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What is This?
Election news in Sweden and the United States: A comparative study of sources and media frames

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Abstract
This study compares election news coverage in two different countries – Sweden and the United States, focusing on the use of the strategic game frame and the conflict frame and the association between these two frames and different types of news sources. The content analysis includes early evening newscasts from CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News and ABC World News in the USA and Rapport, Aktuellt and TV4 Nyheterna in Sweden. The findings show that the strategic game frame is used more frequently in the US coverage and is correlated with the use of media analysts and campaign operatives in both countries. Ordinary citizens as sources contribute to issue framing while domestic political actors tend to be associated with conflict framing. Differences in media framing between public and private media are also identified and discussed in the context of national political and media systems.

Keywords
cross-cultural research, election news, framing of politics, media framing, news sources

Introduction
A well-functioning democracy is dependent upon having a well-informed public in the realm of politics and political issues. In today’s world the media, and more specifically television, constitute the main source of information about politics and public affairs.

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Although a number of studies have examined how the media cover national election campaigns, few have done so in a comparative context (for exceptions see Åsard and Bennett, 1997; De Vreese et al., 2001; Esser and D’Angelo, 2006; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006), and even fewer have investigated how television news frame politics during national election campaigns. In addition, there are virtually no studies that investigate the role of news sources in the frame-building process preceding national elections, although it is widely acknowledged that news sources are crucial in shaping the news (Bennett, 1990; Reich, 2009).

Two of the most widely discussed frames in the literature are the strategic game frame (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993) and the conflict frame (De Vreese et al., 2001; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). There is, however, only limited research on the antecedents of these media frames and, in particular, the extent to which there is a correlation between the use of news sources and these two frames.

Against this background, the purpose of the present study is two-fold: to extend cross-cultural framing research by comparing election news coverage on television in two different media systems represented here by Sweden and the United States (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and to examine the link between the use of news sources and the strategic game and conflict frames. The sources included in this study are domestic politicians, campaign operatives, ordinary citizens and media analysts. The study is based on a systematic content analysis of 259 Swedish and 222 US television news stories aired on the three leading channels in each country: CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News and ABC World News, and Rapport, Aktuellt and TV4 Nyheterna.

Media framing of politics from a comparative perspective

Media framing of politics has received considerable scholarly attention in both the United States and abroad (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2002; Esser and Hemmer, 2008; Scammell and Semetko, 2008; Semetko et al., 1991). Framing as a theoretical concept can be understood as the way that media emphasize certain aspects of issues or events at the expense of others when defining social processes, issues or events (Kerbel et al., 2000; Tankard, 2001). Gitlin summarizes this well by saying: ‘Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters’ (1980: 6). While media framing may not necessarily be intentional, it is virtually inescapable and scholars generally agree that it is consequential – in other words, how media frame issues or events significantly impacts audience schemas and interpretations (D’Angelo, 2002; De Vreese, 2002).

The power of media framing makes it important to investigate how news coverage portrays political issues and processes. Perhaps the most common criticism of US media in terms of how they frame politics is their focus on political strategies, tactics and maneuvers – the political game – as opposed to the substance of underlying issues or policies (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Such tendencies to focus more on the strategies of political actors, winning versus losing candidates, and poll standing have been documented consistently over the past election cycles (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006; Kerbel et al., 2000; Lawrence, 2000a; Patterson, 1993), although they are certainly not unique to the American media (Esser and Hemmer, 2008; Scammell and Semetko, 2008).
What has raised concern in this context is that the framing of politics as a strategic game may lower audiences’ knowledge about the substance of political issues and increase political distrust (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2002; De Vreese and Semetko, 2002). In the end, the news media may even be contributing to a spiral of cynicism that, in turn, could have a negative impact on democracy (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; but see De Vreese and Semetko, 2002; Norris, 2000).

In addition to the strategic game frame, another widely discussed generic frame is the conflict frame (De Vreese et al., 2001; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Based on previous research, there is little doubt that the media coverage of politics has a strong tendency to focus on conflict (De Vreese et al., 2001; Patterson, 1993; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Consequently, most taxonomies of prominent news values include conflict or its equivalent (O’Neill and Harcup, 2009). Although we are not aware of any research comparing the use of conflict framing in election as opposed to non-election news, it can be assumed that the conflict frame is particularly common in campaign news coverage, as conflicts are an inescapable part of politics. There may be variation across countries, however; research comparing the framing of politics in newspapers has, for example, suggested that the conflict frame is more common in US and British than in Swedish election news (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007; see also De Vreese et al., 2001). This may reflect both structural and contextual differences across countries and election campaigns, although the lack of longitudinal and comparative research makes it difficult to sort out the antecedents.

Despite the wide scholarly attention to media framing in general, and the framing of politics in particular, studies that attempt to examine media framing from a comparative cross-cultural perspective remain relatively rare. This holds particularly true for television news framing. As recently noted by De Vreese (2010: 129): ‘Looking at the media during campaigns, research has provided plenty of national accounts, but little in terms of longitudinal and cross-nationally comparative analyses.’

Some of the challenges in doing comparative research stem from the fact that there are several different levels of analysis that impact media framing. At the national level at least two main structural factors need to be taken into consideration: the characteristics of the political and the media systems in each country (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Among the political system factors, the number and strength of political parties as well as the type of electoral system and election campaigning are often included. Among the media system factors it is typical to examine the type of media market (commercial versus public service), degree of journalistic professionalization, dominant journalistic values, degree of political parallelism and government regulation of the media. Testing the impact of such macro-level factors, Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006) have shown that both the media and the political system matter in terms of how political news is framed in the print news in Sweden and the USA. Their impact on television news in the two countries, however, has not been thoroughly investigated. Theoretically though, one would expect that the differences in election news framing between nations that hold different system-level characteristics would remain, regardless of media platform.

In this context, Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) analysis of different models of media and politics among western democracies may be especially relevant. Hallin and Mancini position Sweden as one of the best examples of a democratic corporatist model of media and
politics whereas the United States is seen as the prototypical example of the liberal model of media and politics. Briefly and in terms of media systems characteristics, these countries differ with respect to the degree of political parallelism, the strength and importance of newspapers, the degree and type of journalistic professionalization, and the role of the state in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 67). Some of these differences were more pronounced in an earlier period, but it is fair to say that the state is more likely to intervene in the Swedish than in the US media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Also, journalists in the two countries interpret the notion of journalistic objectivity differently: while Swedish journalists tend to define it as ‘going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute’, US journalists tend to define it as ‘expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute’ (Patterson, 1998).

In addition to differences across media systems, it is also important to examine the differences across political systems. While the USA is a federal state with a presidential system, only two major parties, a majoritarian electoral system and candidate-centered politics, Sweden is a unitary state with a parliamentary system, eight parties in Parliament, a proportional electoral system and party-based politics (Asard and Bennett, 1997; Smith, 2008). These differences create different dynamics of both politics and the media’s coverage of politics; for example, the fact that US politics is based on a majoritarian electoral system and that American politics has become increasingly polarized over the last decades (Abramowitz, 2010) may foster a higher use of the conflict frame by the American media compared to the Swedish media. Systems with majoritarian electoral systems and only two parties may also encourage the framing of politics as a strategic game, as such systems produce clearer differences between winners and losers than systems with proportional representation.

In either case, how the media cover politics and current affairs should be understood as shaped not only by structural conditions, but also by the journalistic values, attitudes and routines that are dominant in each country. Conceptually, media coverage represents the manifestation of different journalistic norms, values and practices embedded within a particular national context. As Hanitzsch (2007: 369) has pointed out:

> Journalism culture becomes manifest in the way journalists think and act; it can be defined as a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously or unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others.

Aside from journalism culture, differences between different media organizations within the same country may also impact their news coverage. One of the most important organizational factors is whether the media is funded by the state or needs to rely on commercial profits. Most European counties have a strong tradition of public service broadcasting (PBS) whereas the US media system is mostly commercial. Even though the structure of PBS follows the public service model it is not considered a leading television station. In fact, its flagship news show has less audience share than the Daily Show or the Colbert Report (Pew Research Center, 2007), in contrast to Sweden where public service news has a higher audience share than commercial TV news (Holmberg and Weibull, 2010).

In terms of media market orientation, we can generally distinguish between two ideal types: one is strong market orientation where the audience is perceived as consumers and
profits are the main incentive, while the other is weak market orientation where the audience is seen primarily as citizens and public interest is a priority (Croteau and Hoyes, 2001). Although a competitive television media market exists in both Sweden and the United States it is fair to say that the level of commercialization is considerably stronger in the latter, not least because two of the three most important television news programs in Sweden are broadcast on public service channels (Petersson et al., 2005). This is another reason why the US media would be the one more likely to employ the strategic game and conflict frames.

To sum up, in a political system with a political culture that displays strong emphasis on winning or losing and high levels of political conflict and a media culture characterized by strong commercial pressures such as the United States, we expect to see predominantly strategic framing of politics. Conversely, issue framing of politics is expected to be more common in Swedish than in US election news coverage.

Furthermore, considering the highly polarized nature of US compared to Swedish politics, the commercial incentives for the US media to focus on the most attention-grabbing stories, and that US journalists in contrast to Swedish journalists emphasize that journalistic objectivity is about expressing fairly each side in a political dispute, we also expect the conflict frame to be more common in US than in Swedish election news. Against this background we hypothesize that:

H1: The strategic game frame will be used more frequently in US than in Swedish election news coverage.

H2: The conflict frame will be used more frequently in US than in Swedish election news coverage.

Providing that degree of media commercialism is an important antecedent of the media framing of politics, there might also be differences between public service and commercial TV news within Sweden. Such potential differences may impact election news framing in the same national context, as public service news in general tends to focus more on issues and policies while commercial news may emphasize the political game and be more conflict driven (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 2009). The literature on the impact of commercialism on media content leads us to expect that commercial TV news within Sweden will frame politics as a strategic game and use the conflict frame to a greater extent than public service news, as follows:

H3a: The strategic game frame will be used more frequently on Swedish commercial television news than on public service television news.

H3b: The conflict frame will be used more frequently on Swedish commercial television news than on public service television news.

**News sources in the frame-building process**

Sources and the information they provide in the news story — either directly in quotes or sound bites or indirectly to the reporter covering — undoubtedly influence news framing. In fact, they are often listed among the most common framing devices put forth in prior research (see Tankard, 2001, for a complete list). Whether certain types of sources are likely
to promote particular news frames, however, remains unclear, although there is no doubt that sources are an indispensable part of the news and as such are inherently influential (Cook, 2005; Gans, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Sigal, 1973).

Research on news sources has shown that they perform several important functions in the newsmaking processes. These functions include but are not limited to: (1) offering a way to verify the news account; (2) adding credibility to the news story; (3) reducing uncertainty under deadline pressure; (4) providing diverse viewpoints; and (5) protecting against accusations of bias (Cook, 2005; Lawrence, 2000b; Manning, 2001; Reich, 2009; Tuchman, 1978). Journalists tend to establish relationships with the so-called ‘elite’ sources since they have higher credibility and are considered to be authoritative (Bennett, 1990). Official sources such as political leaders or party operatives are often used as sources by the media (Lawrence, 2000b), especially when political issues are concerned. Some have argued that this frequent reliance on authoritative sources gives them leverage to exert considerable influence over media discourse, not only by giving them direct access to the public but also by allowing them to influence the meaning and interpretations of the issue at hand. Thus, sources play a decisive role in media frame-building processes (Bennett, 1990; Lawrence, 2000b; Shehata, 2010; Tuchman, 1978).

However, scholars are still debating the influence of news sources over media frames. Some have pointed out that the power of political figures as news sources may be limited, as the choice of a particular source, quote and its placement in the news story are ultimately in the hands of the media producer – i.e. the journalist. Others, however, see authoritative sources such as politicians as the main constructors of news frames (Bennett, 1990; Gans, 1980; Lawrence, 2000b; Reich, 2009). The latter arguments are often put forth by framing scholars who approach media framing from a constructivist perspective (D’Angelo, 2002) and the selection of news sources as a natural – and by implication, not necessarily intentional – part of the news gathering process. Those who subscribe to the critical-cultural perspective on framing would, however, argue that journalists consciously choose certain types of sources to support a particular predetermined news frame (D’Angelo, 2002). Although academic debate about the direction of causality between media frames and news sources continues, there is no question that the use of news sources impacts the frame-building process.

Of course, 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. It has been well documented that official sources such as political candidates and government officials are frequently quoted by the news media. But what types of frames would domestic political actors most likely be associated with? If their goals are indeed to discuss different political issues, solutions and policy proposals – from Iraq to the economy and global warming – then one would expect to see issue framing being emphasized. In other words, we would expect politicians to contribute to higher levels of issue framing. We would also expect politicians to contribute to higher levels of conflict framing, both because politics – not least during election campaigns – is conflict ridden in nature and because seasoned politicians know that conflicts have great news value. Therefore, we advance our next set of hypotheses:

H4: Use of domestic politicians as sources will be positively associated with issue framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.
H5: Use of domestic politicians as sources will be positively associated with conflict framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.

Although political campaigning is more professionalized and the use of campaign consultants more widespread in the United States than in most other countries (Plasser and Plasser, 2002), including Sweden (Strömbäck, 2009), campaign professionals within or outside of the parties are important in both countries. They are also frequently asked to comment on current standing in the polls and future tactics for winning over more voters. By design, their input as sources is most likely to focus on the current strategies of each candidate or party, or discussion of what their next move would be. Hence, one might expect that campaign operatives would be contributing to a predominantly strategic framing of the election campaign and be negatively associated with issue framing. As part of the conflict-ridden political campaign cycle, we also expect the use of campaign operatives to be positively associated with conflict framing.

H6: Use of campaign operatives as sources will be negatively associated with issue framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.

H7: Use of campaign operatives as sources will be positively associated with conflict framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.

In addition to politicians and campaign operatives, media observers constitute another important player in election news coverage. Recent studies of US media coverage have shown an increasing tendency to insert other media analysts’ or journalists’ own viewpoints in the news (Dimitrova et al., 2005; Esser and D’Angelo, 2006). This type of coverage is often called ‘self-referential’ or ‘metacoverage’ and refers to the increasing influence of media practitioners on the framing and interpretation of news (Esser and D’Angelo, 2003). One likely result of this increasing reliance on media analysts may be the decreasing influence of other news sources. Although there is little research to date addressing how news framing changes with the use of different types of sources, pundits and academics have already noted that the reliance on media analysts seems to contribute to higher levels of horse-race coverage in the case of political news (Nisbet, 2007; see also Zaller, 2001). When media analysts are speaking on air about recent election developments, they often focus on the current tactics and future strategies of political opponents, explaining who has an advantage and who is trailing behind, rather than on the issues. Considering the news value of conflict, we also expect these sources to contribute positively to conflict framing. Thus, our next hypotheses are:

H8: Use of media analysts as sources will be negatively associated with issue framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.

H9: Use of media analysts as sources will be positively associated with conflict framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.

Although less visible and less newsworthy in the traditional sense, ordinary citizens constitute an important part of the democratic process. Just as no democracy can survive
without citizen input, media reports necessitate the views and opinions of the public at large. Television news in particular relies on ‘man-on-the-street’ interviews and sound bites from regular voters who are asked to comment on certain policy proposals or controversial issues in each election campaign. From the war in Iraq to oil drilling in Alaska, these ordinary citizens provide their own political views and opinions and sometimes question the policies put forth by the candidates. In this scenario, citizens would be most likely to contribute to a predominantly issue framing rather than strategic framing of the campaign, as hypothesized below. Whether they contribute to conflict framing is, however, less clear; hence, we abstain from advancing a hypothesis targeting the association between ordinary citizens as sources and conflict framing.

H10: Use of ordinary citizens as sources will be positively associated with issue framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage.

Case selection and methodology

Following Hallin and Mancini (2004), this study positions Sweden as an example of the democratic corporatist model of media and politics and the United States as an example of the liberal model. Our assumption is that the underlying differences between the two models summarized here as well as the dominant journalistic values and routines will influence the framing of political issues and the role of news sources in the frame-building process. This comparative research design, based on universal theoretical concepts and functional equivalence between the cases, allows us to link system-level factors to type of media coverage (Livingstone, 2003).

The method used in the study is a quantitative content analysis of television news. Our focus was election coverage of the 2006 Swedish parliamentary election and the 2008 US presidential election. In both cases, we examined television news coverage four weeks prior to each election. The top three network news shows in the United States selected for analysis included ABC World News, CBS Evening News and NBC Nightly News. Their Swedish counterparts were also selected: the public service news programs Aktuellt and Rapport and the commercial news program TV4 Nyheterna. Because of the difference in weekend format and lower viewership on weekends only weekday coverage was examined.

The selection criterion used in our content analysis was to record all news stories that, either in words or images, explicitly referred to domestic political actors, political institutions or the election at large. The unit of analysis was the individual news story, which was defined here as a single news story focusing on a particular theme or event. When the focus of the news story changed from one theme or event to another, a new coding unit was introduced.

Measures

When developing the frames used in this study, we built on previous research for conceptual definitions of the framing variables. Broadly following Patterson (1993) and Cappella and Jamieson (1997), the framing of politics as a strategic game was measured by four questions: whether the story:
Deals extensively with politicians or parties winning or losing elections, legislative debates, governing negotiations, or winning or losing in politics generally;

2. Deals extensively with politicians’ or parties’ strategies for winning elections, negotiations or issue debates, i.e. campaign tactics, legislative maneuvers, the way they campaign;

3. Deals with the implications or consequences of elections, governing negotiations, legislative debates or other news events for politicians or parties, i.e. how politicians or parties might be affected by elections, governing negotiations, legislative debates, or other events; and

4. Deals extensively with polls and politicians’ or parties’ standing in the polls ($\alpha = 0.564$).

The *issue framing of politics* was measured by the following four variables: whether the story:

1. Deals extensively with substantive public policy issues, problems or solutions;

2. Provides descriptions of politicians’ stance or statements about substantive policy issues;

3. Deals extensively with general implications or impacts of legislation or proposed legislation for the public; and

4. Deals extensively with real-world problems, situations or processes that explicitly or implicitly have policy implications ($\alpha = 0.819$).

Each of the issue framing questions was given +1 point while each of the strategic game framing questions was given −1 point to form a scale ranging from −4 to +4. A higher number is reflective of higher issue framing. Following this additive scale, a story with balanced framing received a score of 0.

Instead of using a binary variable to measure the conflict frame, we broadly followed Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and relied on the following three questions: ‘Does the story reflect disagreement between parties, individuals, groups, organizations or countries?’; ‘Does one party, individual, group, organization, or country express disapproval, disappointment, objection or otherwise challenge another?’; and ‘Does the story refer to two or more sides of the problem or issue?’ These were combined into an additive score ($\alpha = 0.721$) ranging from 0 to 3, with higher values indicating a higher level of conflict.

A news source was defined as an individual with a directly attributed statement, fact or quote within the news story. Several different types of sources were included in the analysis, as follows: domestic politicians (elected officials or candidates running for office); campaign or party operatives (such as consultants, pollsters, campaign/party managers, campaign/party officials); ordinary citizens (those who get to speak not due to their position within a certain hierarchy but rather as everyday people); and journalists/media analysts (journalists, correspondents, media analysts, people identified as working for the media – beyond the anchor or the reporter covering the story). Coders recorded the number of times a particular type of source was used within each news story.

Two trained coders, one of whom was Swedish and one American, completed the coding. Ten percent of the US news stories were randomly selected from each of the three US television news programs in order to assess intercoder reliability. The second coder in the
intercoder test was the Swedish coder; hence, this procedure functioned as a check of the Swedish coding as well. After initial training sessions and preliminary coding of the same stories by both coders, some modifications of variables were implemented. A formal test to assess the level of agreement between the coders was then conducted using Cohen’s kappa, one of the most common techniques for measuring intercoder reliability (Lacy et al., 2005).² The average agreement for the frame variables was 0.71 and 0.88 for the sources. Specifically, the agreement for each frame variable used here was 0.70 for the game frame, 0.68 for the issue frame, and 0.75 for the conflict frame. For news sources, the intercoder reliability levels were as follows: 0.86 for domestic politicians, 1 for campaign or party operatives, 0.86 for journalists/media analysts and 0.85 for ordinary citizens.

Results

In all, the content analysis includes 481 news stories from the following television programs: 72 (15%) from ABC World News, 78 (16.2%) from CBS Evening News, 72 (15%) from NBC Nightly News, 103 (21.4%) from Rapport, 83 (17.3%) from Aktuellt and 73 (15.2%) from TV4 Nyheterna.

The first hypothesis predicts that the framing of politics as a strategic game will be used more frequently in the USA than in the Swedish election coverage. To test this hypothesis, we use an independent samples t-test to compare the means between the two countries on the basis of the additive issue framing score. The score ranges from $-4$ to $+4$, with higher numbers indicating higher levels of issue framing and lower numbers indicating higher levels of strategic game framing. The results confirm that the framing of politics as a strategic game is significantly more common in US television news than Swedish television news ($t = 4.23, d.f. = 478, p = 0.000$). Specifically, the mean for issue framing of politics is significantly higher for Swedish news stories ($m = -0.04; SD = 2.38$) than that of US news stories ($m = -0.89; SD = 1.96$). This finding supports the notion that US television news is more likely to focus on the game of politics and less likely to focus on substantive discussion of current, past or future political issues than their Swedish counterparts, which is consistent with research during previous election cycles in the two countries (see Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006).

The second hypothesis postulates that the conflict frame will be used more frequently in US than in Swedish election news coverage. To investigate this, we compare the level of conflict between the two countries, using the additive score of the three variables that comprise the conflict frame. The score ranges from 0 (no conflict framing present) to 3 (high level of conflict framing). The results of an independent-samples t-test ($t = 1.98$, d.f. = 478, $p = 0.05$) show that the level of conflict, contrary to our expectations, is slightly higher in Swedish television news ($m = 1.83; SD = 1.11$) than in US television news ($m = 1.62; SD = 1.25$). Hence, $H2$ is not supported.

Hypothesis 3 expects differences across Swedish public service and commercial TV with respect to the framing of politics as a strategic game and the use of the conflict frame. Here the results show that Swedish commercial TV is significantly more likely ($t = 2.97$, d.f. = 145.486, $p = 0.004$) to frame politics as a strategic game ($m = -0.70, SD = 2.17$) than public service TV news ($m = 0.22, SD = 2.41$), thus lending support to $H3a$. There is, however, no difference with respect to conflict framing ($t = 0.198$, d.f. = 257, $p = 0.843$);
the level of conflict was virtually the same in Swedish public service (m = 1.84, SD = 1.13) and commercial (m = 1.81, SD = 1.08) TV news. Therefore, H3b is not supported.

While the results show that the framing of politics as a strategic game is significantly more common in US than in Swedish television news, they also show that these differences can be mainly attributed to the fact that all US television news is commercial, while two of the three major television news programs in Sweden are broadcast by public service. Removing Swedish public service news from the analysis reveals no significant difference (t = 0.695, d.f. = 293, p = 0.488) between US and Swedish television news with respect to the framing of politics as a strategic game.

Turning to the importance of sources in shaping the framing of politics, we examine the relationship between the type of sources used in the coverage and the two frames discussed earlier. The source categories include domestic politicians, campaign/party operatives, journalists/media analysts and ordinary citizens. As noted earlier, each frame is measured by an additive score ranging from –4 to +4 for issue framing, and from 0 to +3 for conflict framing, with a higher score indicating higher levels of issue and conflict framing. This score is correlated with the number of sources from each source category. The results are presented in Table 1.

Hypothesis 4 predicts that use of domestic politicians as sources will be positively associated with issue framing in both US and Swedish election news coverage. However, the correlation results are not significant, indicating that there is no statistically significant relationship between domestic politicians and issue framing in election news coverage in either country (Table 1). There are, however, significant negative correlations between issue framing of politics and the use of campaign or party operatives and of media analysts/journalists (aside from those reporting the story) as sources. These results lend support to both Hypothesis 6 and Hypothesis 8. Interestingly, there is a significant and positive correlation with the use of ordinary citizens as sources, indicating that the more ordinary citizens are used in the coverage, the higher the issue framing, as predicted by H10. The pattern observed is remarkably similar for both countries: the number of media analysts and party operatives is negatively related to issue framing while the number of ordinary citizens shows a positive correlation.

Turning to the association between source use and conflict framing, Hypothesis 5 predicts that there will be a positive association between conflict framing and the use of domestic politicians as sources, while Hypothesis 7 and Hypothesis 9 predict the same

Table 1. Correlations between news sources and media frames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Issue frame</th>
<th>Conflict frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic politicians</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign/party operatives</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary citizens</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media analysts/journalists</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Table shows Pearson correlations (two-tailed). ***, **, and * indicate statistically significant at .001, .01 and .05 levels.
pattern for the use of campaign/party operatives and media analysts/journalists, respectively. In the Swedish case, the results show a positive association between conflict framing and the use of campaign operatives as sources, lending support to Hypotheses 5 and 7 but not to Hypothesis 9. In the US case, the results show a positive association between conflict framing and the use of domestic politicians – similar to the Swedish case – but also a negative relationship between conflict framing and the use of media analysts/journalists as sources, contrary to Hypothesis 9.

To summarize the associations between media framing and source use, it seems that relying on ordinary citizens as sources increases issue framing while using campaign or party operatives and journalists/media analysts contributes to higher levels of strategic framing in both countries. With respect to conflict framing, the results show that in Swedish political news, there is a statistically significant correlation between the use of domestic politicians and campaign or party operatives as sources and conflict framing. In the US case, the use of domestic politicians is positively associated with conflict framing, while the opposite holds true for the use of media analysts/journalists as sources. Hence, while the pattern is rather consistent across countries with respect to the influence of sources on issue framing, it is inconsistent with respect to conflict framing.

Discussion

Adding to previous election framing research, the present study demonstrates that there are some notable differences in the way US and Swedish television covers political news. Our results show that the television coverage of politics during election campaigns in Sweden is significantly more likely to focus on substantive issues than that in the United States, while, conversely, the US news coverage is significantly more likely to frame politics as a strategic game. These differences are consistent with prior research in both countries (see Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Petersson et al., 2005, Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006, 2011). This study, however, extends previous research to the 2006 Swedish and 2008 US election cycles and also applies framing analysis to television as opposed to print media.

As framing theory would predict, the differences in election news framing identified herein are likely to impact citizen understanding of politics in general and the issues specific to this election campaign. The prevalence of issue framing would enable Swedish voters, on the one hand, to acquire deeper levels of knowledge about substantive issues and policy options relevant in the campaign. US citizens, on the other hand, may be at a disadvantage and possess less knowledge and understanding of campaign issues or policies due to the predominantly horse-race media coverage they get. To extend this argument further, being exposed to more strategic game coverage of political news may ultimately make US citizens less equipped than their Swedish counterparts to cast informed votes.

The cross-cultural differences in issue framing, however, seem to be driven largely by the degree of commercialism in the television market in each country, as suggested by the fact that when public service news is excluded from the analysis, the differences disappear. Theoretically, this finding underscores the importance of commercialism as a determinant of news framing and suggests the need to consider television ownership (public vs private) in any future analysis of antecedents of election news frames. It leads us to conclude that public service channels tend to offer more substantive issue framing of politics than
commercial channels, the reasons for which may be illustrated by the following quote: ‘When market orientation is high, journalism gives emphasis to what the audiences want to know at the expense of what they should know’ (Hanitzsch, 2007: 375).

Contrary to our expectations, the US election news coverage was not more oriented towards conflict than the Swedish coverage. This is surprising considering the high level of polarization in contemporary American politics (Abramowitz, 2010), but may have a logical explanation that has less to do with politics or the actual content of election news in the two countries, and more to do with the structure of news programs in the USA and Sweden. In the USA, it is quite common for television news to divide their news coverage into different stories with clearly different themes; for example, one story on the Democrats and one story on the Republicans. As a result, the two sides rarely reproach each other in the same news story; rather, their side of the story is told in different news stories. This structural difference is likely to make conflict more implicit than explicit, and fall outside of our variables based on single news stories as unit of analysis. In the Swedish case it is rather the rule that all different political viewpoints are included in the same news story, thus raising the level of conflict within news stories.

Turning to the relationship between use of news sources and media frames, perhaps the most interesting finding is the negative correlation between the use of campaign/party operatives and journalists/media analysts as sources, and the issue framing of politics. This suggests that the more the news media include campaign operatives or media analysts as sources, the higher the likelihood that politics is framed as a strategic game, regardless of country. These results call into question the increasing trend of relying on media analysts and campaign operatives for interpretation of political news. Another interesting finding, also consistent across countries, is the positive correlation between issue framing and use of ordinary people as sources. From a normative perspective, including the voices of ordinary citizens in the news should be encouraged while the use of media analysts and campaign operatives as sources should be seen as less desirable. The positive correlation between conflict framing and the use of domestic political actors as sources is hardly surprising and can be explained by the fact that conflicts are pervasive in politics and the news media naturally consider conflicts between political actors highly newsworthy. The negative correlation between the issue framing of politics and the use of media analysts and campaign operatives as sources, on the other hand, suggests that the framing of politics as a strategic game is highly driven by media analysts and campaign operatives rather than by other types of sources.

Since our results only show correlation and not causation, it is an open question whether certain sources contribute to a particular media framing or whether journalists select sources to fit a pre-selected framing. In the end, news is always a co-production between journalists – nested in media companies that together form an overall media system – and their sources – nested in political organizations and institutions that together form the overall political system, where both sets of actors are sensitive to public opinion and have to adapt to real-world events and processes. How the media cover election campaigns is thus a reflection of both system-level factors related to the media system and the political system, and contextual factors, related to the circumstances of particular election campaigns.

Nevertheless, to disentangle the influence of system-level factors – as opposed to semi-structural and contextual factors – on the media’s coverage of election campaigns
requires research that is comparative across both countries and time. Perhaps the most important challenge for future research on the antecedents of election news framing is thus to design a study that investigates patterns across time and across countries. Such research could also further explore the importance of news sources in shaping media’s use of generic frames and the extent to which news sources shape media framing, rather than the extent to which journalists choose news sources that fit a pre-selected narrative. Hence, much work lies ahead, but it is our hope that this study will serve as a springboard for more cross-cultural research comparing media framing of election news and the role of sources in the frame-building process.

Notes

1 According to Wimmer and Dominick (1997: 128), 10 percent of all coded units constitutes an acceptable percentage for calculating intercoder reliability.

2 Cohen’s kappa is generally regarded as a more stringent measure of intercoder reliability than Holsti’s formula since it takes into account chance agreement (see Lacy et al., 2005; see also Lombard et al., 2002, for more details).

References


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