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The International Journal of Press/Politics 2013 18: 234 originally published online 27 January 2013

DOI: 10.1177/1940161212473831

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The International Journal of Press/Politics
18(2) 234–255

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DOI: 10.1177/1940161212473831

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Adam Shehata¹ and Jesper Strömbäck¹

Abstract

In recent years, profound media environmental changes have sparked a controversy regarding whether we are entering a new era of minimal effects. Focusing on one of the most important media effect theories, agenda setting, this study combines a panel survey and a media content analysis to test three claims derived from the new era of minimal effects discussion: (1) that recent media environmental changes have reduced the agenda setting influence of traditional news media to non-significance, (2) that increased opportunities for media choice have made partisan selective exposure the key mechanism behind media effects, and (3) that the availability of alternative online news sources reduces susceptibility to agenda setting effects from the traditional news media. Among other things, the results show that traditional news media still exert agenda-setting influence on both the aggregate and individual levels, but that these effects are weakened by use of multiple online news media. Overall, the results suggest that a generalized “we” have not (yet) entered a new era of minimal effects, and that certain media system characteristics are likely to condition the pace of any potential transition to a new minimal effects era.

Keywords

media effects, agenda setting, panel survey, audience selectivity

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In recent years, profound media environmental changes have sparked a controversy regarding the influence of traditional mass media on public opinion. In an important article, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) argued that with

the continued detachment of individuals from the group-based society, and the increased capacity of consumers to choose from a multitude of media channels . . . effects become increasingly difficult to produce or measure in the aggregate while creating new challenges for theory and research. (p. 708)

They also argued that contemporary societies might be entering “a new era of minimal effects” (Bennett and Iyengar 2008: 709).

Others argue, however, that traditional mass media remain crucial to public opinion formation and that the idea of a new era of minimal effects is mistaken. In a direct response to Bennett and Iyengar (2008), Holbert et al. (2010: 16), argued, for example, that “a full range of effects is not only plausible, but distinctly probable, even amidst the extraordinary sociotechnical change occurring in our media system and democracy.”

One of the most important media effect theories, which also contributed to changing the effects paradigm from one of minimal effects to one of powerful media in the early-1970s, is agenda-setting theory (McCombs 2004). Not only Bennett and Iyengar (2008) but also scholars such as Chaffee and Metzger (2001) and Takeshita (2005) have, however, questioned whether the news media still have agenda-setting effects. Based on their theorizing and if we are indeed entering a new era of minimal effects, then it should become increasingly difficult to detect and measure agenda-setting effects.

Against this background and based on a most different systems approach, the purpose of this study is to add empirical evidence to the debate about a new era of minimal effects by investigating agenda-setting effects at the aggregate and individual levels. More specifically, we will test three claims derived from the new era of minimal effects discussion that (1) recent media environmental changes have reduced the agenda-setting influence of traditional news media to nonsignificance, (2) increased opportunities for media choice have made partisan selective exposure the key mechanism behind media effects, and (3) the use of multiple online news sources reduces susceptibility to agenda-setting effects from the traditional news media. Empirically, the study combines a panel survey and a content analysis carried out during the 2010 Swedish election, a design that will enable causal inferences about the agenda-setting effects on both the aggregate and individual levels. Before outlining our argument, we will briefly recapitulate the new era of minimal effects debate.

The New Era of Minimal Effects Debate

Even though arguments suggesting a gradual withering of the traditional news media's impact on public opinion have been around for some time (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Chaffee and Metzger 2001; Takeshita 2005), these ideas were recently put to the research forefront by Bennett and Iyengar (2008, 2010) who argued

that “we” may be entering a new era of minimal effects. Although Bennett and Iyengar (2008) on a more general level argue that political communication scholars have been slow to take societal and technological transformations into account when theorizing, their case for a new era of minimal effects rests on five interlinked arguments. The first argument is that the number of media and the supply of information have increased exponentially due to technological transformations such as the rise of cable TV and the Internet. The second argument is that this has caused increasing audience fragmentation. With ever more channels and a greater supply of information available, all the time and through different platforms, audiences are increasingly forced to make choices regarding which media and media content to expose themselves to.

The third argument is that this leads to an increasing importance of selective exposure. When citizens have to choose what media and media content to expose themselves to, their preferences will play a significantly more decisive role in explaining their media consumption (Prior 2007; Strömbäck et al. 2012). This results in what Bennett and Iyengar (2008: 717) label “stratamentation,” stratification and fragmentation taking place at the same time. The fourth argument is that all this leads to the decline of the inadvertent audience for news. The fifth argument, and this may hold particularly true in the United States due to the increasing political polarization (demand) and the availability of partisan media channels such as Fox News (supply), is that partisan preferences have become a much stronger predictor of what media and media content citizens choose to follow. Hence, “selective exposure results in attitudes that are endogenous to messages received” (Bennett and Iyengar 2010: 38).

Taken together, this suggests “the issue may be less about what media companies are doing to people and more about what people are doing with the media” (Chaffee and Metzger 2001: 370). This makes it increasingly difficult to “treat exposure as a potential cause of political beliefs and attitudes” and to “disentangle the reciprocal effects of media exposure and political attitudes or behaviors” (Bennett and Iyengar 2008: 724). Although Bennett and Iyengar (2008: 725) note that diminishing effects are particularly likely for persuasive effects, they also approvingly quote Chaffee and Metzger’s (2001: 375) prediction that “the key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about.” Thus, in their discussion about a new era of minimal effects, they do not exclude agenda-setting effects.

In contrast to the new era of minimal effects perspective, other scholars have, however, argued that the traditional news media still exert substantial influence over public opinion, despite the tremendous media environmental changes that have taken place. For instance, in a direct response to Bennett and Iyengar, Holbert et al. (2010) stress several theoretical and empirical reasons why the broader societal and media environmental transformations have not weakened traditional media effects. With respect to agenda-setting effects in particular, Takeshita (2005) asks whether the multiplication of new media channels necessarily has led to growing diversity of news content, and highlights the fact that most Internet users tend to visit only a limited number of news sources online, often those of the largest traditional news media. Studies indicating

fairly strong correlations between the agenda of traditional and online media also question whether audience agendas are fragmenting as the number of channels and outlets increase (McCombs et al. 2011). Following this argument, it might still be “too early to answer the questions of whether the consensus-building function of the mass media will decline or whether the fragmentation of the public agenda is inevitable” (Takeshita 2005: 288).

Purpose and Research Design

To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to add empirical evidence to the debate about a new era of minimal effects by investigating agenda-setting effects at the aggregate and individual levels. Although this study will not be able to test all claims in this debate, it will shine new empirical light on three related aspects of the “new era of minimal effects” debate. First, we will investigate whether there are still agenda-setting effects and whether there are any differences in those effects on the aggregate and the individual levels. Second, we will investigate whether partisan effects have replaced agenda-setting effects in an era when media choice is greater than ever. Third, we will investigate whether individual-level agenda-setting effects are weaker among users of multiple online news sources.

Empirically, the study is based on a representative panel survey and a content analysis of the most important national media carried out during the 2010 Swedish election. The rationale for choosing Sweden is that Sweden constitutes a most different case compared with the United States (Åsard and Bennett 1997), the basis for the recent debate. Although both countries are advanced, postindustrial democracies, with an abundance of media, the United States is a prototypical example of the liberal model of media and politics while Sweden is a typical example of the democratic corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In particular, we suggest that two characteristics that differentiate the Swedish from the U.S. media system are of importance when generalizing about the influence of traditional news media based on the American experience. First, the Swedish dual broadcasting system is heavily shaped by two public service channels (SVT1 and SVT2) and a commercial channel with some public service obligations (TV4), which together provide extensive political information opportunities through news and current affairs programs during prime time (Aalberg and Curran 2011; Aalberg et al. 2010; Asp 2011; Esser et al. 2012). Together, these channels still attract large and broad segments of the population in ways that influence the size of the inadvertent audience for news (Shehata 2012). Second, the Swedish broadcasting system lacks explicit partisan television channels that would enable citizens to actively seek out channels that correspond to their personal ideological preferences. The major television and radio channels are guided by public service obligations that require neutrality and impartiality in their news reporting (Strömbäck and Nord 2008).

Both these characteristics provide a different context for traditional news media to influence public opinion compared with the U.S. media system. In essence, if “we” are

indeed entering a new era of minimal effects, this should be manifest also in countries that are highly different from the United States, such as Sweden. If no trace of minimal effects can be found, it would serve to qualify *universal* statements of a new era of minimal effects.

The rationale for choosing agenda setting is that this is the most established of all effect theories and one of the key theories that changed the effects paradigm from minimal to powerful media effects (Bryant and Miron 2004; McCombs 2004), while at the same time, many have argued that the media's agenda-setting influence has been undermined by the proliferation of media channels and increasing audience fragmentation (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Chaffee and Metzger 2001; Metzger 2009; Takeshita 2005). Thus, there is a need to investigate whether it still holds true that the media have great influence over what issues people consider to be the most important.

Agenda Setting in a New Era: Aggregate- and Individual-Level Effects

The idea that media environmental changes have rendered agenda setting irrelevant as a theory of media effects lies at the heart of the new era of minimal effects controversy (Bennett and Iyengar 2008, 2010; Chaffee and Metzger 2001; Metzger 2009; Takeshita 2005). This controversy raises the question whether—and to what extent—news coverage in traditional media still have any discernable causal impact on public opinion by influencing public issue salience. One key distinction that has not received enough attention in this controversy, however, is the distinction between aggregate- and individual-level effects. While it might be the case that the media have lost their agenda-setting influence on the aggregate level, they might still have it on the individual level—or it might be the case that the media have or have not lost their agenda-setting influence on both or none of these levels of analysis.

A premise of agenda-setting theory, as noted by Chaffee and Metzger (2001), is that citizens get their news from a limited number of media outlets and that the media agenda is fairly uniform across these sources. Such media environments, characterized by a high level of *consonant media coverage*, which can be defined as “uniform or similar tendencies in reporting by different media” (Noelle-Neumann and Mathes 1987: 404), are typically considered conducive to powerful media effects (Peter 2004: 161). As argued by several media effect scholars, the multiplication of media channels coupled with individually customized media use patterns has rendered these conditions much less likely than in the heydays of agenda-setting research. As argued by Bennett and Iyengar (2008),

In the era of “old media” . . . it made little difference where voters got their news. The offerings of all news organizations were sufficiently homogeneous and standardized to represent an “information commons.” Americans of all walks of life and political inclination were exposed to the same information. (p. 717)

Similarly, Stroud (2011) notes,

If the media transmit a similar agenda, then irrespective of the outlet to which people attend, they should form similar impressions of which issues are important. Though it may have been true at some point that the mainstream media all transmitted nearly identical information, media messages arguable are far more diverse today. (p. 145)

As a consequence, the basic idea of a common issue agenda among the public, shaped by a unified media agenda of a finite number of traditional news outlets, is becoming less realistic in today's high-choice media environments.

These trends should, however, primarily affect the agenda-setting function of traditional media on the aggregate level but not necessarily on the individual level. While processes of audience fragmentation decrease the likelihood of exposure to similar content as people increasingly use different media, individual citizens might still be influenced by the news media they actually use. In this case, agenda-setting theory would still hold as a theory describing media influence on the micro level, but these effects would not lead to any large-scale imprints on aggregate opinion (Bennett and Iyengar 2010).

To be sure, the distinction between aggregate- and individual-level agenda-setting effects is not unique for the present study. For instance, a key dimension of the Acapulco typology, proposed by McCombs et al. (2011) to classify agenda-setting studies according to their research design, focuses on whether the public agenda is measured on the aggregate or individual level. Compared with the support for agenda-setting effects at the aggregate level found in many previous studies—focusing either on the rank-order correlation between whole sets of issues on the media and public agenda, or on the salience of single issues on the media agenda and in public opinion—the number of individual-level studies is substantially smaller (McCombs et al. 2011; Roessler 1999). As Roessler (2008) has noted, “Individual-level evidence of agenda-setting effects is scarce compared to the overwhelming body of aggregate-level research” (p. 209). Exceptions to this pattern come from experimental and survey studies where participants' perceptions of the importance of single issues are matched with their exposure (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Erbring et al. 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kioussis et al. 1999; Roessler 1999; Shehata 2010).

This lack of strong evidence for individual-level effects is problematic because agenda-setting theory suggests that media effects occur at the micro level through a “learning process that takes place within an individual's information processing” (Bulkow et al. 2012: 2; see also Kioussis and McCombs 2004; Son and Weaver 2005). Thus, to the extent that citizens use the news media for cues on what issues are of national importance, this should be reflected on the individual level, even though large shifts in aggregate opinion might be increasingly hampered by individualized media use patterns.

Against this background, this study will test the classic agenda-setting hypothesis at both levels of analysis using longitudinal panel data. This design will also enable a

stronger test of the hypotheses than most previous studies by allowing us to use *changing* issue importance as key dependent variable. If agenda setting still holds as a theory of media effects at both levels, we should expect the following:

Hypothesis 1: On the aggregate level, issues on top of the traditional news media agenda during the election campaign will be perceived as more important by the public at the end of the election campaign than at the beginning.

Hypothesis 2: On the individual level, exposure to issues on top of the traditional news media agenda will increase the perceived importance of these issues during the election campaign.

In contrast to the argument outlined above—that even though aggregate-level agenda-setting effects might be waning due to fragmented audiences, individual-level effects might persist as a function of specific news media use—there are some suggested and testable reasons why individual-level effects might becoming weaker. Not only may audiences fragment into more diverse issue agendas but individual citizens may also become *less dependent* on traditional news media sources when forming their perceptions of issue importance (Coleman and McCombs 2007; Takeshita 2005). As the number of media choices has increased, citizens are now better able than ever to adjust their media consumption to their personal content preferences—a trend with potentially polarizing consequences for news consumption (Prior 2007; Strömbäck et al. 2012). While citizens who lack an interest in politics are more likely to tune out from news and current affairs altogether, those with a preference for such content can find more information than ever in both traditional media and on the Internet (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Blekesaune et al. 2012).

Thus, the multiplication of channels and media choice opportunities has—in theory—left citizens less dependent on the traditional news media agenda for their perceptions of issue importance (Allen et al. 2007; Perse 2007). This process might have at least two implications.

First, the American experience has highlighted the growing importance of partisan selective exposure, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish media effects from partisan effects (Bennett and Iyengar 2010; Stroud 2011). If partisan preferences are gaining in importance as a predictor of opinion effects, what appear to be agenda-setting effects might, in fact, be partisan effects. That is, while increases in perceived issue importance may occur during a campaign, these changes may not be best explained by attention to traditional news media channels, but rather by partisan predispositions: Citizens with left-wing predispositions might be mobilized on left-wing issues, whereas right-wing citizens might be mobilized by right-wing issues, irrespective of the salience of these issues on the traditional news media agenda. These trends might, however, be specific to the U.S. case and, therefore, not valid descriptions of developments in countries with other media and political systems.

Second, following the argument that the greater availability of alternative news sources has made citizens less dependent on the traditional news media for information

about politics and current affairs, the extent to which people use such supplementary sources should moderate agenda-setting effects from the traditional news media. Thus, it can be expected that citizens who take advantage of multiple news sources online are less dependent on issue importance cues from the traditional news media, as they are able to base their evaluations of issue importance on a broader and more diverse set of considerations.

Based on these arguments derived from the new era of minimal effects controversy, our next two hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Individual-level agenda-setting effects are spurious due to partisan preferences, that is, left-wing voters are mobilized on left-wing issues, whereas right-wing voters are mobilized on right-wing issues, irrespective of the salience of these issues in traditional news media.

Hypothesis 4: Regular use of online news weakens individual susceptibility to agenda-setting effects from traditional news media.

Data and Method

To test our hypotheses, this study uses two panel surveys and a content analysis of the news coverage during the 2010 Swedish election campaign. The surveys and content analysis were designed to enable matched comparisons of content characteristics and changes in public opinion between panel waves. The research design adopted here provides a substantially stronger test of agenda-setting effects than most previous studies: Rather than using rank-order correlations as a measure of aggregate-level effects, this study focuses on *changes* in perceived issue importance over time on the aggregate and individual levels following variations in the salience of a range of issues in the traditional news media.

Investigating the Public Agenda: The Panel Survey(s)

Our primary source of public opinion data is a four-wave panel survey conducted during the Swedish election campaign. As a complement, information from a two-wave panel study will be used to validate findings from the main survey. Both panel surveys (Panel A and Panel B) were conducted by the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University, in cooperation with the polling institute Synovate.

The samples for both surveys were drawn using stratified probability sampling from a database of approximately twenty-eight thousand citizens from Synovate's pool of Web-survey participants. The participants included in this pool are recruited continuously using both random digit dialing and mail surveys based on random probability samples. Approximately, 5 percent of those who are initially contacted and invited agree to be part of this pool of respondents.

Panel Survey A is based on a stratified probability sample of 4,760 respondents aged eighteen to seventy-four from this pool, stratified by gender, age, county size,

political interest, and Internet use, so as to be as representative of the Swedish population aged eighteen to seventy-four as possible. Respondents in Panel A were asked to complete a Web survey four times during a period of approximately five months leading up to the election. Wave 1 of the panel took place in May (May 3–20), Wave 2 in mid-June (June 14–23), Wave 3 in mid-August (August 16–23), and Wave 4 immediately after Election Day (September 20–27). The regression models will be based on respondents who completed the Wave 3 and Wave 4 questionnaires, resulting in a final sample of 1,612 respondents and a total cooperation rate of 34 percent (COOP2, American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR]).

Panel survey B was conducted as a two-wave panel study completely mirroring the final two waves of Panel A in terms of timing and question wording, with the specific purpose of validating findings from the four-wave panel study. A stratified probability sample of 1,912 pool members was drawn based on gender, age, county size, political interest, and Internet use. Following Panel A, the first wave of Panel B was conducted in mid-August (August 16–23), whereas the second wave took place the week after Election Day (September 20–27). Approximately, 68 percent completed the Wave 1 questionnaire in August and of those 1,305 respondents, 75 percent also completed the September questionnaire, yielding a final sample of 982 respondents and a total cooperation rate of 51 percent (COOP2, AAPOR).

Measures

Perceived Issue Importance. Two different measures of issue importance are available for the purpose of this study, following alternative operationalizations in past agenda-setting research. First, respondents in Panel Survey A were asked to evaluate the importance of a series of political issues based on the question, “How important do you consider the following political issues to be?” The list contained ten issues, including unemployment, health care, education, environment, taxes, health insurance, crime, and immigration. Respondents rated their importance along a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*). Second, respondents in Panel Survey B were asked the open-ended question “What do you consider to be the most important political issue today?” and they were able to name any issue they considered to be the most important. The answers were coded in a way that matched comparisons with the content analysis as well as the issue categories from Panel Survey A. The availability of different measures from two separate surveys conducted in the same time period substantially improves our ability to validate the findings.

Traditional News Media Use. To analyze agenda-setting effects at the micro level, we followed a matching procedure used by several media effect scholars (Boomgarden et al. 2011; Roessler 1999) to create a measure of *issue exposure*, which simultaneously accounts for the salience of each issue in traditional news media as well as each respondent’s specific news media use. The measure was created by integrating information from the survey on each respondent’s usage

frequency of seven traditional news media outlets during the campaign with information from the content analysis on the salience of different issues in these same outlets. These outlets were the same traditional news media as were included in the content analysis (see below): the most important television news programs *Aktuellt* (SVT), *Rapport* (SVT), and *Nyheter* (TV4); the most important quality newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*; and the most important newsstand tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*. For instance, for the unemployment issue, each respondent's reported frequency of exposure to each news outlet (ranging from 0 = *no exposure* to 1 = *everyday exposure*) was first multiplied by the salience of unemployment in this specific news outlet measured as a proportion of all news items (ranging from 0 = *no news items on unemployment* to 1 = *all news items about unemployment*). These seven products, each representing exposure to a specific news outlet, were then added, yielding a measure of total exposure to the unemployment issue in traditional news media. A separate measure was created for each single issue. As this measure captures the likelihood of being exposed to certain issues in the traditional news media during the campaign, irrespective of whether the respondents use only one of the traditional news media or several, this index is advantageous with respect to the analysis of individual-level effects.

Partisan Preferences. We measure *partisan preferences* based on the survey question, "In politics, people sometimes say that political opinions can be placed on a left–right scale. Where would you place yourself on the left–right scale?" with response categories ranging from 0 (*clearly to the left*) to 10 (*clearly to the right*).

Number of Online News Media Sources. To capture the extent to which respondents use a variety of online news sources, in addition to traditional news media, they were asked how frequently they read a number of daily newspapers online the preceding week. Focus here lies on some of the most frequently used online news sites in Sweden—the Web sites of *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*—as well as the local newspaper in the area where respondents live. An index of the number of online news sources regularly used was created by summing the number of those Web sites that the respondents visit at least three days a week, yielding an index ranging from 0 (*uses no online news media regularly*) to 5 (*uses five online news sites regularly*).

In addition, several control variables will be used when estimating individual-level agenda-setting effects. Political interest is based on two items measured at the beginning of the campaign, tapping the respondents' level of interest in politics as well as in the election campaign, measured by 2 four-level variables ranging from 1 (*not interested at all*) to 4 (*very interested*), (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). Most importantly, however, the panel design allows us to control for *prior levels of issue importance* when estimating agenda-setting effects. That is, by including lagged values of the dependent variable on the right-hand side of the regression equation, the models estimate the effect on *changes* in issue importance between panel waves (Finkel 1995)—a fact that

substantially increases our ability to make causal inferences at the individual level. Finally, all models also include *gender*, *age*, *education*, and *income* as control variables.

Investigating the Media Agenda: The Content Analysis

To investigate the media agenda, a quantitative content analysis covering the last three weeks before Election Day was conducted. This time period fell between the third and fourth panel wave in Panel A and the first and second panel wave in Panel B. The content analysis included the same traditional news media as included in the panel surveys (see above).

The unit of analysis was entire news stories. The selection criteria were that the news story should make references to political candidates, parties or institutions in headline, photo or first paragraph (newspapers), or either verbally or visually in the full news story (television). In total, the content analysis included 1,158 news stories, distributed as follows: *Aftonbladet* (258), *Expressen* (272), *Dagens Nyheter* (169), *Svenska Dagbladet* (161), *Rapport* (106), *Aktuellt* (94), and *TV4 Nyheterna* (98).

The key variable for the purpose of this study asked about the main issue of the news story. The list included thirty-one issues, out of which ten corresponded to the issue categories in Panel Survey A and eight to the issue categories in Panel Survey B. In subsequent analyses, all other categories—mainly low-salience issues—were excluded to conduct matched issue comparisons between the media and public agendas. Two coders did all of the coding. To test for intercoder reliability, 118 news stories were randomly selected. A reliability test showed an intercoder reliability (Holsti) of .77. Although higher reliability would have been desirable, we consider this as satisfactory because the variable included more than thirty values.

Results

To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to investigate agenda-setting effects at the aggregate and individual levels in the context of the 2010 Swedish election campaign. Table 1 presents aggregate-level data of both the media and public agenda during the campaign. As can be seen, unemployment (16.4 percent) was on top of the aggregate media agenda during the last three weeks of the campaign, followed by health insurance (10.6 percent), immigration (8.8 percent), and education (8.6 percent). The second column presents a measure of agenda consonance across the seven media outlets—the *coefficient of variation* (c_v)—indicating the dispersion across media outlets with respect to the salience of each issue. While high values indicate larger dispersion, low values reflect more consonant salience across media channels. Among the high-salience issues, health insurance deviates in the sense of being on top of the agenda of one of the tabloids but totally absent in the other news media. The salience of the other issues was more equal across the news media outlets, suggesting fairly

Table 1. Media and Public Agendas during the Election Campaign (Percentages and Mean Values).

	Media Agenda		Public Agenda Open Ended		Public Agenda Close Ended	
	Salience	Consonance	August	September	August	September
Unemployment	16.4%	0.45	36.3%	33.3%	6.17	6.20
Health insurance	10.6	1.13	1.1***	4.2***	5.26***	5.52***
Integration/immigration	8.8	0.57	4.3	5.7	4.75***	5.02***
Education	8.6	0.53	8.3	7.5	5.96	5.96
Elderly care	7.2	0.53	0.9	1.1	—	—
Child care/family policy	6.1	0.83	1.4	1.2	—	—
Environment	5.2	0.77	7.0*	4.6*	5.35*	5.29*
Taxes	3.3	1.59	9.5***	3.4***	5.22**	5.17**
Health care	5.1	0.89	5.2	6.7	6.00	5.95
Crime	5.1	0.75	0.8	0.2	5.17***	5.06***
<i>n</i> (unweighted)			1,305	979	2,051	1,864

Note: Salience on the media agenda is a measure of the number of stories published weighted by the space (newspapers) or time (television) devoted to each issue. Media agenda diversity is measured as the standard deviation of salience divided by the average salience for each issue (the coefficient of variation, c_v). Thus, large diversity values reflect high dispersion across media outlets with respect to the salience of a given issue. Low values reflect homogeneity in salience (consonance). The public data are weighted on gender, age, type of residence, education, political interest, general Internet use, and vote choice in the 2010 national election. Test of significance, based on McNemar's Nonparametric test of related samples (open ended), and paired-samples *t*-tests (close ended), performed on unweighted data.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

consonant media coverage. The two middle columns present the public agenda based on the open-ended question, showing the percentage of respondents naming each of the issues as the most important problem in August and September, respectively. The two left columns similarly display the public agenda but based on close-ended questions where respondents evaluate their importance on seven-point scales from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*).

According to Hypothesis 1, which closely follows the traditional aggregate-level version of agenda-setting theory, we expected that issues on top of the media agenda during the election campaign would be perceived as more important by the public at the end of the campaign than at the beginning. On a general level, the overall pattern in Table 1 lends support to this hypothesis. Issues on top of the media agenda tend to be perceived as more important at the end of the campaign than at the beginning (health insurance and immigration), whereas issues receiving less media coverage either became considered less important by the public (environment, taxes, and crime) or remained unaffected.

However, there is one exception: The media coverage of the unemployment issue—the issue on the very top of the media agenda—does not seem to influence public

opinion. This issue is perceived as about equally important by the public at the beginning and at the end of the campaign. There may be various reasons for this absence of aggregate media influence but one is the potential ceiling effect in public opinion. Unemployment is really *the* dominant issue on the public agenda from the very beginning—regardless of what measure of issue importance we use. Another possible cause is rooted in the obtrusive characteristics of the issue itself as well as more long-term agenda-setting dynamics preceding the final weeks of the election campaigns. This issue has been at the top of the public agenda at least since the 2006 election, thus restricting the scope for further agenda-setting effects (Shehata 2010; Strömbäck and Kioussis 2010).

Turning to effects on the individual level, Hypothesis 2 predicted that individual-level exposure to issues on top of the news media agenda would increase the perceived importance of these issues during the election campaign. This hypothesis is largely supported by the data presented in Table 2, which shows the results of eight regression models predicting changes in perceived issue importance on the individual level. Two things are important to note. First, by including a lagged dependent variable in each model—perceived issue importance measured in the first panel wave—these autoregressive panel models estimate how different individual-level factors are related to *changes* in perceived issue importance during the campaign (Finkel 1995), which provides a much stronger test of individual-level agenda-setting effects than cross-sectional data. Second, the key measure of issue exposure taps the likelihood of being exposed to each of the issues through the seven traditional news media, based on the respondents' exposure to these media as well as the salience of each issue in these media.

As can be seen, issue exposure has a positive and statistically significant effect on issues high on the agenda of the traditional news media: health insurance, immigration, education, and environment. Thus, citizens who are exposed to these issues in the traditional news media tend to regard them as more important at the end than in the beginning of the campaign compared with citizens with lower levels of issue exposure. This pattern is not found for issues lower on the media agenda. There is again, however, one exception to this pattern. Following the aggregate-level findings above, exposure to the unemployment issue in the traditional news media has no discernable impact on changes in perceived importance of this issue during the campaign—a finding we will return to.

To further test some of the claims stemming from the new era of minimal effects debate, two hypotheses on the role of partisan preferences and online news were offered—both reflecting a weakening role of traditional news media. Hypothesis 3 predicted that individual-level agenda-setting effects would be spurious due to partisan preferences. Irrespective of the salience of various issues in the traditional news media, it was argued, issue mobilization would occur along partisan lines whereby left-wing voters are mobilized on left-wing issues while right-wing voters are mobilized on right-wing issues.

To classify issues as either left-wing or right-wing, we estimated the relationship between partisan predispositions and perceived importance of each issue measured in the first panel wave using bivariate regressions. The result of this classification is shown

Table 2. Effects of Issue Exposure on Perceived Issue Importance (OLS, Panel Survey A).

	Health											
	Unemployment	Insurance	Immigration	Education	Environment	Taxes	Health Care	Crime				
Sex	-.15** (.04)	-.15** (.06)	-.07 (.06)	-.10* (.05)	-.08 (.05)	-.08 (.06)	-.13** (.04)	-.04 (.06)				
Age	.00 (.00)	.01*** (.00)	.01*** (.00)	.00*** (.00)	.00 (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01*** (.00)	.01*** (.00)				
Income	-.01 (.01)	-.03 (.02)	-.05* (.02)	-.05** (.01)	-.05** (.02)	-.00 (.02)	-.04** (.01)	-.06*** (.02)				
High school	-.00 (.07)	.04 (.09)	.08 (.10)	.13 (.07)	-.13 (.08)	-.08 (.09)	.03 (.07)	.08 (.09)				
University	-.04 (.07)	-.20* (.09)	.02 (.10)	.13 (.08)	-.03 (.08)	-.18* (.09)	-.02 (.07)	.01 (.09)				
Political interest _{t-1}	.04** (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.06** (.02)				
Prior issue importance _{t-1}	.53*** (.02)	.48*** (.02)	.52*** (.02)	.59*** (.02)	.67*** (.02)	.49*** (.02)	.55*** (.02)	.65*** (.02)				
Issue exposure _t	.05 (.11)	.46* (.18)	.70* (.28)	.48*** (.21)	.97* (.43)	-.62 (.51)	.04 (.34)	.45 (.39)				
L-R predispositions	.01 (.01)	-.09*** (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	-.05*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)	-.05*** (.01)	.05*** (.01)				
R ² adjusted	.35	.41	.33	.39	.53	.34	.43	.49				
n	1,612	1,612	1,612	1,612	1,612	1,612	1,612	1,612				

Note: OLS = ordinary least squares; L-R = left-right. Estimates are unstandardized OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

LEFT-WING ISSUES			RIGHT-WING ISSUES		
Health Insurance (-.16***)	Health Care (-.09***)	Education (-.05***)	Immigration (-.02)	Crime (.08***)	Taxes (.12***)
Environment (-.13***)		Unemployment (-.04***)			

Figure 1. Classification of left-wing and right-wing issues (OLS estimated in parentheses). Note: OLS = ordinary least squares. Classification is based on bivariate OLS estimates of the relationship between partisan predispositions (0–10) and perceived issue importance (1–7) measured in the first panel wave. Unstandardized *b*-values in parentheses. Based on Panel Survey A.

****p* < .001.

in Figure 1. The most clear left-wing issues—that is, issues perceived as significantly more important by citizens with left-wing predispositions before the election campaign—are health insurance and environment, followed by health care, education, and unemployment. Issues considered as more important by right-wing citizens were taxes and crime. Immigration was the only issue that lacked a partisan leaning.

With respect to Hypothesis 3, Table 2 reveals an interesting pattern of both partisan and agenda-setting effects. While partisan preferences do matter, they matter primarily for issues *low* on the media agenda, where the partisan effects follow the expected pattern. Right-wing voters perceive right-wing issues (taxes and crime) as increasingly important over the course of the campaign, whereas left-wing voters are mobilized on left-wing issues (environment and health care). However, partisan preferences cannot explain individual-level agenda-setting effects for issues *high* on the media agenda. Irrespective of partisan predispositions, issue exposure increases the perceived importance of health insurance, immigration, education, and environment. Thus, while partisan preferences do play a role, they appear to matter predominantly for low-salience issues, while agenda-setting effects occur for high-salience issues receiving consonant coverage. In sum, Hypothesis 3 is not supported by the data.

Based on the argument that the availability of alternative news sources online reduces citizens' dependency on the traditional news media as a source of political and current affairs information, Hypothesis 4 predicted that regular use of online news would weaken individual susceptibility to agenda-setting effects from traditional news media. To test this, we included an interaction term between issue exposure and the number of online news sources used at least three days a week, to each of the regression models in Table 2 (including, of course, the corresponding stand-alone coefficient for issue exposure and number of online news sources). The results largely supported Hypothesis 4 with respect to three of the four issues where individual agenda-setting effects were documented. The results, which are displayed graphically in Figure 2 following the approach suggested by Brambor et al. (2006), reveal a consistent pattern of negative interaction effects between issue exposure and the number of online news sources used for three high-salience issues—health

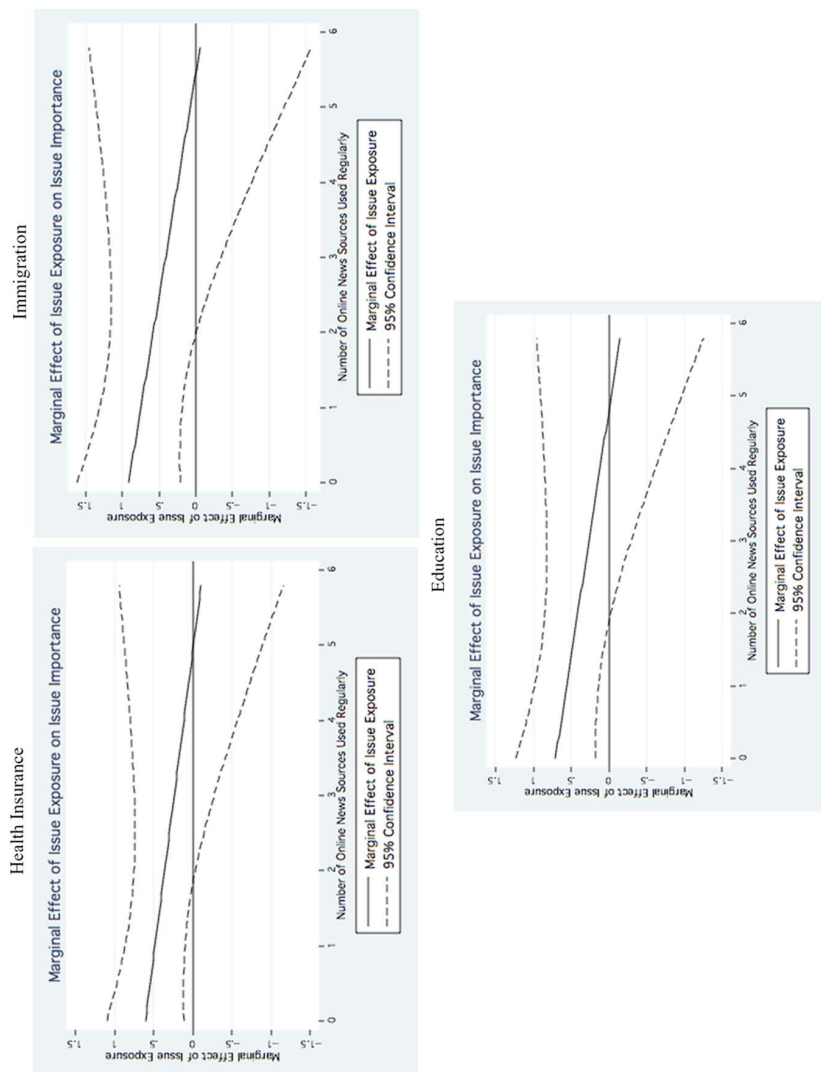


Figure 2. The marginal effect of issue exposure on perceived issue importance for different levels of online news sources usage.

insurance, immigration, and education. As displayed by the graphs in Figure 2, individual susceptibility to agenda setting from the traditional news media is stronger among citizens who use few online news sources as a supplement to their use of traditional news media. In fact, the effect of issue exposure on changes in perceived issue importance is positive and statistically significant for low values of online news use. Citizens who use more than two online news sources regularly are not affected by the traditional news media—a finding lending support to Hypothesis 4. A possible reason for these findings might be that citizens who use multiple sources of online news are exposed to a more heterogeneous issue agenda than consumers who depend on the traditional media only.

Conclusion

Before discussing the results, it is important to note that our test of *causal* agenda-setting effects has been more rigorous than is usual. First, we have not investigated correlations between the media and public agendas only but whether the media agenda *precedes changes* on the public agenda. Second, by combining panel data and media content data, we have been able to investigate agenda-setting effects at the *aggregate* and *individual* levels, still using *changes* on the public agenda as key measure of agenda-setting effects.

Despite these controls, the results have revealed a general pattern of significant media effects in line with agenda-setting theory. Issues that received more extensive coverage in the traditional news media tended to be perceived as more important by the public over time—while no such effects were documented for issues low on the media agenda. Furthermore, with one important exception, the results showed a striking correspondence between opinion dynamics at the aggregate and individual levels, where changes in the number of people who regarded a high-salience issue as important mirrored micro-level effects of exposure to the issue agenda of the traditional news media. Overall, this is strong evidence that the traditional news media—despite profound media environmental changes in the last decades—still can exert agenda-setting influence on public opinion.

The exception to this general pattern was related to the issue of unemployment. This issue dominated both the media and public agenda during the campaign, but there were no evidence of agenda-setting effects. Arguably, there may be various reasons for this apparent absence of agenda-setting effects. The most plausible reason, we believe, is the fact that the issue of unemployment has been at the center of Swedish political discourse for several years, thus restricting the scope for any short-term agenda-setting effects during the final weeks of the election campaign. Thus, due to long-term frequent media coverage—not least as a result of constant coverage of the economic crisis—the issue of unemployment might have reached the status of chronic accessibility in the minds of the public, whereby temporary ups and downs in media salience have little impact on perceived importance (Althaus and Kim 2006; Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen 2009; Willnat 1997).

Not only do the results document agenda-setting effects on the aggregate as well as the individual level but they also shine light on two claims derived from the discussion about a new era of minimal effects. First, despite the growing opportunities for media choice, which would make selective exposure result in attitudes that are endogenous to the media coverage (Bennett and Iyengar 2008), the agenda-setting effects documented here are clearly distinguished from partisan effects. At the same time as issues on top of the traditional news media agenda are considered as increasingly important by citizens—irrespective of their partisan predispositions—partisan effects do occur for issues low on the media agenda. Citizens with left-wing predispositions are mobilized on left-wing issues, whereas right-wing voters are mobilized on right-wing issues—but citizens from all partisan segments still respond to the issues on top of the agenda of the traditional news media. Hence, neither theoretically nor empirically does audience selectivity necessarily preclude media effects (Holbert et al. 2010; Stroud 2011). Second, even though partisan preferences by themselves have not replaced the traditional news media's agenda-setting influence, the results clearly indicate that the increasing availability of alternative online news sources might weaken the impact of the traditional news media on public opinion. Citizens who used multiple online news sources were less susceptible to the agenda of the traditional news media. In fact, individual-level agenda-setting effects occurred only among citizens who depended more heavily on the traditional news media for information about politics and current affairs, and regularly used no more than two source of online news. Additional analysis reveals that users of multiple online news sources tend to be more interested in politics, more likely to use the Internet as main source of political information, and more likely to have university degree.

Overall, these results provide evidence that qualify arguments of a new era of minimal effects. Obviously, the traditional news media agenda still matters for public opinion dynamics at the aggregate and individual levels, and these effects are clearly distinguishable from partisan effects (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert et al. 2010). At the same time, the results also support the idea that the growing availability and use of alternative online news sources reduce the agenda-setting impact of traditional news media. Thus, citizens who take advantage of their high-choice media environment by looking for news online are less dependent on cues from the traditional news media when forming perceptions of issue importance (Bryant and Zillmann 2009; Metzger 2009).

Are these results typical for Sweden, or are the arguments for a new era of minimal effects offered by Bennett and Iyengar (2008, 2010) typical for the United States? While more research is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn, taken together the results suggest that any process toward a new era of minimal effects is conditioned by the political and media systems of particular countries. In the Swedish case, the strong public service broadcasting institutions that attract broad audience segments, one of the highest newspaper circulations in the world, and an absence of partisan news media outlets (Aalberg and Curran 2011; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Strömbäck and Nord 2008) might thus serve to mitigate any changes from an era of

powerful to a potential new era of minimal effects. At the same time, Sweden might be a more typical case than the United States, at least with respect to other Western democracies. If that holds true, most countries have not (yet) entered a new era of minimal effects.

In either case, although we cannot rule out that Sweden or other countries further down the road will enter a new era of minimal effects, we can rule out the notion that a generalized “we” at this stage have done so. The fact that we found clear agenda-setting effects on both the aggregate and individual levels of analysis instead strengthens the agenda-setting hypothesis. Despite major transformations in media environments, the media are still surprisingly successful in influencing what issues the public perceives to be important. However, further replication of these findings across countries is important, and future research would gain from systematic cross-national comparative designs that enable more powerful analyses of how political- and media-system-level factors condition the agenda-setting impact of traditional news media.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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