting, research also shows that the Swedish media can hardly be accused of systematically favoring one side or one party over another (Asp, 2003). In each and every election some party or parties tend to gain more favorable coverage than

others, but that bias has more to do with the dynamics of the specific election campaign and which parties offer the most exciting stories; thus, the party that is treated most favorably by the media differs from election to election. Hence, there is no consistent partisan bias (Asp, 2003), even if research also shows that journalists' partisan sympathies differ from the population at large (Asp, 2001).

In the United States, the question of partisan – or liberal – media bias is much more of an issue, but as noted by Gulati, Just and Crigler (2004, p. 239; cf. Graber, 2005b), “Repeated analyses of news coverage of recent presidential elections continue to find no evidence of partisan bias in news reporting” (see also Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006, who finds a slight bias favoring the Democrats over the Republicans). This has obviously not changed the view among some commentators that the U.S. media in general, and the broadcast news in particular, display a liberal bias. Nevertheless, what may be more important is what has Gulati, Just and Crigler call “structural bias”, bias that favors some issues and some stories over others, which in the end also might favor some political actors over others, within the context of a certain story or issue. For example, the news media seems to be “biased” against losing campaigns, not out of partisan beliefs but because winning campaigns offer more exciting news stories (Gulati, Just & Crigler, 2004; Strömbäck, 2004). Likewise, “negative” news is often preferred over “positive” news, because of the predominant news values (McManus, 1994; Fallows, 1996).

This kind of “structural bias” has also been linked to the framing of politics, especially the framing of politics as a strategic game, a horse race, and in an episodic rather than thematic way (Patterson, 1993; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Strömbäck, 2004; Gulati, Just & Crigler, 2004).

## **The Framing of Politics**

During the last 15 years, framing has become one of the most popular and widely used mass communication theories (Bryant & Miron, 2004). Even though it remains a rather “fractured paradigm” (Entman, 1993), with many different definitions being used (c.f. Reese, Gandy & Grant eds., 2001), there seems to be a growing consensus about the definition of framing. According to Entman (2004, p. 5), the “standard definition” of framing involves “selecting and highlighting some facets of events and issues, and

making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution". Another definition is offered by Gitlin, who defines frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion" (Gitlin, 1980, 7). Thus, framing is ultimately about choices of, for example, words, emphasis, sources and organization of texts (Reese, 2001). In this regard, it does not matter whether we are referring to media framing or the framing of messages by political actors.

Two aspects of framing are especially important. The first important aspect is that framing is inescapable (Entman, 2005, p. viii). Framing is a process at work each time anyone is crafting a verbal, visual and textual message. Thus, in the context of journalism, journalists simply cannot choose not to frame their stories, even though the degree of consciousness and intention can vary considerably. The second important aspect is that framing is consequential; media frames influence the perceptions of actors, issues, and the context being framed. Generally, scholars agree that media allow audiences to make sense of events by framing issues in different ways, helping the reader or the viewer organize reality and interpret issues (Valkenburg et al., 1999). As noted by Price, Tewksbury and Powers (1997, p. 483), "by activating some ideas, feelings and values rather than others, then, the news can encourage particular trains of thought about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions".

It is now a widely accepted that the framing of political phenomena gives media power (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Schnell & Callaghan, 2005; Shah, 2001; Kinder, 2003). This process is similar to the second level of agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001; but see also Maher, 2001). What might be of particular importance with regards to the power of framing is whether the frames being used are culturally congruent or not: "The more congruent the frame is with schemas that dominate the political culture, the more success it will enjoy. The most inherently powerful frames are those fully congruent with schemas habitually used by most members of society" (Entman, 2004, p. 14). Frames that are culturally congruent are frames that seem natural or self-evident, thus, there is no cognitive or affective need to question them.

There are different kinds of frames, however. Entman (2004) makes a distinction between substantive and procedural frames, broadly similar to Callaghan and Schnell's (2005, p. 4-5) distinction between issue-specific frames and generic frames. They also add episodic versus thematic frames as a special category. The last category might also be called "contextual framing", since it is referring to the presence or absence of contexts in journalistic accounts of political phenomena.

Research on structural bias has mostly been concerned with procedural/generic and contextual frames. For example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have shown not only that the U.S. media tend to frame politics as a strategic game, or a horse race, but also that they encourage political cynicism among citizens. In a longitudinal content analysis of the U.S. press, Benoit (2005), for example, found a heavy focus on horse race coverage. The horse race frame presents politics as a competition, a race, a game of winners and losers. Iyengar (1991) has similarly shown that episodic framing is very common in U.S. television network news coverage, and that it has effects on, among other things, the attribution of casual and treatment responsibility for issues such as poverty, racial inequality, and crime.

This does not mean that the U.S. media frame politics as a strategic game with the intention to increase political distrust, or that they use episodic framing to shield politicians from the attribution of responsibility. Rather, news framing is the result of various factors at work, among them commercial imperatives (the stories must be produced quickly, fast paced and easily accessible to the audiences), the political system and its configuration and separation of power (who is responsible for the lack of employment – the individuals, the companies, some branch of government?), political-cultural understandings and values (dominant interpretation and valuation of "democracy", "responsibility", "individualism", "welfare" and so on), and the frames put forward by powerful elites (the President or Prime Minister, the Parliament).

Since several of these factors, to some extent at least, are culture- and nation-specific, the use of different issue frames, contextual frames and procedural frames can be expected to vary in different countries. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the framing of politics in election news coverage in the two countries that we have shown can be considered most different cases: the United States

and Sweden. In each country, we have studied the election news coverage in one broadsheet and one popular newspaper: the *New York Times* and *USA Today* in the United States, and *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet* in Sweden.

## **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

As noted above, Iyengar (1991, p. 27, 47) has shown that episodic framing is very common for U.S. network news coverage, especially with regards to issues such as crime, terrorism and poverty, whereas thematic framing is more common in the coverage of unemployment and racial inequality. Episodic framing refers to stories that take “the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances”, whereas thematic framing “places public issues in some more general or abstract context”, “directed at general outcomes or conditions” (p. 14). Iyengar also postulates that there is a link between episodic framing and framing of politics as a horse race, even though he does not investigate it empirically. In Sweden, no research regarding contextual framing has been carried out. However, it is reasonable to expect that episodic framing will be more common in the U.S. election news coverage, not only because previous research has shown that it often dominates U.S. news coverage, but also because it fits with the commercialized character of the U.S. media system. Episodic news reporting is not as time consuming as thematic news reporting, it does not demand as much knowledge and interest from the audiences, and it is easily accessible and more attention-grabbing. Thus, our first hypothesis is:

**H1:** The use of episodic contextual framing in election news coverage will be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers.

One of the most often observed and criticized structural biases in the U.S. political and election news coverage is the tendency to frame politics as a strategic game in which political candidates compete for an advantage (Patterson, 1993). These are news stories that focus on “who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 33). The media tendency to frame politics in such a way is not unique to the

United States; the same tendency has been found in several other countries (Semetko, 2000; Kaase, 2000; Wahldal & Narud, 2004), including Sweden (Strömbäck, 2004). According to Patterson (2000a, p. 253-254), this particular frame is a result of commercialism. Even if the evidence for such a chain of causality outside of the U.S. context is disputed (Strömbäck, 2005), together with prior research regarding the U.S. media framing of politics as a strategic game it informs our second hypothesis:

**H2:** The metaframing of politics as a strategic game will be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers.

If contextual framing and metaframing are treated as mutually exclusive categories, another approach to framing is to investigate the frames used on a presence-absence basis. Thus, given the commercialized and market-driven nature of the American media system, especially in comparison with the Swedish media system, we predict that a number of frames will be more common in the U.S. election news coverage than in the Swedish one.

The frames we are referring to here are the sensationalism frame, the horse race frame, the political strategy frame, the news management frame, the politicians as individuals frame and the conflict frame. If the metaframing of politics as a strategic game is more common in the U.S. election news coverage than in the Swedish election news coverage, it seems logical that the horse race frame, the political strategy frame and the news management frame also should be present in more articles in the former than in the latter case. With regards to the sensationalism frame, the case is not as clear, especially since this study is focused on the newspaper rather than the television coverage. Nevertheless, since the overall media system in the U.S. is highly market-driven, we predict that this will affect even the U.S. newspapers under comparison.

The hypothesis with regard to the politicians as individuals frame and the conflict frame emanates from the different political systems in Sweden and the United States. Since Sweden is a parliamentary democracy, where minority or coalition governments is the rule, all the parties have an interest in electoral campaigns where the tone of the political debate does not become too negative: if the electoral campaigning from one or

several of the parties would be considered too negative and argumentative, that might hurt their influences in parliament after election day. Thus, the parties need to balance the need to mobilize their bases – which calls for attack and negative campaigning – and the need for cooperation after election day – which calls for restraint with regards to attacks on the opponents. In the United States the situation is quite different, due to the first past the post electoral system and the candidate-centeredness of American politics. The candidate-centeredness of American politics in contrast to Swedish politics is the reason why we expect the politicians as individuals frame to be more common in the U.S. election news coverage. Furthermore, in recent years American politics has become much more polarized, a development that has no equivalence in Sweden. Thus, we expect the conflict frame to be more present in the U.S. election news coverage than in the Swedish election news coverage, together with the other frames discussed above:

**H3:** The sensationalism frame, the horse race frame, the political strategy frame, the news management frame, the politicians as individuals frame and the conflict frame will be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers.

Finally, we are also interested in the extent to which Swedish and U.S. newspapers follow an interpretative rather than a descriptive journalistic style. Research in both the United States (Patterson, 2000b) and Sweden (Strömbäck, 2004) has shown that it is rather common that the news stories are interpretative rather than descriptive, and that this tendency has become stronger over the years. It is also an interesting issue when considering the different understandings of journalistic objectivity among Swedish and American journalists. However, is not entirely clear how these differences between the American and Swedish media systems play out with regards to the journalistic style. Thus, we pose the following research question:

**RQ1:** To what extent do the U.S. and the Swedish newspapers follow an interpretative rather than descriptive journalistic style?

## **Methodology and data**

The study used content analysis methodology to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions stated above. The focus was on the leading elite newspaper and what Sparks (2000, p. 14-17) characterized as “serious-popular” or “news stand tabloid” in each country. We will use “popular” to describe this kind of paper. The unit of analysis was the individual news article.

### *Data Collection*

Two national newspapers were selected for the analysis for each country. For the United States, the *New York Times* was chosen as the leading elite newspaper and *USA Today* was chosen as the leading popular newspaper. The respective publications for Sweden were *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet*. The time period for the study was three weeks before the national elections: November 2, 2004 for the U.S. and September 15, 2002 for Sweden. Manual selection of articles procedure was followed to ensure that all articles that meet the selection criteria were included in the analysis.

The first selection criterion was placement of the article: only front-page stories from the four newspapers were selected as these were the most prominent stories about the elections. Articles that started on the front page (including partial news stories or stories whose headlines were on the front page) and continued on later pages were also included. Second, the elections had to be the main focus of the article. The selection criteria stated that front page articles should refer explicitly to the election, the presidential candidates, the party leaders, or the parties competing in the election in the first three paragraphs of the story. Thus, articles that were marginally related to the election were excluded. Finally, articles shorter than 160 words on the inside pages were also excluded.

### *Coding Categories*

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

First was the *metaframe of politics* presented in the articles; coders could choose from two possible values: either game metaframe or issue metaframe; coders were also given the option to choose “cannot be determined” if there was no clear indication of the metaframe. Briefly, “game frame” metaframe refers to news stories that frame politics as a game, personality contest, strategy, or personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions. “Issue frame”, in contrast, includes stories that focus on issues and issue positions.

Second, we coded for the *contextual frame* of the news story, trying to distinguish between episodic framing and thematic framing. Coders assigned 3 to stories where the contextual framing could not be determined. Episodic framing refers to isolated reporting that is removed from the context of a particular event, when the story does not go much beyond that specific event and takes the form of a case-study. Thematic framing, on the other hand, positions the news story in the broader context that deals with its meaning or implications for society, a trend that goes beyond the single event.

Further, we included a number of issue-specific frames. These variables were coded on a presence/absence basis since it is possible to have more than one frame in the news story. These were the *sensationalism frame* (related to the “breathlessness” quality of a news story; if the event was presented as earthshaking, unsettling or remarkable, and sensationalistic); the *horse race frame* (news story focusing on winning or losing in the battle for votes); the *politicians as individuals frame* (if the news story focuses on politicians as individuals – i.e., persons with different attributes, characters and behaviors rather than as spokespersons for certain policies or ideologies); the *political strategy frame* (the news story focuses on the strategies of the political parties or candidates, who they target, why they act as they do with reference to electoral/opinion gains, not to issue positions); the *news management frame* (focus is on the news management of the political parties or candidates, how they act in order to achieve extensive and positive news coverage, trying to downplay stories that might damage them); and the *conflict frame* (whether there is a substantial level of conflict in the news story).

Finally, a variable about journalistic style was included. Coders distinguished between stories where the journalistic style was mainly *descriptive* – tells what happened in a rather straightforward, descriptive style, and stories where the journalistic style was

mainly *interpretive* – analyzes, evaluates, or explains a situation while also describing aspects of it. Particular attention was given to the dominant storyline to determine the journalistic style of the news story.

## Results

A total of 218 articles were retrieved from the four newspapers. The largest number of articles came from the *Dagens Nyheter* (88), compared with 39 articles from the *Aftonbladet*, 38 from the *New York Times*, and 53 from the *USA Today*. The majority of the articles across all newspapers were straight news stories.

The first hypothesis predicted that episodic contextual framing would be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers. Chi-square comparisons were used to test this relationship. The results show that there were no significant differences between the two country's news coverage (Chi-square= .96, d.f.=1, n.s.). There was more episodic than thematic coverage in the election news in both countries: 81 (63.8%) of the Swedish articles and 56 (61.5%) of the U.S. articles had episodic contextual framing. Thus, even though the difference is not statistically significant, episodic framing was actually somewhat more common in the Swedish election coverage than in the U.S. coverage.

The second hypothesis stated that the metaframing of politics as a strategic game would be more common in the U.S. newspapers than in the Swedish newspapers. This hypothesis was supported (Chi-square=8.59,  $p = .014$ , d.f.=1). The results indicate that the U.S. articles contained the strategic game metaframe more frequently than their Swedish counterparts (See Table 1). The game frame was the metaframe in 71.4% of the U.S. articles compared with only 52% of the Swedish articles. In contrast, the Swedish newspapers were more likely to use issue metaframing in their election news coverage.

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

First, there were not enough cases in the dataset to test differences across the sensationalism frame. In other words, we cannot statistically test for differences between

the two sets of newspapers. However, this frame was extremely rare for all newspapers examined in this study, suggesting that blatant sensationalism is not common in the election coverage in either country.

**Table 1. Framing of Politics in Swedish and U.S. Newspapers**

Frame	Swedish Articles	U.S. Articles	All Articles
Game metaframe**	66 (52.0%)	65 (71.4%)	131 (60.1%)
Sensationalism frame <sup>c</sup>	8 (6.3%)	1 (1.3%)	9 (4.1%)
Horse race frame***	63 (49.6%)	65 (71.4%)	128 (58.7%)
Political strategy frame***	40 (31.5%)	62 (68.1%)	102 (46.8%)
News management frame <sup>c</sup>	7 (5.5%)	3 (3.3%)	10 (4.6%)
Politicians as individuals frame	32 (25.2%)	19 (20.9%)	51 (23.4%)
Conflict frame	55 (43.3%)	51 (56.0%)	106 (48.6%)
<b>Number of articles</b>	<b>n=127</b>	<b>n=91</b>	<b>N=218</b>

- a. Table presents results from two Swedish newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet*) and two U.S. newspapers (*New York Times* and *USA Today*) election coverage.
- b. \*, \*\*, \*\*\* indicate statistically significant differences between Swedish and U.S. articles at the .05, .01, and .001 level respectively, using Chi-square tests.
- c. Chi-square tests could not be performed due to the low number of observations.
- d. Articles where the meta frame could not be determined were eliminated.

Next, we compared the frequency of use of the horse frame. As predicted, the horse race frame was more common for U.S. newspapers (Chi-square=10.42,  $p = .001$ , d.f.=1). The same was true for the political strategy frame, which was used more frequently in the U.S. newspapers as well (Chi-square=28.58,  $p = .000$ , d.f.=1). More than two-thirds of the U.S. articles included the political strategy frame. The dominance of these two frames in the U.S. press is consistent with the metaframing of politics as a game, which was found to be more common for U.S. media than for Swedish media. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the two countries in the use of the politicians as individuals frame.

Next, we examined differences in the use of the news management frame between the *New York Times* and the *USA Today*, on the one hand, and *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet*, on the other. The Chi-square test could not be performed because of the low number of occurrences of the news management frame. Only seven of the Swedish articles and three of the U.S. articles contained that frame, suggesting no differences.

Comparing the frequency of use of the conflict frame, we found no statistically significant differences between the Swedish and U.S. newspapers (Chi-square=3.44,  $p=.064$ ,  $d.f.=1$ ). However, the frequency was higher for the U.S. articles: 56% contained the conflict frames compared with 43.3% of the Swedish articles. It is possible that a larger number of articles may lead to statistical significance.

Finally, we posed one research question about the extent to which U.S. and Swedish newspapers follow an interpretative rather than descriptive journalistic style. The comparison shows that Swedish media used a more interpretive reporting style than U.S. media (Chi-square = 44.37,  $p=.000$ ,  $d.f.=1$ ). In contrast, descriptive style was more common for the U.S. newspapers: 95.6% of the U.S. articles were predominantly descriptive. Almost half of the Swedish articles were classified as interpretive (45.7%) and 54.3% were classified as descriptive in style. These differences were statistically significant.

We were also interested in whether there were any framing differences between the prestige and tabloid newspaper within each country. When we compared *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet*, some interesting differences emerged. First, *Aftonbladet* was more likely to use the game metaframe than *Dagens Nyheter*. The Swedish tabloid also used the horse race frame, politicians as individual frame, and the political strategy game more frequently than the broadsheet Swedish newspaper. It is interesting to note that there were no statistical differences in the framing of the election between the *New York Times* and the *USA Today*. The possible reasons for this finding are beyond the scope of this study.

## **Discussion**

The main goal of this study was to compare differences in the news coverage of national elections between Sweden and the United States, looking specifically at issue frames,

contextual frames and procedural frames. This is one of the first studies to systematically explore the framing of politics in a cross-cultural context. The results presented above show some interesting differences as well as some similarities.

When looking into the way politics was framed in each country, it is clear that the U.S. media was more likely to present the election campaign in terms of a strategic game. That is evident from the frequent use of the game metaframe in the two U.S. newspapers. Therefore, we can extrapolate that American citizens were often presented with a picture of politicians plotting strategies in the competition for the White House. Winning versus losing, scoring higher in polls, and targeting specific minority groups was common in this coverage. The metaframing of politics as a game was supported by the frequent use of the horse race and political strategy frames in the U.S. news coverage. Such framing has important implications for the audience as it is bound to influence voters' interpretations of issues and understanding of the political alternatives while trying to form an informed opinion. The heavily strategic, horse race framing, coupled with the largely descriptive style of reporting, may have impeded the ability of voters to analyze the current political alternatives and understand the broader implications of supporting either candidate in the national election. Another possible consequence of such game framing might be activating and/or strengthening political cynicism among U.S. voters (cf. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

In contrast, the Swedish voters were exposed to more analytical election coverage that focused less on political strategy (the process of winning and losing) and more on substance, addressing pertinent issues and policies. One reason may lie in the fact that the parties are very important in Swedish politics, and their electoral campaigning focus mostly on the issues rather than on the strategies. Thus, perhaps Swedish voters following the national press in the last election were better equipped to comprehend the main issues of the campaign and, therefore, make an informed decision on election day compared with American voters. Unfortunately, this could not be tested in our study. However, previous research has shown that the level of perceptual consensus with regards to both an abstract ideological dimension and the issue positions of parties and candidates is higher in Sweden than in the U.S. (Granberg & Holmberg, 1998, p. 212-216), indicating

that Swedish voters in general tend to be more informed with regards to the issue positions than U.S. voters.

It is important to place framing within a national/cultural context. Entman (2004) argued that frames that are more congruent with the dominant political culture are more successful and powerful. If presenting politics as a game is congruent with the schemas used by the members of society, it will be readily accepted because such framing fits with individual schemas. Culturally congruent frames have a tendency to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo, supporting the idea of politics as a game in this case, and of politicians as competing for victory in a strategic race. The fact that American politics is candidate-centered, and candidates come and go and fight first in the primaries and then in the general election, whereas the political parties in Sweden remain and stay highly visible between the elections, may contribute both to the framing of politics as a game and to the perceptions among some voters that winning and losing, rather than enacting policies and reshaping society, is at the heart of political processes.

No differences emerged in the contextual framing of the election campaign. It was surprising to see that the majority of articles in both countries were episodic in nature, and also that it was somewhat more common in the Swedish coverage than in the U.S. coverage, even if the difference was insignificant. This finding suggests that contemporary political reporting is constrained by commercial pressures and that news articles do not provide as much context to political issues and events in general.

However, the results show that the Swedish newspapers followed an interpretative journalistic style more often than the U.S. newspapers. This might be a reflection of different understanding of journalistic objectivity among Swedish and American journalists and the discussion about partisan bias. As we have seen, the understanding of journalistic objectivity most favored among U.S. journalists is expressing fairly the position of each side of a political dispute (Patterson, 1998). It is also well-known that the issue of partisan bias in the news is lively in the U.S. The combination of these two factors might contribute to a coverage that, on the one hand, avoids issue interpretation, in an effort by journalists not to be accused of bias, and, on the other hand, describes what each side in a dispute is claiming. In contrast, the understanding of journalistic objectivity favored among Swedish journalists is going

beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute (Patterson, 1998). Such an understanding might encourage an interpretive rather than a descriptive journalistic style, since it leaves it to the journalists to decide what the hard facts of the dispute really are. Whether the end result is more informative journalism is unclear, however: there are arguments both in favor of and against the interpretative, as contrasted with the descriptive, journalistic style (Strömbäck, 2004; Patterson, 2000a).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to compare the framing of politics in election news coverage in two different countries: the United States and Sweden. The findings show that there were some significant differences. Most importantly, we found that “game was the name of the frame” in the U.S. election news coverage, suggesting that American citizens were exposed to highly fractured and rather episodic coverage. The comparatively high frequency of the metaframe of politics as a game, the horse race frame and the political strategy frame in the U.S. election news coverage is evidence of that. On the other hand, the Swedish coverage was more substantive and issue-oriented, providing more interpretive and perhaps also analytical reporting on election issues. However, there were no differences with regards to the sensationalism frame and the news management frame.

The results also indicate that the framing of politics seems to be informed by the political system, the media system as well as the journalistic norms and values and the strength and character of the party system. This emphasizes the importance of comparative political communication research, and it warns us against making broad generalizations beyond the system where the empirical research has actually taken place.

However, the study also has its limitations. Most importantly, the number of articles and newspapers examined in this study is limited. Future research should include a larger number of newspapers per country and incorporate analysis of broadcast/TV news.

Further research should also try to develop a framework for comparing election news coverage in different countries. The purpose of such a framework would be to develop theoretically as well as empirically grounded hypotheses that (a) take into

consideration the political system, the party system, the media system and journalistic norms and values as systematically as possible, and b) allow cross-cultural comparisons including a large set of countries from around the world.

The road to such a framework is long, however. In the meantime, what are needed are more studies that systematically compare the election coverage in two, three or more countries, serving as extensions of the empirical database and laying the groundwork for further theorizing and the development of a framework for comparing election coverage.

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