

# Electoral Cycles and the Mobilizing Effects of Elections: A Longitudinal Study of the Swedish Case

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*ABSTRACT* In the theory and practice of democratic politics, elections are essential. Not only is voting the one activity that binds the individual to the political system, elections are also expected to mobilize people politically. Thus, the purpose of this article is to study the mobilizing effects of national elections, using Sweden as a case study. More specifically, this article investigates political interest, party identification, trust in political and media institutions, media consumption and satisfaction with the way democracy works through the electoral cycles between 1986 and 2004. The results indicate that elections do mobilize people politically, but not with regard to the media variables.

## Introduction

In the theory and practice of democratic politics, elections are essential. In fact, whether or not a country holds free and fair elections on a regular basis is what ultimately distinguishes a democratic from a non-democratic country. It is also on Election Day that the democratic principle of political equality (Dahl, 1998) most effectively comes into play. Between elections, some people have more power and political resources than others, but on Election Day, each and every citizen has one, and only one, vote.

However, it is also well known that in democracies all around the world not all citizens choose to use their right to vote. For example, during the 1990s, voter turnout as a proportion of the voting age population was 88% in Iceland and 83% in Sweden, Israel and the Czech Republic. However, it was only 47% in the United States and 38% in Switzerland (Norris, 2004: 152). Furthermore, voter turnout has decreased in most, but not all, established democracies since the 1970s (Dalton, 2002; Franklin, 2004), causing scholars and commentators to ask questions such as “Where have all the voters gone?” (Wattenberg, 2002). As Dalton (2002: 39) has noted, “Voting is the one activity that binds the individual to the political system and legitimizes the rest of the democratic process”. Thus, it is not surprising that falling turnout has been

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viewed as a symptom of deep democratic problems, especially in the United States where turnout has been falling at almost every presidential or mid-term election since the 1960s (Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2002).

Previous research has revealed a number of individual level and system level factors which are involved in voter turnout. With regard to the system level, some of the important factors involved are whether a country has proportional representation or a majoritarian system, the frequency of elections, the use of compulsory voting, the size of electoral districts, the electoral costs of registering and voting, and the competitiveness of the party systems (Dalton, 2002; Wattenberg, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Norris, 2004). With regard to the individual level, research has similarly shown that important factors include age, education, income, gender, political interest and party identification (Topf, 1998; Franklin, 2004; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004; Norris, 2004).

The electoral context is also crucial, as shown by the importance of the closeness of the elections, the likelihood that a particular outcome will lead to a change in government or the perceived differences between the parties or candidates competing in an election (Franklin, 2002, 2004; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004). This is an indication that some elections are more mobilizing than others, regardless of system or individual level factors, and that voter turnout is not mainly “about how people approach elections; rather, it is mainly about how elections appear to people” (Franklin, 2004: 6).

By adopting this approach, it is reasonable to expect that all things being equal, people should be more politically mobilized during election years than during non-election years. The very fact that an election is approaching or has recently been held should manifest itself in, for example, higher levels of party identification and higher political interest than during periods when no election is close (Holmberg, 1994, 1999). In other words, the degree of political mobilization can be expected to vary throughout the electoral cycle, in a similar manner to the cyclical nature of party support and political knowledge (Andersen, 2003; Andersen *et al.*, 2005).

### **Purpose and Hypotheses**

The purpose of this paper is to study the mobilizing effects of national elections, using Sweden as a case study. One reason why Sweden has been chosen is because it is a country where people vote in national, regional and local elections on the same day every fourth year. This makes Sweden a country in which the opportunity to vote is rather rare when compared with countries in which the intervals between elections is shorter. Thus, if elections do mobilize people politically, such effects should be readily detectable in the Swedish case. A second reason why Sweden was chosen is because access is available to a unique dataset of annual and nation-wide surveys, carried out annually since 1986 (for details, see below).

The concept of “mobilizing effects” is broad, and thus needs to be operationalized. In this article the primary interest is in a number of variables which have been shown to be influential in explaining whether or not people choose to vote, as well as some variables assumed to be of importance from a political communication perspective.

If people are mobilized by elections, it is expected first of all that the level of political interest will vary throughout the electoral cycle. In particular, it is expected that people will express higher levels of political interest during election years than in non-election years. From a normative point of view, the level of political interest is particularly important, since research has shown that people who express high levels of political interest are more likely to vote than those who express low levels. In the 2002 Swedish national election, 90% of those saying they were “very much interested” in politics went to the voting booth on Election Day, as compared with 55% of those saying they were “not at all interested” in politics (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004: 21). Thus, the first hypothesis is:

H1: Political interest will be higher during election years than in non-election years.

In modern democracies, there is little doubt that the role of the mass media is indeed central. Even allowing for differences between countries, one common thread is that people mainly receive their political information through the mass media. If enlightened understanding is an important democratic value, as argued by Dahl (1998), then the mass media and the political information transmitted through various mass media is crucial (Asp, 1986; Patterson, 1993; Johansson, 1998; Andersen, 2003). In some countries, most notably the United States, televised political advertisements have become one of the most important sources of information (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006; Kaid, 2006), whereas in other countries, the news coverage of politics in general, and the election campaigns in particular, has proved to be of greater importance (Norris *et al.*, 1999; Strömbäck, 2004). Furthermore, some countries are more television-centered whereas other countries are more newspaper-centered (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that if elections mobilize the electorate, then the public’s news consumption should increase during election years. Research has also shown a correlation between the exposure of political news coverage and voting. In this case it is those who have a high consumption of political news coverage who are more likely to vote (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004: 21). Therefore, the second hypothesis is:

H2: News consumption will be higher in election years than in non-election years.

One concern during the last decades has been the decreasing trust in political and media institutions (Nye *et al.*, 1997; Norris, 1999; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). To some observers, decreasing trust in political institutions is a sign of decreasing social capital, which has detrimental effects on democracy (Putnam, 2000). Others argue that interpersonal trust is more important and that the decrease in political trust is a sign of rising post-materialistic values and subjective well-being, which is related to a support for democracy (Inglehart, 1999a, 1999b). From the latter perspective, the degree of trust in political institutions need not be of great concern, as long as there

is widespread support for democracy as a form of government (Klingemann, 1999). Regardless of normative evaluations, however, there is evidence that “contemporary publics are dissatisfied with the incumbents of office and even with the political institutions of representative democracy, but these feelings of dissatisfaction have apparently not (yet) affected basic support for the political system and the values of the democratic process” (Dalton, 1999: 72). As for trust in media institutions, there is evidence of declining trust in several countries (Graber, 2005; Holmberg & Weibull, 2005).

With regard to mobilizing effects, if elections do indeed mobilize people politically, this should manifest itself in increasing trust, at least in political institutions, during election years (Holmberg, 1999). With regard to media institutions, the expectation is less clear. On the one hand, people can be expected to rely more on the media for information when their political attentiveness increases, which might go hand in hand with increasing trust in media institutions. On the other hand, in some elections at least, the polarized political climate during an election campaign might manifest itself in decreasing trust, if the media institutions are perceived as being biased. Nevertheless, the third hypothesis is:

- H3: Trust in political institutions and media institutions will be higher during election years than in non-election years.

Since the political temperature rises during election years, it is also reasonable to expect party identification, a concept that describes people’s psychological identification with or their affective orientations towards the parties (Schmitt & Holmberg, 1998; Dalton, 2000), to vary through the electoral cycle (see Holmberg, 1999). As an election approaches, and as greater insights are gained due to increasing media attention for the parties and their positions, people’s opinions and attitudes towards the parties should crystallize (Holmberg, 1999; Andersen, 2003), creating an activation effect, reinforcement effect or conversion effect (Lazarfeld *et al.*, 1948). Regardless of the type of effect, party identification should be more pronounced during election years compared with non-election years.

Furthermore, if elections do cause political mobilization, people should also be expressing greater satisfaction with the way democracy works during election years than in non-election years. If the contrary was true, and people were less satisfied during a period of opportunity to influence the political processes through their votes, it would be truly remarkable. Thus, combining the expectations with regard to party identification and satisfaction with the way democracy works, the fourth hypothesis is:

- H4: Party identification and satisfaction with the way democracy works will be higher during election years than in non-election years.

If mobilizing effects are thus measured by level or strength of political interest, news consumption, trust in political and media institutions, party identification and

satisfaction with the way democracy works, and if mobilizing effects can be detected, they are unlikely to be uniform across different groups of people. Which people do we expect to be particularly affected by any mobilizing effects?

One theory that can be helpful with regard to that question is Zaller's (1992: 119) so-called RAS (Receive–Accept–Sample) model of attitude change. According to Zaller, attitude change involves two steps: reception of new ideas and messages, and acceptance of some of these ideas and messages. Dividing people into those with high, medium and low political awareness, he finds that the ones who are most susceptible to attitude change, are those with a medium level of political awareness:

Highly aware persons will [...] be heavily exposed to inconsistent messages but, being highly aware, they will possess the contextual information necessary to recognize and reject these messages. Very unaware will be exposed to few messages of any kind and hence also form few inconsistent considerations. This would leave moderately aware persons as most likely to form inconsistent considerations: They pay enough attention to politics to be fairly heavily exposed to inconsistent messages, but often lack the message clues necessary to recognize inconsistency. (170)

Following this logic, and using education as a shortcut to political awareness, we expect the mobilizing effects to be stronger among people with medium levels of education (10–13 years) than among people with either low (less than 10 years) or high (university education) levels of education. Furthermore, using social class as a shortcut to integration into the political processes, we expect the mobilizing effects to be stronger among people who describe their current family situation as working class, than among people who describe their current situation as middle class.

Another theory that might be helpful is socialization theory, and more specifically, that which states that it takes time to establish the voting habit, and that people tend to vote (or not vote) if they have done (or not done) so previously. Thus, according to Franklin (2004: 43), “the past leaves a ‘footprint’ in subsequent elections” and it might take three consecutive elections until people’s voting behavior becomes set (2004: 65). Following this logic, we expect the mobilizing effects to be stronger among the youngest respondents (18–25 years old) than among older respondents.

- H5: The mobilizing effects will be stronger among people with medium rather than low or high levels of education.
- H6: The mobilizing effects will be stronger among people living in working class families than among those living in middle class families.
- H7: The mobilizing effects will be stronger among the younger rather than older citizens.

In the next section, the methodology and data used will be described, before presenting, as an empirical background, a brief description of the Swedish party system and the elections during the time period covered in this study.

## Methodology

This study covers the time period from 1986–2004. During this time period, national elections were held in Sweden in 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998 and 2002. Thus, this study builds upon an annual and nation-wide survey – the National SOM survey (Society, Opinion, Mass media) – carried out over the 14 years when there were no national elections (1986, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003,<sup>1</sup> 2004) and in the five years when a national election was held. These data offer a unique opportunity to study the changes regarding a number of indicators of political mobilization through four full electoral cycles (1988–1991, 1991–1994, 1994–1998, 1998–2002).

The National SOM survey is carried out every autumn in the form of a questionnaire mailed to a sample of randomly selected individuals in Sweden, using the Swedish National Population Register as the sampling frame. From 1986 to 1997 the questionnaire was sent to 2800 people between the ages of 15 to 80. In 1998 it was expanded, and each wave now includes approximately 6000 respondents between the ages of 15 and 85. The total dataset contains more than 45,000 respondents. This extension of the sample is, however, somewhat problematic when computing the whole dataset using individual level data. This is because, as the size of the samples from 1998 to 2004 has doubled, the effects (and no effects) found with regard to these years will have a greater impact. To solve this problem a random sub-sample of 50% of the respondents from 1998 to 2004 was drawn. By doing this, we ensured that the samples have approximately the same size every year, which makes it easier to analyze differences between election years and non-election years, using individual level data.

The central questions addressed in the survey are attitudes concerning mass media, politics and public services. The survey is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Institute for Journalism and Mass Communication, the Department of Political Science and the School of Public Administration at Göteborg University.

The National SOM survey is carried out during November–December every year. This means that respondents in election years answer the survey approximately two months after the elections have been held. For the purposes of this study, it would have been more advantageous if the survey had been carried out in the weeks immediately preceding the elections. However, even allowing for the fact that the surveys have been carried out about two months after the elections, significant mobilizing effects should still be present and detectable.

The response rate of the survey has varied between 63 and 71% (Nilsson, 2005: 404). To test the quality of the sample, demographics were compared between the Swedish population (using official statistics) and the group of respondents. These comparisons show very small differences between the sample and the population: women tend to answer somewhat more often than men, and young people (15–29) and the very old (80–85) are somewhat less likely to

answer. Overall, however, these differences are rather small (3–5%). Thus, the conclusion must be that the sample is a good reflection of the Swedish population (Nilsson, 2005: 397–417).

## **Measures**

A number of questions indicating mobilization effects were addressed in the surveys between 1986 and 2004. The questions used as dependent and independent variables and the means by which they were transformed in the analysis are presented in the following section.

### *Dependent Variables*

*Political Interest* Political interest was measured by a question of interest in politics, ranging from (1) “very limited interest” to (4) “very strong interest”.

*News Consumption* Three variables measuring news consumption were analyzed: exposure to national television and radio news, morning papers and tabloids. The question addressing consumption of television and radio news was posed as: “How often do you usually watch or listen to the following shows on radio or television?” An index was created based on responses with regard to exposure to national broadcast public service news shows (three on television and one on radio). “If you read a morning paper regularly – how many times does this usually occur in a week?” This was the question capturing morning paper reading. To measure exposure to tabloid papers an index was created measuring readership of the two national tabloids.

*Trust in Political Institutions and Media Institutions* Questions concerning trust in political and media institutions have been asked in the National SOM survey since 1986. In this article, trust in the Swedish Parliament is used as an indicator of trust in political institutions. Trust in media institutions was measured by questions concerning trust in newspapers and television. The question posed was: “How much confidence do you have in the way in which the following institutions/groups are doing their jobs?” The questions had five response alternatives, ranging from “very much” to “very little”.

*Party Identification* A question given to respondents stating a party preference indicates party identification. The question was: “Do you consider yourself to a convinced supporter of your party?” The response alternatives ranged from “very” or “somewhat” convinced to “not convinced at all”.

*Satisfaction with the Way Democracy Works* Since 1996 the National SOM survey has included a question concerning satisfaction with the way democracy works at a national, local and international level. This analysis is limited to satisfaction with the

way democracy works at the national level. The questions had four response alternatives ranging from “not at all” to “very” satisfied.

### *Measures of Mobilization Effects in Different Groups*

In order to test hypotheses of mobilization effects in different groups we used the following independent variables. The *age* variable was based on the respondent's own statement of their year of birth. In the cases where age information was missing from the respondents, such information was taken from the register. The variable was computed into four categories: (15–24, 25–44, 45–64, 65–85<sup>2</sup>). *Education* was measured by one question, which included a number of different types of education levels. These were computed into three categories: low education (elementary school), middle–high education (high school) and high education (college/university). To measure *social class* a variable was used in which respondents answered a question about their current family situation. Respondents defining their current family situation as “workers” were categorized as “working class”. Those choosing the alternatives “lower/higher manual employees” were categorized as “middle class”. To test the hypotheses of mobilization effects in different groups the dataset was split into different categories. Thereafter the regression models were conducted to see whether the mobilization effect differed from one group to another.

### *Controlling for Time-Series Effects*

To control for time-series effects another independent variable (year order, ranging from 1986 = 1 to 2004 = 19) was included in the regression models.

## **Empirical Background**

To place this study into context, it should be noted that Sweden has a unicameral parliamentary system, with a proportional electoral system. People vote for parties rather than candidates, and even though it is possible to express a preference for a favored candidate on the chosen party list, the number of seats is allocated according to the share of the votes received by the parties. Only 26% of the voters chose to express a preference for a particular candidate in the 2002 national election (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004: 179). It should also be noted that people only vote in national elections every fourth year, thus making Sweden a country in which the opportunity to vote is, comparatively speaking, rather infrequent.

The number of parties represented in parliament has varied between 1986 and 2004. From the time of the first election in the 1920s when women won the right to vote, up until the election of 1988, only five parties had parliamentary representation, namely: the Social Democrats, the Left Party (formerly the Communists), the Centre Party (historically an agrarian party), the Liberal Party and the Moderate Party (a conservative party). Between the 1920s and the late 1980s, the Swedish party system could be described as being “frozen”. No other party managed to win

the necessary 4% in order to gain parliamentary representation. However, in 1988, the Green Party won representation, thus breaking up the old system. In 1991, the Green Party lost ground and lost representation, but at the same time, two new parties – New Democracy (a right-wing populist party) and the Christian Democrats – won representation. Then, in 1994, New Democracy more or less ceased to exist, due mainly to internal conflicts, but the Green Party managed to return to parliament. Since 1994, seven parties have been represented in the parliament.

Due to the fragmented party system, minority or coalition government has been the rule, and the biggest party, the Social Democrats, have won more than 50% of the vote only once (in 1968). The Social Democrats have been the governing party since 1932, either alone or in coalition with the Centre Party, with the exception of time periods between 1976–1982, 1991–1994 and following the latest election in 2006. In these cases different coalitions, made up of the non-socialist parties, were, or in the case of the latest election, are in power. It should also be noted that in Swedish politics, there is traditionally a clear distinction between the parties to the left and the parties to the right. This is measured by the Wing Party Distance (WDP = 7.78 in 1998), the correlation between party choice on Election Day and where voters place themselves on the left–right ideological continuum ( $\eta = 0.77$  in 1998) and Perceptual Agreement in the placement of the parties on the left–right ideological continuum (PA = 0.65 in 1998) (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004: 105–106)

To provide an overview of the Swedish system during the time period of this study, Table 1 shows the voter turnout at each election, the number of parties winning parliamentary representation and the percentage share of voters stating that they had changed their decision with regard to party preference during the election campaigns preceding each election.

**Table 1.** An overview of the Swedish system between 1986 and 2004

Election year	Voter turnout	Number of parties winning representation in parliament	Changing voting decisions during election campaigns
1988	86.0	6	13.2%
1991	86.7	7	16.3%
1994	88.1	7	13.6%
1998	81.4	7	18.1%
2002	80.1	7	19.1%

## Results

If elections are indeed mobilizing people politically, such a mobilizing effect should first manifest itself in an increasing political interest during election years. As already noted, rising political interest during election years is important from a normative perspective, since there is a positive correlation between political interest

**Table 2.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects on political interest (standardized regression coefficients)

	Beta	Sig.
Effect of election year	0.019	***
Effect of year order	0.003	
<i>N</i>	32,444	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

and voting (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004). As noted by Bennulf and Hedberg (1999: 105), it is possible for political interest to be viewed as a measure which summarizes people's orientation towards political phenomena. Thus, the first hypothesis (H1) is that political interest will be higher during election years than in non-election years. This hypothesis is addressed in Table 2.

The results show a significant mobilizing effect of elections on general political interest. H1 is therefore supported (beta = 0.019,  $p < 0.001$ ). A closer look at the results also shows that in four of the five occasions when there has been an election, political interest has increased as compared with the previous year, and on three occasions, there were also significant mean score differences.<sup>3</sup> By way of contrast, only three of the 12 non-election years showed an increase in political interest. The conclusion is therefore that election years do indeed mobilize political interest among the electorate.

The second hypothesis addressed the role of the media in advanced modern democracies. Since people rely on the media for political information, it was expected that news consumption would increase during election years. More specifically, H2 stated that news consumption would be higher during election years than in non-election years.

Generally speaking, the results are mixed. Two of three results seem to support the hypothesis (Table 3). For television and radio news no significant systematic

**Table 3.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects on nation television & radio news consumption, morning paper reading and tabloid paper reading (standardized regression coefficients)

	National television & radio news		Morning paper reading		Tabloid paper reading	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Effect of election year	0.000		0.022	***	0.035	***
Effect of year order	0.007		-0.050	***	-0.012	*
<i>N</i>	32,786		32,339		32,883	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

change in the direction of the hypothesis could be found. Thus, there is no indication of mobilizing effects with regard to television and radio news consumption. Investigations into the morning paper readership show that there has been a definite decrease in newspaper consumption in Sweden ( $\beta = -0.050, p < 0.001$ ), but election years appear to limit this trend ( $\beta = 0.022, p < 0.001$ ). However, since the general decrease in readership is stronger, the mobilizing effects of election years cannot reverse the decline in the reading of morning papers. However, one should be careful not to draw too definite conclusions with regard to the mobilizing effects on morning newspaper readership, as an analysis of the mean score differences between election years and non-election years shows no significant effects.

There is a slightly more dramatic change in the consumption of tabloid papers compared with other news media consumption. Since approximately 70% of the Swedish population live in households whose newspaper comes via subscription (Andersson, 2005), access to morning papers as well as television and radio news is widespread regardless of whether it is an election year or not. With regard to access and reading of tabloid papers, the situation is quite different. Since it is impossible to subscribe to tabloid papers, sales and readership depend more upon exciting news events than on habits, even though some people buy tabloids almost every day. Thus, there is more potential for mobilizing effects with regard to the consumption of tabloid papers than for radio, television news or morning papers. H2 also receives stronger support concerning tabloid papers than with regard to the other media ( $\beta = 0.035, p < 0.001$ ). The changes with regard to consumption of tabloids papers are not dramatic, but the effect of election years is significant. When the mean score differences on individual data are analyzed it also shows that consumption of tabloid papers increased during four out of five election years compared with the year before each election year, although one of these changes was not statistically significant.<sup>4</sup>

The third hypothesis (H3) predicted that trust in political institutions as well as media institutions will be higher during election years than in non-election years. As is shown in Table 4, this hypothesis was clearly supported with regard to political institutions ( $\beta = 0.098, p < 0.001$ ). Even if trust in the national parliament is declining over time, it is significantly higher in election years than in non-election years (cf. Holmberg, 1999).<sup>5</sup>

However, even if election years mobilize trust in political institutions it appears to have a negative impact on trust in media institutions. Whatever effect news reporting in general and the election coverage in particular might have on viewers, listeners and readers, it is not manifested in increased trust in the media institutions. Instead we find that trust in media institutions is lower during election years compared with non-election years (*press*,  $\beta = -0.014, p < 0.05$ ; *television & radio*,  $\beta = -0.021, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H3 is supported with regard to the national parliament, but rejected with regard to media institutions. It is interesting to note that there is also a general decline in trust regarding both media and political institutions. However, while election years seem to limit this decline of trust in parliament,

**Table 4.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects on trust on political and media institutions (standardized regression coefficients)

	National parliament		Press		Television & radio	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Effect of election year	0.098	***	-0.014	*	-0.021	***
Effect of year order	-0.057	***	-0.072	***	-0.040	***
<i>N</i>	30,604		29,005		29,001	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

the opposite is true with regard to trust in media institutions. The fall of trust in media institutions actually seems to be strengthened during elections years. However, a comparison of the mean score differences shows no significant difference between election years and non-election years.

The fourth hypothesis (H4) proposed a mobilization effect of election years on aggregate party identification and satisfaction with the way democracy works in Sweden. The results are shown in Table 5.

The results confirm the hypothesis. Even if party identification generally speaking has decreased in Sweden as well as in several other countries (Schmitt & Holmberg, 1998; Dalton, 2000), there are clear mobilizing effects on party identification during election years (beta = 0.072,  $p < 0.001$ ) (cf. Holmberg, 1999).<sup>6</sup> Clearly, in election years, when people are given the opportunity to vote, and there are increased efforts made by the political parties to reach out to voters, people do respond in a positive manner and feel a greater affiliation to the parties. With regard to satisfaction regarding how democracy works in Sweden, the support for the hypothesis is also supported (beta = 0.041,  $p < 0.001$ ). When people have the chance to vote they also seem to be more satisfied with the way democracy works. At the same time, it should be noted that there are no significant mean score differences when comparing non-election years with election years.

**Table 5.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects on party identification and satisfaction with democracy (standardized regression coefficients)

	Party identification		Satisfaction with democracy, television & radio	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Effect of election year	0.072	***	0.041	***
Effect of year order	-0.122	***	0.165	***
<i>N</i>	30,073		14,461	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Let us now move on to testing hypotheses regarding mobilization effects in different groups of citizens. Briefly: who is mobilized by the fact that an election is held? Earlier we related to Zaller’s RAS model of attitude change, and using education as a shortcut to political awareness, we proposed mobilizing effects to be stronger among people with medium–high levels of education (10–13 years) than among people with either low (less than 10 years) or high (university education) levels of education (H5).

The results presented in Table 6 show only limited support for the hypothesis that the mobilization effect would be stronger for people with medium–high education compared with groups with lower or higher education.<sup>7</sup> Compared with the analysis

**Table 6.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects depending on education level (standardized regression coefficients)

Education	Low		Middle–high		High	
<i>Political interest</i>						
Effect of election year	0.020	*	0.024	*	0.031	*
Effect of year order	0.000		–0.031	**	–0.036	**
<i>N</i>	12,697		7328		6473	
<i>News consumption</i>						
Television and radio news:						
Effect of election year	0.007		0.015		0.020	
Effect of year order	–0.049	***	–0.056	***	0.021	
<i>N</i>	12,807		7396		6512	
Morning paper reading:						
Effect of election year	0.024	**	–0.012		0.044	***
Effect of year order	–0.014		–0.056	***	–0.063	***
<i>N</i>	12,632		7214		6393	
Tabloid paper reading:						
Effect of election year	0.024	**	0.051	***	0.068	***
Effect of year order	–0.038	**	0.029	*	0.034	**
<i>N</i>	12,839		7404		6523	
<i>Trust in institutions</i>						
National parliament:						
Effect of election year	0.111	***	0.121	***	0.097	***
Effect of year order	–0.108	***	–0.081	***	–0.021	
<i>N</i>	12,611		7294		6464	
Press:						
Effect of election year	–0.023	*	–0.035	**	–0.031	*
Effect of year order	–0.057	***	–0.048	***	–0.022	
<i>N</i>	11,635		6969		6179	

Table 6. Continued.

Education	Low		Middle–high		High	
<i>Television and radio:</i>						
Effect of election year	–0.028	**	–0.035	**	–0.026	*
Effect of year order	–0.025	**	–0.012		–0.008	
<i>N</i>	11,635		6969		6181	
<i>Party identification</i>						
Effect of election year	0.085	***	0.064	***	0.076	***
Effect of year order	–0.097	***	–0.071	***	–0.087	***
<i>N</i>	11,663		6862		6133	
<i>Satisfaction with democracy</i>						
Effect of election year	0.028		0.016		0.007	
Effect of year order	0.198	***	0.217	***	0.127	***
<i>N</i>	4894		2860		3009	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

at a general level we only find support for the suggestion that people with medium–high education are mobilized to a greater extent concerning trust in national parliament (beta = 0.121,  $p < 0.001$ ). But one should be aware of the fact that mobilization effects are also significant for people with low and high education. In relation to other indicators of mobilizing effects we do not find any tendencies that people with middle–high education are systematically mobilized to a greater extent than those who are either lower or higher educated. At the general level we found significant mobilization effects in relation to six indicators (political interest, morning paper reading, tabloid paper reading, trust in national parliament, party identification and satisfaction with democracy), but in only one case were middle–high educated people mobilized to a greater extent. H5 must therefore be rejected.

H6 was based on a similar type of logic as H5. Using social class as a shortcut to integration into the political processes, we also expect the mobilizing effects to be stronger amongst people who describe their current family situation as working class than amongst people who describe their current situation as middle class.

The results in Table 7 give more support to the hypothesis as compared with H5, but cannot be seen as being either supported or rejected. In three out of six cases we find support for the suggestion that people defining their social situation as being working class are more mobilized compared with those defined as being middle class. In relation to satisfaction with how democracy works the results show that working class respondents are more strongly mobilized (beta = 0.078,  $p < 0.001$ ) in comparison with middle class respondents, who are not affected at all. Investigations with regard to trust in national parliament and party identification showed significant effects for both groups.

**Table 7.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects depending on social class (standardized regression coefficients)

Social class	Working class		Middle class	
<i>Political interest</i>				
Effect of election year	0.011		0.028	**
Effect of year order	-0.035	***	0.033	***
<i>N</i>	13,778		11,992	
<i>News consumption</i>				
Television and radio news:				
Effect of election year	-0.002		0.004	
Effect of year order	-0.076	***	0.017	
<i>N</i>	13,878		12,070	
Morning paper reading:				
Effect of election year	0.016		0.024	**
Effect of year order	-0.053	***	-0.052	***
<i>N</i>	13,640		11,972	
Tabloid paper reading:				
Effect of election year	0.028	***	0.047	***
Effect of year order	-0.014		-0.017	
<i>N</i>	13,918		12,096	
<i>Trust in institutions</i>				
National parliament:				
Effect of election year	0.113	***	0.092	***
Effect of year order	-0.088	***	-0.036	***
<i>N</i>	12,961		11,364	
Press:				
Effect of election year	0.001		-0.027	*
Effect of year order	-0.079	***	-0.064	***
<i>N</i>	12,237		10,762	
Television and radio:				
Effect of election year	-0.015		-0.019	*
Effect of year order	-0.066	***	-0.017	
<i>N</i>	12,235		10,763	
<i>Party identification</i>				
Effect of election year	0.085	***	0.061	***
Effect of year order	-0.152	***	-0.093	***
<i>N</i>	12,687		11,396	
<i>Satisfaction with democracy</i>				
Effect of election year	0.078	***	0.008	
Effect of year order	0.185	***	0.149	***
<i>N</i>	5986		5525	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

On the other hand we find the opposite effect with regard to political interest and news consumption. In relation to these indicators the strongest mobilization effects of election years are to be found among those defining themselves as being middle class. Tabloid paper reading appears to increase based on the fact that an election is being held and this relates to both groups. But in relation to political interest and morning paper reading we only find significant effects among middle class respondents (*political interest*,  $\beta = 0.028$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; *morning paper reading*,  $\beta = 0.024$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The last hypothesis (H7) proposed stronger mobilization effects among the younger rather than older respondents. The rationale for this hypothesis builds on

**Table 8.** Multiple regressions predicting election-year effects depending on age (standardized regression coefficients)

Age	15–24	25–44	45–64	65–79
<i>Political interest</i>				
Effect of election year	0.053 ***	0.022 *	0.002	0.015
Effect of year order	0.008	-0.059 ***	0.023 *	-0.017
<i>N</i>	5002	11,057	10,582	5289
<i>News consumption</i>				
Television and radio news:				
Effect of election year	0.000	0.004	0.011	0.012
Effect of year order	-0.191 ***	-0.040 ***	0.010	-0.010
<i>N</i>	5066	11,159	10,691	5334
Morning paper reading:				
Effect of election year	0.009	0.030 **	0.016	0.031 *
Effect of year order	-0.113 ***	-0.102 ***	-0.044 ***	0.004
<i>N</i>	4942	10,914	10,632	5317
Tabloid paper reading:				
Effect of election year	0.044 **	0.042 ***	0.028 **	0.031 *
Effect of year order	0.008	0.009	0.006	0.004
<i>N</i>	5069	11,168	10,731	5377
<i>Trust in institutions</i>				
National parliament:				
Effect of election year	0.084 ***	0.102 ***	0.110 ***	0.088 ***
Effect of year order	-0.062 ***	-0.031 ***	0.077 ***	-0.095
<i>N</i>	4625	10,392	10,069	5004
Press:				
Effect of election year	-0.025	-0.005	-0.016	-0.016
Effect of year order	-0.081 ***	-0.069 ***	-0.078 ***	-0.077 ***
<i>N</i>	4321	9787	9606	4774

Table 8. Continued.

Age	15–24		25–44		45–64		65–79	
<i>Television and radio:</i>								
Effect of election year	-0.009		-0.014		-0.027 **		-0.026	
Effect of year order	-0.060 ***		-0.046 ***		-0.035 ***		-0.034 *	
<i>N</i>	4321		9785		9608		4774	
<i>Party identification</i>								
Effect of election year	0.101 ***		0.076 ***		0.062 ***		0.068 ***	
Effect of year order	-0.108 ***		-0.130 ***		-0.172 ***		0.178 ***	
<i>N</i>	4606		10,023		9876		4905	
<i>Satisfaction with democracy</i>								
Effect of election year	0.027		0.015		0.072 ***		0.051 **	
Effect of year order	0.145 ***		0.156 ***		0.158 ***		0.198 ***	
<i>N</i>	1945		4686		5036		2473	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Since the education variable was measured somewhat different 2003 and 2004 respondents from these years were excluded from the analysis.

socialization theory where experience of previous campaigns and voting behavior is said to leave footprints in the way we respond to the fact that an election is being held.

However, the results in Table 8 show only mixed support for H7. It is supported with regard to political interest, tabloid paper reading and party identification. Political interest increases significantly in election years among the youngest respondents (beta = 0.053,  $p < 0.001$ ), but on reaching middle age there appears to be no such effect. The same tendencies can be found for both tabloid paper reading and party identification, but even though these effects appear to be stronger for the youngest respondents, they are also significant for the older respondents.

The mobilization effect with regard to trust in the national parliament is significant in all groups but is not in fact strongest among the youngest, but among the oldest citizens. Satisfaction with democracy only shows significant effects for the election years amongst the oldest respondents.

## Conclusions

This study has shown that in the Swedish case, there is clear evidence of mobilizing effects with regard to political interest, trust in the national parliament, party identification and possibly also satisfaction with the way democracy works. The results also show mobilizing effects with regard to the readership of tabloid papers, but not with regard to consumption of other news media, although election years appear to limit the downward trend in readership of morning newspapers. Interestingly, with

regard to trust in media institutions, the results show an inverse relationship. Instead of increasing trust in media institutions during election years, we find decreasing trust. Generally speaking, then, the evidence suggests that elections do mobilize people, but mainly politically and not with regard to the media. The fact that modern election campaigns are mainly fought in the media and that people rely on the media for political information appears to make little difference, although dissatisfaction with the media coverage of elections might be part of the explanation behind the decreasing trust in media institutions in election years.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the results show that the mobilizing effects occur among all groups of people regardless of educational level, and there was no support for the hypothesis that those with medium–high educational level would be more mobilized than those with lower or higher educational levels. Regarding the importance of social class, those belonging to the working class were more mobilized than middle class respondents in relation to satisfaction with the way democracy works, trust in parliament and party identification, but middle class respondents were more mobilized with regard to political interest and news consumption. Finally, the youngest respondents were more mobilized than older respondents with regard to political interest, party identification and consumption of tabloid papers, but not with regard to the other dependent variables.

The general conclusion is thus that elections do matter and they do mobilize people politically, and this effect is only moderately affected by whether people are young or old, if they have low, medium or high education, or which social class they belong to.

However, it should also be noted that there are some weaknesses associated with this study. Most importantly, the measures of the media variables might be too broad in scope. The consumption of morning papers, TV news and radio news by the general public might not significantly change during election years, since this kind of news consumption tends to be habitual (Andersson, 2005). However, this does not rule out the possibility that people follow political news more closely during election years than otherwise, and that there might indeed be stronger mobilization effects with regard to media consumption after all. The fact that readership of tabloid papers increased during election years whereas consumption of other media did not does lend some support to such an interpretation. Reading of tabloid papers tends to be more event-driven than consumption of morning papers and broadcast news, creating more potential for mobilization effects.

Additionally, further research is obviously required in order to establish whether these kinds of mobilizing effects also occur in other countries with different political systems and media systems. The results in this study show that elections in Sweden do mobilize people, although mainly politically and not with regard to the media, but the universality of such effects needs to be further researched.

Finally, it should be noted that all kinds of mobilizing effects might be sensitive to different contextual factors. Just as electoral turnout is affected by a number of individual level and system level factors, mobilization effects can be expected to depend on a number of factors not accounted for in this study. Most importantly,

perhaps, is the frequency of elections. Considering the low frequency of elections in Sweden, it is important to study whether there are also mobilizing effects in countries with a higher frequency of elections.

Thus, a great deal of further research is required in order to not only demonstrate the existence and the strength of these effects, but also to find the necessary preconditions for mobilizing effects with reference to elections, in Sweden and elsewhere.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that in 2003 Sweden had a referendum about the euro.
2. Until 1998 65–79 years.
3. 1990–1991,  $n = 3121$ ,  $t = -1,14$ ,  $p < 0.25$ ; 1993–1994,  $n = 3523$ ,  $t = -2,28$ ,  $p < 0.02$ ; 1997–1998,  $n = 5261$ ,  $t = -4,00$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 2001–2002,  $n = 7088$ ,  $t = -2,83$ ,  $p < 0.00$ .
4. 1990–1991,  $n = 3155$ ,  $t = -3,25$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 1993–1994,  $n = 3561$ ,  $t = -1,52$ ,  $p < 0.13$ ; 1997–1998,  $n = 5315$ ,  $t = -1,38$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 2001–2002,  $n = 7247$ ,  $t = -3,32$ ,  $p < 0.00$ .
5. 1990–1991,  $n = 3095$ ,  $t = -3,59$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 1993–1994,  $n = 3530$ ,  $t = -13,37$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 1997–1998,  $n = 5245$ ,  $t = -6,68$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 2001–2002,  $n = 7019$ ,  $t = -2,42$ ,  $p < 0.00$ .
6. 1987–1988,  $n = 3059$ ,  $t = -1,89$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 1990–1991,  $n = 2873$ ,  $t = -8,89$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 1993–1994,  $n = 3431$ ,  $t = -4,51$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 1997–1998,  $n = 5245$ ,  $t = -6,68$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ; 2001–2002,  $n = 6840$ ,  $t = -6,26$ ,  $p < 0.00$ .
7. The analyses focus on findings of significant effects, comparing regression models in different groups. In doing so we cannot tell if the mobilizing effects in different groups are significant *from each other*.
8. The findings were systematically tested comparing mean differences between election years and non-election years. To strengthen our conclusions we also tested mobilizing effects doing regression models using aggregate data. In these models the dependent variables measured changes in mean scores compared with the year before. These regression models included between eight (satisfaction with democracy) and 18 cases (political interest, media exposure and party identification). Despite the small number of cases, significant mobilizing effects ( $p < 0.10$ ) were found for political interest, trust in national parliament, tabloid paper reading and party identification.

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