

Election News Coverage in Democratic Corporatist Countries: A Comparative Study of Sweden and Norway

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The study of political communication and election research has been closely intertwined ever since the end of the Second World War. However, there is still a troubling lack of comparative research with regard to election news coverage in different countries. Thus, the purpose of this article is to compare election news coverage in Sweden and Norway. More specifically, this study focuses on the use of different frames, such as game versus issue framing, episodic versus thematic framing, the journalistic style and the origins of the news stories in the two countries. As Sweden and Norway are very similar, and both belong to the democratic corporatist model of media and politics, this study follows the most similar systems design. Thus, the main hypothesis is that similar political and media systems will produce similar news coverage. The results, however, show that although the election news coverage was rather similar in Swedish and Norwegian newspapers, some significant differences were found. The article discusses these results using the concepts of structural and contextual biases.

Introduction

The histories of political communication research and election research have been closely intertwined ever since the end of the Second World War and the expansion of empirical scholarship (Blumler & McQuail 2001). However, there is still an apparent lack of comparative research with regard to news coverage of national elections. Recently De Vreese (2003b, 184) thus concluded that: 'Evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent.' The only major exception to that rule was the seminal study *The Formation of Campaign Agendas* by Semetko et al. (1991). Since then, the situation has begun to change, and a few studies now exist which compare news coverage of national elections in different countries (Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2006; Strömbäck & Shehata 2007). However, these studies have been based on a *most different systems design*, and as of today

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there are virtually no studies based on a *most similar systems design*. Thus, the purpose of this study is to compare the news coverage of national elections in two countries very similar to each other: *Sweden* and *Norway*. The study will focus on the framing of politics in election news coverage at the time of the Swedish national election in 2002 and the Norwegian national election in 2005.

Sweden and Norway: Two Democratic Corporatist Countries

Sweden and Norway are indeed two very similar countries, and not just because they are small and located next to each other in the northern part of Europe. More importantly, they both belong to the same model of media and politics (Hallin & Mancini 2004). In their empirically grounded analysis, Hallin and Mancini identified three different models of media and politics within the framework of established Western democracies. Although these models are ideal types, they do capture important characteristics of media systems and political systems in different countries, and they also enable the classification of individual systems. With reference to media system characteristics, the three models differ with regard to the degree of political parallelism, the strength and importance of newspapers versus broadcasting media, the degree of journalistic professionalization and the role of the state in the media system (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 67). With reference to political system characteristics, the models differ with regard to patterns of conflict or consensus, majoritarian or consensus government, individual versus organized pluralism, the role of the state and the importance of rational legal authority (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 69). The models are labelled the *Liberal Model*, the *Polarized Pluralism Model* and the *Democratic Corporatist Model*. In brief, Hallin and Mancini (2004, 11) describe these as follows:

The Liberal Model is characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media; The Democratic Corporatist Model is characterized 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; The Polarized Pluralism Model is characterized by integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the state.

In their classification of individual countries, Hallin and Mancini state that the United States is the most typical example of the Liberal Model, whereas Greece is the prototypical example of a Polarized Pluralist country. With regard to the Democratic Corporatist Model, they group the Scandinavian countries together and single them out as typical examples of this model. It is as if these countries are indistinguishable. Hence, in the case of Sweden as well as Norway, Hallin and Mancini (2004, 144–5) note three ‘co-existences’

that are typical of Democratic Corporatist Countries. The first relates to a high degree of political parallelism – that is, the tendency for the media to express and reflect political or social divisions in society – co-existing with a strongly developed mass circulation press. Second, a high level of political parallelism has co-existed with a high level of journalistic professionalization. Third, a strong tradition of freedom of the press has co-existed with active welfare state policies and interventions in the media sector. Some of these co-existences are still in existence, even though the news media no longer reflect political and social divisions to the same extent as was previously the case. Nowadays, it is perceived as contrary to the standards of journalistic professionalization to allow news coverage to be influenced by partisan bias. However, there is still a strong mass circulation press. In 2000, newspaper sales per 1,000 adult citizens were about 719 in Norway and 541 in Sweden (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 24). Similarly, the public service television audience share is almost exactly the same in Sweden and Norway, or more specifically 44 and 41 percent, respectively (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 42).

With regard to the political system, both Sweden and Norway are parliamentary democracies with multi-party systems, with seven parties being represented since the 2002 and the 2005 election, respectively. Both countries have proportional electoral systems, where voters choose between party ballots. Thus, both countries are party-centered as opposed to candidate-centered. This is true, even though voters in both countries can express their preference for a candidate. Furthermore, coalition or minority governments are the rule and single-party governments based on a parliamentary majority are the exception.

In Sweden, the Social Democrats are the most important party. They have formed the government since the 1930s with the exceptions of 1976–1982, 1991–1994 and following the election in 2006. The situation in Norway used to be similar, but nowadays one single party no longer dominates the Norwegian parliament to the same extent as the Social Democrats dominate in Sweden. However, the number of relevant parties and the degree of fragmentation of the parties in the respective parliaments are very similar (Klingemann 2005, 36–7). The average level of polarization of relevant parties since the 1940s is higher in Sweden than in Norway, although this difference has declined during the last decades (Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004). One important difference, however, is the existence of a right-wing populist party. Norway has had such a party since the 1970s – the Progress Party – and it has regularly increased its support among the Norwegian electorate. The Swedes had only a brief encounter with a similarly constituted party when ‘New Democracy’ stepped into the Swedish political arena in 1991. However, it vanished from the scene only three years later.

Although this discussion is by no means exhaustive, it shows that it is reasonable to treat Norway and Sweden as very similar cases. The question,

then, is whether this situation is reflected in the framing of politics in election news coverage in Sweden and Norway.

The Concept of News Framing

During the last decade, framing theory has become one of the most popular theories within research on mass communication and political communication (Bryant & Miron 2004). Its modern roots, however, can be traced back to Goffman (1974; see Lemert & Braneman, 1997), who wrote about 'frame analysis' as an examination 'of the organization of experience' in everyday life (Lemert & Braneman 1997, 155). Similarly, framing theory as applied to communication research concerns the organization of media texts, as well as the origins of media framing and their effects (De Vreese 2003a; Callaghan & Schnell 2005; Reese et al. 2001; Scheufele 1999). At its core, framing is concerned with how events, issues or social actors are organized in communicative messages and in the thinking of individuals. Within the context of media framing, a more specific definition is offered by Tankard (2001, 100) who writes that: 'A frame is a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.' Another influential definition is offered by Entman (1993; 2004, 5), according to whom framing concerns 'selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution'.

Thus, framing is a process at work every time anyone has to make choices with regard to what to include and exclude as well as what to emphasize or de-emphasize in a communicative text. In the context of news production this means that framing is inevitable. It does not mean, however, that it must be a conscious process, although it can be. Furthermore, and to the extent that people make use of the news to form opinions about the world outside their own experiences, it means that framing is consequential. Thus, how the media frame politics is able to have profound effects on how people perceive what it is that is being reported by the news media (Cappella & Jamieson 1997; Entman 2004; Iyengar 1991; Price et al. 1997; Shah et al. 2001).

According to Entman (2004, 14): 'The most inherently powerful frames are those fully congruent with the schemas habitually used by most members of society.' Thus, the *effects of framing* are affected by the socio-cultural context of the media reporting and the audiences who are exposed to the news frames. As journalists are generally part of the same socio-cultural context as their audiences, this indicates that to some extent the *antecedents of framing* can also be traced back to specific socio-cultural conditions. However, it is not only the socio-cultural context that is important. Other

important variables in this context include the political system and the media system, the context of a particular election or issue, and the circumstances of news production. This forms the major concerns with regard to the concept of structural bias.

The Concept of Structural Bias

When bias is discussed in political communication research it is most often referring to partisan bias – that is, the real or imagined tendency for news media and news journalists to give more, and more positive, coverage to parties, candidates or policies with which they agree, and the opposite for those with which they disagree. While the topic of partisan bias is important and worthy of scholarly attention, it is also obvious that most research shows that partisan bias is quite rare in modern day news reporting. This is true in Sweden (Asp 2003, 2006; Petersson et al. 2006) as well as in Norway (Narud & Waldahl 2004; Waldahl & Narud 2004; Hoff 2006) and other countries such as the United States (Gulati et al. 2004; Niven 2002).

However, the absence of partisan bias does not mean that modern-day news reporting is neutral. On the contrary, there is a great deal of evidence that the news media tend to favor some stories and frames over others. Furthermore, they might favor one party and disfavor another, but this is not due to journalistic intentions and partisan bias. Rather, in such cases it might be due to structural biases. For example, research shows that there is a journalistic tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than as issues (Patterson 1993; Waldahl & Narud 2004; Strömbäck 2004), to apply episodic rather than thematic framing (Iyengar 1991; Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2006), to focus the coverage on likely winners of an election campaign (Gulati et al. 2004; Hofstetter 1976), and to favor stories that include controversies and negative news rather than those dealing with consensus, solutions and positive news (Bennett 2003; Entman 2004; Fallows 1996; Niven 2002; Benoit et al. 2005).

The concept of structural bias can be traced back to Hofstetter (1976). According to him, structural bias is concerned with biases that occur due to factors associated with the medium itself or the processes of news production: ‘Structural bias in television news reporting occurs 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’ (Hofstetter 1976, 34). Similarly, Graber (2006, 236) writes that: ‘Political bias reflects ideological judgments, whereas structural bias reflects the circumstances of news production.’ However, as a theoretical concept, structural bias is still rather underdeveloped and in need of further conceptual analysis and explication. Nevertheless, it might offer a promising avenue for linking the abstract level of different models of media and

political systems to the journalistic output. If different models of media and political systems are closely interrelated with the circumstances of news production, and the circumstances of news production cause structural biases that influence the news, then it follows that news produced by different media located in different systems of media and politics under different circumstances should produce significantly different news (Strömbäck & Shehata 2007). Conversely, this implies that the news should be rather similar when produced by similar media in similar systems of media and politics under similar circumstances.

Hypothesis

To study whether this is indeed true, this study investigates the news coverage in two similar countries – Sweden and Norway – belonging to the same model of media and political systems – the Democratic Corporatist Model – focusing on the framing of politics in the same type of media – newspapers – during similar circumstances – election campaigns. Of course, ‘similar’ does not imply that the cases under comparison are exactly the same.¹ Even though the news coverage is expected to be influenced by structural biases, it is also influenced by contextual factors. For example, the closeness of an election might have an influence on the extent to which the news media frame politics as a game rather than as issues. In addition, the existence of a populist right-wing party in Norway and the strong position of the Social Democrats in Sweden are part of the structural settings, which might cause differences in how the elections are covered despite the similarities across the two countries with regard to other aspects of the media and political systems. Nevertheless, and as this study should be perceived as exploratory, we have chosen as our main hypothesis that there will be no major differences with regard to how Swedish and Norwegian newspapers covered the Swedish and Norwegian elections in 2002 and 2005, respectively. To study whether this hypothesis is supported, we will compare the framing of politics, the journalistic style, the extent to which the news stories originate from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors, the publication of polls, occurrences of speculation and the frequency of articles investigating the record of the administration.

Methodology and Data

To compare the election news coverage in Sweden and Norway, we have chosen three newspapers in each country that can be considered functionally equivalent. Thus, in both countries, we have included two leading morning

papers and one leading newsstand tabloid. The morning papers in Sweden are *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, and in Norway *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen*. The newsstand tabloid included is *Aftonbladet* in the Swedish case and *VG* in the Norwegian case. The study uses quantitative content analysis, and the time period was the three weeks before the Swedish election in 2002, held on September 15, and the Norwegian election in 2005, held on September 12. The unit of analysis is single news articles. All articles were manually selected. The first selection criterion was that the articles should start or be referred to on the front page. 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*, 38 articles from *Aftenposten*, 33 articles from *Dagsavisen* and 14 articles from *VG*.²

The code sheet included a number of variables. Most importantly, a number of predefined framing variables were included in order to capture the framing of politics in each article. Two of these variables – *contextual frame* and the *metaframe of politics* – were coded on a dominant frame basis. Coders were also able to make the choice of ‘cannot be determined’. With regards to the *metaframe of politics*, coders were asked 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. With regard to the *contextual frame*, coders were asked to choose between episodic and thematic framing, where the former refers to isolated reporting focusing on a specific event removed from its context. These news stories take the form of a case study. Thematic framing, on the other hand, refers to news stories that position the event in a broader context or that deal with its meanings or implications for society (Iyengar 1991).

A number of frames coded on a presence/absence basis were also included because it is possible to have multiple and sometimes overlapping frames within a news story (see Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2006; Strömbäck & Shehata 2007). 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 behaviors 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 using 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). Four of these (*horse race frame*, *governing frame*, *political strategy frame* and *news management frame*) can be perceived as forming part of the game metaframe. The other frames are more independent in relation to the game and issue metaframes.

In addition to these variables, coders were asked: 'In your best judgment, does the news story originate from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors?' The options available were 'yes', 'no' or 'cannot be determined'. A variable was also included regarding the publication of scientific opinion polls – that is, polls with a representative sample, where coders were given the choice of 'yes' and 'no'. Regarding journalistic style, coders were asked to judge whether the style of each news story was either *descriptive* (told in a rather straightforward style) or *interpretive* (a situation is analyzed, evaluated or explained while also being described). Coders were also asked to analyze whether the articles included a journalistic investigation of the record of the former administration. They were instructed that the answer should be 'yes' if the news story presented results from a *journalistic investigation* about whether the administration had kept its promises, the effects of the policies enforced by the administration or if the journalist presented facts about societal developments and related these to the policies of the administration. Finally, a variable was included regarding whether each story included speculation concerning future possible events. Coders were given the choice 'yes' or 'no'.

To conduct an intercoder reliability check, 10 percent of the Swedish and 10 percent of the Norwegian articles were randomly selected to include news articles from all newspapers. With regard to the Swedish articles, the intercoder reliability was 0.91 across all categories, using Holsti's formula. The corresponding reliability score was 0.87 with regard to the Norwegian articles. This level of agreement was considered acceptable.

Results

The theoretical review suggests that the circumstances of news production might cause structural biases to occur in election news coverage. The political system, the media system and the context of a particular election are factors assumed to contribute to such a bias. In a comparative perspective, Sweden and Norway are considered similar cases; hence, we expect to find no major differences in election news coverage in Swedish and Norwegian newspapers. The first results are displayed in Table 1, focusing on the two frames in this study that were coded on a dominant frame basis: the contextual

Table 1. Dominant Frames in Swedish and Norwegian Newspapers (%)

	Swedish articles	Norwegian articles	Cramers V
Metaframe			0.17*
Game	50	66	
Issue	50	34	
Contextual frame			0.07
Episodic	61	64	
Thematic	39	36	
N	175	85	

Note: Entries are percentages of number of articles. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

frame and the metaframe. The results show that there was virtually no difference with regard to the usage of episodic versus thematic contextual framing, as expected. The episodic frame was dominant in 61 percent of the Swedish and 64 percent of the Norwegian articles.

There was, however, a significant difference with regards to usage of a game metaframe. This frame was dominant in 50 percent of the Swedish and 66 percent of the Norwegian articles, whereas the issue metaframe was dominant in 50 percent of the Swedish and 34 percent of the Norwegian articles. Perhaps this can be explained with reference to the context of the two elections under comparison. In the Swedish case, Prime Minister Persson entered the campaign as the country's most popular party leader and his party was strong according to the polls. There was not much to suggest that the opposition bloc would achieve a majority (Widfeldt 2003, 1091). From this perspective, the media was not encouraged to focus on the game. The race before the Norwegian election in 2005, on the other hand, was much closer. The red-green opposition had been leading in the polls for some time, but during the final week, polls indicated that it would be a very close race (Aalberg 2006). In this case, what might be labeled 'contextual bias' may have trumped the importance of structural bias. If so, we might have to revise our initial hypothesis somewhat, and expect the governing frame to be more common in the Norwegian than in the Swedish coverage. The results with regard to the frames coded on a presence/absence-basis are displayed in Table 2, and they indeed show that the governing frame was significantly more common in the Norwegian case. This frame was present in about twice as many Norwegian than Swedish articles, which might be interpreted as an effect of a contextual bias at work.

The results also show that the politicians as individuals frame was significantly more common in the Norwegian articles, whereas the conflict and the news management frames were more common in the Swedish articles. There were no significant differences between the countries in the usage of the horse race frame and the political strategy frame. The former was present in

Table 2. The Framing of Politics in Swedish and Norwegian Newspapers (%)

	Swedish articles	Norwegian articles	All articles	Cramers V
Horsrace frame	52	45	50	0.07
Political strategy frame	30	31	30	0.01
News management frame*	9	2	4	0.13*
Politicians as individuals frame*	28	40	32	0.12*
Conflict frame**	45	19	36	0.25**
Governing frame**	26	53	35	0.27**
N	175	85	258	

Note: Entries are percentages of number of articles. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

about 50 percent of all articles, whereas the latter was present in close to a third of the articles in both countries. In the case of the news management frame, it should however be noted that this frame was rather rare in both countries. The most important findings that run contrary to our hypothesis are related to the politicians as individuals frame and the conflict frame.³ The more frequent use of the politicians as individuals frame could, however, be at least partly explained by the existence in Norway of the populist right-wing Progress Party under its leader Carl I. Hagen. Mazzoleni et al. (2003) argue that there is a close relationship between the media and the growth of such parties as the media cannot ignore the newsworthiness of politicians who defy the existing order and often use a slogan-based tabloid-style language. The charismatic leadership that is often associated with such parties might explain why the politicians-as-individuals frame was more common in the Norwegian than in the Swedish articles. If so, this forms part of a structural bias that in this case appears to be more important than the other similarities between Sweden and Norway.

It could also be that personal characteristics, generally speaking, are considered more important in Norway, and that this represents a political communication culture that is different from that of Sweden. There is no doubt that the Norwegian parties and the Norwegian media believe that candidate characteristics are important for the electorate (Jenssen & Aalberg 2006). For example, in 1997 and 1999 the Norwegian media generally concluded that the Labour Party's disastrous election results were a function of its leader's lack of personal communication skills. Based on a dubious opinion poll, Norway's largest newspaper even 'promised' the Labour Party an 11 percent gain in popular support by simply changing leaders. The immense pressure forced the party leader to stand down, but without the predicted effect in the polls.

The behavior of the Progress Party and its party leader might also explain some of the other results with regard to framing in Norway as opposed to

Sweden. Prior to the 2005 election campaign in Norway, Hagen clearly indicated that their ultimate dream was to be part of a new non-socialist government. However, for the first time in many years, the election campaign focused on two clearly defined governmental alternatives. The Progress Party was included in neither and discovered during the spring of 2005 that attention was primarily directed towards the other parties. At the same time, Prime Minister Bondevik turned down all overtures to establish formal cooperation with the Progress Party. This made Hagen declare that his party would, under no circumstances, support a new government under Bondevik's leadership. As a result, much attention was again directed towards the Progress Party. Much of this attention focused not on the policies, but on the motives behind the actions and thus framed politics as a game. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that some of the difference regarding the usage of the game metaframe, the governing frame and the politicians as individuals frame could be explained by the closeness of the election and the existence of a populist party in Norway, but not in Sweden.

Regarding the significant difference in the usage of the governing frame, this might also be explained by the different roles of the Social Democratic parties in the two countries. While the Social Democrats in Sweden have formed most governments since the 1930s, this is not the case in Norway. Another structural factor concerns the role of political cleavages in the two countries. Swedish politics have often been described as one-dimensional in that the left-right ideological continuum is by far the most dominant factor for both voter preferences and government formation (Oscarsson 1998, 298; Heidar 2004, 52). In Norway, the territorial cleavage has been equally important, which has also made the question of government alternatives more complex (Aardal 1999; Valen 2003; Heidar 2004; Narud 1999, 2003). Hence, the absence of one dominant party and the multidimensional cleavage system in Norwegian politics are two structural factors that might explain the higher share of articles with a governing frame in Norway.

The difference in the usage of the conflict frame is somewhat more difficult to explain as both countries are consensus-oriented. The role of political cleavages could, however, explain some of this difference as party polarization generally is higher in Sweden than in Norway (Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004, 106). The multi-cleavage structure in Norway could also be a factor that de-emphasizes party conflicts. There is also a large share of the Norwegian electorate who see no major difference between the political parties (Aardal et al. 2003, 115). Furthermore, the 2004 European Parliament election study indicates that a larger share of the Swedish electorate, as compared to the Norwegian one, is able to see major differences between the parties (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2006). Hence, the clear conflict structure in Swedish politics might explain the higher share of articles with a conflict frame.

Table 3. The Journalistic Style in Swedish and Norwegian Election Coverage (%)

	Swedish articles	Norwegian articles	All articles	Cramers V
Interpretive style*	45	59	50	0.13*
Speculation**	76	52	68	0.24**
Investigation*	5	13	7	0.15*
N	175	85	258	

Note: Entries are percentages of number of articles. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Still, the results so far do not support our main hypothesis. Instead, the evidence is mixed. The next step is to study whether the journalistic style varied between the two countries and if there are any differences regarding the occurrence of speculation and the frequency of articles including a journalistic investigation into the record of the administration. The results are presented in Table 3, and they show several differences between the Swedish and the Norwegian articles. While 59 percent of the Norwegian articles followed an interpretive style, this was the case in only 45 percent of the Swedish articles. An even bigger difference is found in the journalists' tendency to speculate. In Sweden, 76 percent of the articles included speculation concerning future events. Norwegian articles also include speculation concerning outcomes or events that are uncertain, but here only a narrow majority of 52 percent included such statements. Finally, there is a small but significant difference with regard to the number of articles that included a journalistic investigation into the record of the administration. This type of journalistic investigation was rare in both countries, but was rather more common in the Norwegian (13 percent) than in the Swedish (5 percent) press.

These different findings are more difficult to explain. As Gulati et al. (2004, 243) argue, many journalists consider it irresponsible to simply describe the campaign without delving into the candidate's motivation or without exploring why particular campaign decisions were made. Yet the Norwegian and Swedish media systems are about equally commercialized, the level of political public relations equally developed in the two countries, and most newspapers in both Sweden and Norway have broken their formal ties to the political parties. Hence, system differences can hardly explain the higher number of interpretive articles in Norway. Neither is it easy to explain the higher level of speculations in the Swedish press, or the somewhat higher share of investigative articles in Norway. It might be the case that there are different journalistic cultures in Sweden and Norway, which leads to these differences, but due to the lack of comparative research in this area we cannot be sure.

Table 4. The Origin of News Stories in Swedish and Norwegian Election Coverage (%)

	Swedish articles	Norwegian articles	All articles	Cramers V
Triggered by political actors	27	24	26	0.03
Scientific poll	15	18	16	0.04
N	175	85	258	

Note: Entries are percentages of number of articles. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

We also investigated the origin of the news stories in the Swedish and Norwegian election coverage. Coders were asked to indicate whether the news story originated from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors. This appeared to be the case in about a third of the articles, and there was no significant difference between the Swedish and the Norwegian articles (Table 4). The results additionally show that there was no significant difference with regard to the publication of opinion polls: 15 percent of the Swedish articles and 18 percent of the Norwegian articles presented results from one or several such opinion polls. Despite the differences with regard to journalistic style, the results thus indicate that both Swedish and Norwegian journalists refuse to be dictated to by party sources and ultimately control most of the election coverage (Aalberg & Brandenburg 2004; Strömbäck & Nord 2006).

Conclusion

This study compared the news coverage of national elections in Sweden and Norway. Based on the similarities of these two countries and the concept of structural bias, we assumed that there would be no major differences in the election coverage in these two countries. However, the evidence indicates that although the origin of the news stories and much of the framing were similar across the two countries, there were also some important differences. Some of these differences can be explained by contextual factors and a few structural differences that actually do vary between the two countries. The higher percentage of Norwegian articles that applied a game metaframe might be explained by the closeness of the election and, to some extent, by the existence of a right-wing populist party. Moreover, the higher share of Norwegian articles with a governing frame is probably caused by the absence of one dominant party, the closeness of the election, as well as the multi-dimensional cleavage system in Norwegian politics. Similarly, the higher share of Swedish articles with a conflict frame could be caused by the clear and one-dimensional conflict structure within Swedish politics.

Thus, we believe that different contextual circumstances might create a contextual bias that may vary within similar models of media and politics and from one election to the next. While the concept of structural bias might explain differences and similarities between different systems and models of media and politics, the concept of contextual bias might help us understand variations across time and between countries that are described as having similar party and media systems. Our study also suggests that even within similar systems there may be a few important structural differences that may influence the election news coverage. In addition to the need for further conceptual analysis and explication of the concept of structural bias, there thus appears to be a need for further conceptual analysis and explication of the concept of contextual bias.

In order to investigate these arguments further, future research should include other democratic corporatist countries as well as several elections from each country. For instance, if the existence of a dominant party or a right-wing populist party matters with regard to how the news media frame an election campaign, then Denmark should be closer to the Norwegian case than to the Swedish case. Moreover, the closeness of elections not only varies from country to country, it also varies over time. Future research should thus include studies from more than one election in each country. Such a design will also assist in the uncovering of the relative influence of structural biases, contextual factors and the importance of a more indefinite political communication culture. Future research should also include not only front-page stories, but also a wider sample across different media. Finally, we see a strong need for further theoretical and conceptual thinking related to the different biases that might be at work, shaping not only the election news coverage, but also the coverage of everyday politics.

NOTES

1. Originally the method of agreement argues that if two or more instances of a phenomenon under investigation have only one of several possible causal circumstances in common, then the circumstance in which all the instances agree is the cause of the phenomenon of interest. In our case we assume that similar political and media systems will create similar news coverage. Although the system is described as similar, a diffusion of political structure and media formats can occur. We do not perform a strict method of agreement analysis in that we study several cases with identical election news coverage – and then search for a wide variety of possible causal factors that may influence this coverage.
2. The lower number of Norwegian news stories may suggest that election news is given a higher priority by the Swedish than the Norwegian press. We also see that a larger share of the Swedish sample consists of stories from the newsstand tabloids. To make sure that this does not influence our results, we have run a separate analysis for the quality morning papers only. The results are basically the same.
3. This difference is even stronger if we exclude the newsstand tabloid stories from the analysis. Separate analyses on the quality morning papers show that 38 percent of the Norwegian news stories used such a frame, while only 19 percent of the Swedish quality press applied politicians as individual frames.

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