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Jesper Strömbäck and Óscar G. Luengo

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POLARIZED PLURALIST AND DEMOCRATIC CORPORATIST MODELS

A Comparison of Election News Coverage in Spain and Sweden

Jesper Strömbäck and Óscar G. Luengo

Abstract / Even though the news coverage of election campaigns is important and has been at the centre of political communication research for a long time, there is still a lack of comparative studies in this area. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the election news coverage in Spain and Sweden. Theoretically, the study draws primarily on the concept and theory of framing and structural bias. The empirical method used is quantitative content analysis of the election news coverage in three newspapers in each country. The time period includes the three weeks prior to the Swedish national election in 2002 and the Spanish national election in 2004.

Keywords / election news coverage / framing / media systems / political systems / Spain / structural bias / Sweden

Introduction

Election campaigns in present-day advanced democracies are highly mediated events. The electorate has come to depend upon the mass media for information regarding the election, the candidates or the parties, and the policy proposals as well as societal developments that might be politically relevant. Political actors have similarly come to depend upon the mass media for their efforts to reach out to and communicate with the electorate.

More specifically, both the electorate and political actors such as parties or candidates have come to be highly dependent upon the *election news coverage* for the flow of information that is, or might be, politically and electorally relevant. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that there is an abundance of studies that focus on the news media coverage of elections, its antecedents or its effects.

However, there is still an apparent lack of comparative research in this area. As noted by de Vreese (2003b: 184): 'Evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent'. Even though there are some important exceptions (e.g. Luengo, 2005; Semetko et al., 1991; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008), they are few indeed. This is very unfortunate, for several reasons. One reason is that 'election campaigns are highly amenable to

cross-national political communication comparisons' (Blumler and McQuail, 2001: 238). A second reason is that it is only by comparing cross-nationally that we can hope to avoid 'naive universalism' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 75). A third reason is that it is only by cross-national comparisons that we can begin to understand how and to what extent the election news coverage is affected by semi-structural conditions rooted in different media systems and political systems.

Against this background, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate and compare the election news coverage in two very different countries – Spain and Sweden – focusing primarily on the framing of politics.

Spain and Sweden: Two Highly Different Cases

In their seminal book, *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) distinguish between three different models of media systems within the framework of established western democracies. These models are of course ideal types, but they nevertheless capture significant characteristics of media systems and political systems in different countries, and they enable classifications of individual systems. With reference to political system characteristics, the three models differ with regard to patterns of conflict or consensus, majoritarian or consensus government, individual vs organized pluralism, the role of the state and the importance of rational legal authority (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 69). They also display different media system characteristics with regard to the degree of political parallelism, the strength and importance of newspapers as opposed to broadcasting media, the degree of journalistic professionalization and the role of the state in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 67).

The three models are the *Liberal* or North Atlantic Model, the *Democratic Corporatist* or Northern European Model, and the *Polarized Pluralism* or Mediterranean Model. Briefly, Hallin and Mancini (2004: 11) argue that:

The Liberal Model is characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media; the Democratic Corporatist Model by a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organized social and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state; and the Polarized Pluralist Model by integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the state.

According to the classification of individual countries made by Hallin and Mancini (2004: 70), Sweden is a prototypical example of the democratic corporatist model, whereas Spain is a typical example of the polarized pluralism model. Thus, differences between Spain and Sweden can be found along several analytical dimensions.

Sweden: A Democratic Corporatist Country

The Swedish media system is very newspaper-centric. Newspaper sales per 1000 adult citizens is approximately 540 (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 23), and almost 80 percent read a daily newspaper at least five days a week. Most people subscribe to a local newspaper, but around 25 percent also purchase a news stand tabloid at least three

days a week (Andersson, 2006). Up until the 1960s, the newspapers were closely affiliated with different political parties, which was reflected in readership, political dispositions among journalists working on different newspapers and in the news articles (Nord, 2001). During the last few decades, however, these links between newspapers and political parties have successively weakened. Thus, Swedish newspapers are nowadays politically independent. The norm of journalistic objectivity is strong (Petersson et al., 2005) and mainly interpreted as 'going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute' (Patterson, 1993, 1998). This is true of newspaper as well as broadcast journalists. In both sectors, journalistic professionalization is strong. Swedish journalists have a high degree of autonomy, distinct professional norms and a strong public service orientation (Petersson et al., 2005).

With regards to broadcasting media, up until the late 1980s commercial television and radio were banned in Sweden. The monopoly started to break down in the late 1980s, and in 1991 the first commercial terrestrial television station was allowed. Today, Sweden has a dual model of public service and commercial broadcasting. Since the advent of commercial television and digital television, the Swedish media landscape has become increasingly competitive and commercialized, a process fuelled by an economic recession during the 1990s. However, the public service television audience share is still 44 percent (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 42) and there is no evidence that the major media have reduced the news space devoted to politics and public affairs (Petersson et al., 2006). Politics and public affairs still have a considerable news value, people mainly rely on television news and newspapers for information about politics and societal matters, and political actors mainly communicate with the electorate through the news media. The fact that paid political advertising is banned on the terrestrial and most important television channels is also important to note, as it forces the political actors to rely on their news management skills in their communication with the electorate.

With regards to the political system, 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 forming the government. Sweden has proportional elections where people vote for party lists, even though they also can express a preference for a particular candidate. However, no more than about a quarter of the voters choose to express such preference (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). Thus, the parties are the major players. There are seven parties represented in parliament, with the Social Democrats being stronger than the other parties. In the last national election, in 2006, they won 35 percent of the votes, whereas the second largest party, the Moderates, won 26 percent. The smallest party represented in parliament is the Greens, with 5.2 percent of the votes. All parties are firmly anchored on the left–right ideological continuum, and the correlation (η^2) between support for the parties and the voters' placement of the parties on the left–right scale is very high (.77). The perceptual agreement regarding how voters place the parties on the left–right scale is also high (.65) (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). Thus, the left–right ideological continuum is without compare the most important ideologically structuring dimension (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004).

With regards to governing, the rule in Sweden is minority governments. Usually these are formed by the Social Democrats; the non-socialist parties have only been in government between 1976 and 1982, 1991 and 1994 and following the election in 2006. As minority governments are the rule, all parties are used to and forced to compromise and cooperate with other parties. Thus, there is sometimes no clear distinction between the governing and opposition parties. This was particularly true between 2002 and 2006, when the Social Democratic minority government had a long-term agreement to cooperate with the Greens and the Left Party in some but not all policy areas. Overall, the Swedish political culture can be characterized as consensual rather than conflictual.

However, there is also evidence that the Swedish electorate is becoming ever more volatile, with party identification decreasing and electoral volatility increasing. Swedish voters are also less trusting than they used to be (Holmberg, 1999), and they tend to wait until the election campaign or even that last week before Election Day before making their voting decision. In the 2002 national election, 57 percent of the voters decided which party to vote for during the last four weeks before Election Day, and 35 percent decided during the final week of campaigning (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). Consequently, Sweden has witnessed major shifts in electoral fortunes for one or several parties in every election in the last 20 years.

Spain: A Polarized Pluralist Country

The media system in Spain cannot be explained without an understanding of the specific history of Spain with regard to political development. During 40 years, the mass media had to work according to the guidelines imposed by Franco's regime after his victory in the Civil War (1939). The conditions for the development of the media were tightly controlled. From 1966 to 1975, when the dictator died and the process of democratization started to open up the political system, the media began to be, only apparently, more liberal. Since then, the Spanish media has gone through continuous changes that have contributed to the consolidation of media structures.

The Spanish media system is quite television-centric. According to the data presented by the European Social Survey (Jowell, 2003), 22.7 percent of Spaniards watch television for more than three hours per day, which is almost twice as much as in Sweden, where the corresponding share is 11.6 percent. Newspaper sales are 129.4 per 1000 adult citizens in Spain, approximately four times less than in Sweden (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 23). However, there is an increasing market in Spain for free dailies. On the other hand, there is no daily tabloid newspaper in Spain, but instead a huge catalogue of magazines published weekly or monthly that provide similar content to tabloids in other countries.

Due to 40 years of an authoritarian regime and the lack of press freedom during that period, professionalization of journalism started later in Spain than in many other contemporary democracies. This had led observers to characterize the situation in Spain with regards to journalistic professionalization as 'incomplete professionalization' (Ortega and Humanes, 2000: 162–8). One indication of this is the low degree of associationism among Spanish journalists (Ortega and Humanes, 2000: 165).

There is neither an active deontological code nor an institution in charge of its effectiveness. Normatively speaking, it would perhaps be possible to say that Spanish journalism is independent, but it is also clear that Spanish newspapers tend to belong to a clear ideological orientation, and that they, to some extent, are quite belligerent (Cotarelo, 2002: 191). This polarized pluralist model reproduces social divisions in the structures of Spanish journalism, which often cover processes and events in a partial way. This is what López-Escobar et al. (2008: 185–86) refer to as entrenched journalism. Thus, there are clear differences between the journalistic cultures in Spain and Sweden.

Concerning the broadcasting media, however, there are some similarities between Sweden and Spain. As in Sweden, there was a public service monopoly in Spain both nationally and regionally until the late 1980s. It was not until 1989 that private companies were allowed to broadcast, and it took until the late 1990s before satellite technology was introduced. At present, Spain also has a dual model of public service and commercial television.

More than a decade after the introduction of private television in Spain, the market for television has expanded. The media landscape has become more competitive and commercialized, as well as dominated by large private corporations. The public service share of the television audience decreased in both Sweden and Spain between 1990 and 2000. In Spain, it decreased from 56 to 32.4 percent, whereas in Sweden it decreased from 82 to 44 percent (Sánchez-Tabernero and Carvajal, 2002). Paid political advertising is prohibited on television in Spain. However, the parties do get free space on public television during election campaigns according to their parliamentary representation, in contrast to the Swedish case.

Concerning the political system, Spain is a parliamentary monarchy. The political representation is structured in two chambers, the Congress and the Senate. The country is politically and administratively decentralized in a model that has been labelled as effective asymmetric federalism, a complex constitutional framework that combines the conception of Spain as a single political nation with the existence of Autonomous Communities. This configuration provides a structure for joint decision-making characteristic of a federal model. At the same time, it lays the foundation for a bilateral dialogue, especially with the so-called historic nationalities.

The electoral system established to elect the Congress, which elects the prime minister, is proportional. Political parties present their candidacies in closed lists, which makes the parties the major players in Spanish politics. After the general election in 2004, 11 political parties won representation in the chamber. The Social Democrats (PSOE) won 42.6 percent of the votes, and finally seized the government from the conservatives (PP) with 37.6 percent of the votes. The third national party is the Communist colligated with the Greens and other left minority formations (IU), which obtained 5 percent of the votes. In Spain, there is not only the ideological cleavage but also a peripheral one. Out of the 11 parties with parliamentary representation, eight are regionalists or nationalists from both sides of the ideological continuum. The correlation (η^2) between support for the parties and voters' placement of the parties on the left–right scale is lower in Spain than in Sweden (.70). The perceptual agreement regarding how voters place the parties on the left–right scale is

also lower in Spain than in Sweden (.59 as compared with .65) (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004: 106).

From 2004, we can talk about a moderate multiparty system in Spain, although during periods of overall majority it could also be characterized as an imperfect biparty system (Cotarelo and Bobillo, 1991). Nevertheless, Spain is one of the more fragmented party systems of Europe, a dynamic fuelled by the emergence of regional political forces (Gallagher et al., 1995). With regards to governing, in Spain there is no general rule since we can find minority as well as majority governments. From 1982 to 1993, the Social Democrats organized a majority government. In 1994, the Social Democrats lost their overall majority, but still won the election and could continue to govern as a minority government. As such, the government had to cooperate with other parties. In 1996, the conservatives (PP) defeated PSOE and in 2000 they won an overall majority. In 2004, however, the Social Democrats won the election and were able to form a government. Thus, and in conclusion, the two main parties (PP and PSOE) have alternated in government after the consolidation of the Spanish party system during the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime.

With regard to electoral behaviour, there are indications that the Spanish electorate has become more volatile, with an increasingly more blurred party identification. In the last 10 years, the aggregate electoral volatility has doubled from 4.2 in 1996 to 8.7 percent in 2004. However, 83.6 percent of the voters decide their vote before the electoral campaign (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2004: 7). Regarding the political culture in Spain, it is a good example of so-called political disaffection (Morán and Benedicto, 1995).

This discussion regarding differences and similarities between Spain and Sweden is by no means exhaustive, but it does show that it is reasonable to conclude that Spain and Sweden constitute two highly different cases. This should manifest itself in the framing of politics in the two countries.

The Framing of Politics

One of the most important and widely used theories in media and communication research during the last 15 years is framing theory (Bryant and Miron, 2004). However, despite or due to its popularity, many different definitions of framing are used. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of consensus that framing ultimately is about choices of, for example, words, emphasis, sources, images and organization of texts (Reese, 2001). Put differently, 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' (Entman, 2004: 5).

The process of framing can be intentional or unintentional, and framing can be done by various social actors, such as political parties or the media. What is noteworthy, however, is that framing is inescapable, as it is a process at work each time anyone is crafting a message and has to make choices with regards to words, emphasis, images and so on. Thus, journalists cannot choose not to frame their stories. What is also crucial to remember is that framing is consequential, in the sense that it shapes the perceptions of actors, events, issues and the context being

framed (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005; Iyengar, 1991). This means that the process of framing is also a process of influencing those exposed to the framing, regardless of whether or not the framing is intentional or unintentional. As noted by Price et al. (1997: 483): 'by activating some ideas, feelings and values rather than others, then, the news can encourage particular trains of thought about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions'.

However, framing is also a process aimed at making it easier to organize reality and interpret issues. In order for this to happen, the frames used should seem logical and comprehensible, or culturally congruent, by the audiences. This is also important with regards to the power of framing, as noted by Entman (2004: 14): 'The most inherently powerful frames are those fully congruent with schemas habitually used by most members of society.'

The notion of cultural congruence as an important factor in understanding the news framing of politics points to the fact that all framing is dependent upon the context in which the process and effects of framing take place. Another concept that is important in this regard is the concept of structural bias. In fact, news media framing can be perceived as a manifestation of structural biases in different settings.

Framing as a Manifestation of Structural Bias

The notion of structural bias dates back to Hofstetter's (1976) classic account of bias in US network news coverage. According to Hofstetter (1976: 34), structural biases occur 'when some things are selected to be reported rather than other things because of the character of the medium or because of the incentives that apply to commercial news programming'. Thus, in contrast to partisan bias, which is rooted in ideological beliefs, structural bias 'reflects the circumstances of news production' (Graber, 2006: 236). In both cases, some issues, candidates, parties and – most importantly in the context of this study – frames might be favoured in and due to the coverage, but the underlying reasons are totally different. Thus, Gulati et al. (2004: 239) writes that structural bias refers to the tendency in which 'norms of journalism or reporter behavior favor news about some topics over others and that this news emphasis advantages some candidates and disadvantages others'.

As an example, Gulati et al. (2004: 239) state that the news is biased against losing candidates, 'not because of their policy positions, but because of reporters' decisions about what is news'. Other examples of structural bias mentioned is the journalistic tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than as issues (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993), to favour episodic rather than thematic framing (Iyengar, 1991) and to focus on single events rather than processes (Lippman, 1997). Similarly, Schudson (2003) has noted that news reporting tends to be event centred, detached, focused on bad news as well as on politics as strategy and tactics rather than policies, and that it is highly dependent on officials and official viewpoints. He does not use the term structural bias, but his account is clearly referring to the same problem as the concept of structural bias.

However, most of this research and theorizing have American origins. This is problematic, in the sense that the circumstances of news production in the US is

not exactly the same as in Sweden, Spain or other countries. Put differently, *if* the circumstances of news production result in structural biases, *and* these can be expected to manifest themselves in the framing of politics, *then* the framing of politics should be different in different countries belonging to different models of media and politics. If this indeed is the case, then the concept of structural bias might offer a linkage between the system level of analysis and the actual media content. This process and the linkages are depicted in Figure 1.

According to Figure 1, the concept of different models of media and politics is the most overarching concept. These models of media and politics result, and manifest themselves, in different circumstances of news production, even though the latter is affected by other processes and variables besides those that can be linked to the models of media and politics. In turn, these circumstances of news production result in structural biases, which manifest themselves in different framings of politics as well as in different journalistic styles, news values and patterns of news selection, to name just a few outcomes. Of course, whether or not this theorizing can add to our understanding of the antecedents of news coverage in general remains to be studied empirically.

Purpose and Research Questions

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is to investigate and compare the framing of politics in the election news coverage in Spain and Sweden. Due to the explorative nature of this study, we have chosen to ask research questions instead of posing hypotheses.

The first research question focuses on the metaframing of politics as a strategic game vs issues. The interest in this particular kind of framing builds on prior research showing that it is very common for the US media to frame politics as a strategic game (Gulati et al., 2004; Patterson, 1993; Skewes, 2007), and that it can be consequential in terms of increasing political distrust (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997):

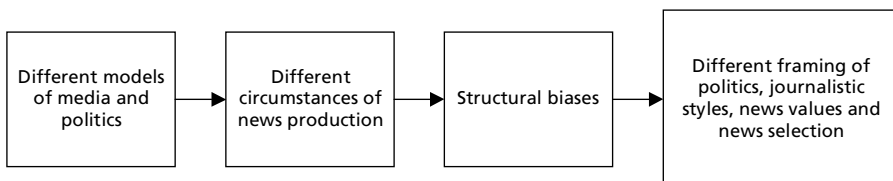
Research Question 1: What differences between the Spanish and Swedish news articles can be found with regards to the metaframing of politics as a game vs issues?

The second research question focuses on the contextual framing, building on Iyengar's (1991) distinction between thematic and episodic framing:

Research Question 2: What differences between the Spanish and Swedish election news articles can be found with regard to the usage of episodic vs thematic framing?

FIGURE 1

Structural Bias as a Linkage between the System Level and the Media Content



As is explained below, the coding of the articles with regards to the metaframing and contextual framing was done on a dominant frame basis. However, it is also possible for a single article to include several different and sometimes overlapping frames. Thus, the third research question focuses on the usage of a number of different frames that were coded on a presence/absence basis. Four of these – horse race frame, political strategy frame, news management frame and governing frame – can be perceived of as derivatives of the metaframing of politics as a strategic game (see further Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006), whereas the linkage between the metaframing of politics and the usage of the two remaining frames – politicians as individuals frame and conflict frame – is more unclear. However, due to the alleged personalization or presidentialization of parliamentary democracies (Mughan, 2000), the extent to which the media focuses on politicians as individuals is relevant in this context. The usage of a conflict frame is also interesting, due to the high news value often attached to conflicts (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). With regards to all these frames, there is no existing research comparing their frequencies in Swedish and Spanish newspapers.

Research Question 3: What differences between the Spanish and the Swedish news articles can be found with regards to the usage of the *horse race frame*, *political strategy frame*, *news management frame*, *governing frame*, *conflict frame* and *politicians as individuals frame*?

The two last research questions focus on the extent to which the Spanish and Swedish news articles are triggered by political actors and how often the news articles follow an interpretive rather than a descriptive journalistic style. Both these dimensions are clearly important if one is to understand and compare the relationship between political actors and media actors in different countries, as they can be perceived of as indicators of journalistic independence (Patterson, 1993; Skewes, 2007; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006). Thus, the two last research questions are:

Research Question 4: Are there any differences in the extent to which Spanish and Swedish news articles originate from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors?

Research Question 5: Are there any differences between how often Spanish and Swedish election news articles follow an interpretive rather than a descriptive journalistic style?

Methodology and Data

This study used quantitative content analysis to answer the research questions. The study includes two leading elite newspapers from each country – *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* in the Swedish case, and the Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*. These newspapers can be perceived as functionally equivalent. In addition, we included the leading news stand tabloid in Sweden, *Aftonbladet*, and the Spanish newspaper that was as functionally equivalent as possible, *ABC*, although Spain does not have any news stand tabloids in the same sense as Sweden and some other countries.

The time period for the study was three weeks before the Swedish and Spanish national elections in 2002 and 2004, respectively. These elections were held on 15

September 2002 in Sweden and 14 March 2004 in Spain. However, due to the terrorist attacks in Madrid on 11 March, which compelled the Spanish parties to finish their election campaigning prematurely, the three last days were excluded from the Spanish data.

All articles were manually selected. The first selection criterion was that the articles should start or be referred to on the front pages. Only articles that were referred to *directly* were included. The second criterion was that only news stories were selected. The third criterion was that the election should be the main focus of the article. Thus, only articles referring to the election in the headlines or the first three paragraphs were included. In all, the study includes 75 articles from *Dagens Nyheter*, 41 articles from *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30 articles from *Aftonbladet*, 29 articles from *El País*, 46 articles from *El Mundo* and 43 articles from *ABC*.

The code sheet included a number of variables. Most importantly, a number of predefined framing variables were included in order to capture the framing in each article. Two of these variables – *contextual frame* and the *metaframe of politics* – were coded on a dominant frame basis, as explained earlier. Coders could also choose ‘cannot be determined’.

With regards to the *metaframe of politics*, coders were to choose between game metaframe or issue metaframe. In brief, ‘game frame’ refers to news stories that frame politics in terms of a game, personality contest, strategy or personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions. ‘Issue frame’ refers to stories that focus on issues and issue positions (see further Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Strömbäck, 2004). With regards to the *contextual frame*, coders were to choose between episodic and thematic framing, where episodic framing refers to isolated reporting focusing on a specific event removed from its context. These types of news stories take the form of a case study. Thematic framing refers to news stories that position the event in a broader context or that deal with its meanings or implications for society (Iyengar, 1991).

As noted earlier, a number of frames coded on a presence/absence basis were also included. Following Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006), these were the *horse race frame* (focus on opinion polls and winning or losing in the battle for votes); *politicians as individuals frame* (focus on politicians as people having different attributes, characters and behaviours rather than as spokespersons for certain policies); *governing frame* (focus on the opportunities to form governing coalitions, or cooperation between different branches of government, after election day in different scenarios regarding electoral outcomes); *political strategy frame* (focus on why parties or candidates act as they do with regard to electoral/opinion gains); *news management frame* (focus on how political actors act in order to achieve extensive and positive news coverage or to downplay negative stories); and *conflict frame* (whether there was a substantial level of conflict in the news story).

Besides these variables, coders were also asked: ‘In your best judgment, does the news story originate from events, incidents, or statements triggered by political actors?’ They were able to choose either ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘cannot be determined’. Finally, coders were asked to judge whether the journalistic style of each news story was either *descriptive* (told in a rather straightforward style) or *interpretive* (a situation is analysed, evaluated or explained while also being described).

To conduct an intercoder reliability check, 10 percent of the Spanish and 10 percent of the Swedish articles were randomly selected to include news articles from all newspapers. With regards to the Swedish articles, the intercoder reliability was .91 across all categories, using Holsti's formula. With regards to the Spanish articles, the intercoder reliability was .90.

Results

Prior research has shown that it is a common tendency for the media in different countries to frame politics as a strategic game rather than as issues (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2003a; Strömbäck, 2004). However, little is known about cross-national differences in this regard (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006). Thus, our first question is how common it is for the Spanish and Swedish newspapers to apply the metaframing of politics as a game rather than as issues? The second research question is what differences there are between Spanish and Swedish newspapers with regards to the usage of episodic vs thematic framing. Here we know that episodic framing is very common in the US (Iyengar, 1991; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006), but we know very little about cross-national differences and about how common it is in Spain or Sweden. Both these research questions are addressed in Table 1.

The results show that there is not a significant difference between how often Spanish and Swedish newspapers apply the metaframing of politics as a strategic game ($\chi^2 = 117, p = .732, d.f. = 1$). However, they also show that there is a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 16,840, p = .000, d.f. = 1$) in the usage of episodic contextual framing. Whereas episodic framing dominates in almost two-thirds of the Swedish articles, it dominates in only about 38 percent of the Spanish articles. Thus, Swedish election news journalism has a significantly stronger tendency to focus on single, isolated events, whereas Spanish election news journalism tends to place the news stories in broader contexts that deal with their meaning or implications for society beyond the single events that might have triggered the news stories.

The next research question, RQ3, refers to several different frames that previous research has found to be present in the election news coverage in countries such as the US, Sweden and Britain (de Vreese, 2003a; Norris et al., 1999; Patterson, 1993;

TABLE 1

Metaframing and Contextual Framing in Spanish and Swedish Election News Coverage

	Spain	Sweden
Game frame	53.0%	55.2%
Episodic frame***	38.3%	63.9%
<i>N</i>	115	145

Table presents results from the election news coverage in three Swedish newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Aftonbladet*) and three Spanish newspapers (*El País, El Mundo, ABC*).

*, ** and *** indicate statistically significant differences between Swedish and Spanish articles at the .05, .01 and .001 level respectively, using χ^2 tests.

Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006). These frames are coded on a presence/absence basis. As noted earlier, four of these frames – horse race frame, political strategy frame, governing frame and news management frame – can be seen as derivatives of the metaframing of politics as a game, whereas the other two – conflict frame and politicians as individuals frame – are more independent of the metaframing of politics. The results addressing RQ3 can be found in Table 2.

The results show that there are significant differences regarding the usage of the horse race frame ($\chi^2 = 13,179$, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1), the political strategy frame ($\chi^2 = 11,034$, $p = .001$, d.f. = 1) and the conflict frame ($\chi^2 = 7,056$, $p = .008$, d.f. = 1). However, no significant differences could be found with regard to the usage of the governing frame, the news management frame or the politicians as individuals frame, although the difference with regards to the usage of the news management frame borders on significance ($\chi^2 = 3,774$, $p = .052$, d.f. = 1).

Taken together, these results indicate that Swedish newspapers are more focused on opinion polls and on winners and losers in the battle for public opinion than are Spanish newspapers. Swedish newspapers also focus more on conflicts between different political actors. However, Spanish newspapers are more focused on why parties act as they do with regard to electoral or opinion gains, that is the strategies employed by the political parties. This is an indication that the Spanish news coverage is more focused on the political parties, whereas the Swedish coverage is more focused on the electoral context as it is measured by opinion polls. The finding that the news management frame is used more often in the Spanish than in the Swedish newspapers is consistent with such an interpretation.

Another way of investigating the extent to which Spanish and Swedish newspapers are focused on the political parties rather than the electoral context, is to study how often news articles originate from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors. This could also be perceived as a measure of how independent the election news coverage is from the political actors. This dimension is addressed by

TABLE 2

Framing of Politics in Spanish and Swedish Election News Coverage

	Spain	Sweden
Horse race frame***	36.4%	58.9%
Political strategy frame***	51.7%	31.5%
News management frame	19.5%	11.0%
Governing frame	28.0%	28.8%
Conflict frame**	30.5%	46.6%
Politicians as individuals frame	23.7%	30.1%
<i>N</i>	118	146

Table presents results from the election news coverage in three Swedish newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*) and three Spanish newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*).

*, ** and *** indicate statistically significant differences between Swedish and Spanish articles at the .05, .01 and .001 level respectively, using χ^2 tests.

RQ4, and the results show that there is indeed a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 35,704$, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1) in how often Spanish and Swedish news stories originate from events triggered by political actors. In the Spanish case, 64.3 percent of the articles are triggered by political actors, whereas the same is true regarding only 27.4 percent of the Swedish articles. Thus, the Spanish news coverage seems to be more influenced by the political parties than the Swedish news coverage.

The last research question asks if there are any differences between how often Spanish and Swedish news articles follow an interpretive rather than a descriptive journalistic style. The findings show that there is a slight difference, indicating that Swedish news journalism is more interpretive than the Spanish news coverage. In the former case, 50.7 percent of the articles follow an interpretive style, whereas in the latter case, the corresponding share is 38.7 percent. Although this is not a statistically significant difference, it is close to statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 3,629$, $p = .057$, d.f. = 1).

Discussion

The results show that there are indeed several significant differences between how Spanish and Swedish newspaper covered the last national election in each country. Not surprisingly, there are also some similarities. For example, newspapers in both countries applied the metaframing of politics as a strategic game in somewhat more than half of the cases and as issues in the rest of the articles. Thus, the tendency to frame politics as a game is about as strong in both countries. The governing frame was also present almost exactly as often in both countries. The politicians as individuals frame was more common in the Swedish news coverage than in the Spanish coverage, but the difference was not significant.

However, several interesting differences were significant. To start with, the results show that Swedish news articles used an episodic frame almost twice as often as the Spanish articles. Thus, Spanish articles seem to focus more on the general or abstract context or issues, whereas Swedish journalism is more event centred. Swedish journalism is also more focused on the political horse race and on conflicts between different political actors. These results might be a reflection of the more commercialized and popularized nature of the Swedish newspaper business, compared to the situation in Spain where newspapers rather target a well-educated elite audience.

Spanish election news journalism, on the other hand, focuses more on the strategies behind the actions of political actors, and how political actors behave in order to maximize positive publicity or downplay negative publicity. The Spanish newspapers also used the news management frame more often than the Swedish newspapers, and this difference was almost significant. Thus, Spanish news journalism seems to be more focused on the political actors, primarily the parties, whereas Swedish election news journalism takes a more independent stance towards the parties. This interpretation is underlined by the results showing that Spanish articles originate from events and actions triggered by political actors much more often than Swedish articles. It is also more descriptive, thus allowing other than journalists to decide how events, actions and so on should be interpreted and framed.

Taken together, these differences are largely consistent with the notion that Sweden and Spain belong to different models of media and democracy. As noted by Hallin and Mancini, countries that belong to the polarized pluralist model, such as Spain, are characterized by, among other things, integration of the media into party politics and a lower degree of journalistic professionalization. Such countries are more television-centric, and newspapers are read mostly by a well-educated and politically interested sector of the public. The elite-centredness of Spanish newspapers might explain why the conflict frame was actually used more often in the Swedish than in the Spanish articles, despite Spain belonging to the polarized pluralism model. On the other hand, countries that belong to the democratic corporatist model, such as Sweden, are characterized by, among other things, strong journalistic professionalization, strong and mass-circulated newspapers and a more limited role of the state in the media system. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the Spanish news articles are more closely attached to the political actors than are the Swedish articles.

However, it might be argued that the newspapers included in this study are not really functionally equivalent, particularly with regards to *Aftonbladet* in Sweden and *ABC* in Spain, as the former can be characterized as a news stand tabloid, whereas that kind of newspaper simply does not exist in Spain. To control for this, we investigated whether the results changed when taking into account only the two leading newspapers in each country. However, the results show that the same differences are significant when excluding *Aftonbladet* and *ABC* from the sample as when they are included, although the frequencies of different frames and so on, naturally enough, change somewhat.

Taken together, this indicates that there is indeed a link between different models of media and politics, which is manifested in different circumstances of news production, resulting in structural biases and different framing of politics.

However, much more research is needed before it is possible to fully understand if structural bias as a concept can offer a linkage between the system level and the actual media content. Such research should be both theoretical – in order to develop and further operationalize the concept of structural bias – and empirical – covering the election news coverage in more countries, including more media and a larger sample of news stories in each media outlet in each country. One important limitation of this study is undoubtedly that it includes only front-page stories in three newspapers, and that the number of articles investigated is thus low. Nevertheless, what this study has shown is that there are important differences between the Spanish and Swedish election news coverage, and that these differences are largely consistent with their belonging to different models of media and politics and some important differences regarding the circumstances of news production. As an exploratory study, it has thus shown the importance of more comparative research that attempts to link the actual media content to the system level and to semi-structural factors.

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Jesper Strömbäck is Ludvig Nordström Professor in Journalism at Mid Sweden University. He is also research director at the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University.

Address *Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden. [email: jesper.stromback@miun.se]*

Óscar G. Luengo is Assistant Professor in Political Science at University of Granada. He is also the academic coordinator of the Master Programme on Political Marketing and Communication at the University of Granada.

Address *UGR, Rector López Argüeta, s/n, 18001, Granada, Spain. [email: ogluengo@ugr.es]*