Journalism Studies

STRUCTURAL BIASES IN BRITISH AND SWEDISH ELECTION NEWS COVERAGE

Jesper Strömbäck; Adam Shehata

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Election campaigns in advanced democracies are highly mediated events. Thus, the electorate has come to depend upon the media for information regarding the election, the parties and their policies. At the same time, research indicates that the news coverage of elections tends to be structurally biased, in the sense that the media coverage is episodic rather than thematic and that it is focused on the horse race and the political strategies of the competing parties rather than on the issues at stake. However, comparative studies of election news coverage in different countries are still somewhat lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to compare the election news coverage in Britain and Sweden, two countries that are part of different models of media and political systems. The study investigates the election news coverage in two major broadsheets and one major tabloid in each country, during the last three weeks before the Swedish Election in 2002 and the British Election in 2005. The results show several significant differences between the Swedish and the British election news coverage.

KEYWORDS   bias; Britain; comparative research; election news; framing; Sweden

Introduction

In present-day advanced democracies, the most important source of information for events and processes that lie outside of the general experiences of the public is the mass media. This certainly includes most political events and processes, including election campaigns. In this context, the electorate depends upon the mass media for information regarding the election, the candidates or parties, the policies and societal developments that might be politically relevant. Similarly, political actors such as the candidates, parties, interest groups and so on, require the mass media in order to reach out to and communicate with the electorate (Gunther and Mughan, 2000; Norris et al., 1999).

Thus, it is no coincidence that the histories of political communication and election research have been closely intertwined since World War II (Blumler and McQuail, 2001). However, despite the significant accumulation over the past decades of research focusing on the media in the context of election campaigns, there is still a lack of comparative studies with reference to the election news coverage in different countries. As noted by de Vreese (2003, p. 184): ''Evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent''. This is very unfortunate, not only because ''election campaigns are highly amenable to cross-national political communication comparisons'' (Blumler and McQuail, 2001, p. 238), but also because the political and media systems can be expected to significantly impact upon the election news coverage in different countries.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to compare the election news coverage in two different countries—Sweden and Britain—focusing on structural biases and their manifestations in the framing of politics in three newspapers in each country.

Partisan and Structural Bias in Political News Coverage

In the popular and academic debate, the question of partisan bias in political news journalism has often generated heated debates. This is perhaps particularly true in the US case (Niven, 2002). However, as noted by Gulati et al. (2004, p. 239): "Repeated analyses of news coverage of recent presidential elections continue to find no evidence of partisan bias in news reporting" (Gulati et al., 2004, p. 239). The same conclusion has been drawn with regards to Sweden (Asp, 2003; Petersson et al., 2006).

What might, in fact, be more important than partisan bias is what has been called "structural bias" (Hofstetter, 1976). As a theoretical construct, however, this concept still remains to be fully developed. According to Hofstetter (1976, p. 34), structural biases occur "when some things are selected to be reported rather than other things because of the character of the medium or because of the incentives that apply to commercial news programming". Similarly, Gulati et al. (2004, p. 239) write that structural bias refers to the tendency in which "norms of journalism or reporter behavior favor news about some topics over others and that this news emphasis advantages some candidates and disadvantages others". As an example, it is stated that the news is biased against losing candidates, "not because of their policy positions, but because of reporters' decisions about what is 'news'". They also exemplify structural bias with the journalistic tendency to favor episodic rather than thematic framing (Iyengar, 1991), and game framing rather than issue framing (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). While not using the term structural bias, Schudson (2003) has also noted that news reporting tends to be event-centered, detached, focused on bad news as well as on politics as strategy and tactics rather than policies, and highly dependent on official viewpoints. In his view (2003, p. 55), these tendencies are due to the prevailing notion of journalistic professionalism. Stated differently, the problem is then one of structural bias, as defined and distinguished from partisan bias by Graber (2006, p. 236): "Political bias reflects ideological judgments, whereas structural bias reflects the circumstances of news production".

Thus, the end result of both structural and partisan bias might be that particular candidates or parties are favored in the news. The end result might also be that particular ways of framing the news are favored, whereas others are not. The difference is that, in the former case, it is due to ideological reasons, whereas in the latter case, it is not. Hence, it is also a difference associated with intentions.

If partisan bias focuses on media actors, their ideological beliefs and how they affect the news coverage, then structural bias focuses on journalistic norms with regards to their interaction with the processes and circumstances of news production. However, these factors cannot be perceived as being independent of the different media and political systems or cultural influences (Benson and Hallin, 2005; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Schudson, 2003).

Different Models of Media and Politics

In their seminal book *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) distinguish between three different models of media and politics within the family of western democracies: the Polarized Pluralism Model, the Liberal Model and the Democratic Corporatist Model. With reference to media system characteristics, these differ with regards to the degree of political parallelism, the strength and importance of newspapers as opposed to broadcasting media, the degree of journalistic professionalization and the

role of the state in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 67). They also display different political system characteristics with reference 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 (2004, p. 69). In brief, Hallin and Mancini argue that:

> The Liberal Model is characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media; the Democratic Corporatist Model by a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organized social and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state; and the Polarized Pluralist Model by integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the state. (2004, p. 11)

If structural bias is thus rooted in journalistic norms as well as in the processes and circumstances of news production, and these are different in countries belonging to different models of media and politics, it follows that the news coverage of elections should also display different characteristics in these countries (see Figure 1).

In addition, it cannot be taken for granted that empirical results and theories resulting from research for a single or a few countries are universally valid, particularly when these countries belong to the same model of media and politics. Thus, there is a necessity for more research that compares the election news coverage in countries belonging to different models of media and politics, such as Sweden—a prototypical example of the Democratic Corporatist Model—and Britain—part of the Liberal Model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 70).

Different Political and Electoral Systems in Sweden and Britain

There are several important differences between Sweden and Britain with regards to their political and electoral systems. Sweden is a consensus-oriented system, whereas Britain has a majoritarian system. This is partly a result of their different electoral systems, as Sweden has proportional elections whereas Britain has single-member districts and a first past the post electoral system. As a consequence, there is a clear distinction between the government and the opposition parties in Britain, whereas cooperation between the governing and opposition parties is the rule in Sweden. For example, after the 2006 election Sweden has a coalition government consisting of the four non-socialist parties. However, between 2002 and 2006 the only party in the Swedish government was, formally speaking, the Social Democrats, and it had less than 40 percent of the seats in parliament. However, during this term they entered a long-term cooperative agreement with two of the smallest parties in parliament for some but not all policy areas. In effect, this meant that there were sometimes three governing parties, sometimes one, whereas there are
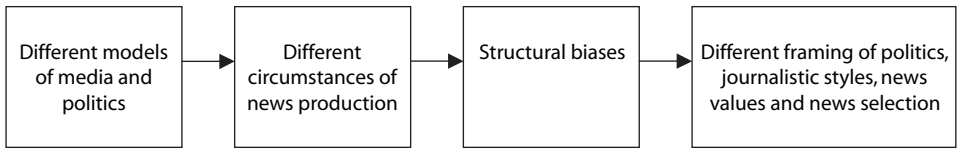

FIGURE 1
The concept of structural bias as a linkage between the system level and the media content

four governing parties following the 2006 election. This illustrates that even the smallest parties can make a difference.

Sweden and Britain also differ with regards to the party system. Whereas Britain has three significant parties in parliament, Sweden has seven. In both countries, the parties are important in the electoral and policy processes. However, British politics is, relatively speaking, more candidate-centered due to the first past the post system, whereas Swedish politics is very party-centered (Petersson et al., 2000). It is possible for Swedish voters to express their preference for a preferred candidate from the party lists, but it is the parties themselves who make the decisions with regards to who is on these lists and in actual fact, less than one-third of the electorate usually express such a preference (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). It thus appears that British politics is thus more susceptible to the individualization and the presidentialization of politics (Heffernan and Webb, 2005; Mughan, 2000; Pogunkte and Webb, 2005).

Different Media Systems in Sweden and Britain

With reference to the media systems in Sweden and Britain, there are similarities as well as differences. One important similarity is the existence of strong public service broadcasting in both countries (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull, 2001). However, whereas commercial television has been allowed in Britain since the 1950s, in Sweden commercial terrestrial television was banned until 1991. Hence, the British broadcasting system has been and still is more competitive than its Swedish counterpart.

There are significant newspaper sales in both countries, but these are higher in Sweden than in Britain, with 70 percent of the Swedish public reading a newspaper on a daily basis as compared to 47 percent in Britain (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, pp. 23–5). Furthermore, whereas the local press is very strong in Sweden, the national press is more important in Britain (Franklin, 1997; Hadenius and Weibull, 2003).

Another part of the media systems relates to the degree of political parallelism, that is, the degree to which the structure of the media system parallels that of the party system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, pp. 26–33). In both countries, newspapers have traditionally reflected their affiliations with the political parties, in both editorials and their news coverage. In Sweden, however, the news coverage no longer reflects distinct political orientations (Asp, 2003; Hadenius and Weibull, 2003; Petersson et al., 2006), whereas in Britain, the political affiliations of the newspapers are much more evident even in the news coverage (Franklin, 1997; McNair, 2000; Scammell and Harrop, 2005). Thus, the British newspaper system seems to be characterized by external pluralism—diversity between different media—rather than internal pluralism—diversity within different media, whereas the opposite is true for Sweden.

One part of that pattern is that Swedish newspaper journalists appear to enjoy more autonomy than their British counterparts in relation to newspaper owners and their political interests. British journalists also have stronger partisan tendencies, particularly in the tabloids. Furthermore, British newspaper journalists think it is more important to champion certain values and ideas in addition to influencing politics than do Swedish journalists (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004). Among broadcast journalists, however, no such differences appear. Instead, broadcast news journalists in both countries stress the importance of journalistic objectivity. At the same time, it is important to note that

Swedish and British journalists have different understandings of journalistic objectivity (see below).

Another difference relates to the issue of political advertising on television. In contrast to the United States and many other countries (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid, 2006), paid political advertising on television was banned in both Sweden and Britain at the time of the 2002 and the 2005 elections, respectively. In Britain, however, the parties are allowed to broadcast a given number of Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs), depending on their polling at the previous election. In Sweden, the parties were for the first time allowed to purchase airtime for political ads at the time of the 2006 election. However, it was only allowed with regards to some of the commercial and digitally distributed television channels and these are, for the moment, rather insignificant in terms of the number of viewers.

Finally, another difference between the British and the Swedish media concerns the degree of competitiveness and commercialization. Even though it is difficult to quantify this difference, most evidence indicates that the British media system is considerably more competitive and commercialized than the Swedish media system (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001; Franklin, 1997; McNair, 2000; Petersson et al., 2006). This is indicated by the larger number of national newspapers and commercial television channels, the importance of the media ownership and the incorporation of British media in large global media conglomerates.

This comparison of Sweden and Britain is by no means exhaustive. However, it does indicate that there are important differences, also evidenced by the classification of Britain as part of the Liberal Model and Sweden as part of the Democratic Corporatist Model. If structural bias thus reflects the circumstances of news production in interaction with journalistic norms, it should manifest itself differently in the Swedish and British election news coverage. Most importantly, it should be manifested in different framings of politics in British and Swedish election news coverage.

The Framing of Politics

According to a recent meta-study (Bryant and Miron, 2004), framing theory has become one of the most widely used mass communication theories. Even though it still remains a somewhat ''fractured paradigm'' (Entman, 1993), there seems to be a growing consensus about the basic definition of framing. Most importantly, framing involves ''selecting and highlighting some facets of events and issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution'' (Entman, 2004, p. 5).

Some scholars argue that framing should be perceived as part of the second level of agenda setting (McCombs, 2004; McCombs and Ghanem, 2001), whereas others disagree (Maher, 2001). This scholarly debate notwithstanding, it is worth noting that framing and agenda setting share some important characteristics. Firstly, both agenda setting and framing are inescapable. Journalists simply cannot choose not to be part of agenda setting and framing processes, even though the degree of consciousness and intention can vary. Secondly, both framing and agenda setting are consequential. By highlighting certain issues, attributes or choosing certain frames, the media can exert considerable power over their audiences (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; McCombs, 2004; Price et al., 1997).

As noted above, one of the features of journalism that has been used as an example of structural bias is the framing of politics as a strategic game rather than as issues. The same holds true for the journalistic tendency to apply episodic rather than thematic frames. Following Entman's distinction between procedural and substantive frames (2004), those frames can be perceived as procedural frames. Similarly, Callaghan and Schnell (2005) make a distinction between issue specific and generic frames, and they add episodic and thematic frames as a special category. This category might also be labeled as "contextual framing", since it refers to the presence or absence of contexts in journalistic texts. Analytically then, structural bias should manifest itself in differences in the usage of procedural/generic and contextual frames in different countries.

Bias in Election News Coverage: Hypotheses and Research Questions

One of the most often noted tendencies in political news journalism in democracies around the world is that of framing politics as a strategic game rather than as issues (Patterson, 1993; Semetko, 2000; Strömbäck, 2004; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006; Waldahl and Narud, 2004). This kind of story focuses on "who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead" (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p. 33). Patterson (2000, pp. 253–4) also postulates that it is a direct result of commercialism. Thus, considering that the British media system is more commercialized and competitive than the Swedish media system, our first hypothesis is:

> H1: The metaframing of politics as a strategic game will be more common in British than in Swedish newspapers whereas the metaframing of politics as issues will be more common in Swedish than in British newspapers.

If the metaframing of politics is treated as a mutually exclusive category, another approach is to investigate the frames used on a presence–absence basis. The results from such an approach might be more nuanced compared to those using only mutually exclusive categories. Thus, in this study we have included a number of frames to be investigated on a presence–absence basis. These can be perceived as being derived from the metaframing of politics as a strategic game. These frames include the horse race frame, political strategy frame and news management frame. If Hypothesis 1 is correct, these frames should also be more common in the British than in the Swedish election news coverage.

> H2: The horse race frame, political strategy frame and news management frame will be more common in British than in Swedish newspapers.

As noted previously, Britain has a majoritarian political system where members of parliament are elected in single-member districts using a first past the post electoral system. In contrast, Sweden is a consensus-oriented democracy. Individual candidates play only a minor role, both in the electoral processes and in parliament, and at times there is no clear distinction between governing and opposition parties. After Election Day, the strongest and governing party or parties will have to cooperate with one or several other parties in order for legislation to be passed. Thus, we expect British newspapers to focus more on politicians as individuals and on political conflicts than is the case in Swedish newspapers.

H3: The politicians as individuals and conflict frame will be more common in British than in Swedish newspapers.

Pursuing the same argument, we further expect the Swedish election coverage to be more focused on the opportunities to form governing coalitions after Election Day, than the British election news coverage.

H4: The governing frame will be more common in Swedish than in British newspapers.

One important difference between Swedish and British journalists concerns their understanding of journalistic objectivity. The understanding most favored among Swedish journalists (58 percent) is "going beyond the statements of the contending sides to the hard facts of a political dispute" (Patterson, 1998). This understanding reflects a distancing from the political parties and their actions, as well as a practical consideration: if there are seven significant political parties, it is more difficult to express the position of all sides in a political dispute as opposed to when there are only two or three significant parties. In contrast, the concept most favored by British journalists (31 percent) is "expressing fairly the position of each side in a political dispute". Even though a significant proportion of British journalists (28 percent) agree with the majority of Swedish journalists, this might be an indication that British journalists have a tendency to follow the agenda set by the political parties. Previous research has also shown that British journalists, as compared to US journalists, have less influence and less ambition to influence the campaign agendas. As noted by Semetko et al. (1991, p. 173), there is "much more party-initiated material appearing in the British press than in the United States". Whether this is true in comparison to the Swedish press is uncertain. Nevertheless, our fifth hypothesis is:

H5: British news stories will originate from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors more often than Swedish news stories.

Another important aspect concerns the extent to which Swedish and British newspapers follow an interpretative rather than a descriptive journalistic style. As noted by Gulati et al. (2004, p. 243), "Many journalists now consider it irresponsible simply to describe the campaign without delving into the candidate´s motivation or without exploring why particular campaign decisions were made". From a British perspective, McNair has also commented on the increase in interpretative journalism, explaining it by means of the commercialization of journalism, the information overload and the emergence of political public relations (2000, p. 71). Because the British media system is more commercialized and competitive than the Swedish media system and because the political public relations industry is more developed in Britain (Franklin, 2004; Lees-Marshment, 2001; McNair, 2000) than in Sweden (Nord, 2006; Nord and Strömbäck, 2003; Petersson et al. 2006), we expect interpretative journalism to be more common in British than in Sweden newspapers.

H6: British newspapers will follow an interpretative rather than a descriptive journalistic style more often than Swedish newspapers.

Finally, we are interested in the extent to which Swedish and British newspapers apply episodic versus thematic frames. According to Iyengar (1991, p. 2), "The episodic news frame focuses on specific events or particular cases, while the thematic news frame places political issues and events in some general context". Thus, the important difference is that "episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic

framing presents collective or general evidence'' (1991, p. 14). Episodic framing can therefore be perceived as a means of simplifying and making the news more accessible.

However, it is not clear whether to expect episodic framing to be more common in the British or the Swedish election news coverage. Thus, instead of stating a hypothesis, we pose a research question:

> RQ1: Are there any differences between the usage of episodic and thematic framing in the British and the Swedish election news coverage?

Methodology and Data in Studying Election News Coverage

This study used quantitative content analysis to test the hypotheses and answer the research question posed above. The focus was on two leading elite newspapers and one newsstand tabloid for each country. In Sweden, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* were chosen as leading elite newspapers and *Aftonbladet* as a leading tabloid. In Britain, the *Times* and the *Guardian* were chosen as elite newspapers and the *Sun* as a leading tabloid. The time period for the study was three weeks before the 2002 Swedish election and the 2005 British election: 15 September 2002 in Sweden and 5 May 2005 in Britain.

All articles were manually selected. The first selection criterion was that the articles should start or be referred to on the front pages. In the case of the *Sun*, using this criterion yielded very few articles, so a separate selection procedure was employed. Almost every day the *Sun* featured a news section titled ''Election 05.05.05'', and in addition to front-page stories, the leading news article in that section was chosen for analysis. 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 88 articles from *Dagens Nyheter*, 46 articles from *Svenska Dagbladet*, 39 articles from *Aftonbladet*, 27 articles from the *Sun*, 50 articles from the *Guardian* and 45 articles from the *Times*.

The code sheet included a number of variables relevant to this paper. Most importantly, a number of predefined framing variables were included in order to capture the political framing in each article. Two of these variables—the *metaframe of politics* and *contextual frame*—were coded on a dominant frame basis. Coders also had the option to choose ''cannot be determined'' if there was no clear dominant metaframe or contextual frame.

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

We also included a number of frames coded on a presence/absence basis. These were the *horse race frame* (news story focused on opinion polls and winning or losing in the battle for votes); *politicians as individuals frame* (news story focused on politicians as having different attributes and behaviors rather than as spokespersons for certain policies); *governing frame* (news story focused on the opportunities to form governing coalitions

after Election Day in different scenarios regarding electoral outcomes); *political strategy frame* (news story focused on why parties or candidates act as they do with regards to electoral/opinion gains); *news management frame* (news story focused 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).

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

To conduct an intercoder reliability check, 10 percent of the British and 10 percent of the Swedish articles were randomly selected to include articles from all six newspapers. The intercoder reliability was 0.92 across all categories, using Holsti's formula, ranging from 1 to 0.67. This level of agreement was considered acceptable.

Results: Election News Coverage in Sweden and Britain

Our first hypothesis predicted that the metaframing of politics as a game would be more common in British newspapers than in Swedish newspapers. Conversely, we expect the metaframing of politics as issues to be more common in the Swedish than in the British newspapers. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate that this hypothesis is indeed supported ($\chi^2 = 5.55$, $p = 0.018$, df $= 1$). The game metaframe is dominant in 65 percent of the British articles, compared to 51 percent of the Swedish articles.

In an attempt to specify the elements of the game metaframe, the second hypothesis dealt with the absence or presence in each article of the horse race frame, the political strategy frame and the news management frames. These frames were expected to be more common in the British articles. However, the results are mixed.

TABLE 1

Election news coverage in Swedish and British newspapers

	Swedish articles	British articles	All articles
Game metaframe*	86 (50.9%)	79 (64.8%)	165 (56.7%)
Horse race frame***	90 (52.0%)	38 (31.1%)	128 (43.4%)
Political strategy frame**	52 (30.1%)	58 (47.5%)	110 (37.3%)
News management frame*	16 (9.2%)	4 (3.3%)	20 (6.8%)
Politicians as individuals frame***	48 (27.7%)	68 (55.7%)	116 (39.3%)
Conflict frame***	77 (44.5%)	85 (69.7%)	162 (54.9%)
Governing frame ***	45 (26.0%)	0	45 (15.3%)
Triggered by political actors***	46 (26.6%)	14 (11.5%)	60 (20.3%)
Interpretive style*	78 (45.1%)	70 (57.4%)	148 (50.2%)
Episodic frame	105 (62.9%)	69 (57.0%)	174 (60.4%)
Number of articles	$N = 173$	$N = 122$	$N = 295$

The table presents results from three Swedish newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet* and *Aftonbladet*) and three British newspapers (*Guardian, Times* and the *Sun*) election news coverage. Articles where the metaframe and contextual frame could not be determined were eliminated.

*, **, *** indicate statistically significant differences between Swedish and British articles at the 0.05, 0.01 and 0.001 level respectively, using χ^2 tests.

As predicted, the political strategy frame was significantly more common ($\chi^2 = 9.35$, $p = 0.002$, df = 1) in the British articles (48 percent) than in the Swedish articles (30 percent). On the other hand, both the horse race frame and the news management frame were present more often in the Swedish news stories. More than half of the Swedish articles contained the horse race frame, compared to less than one-third in the British ($\chi^2 = 12.69$, $p = 0.000$, df = 1). The news management frame was almost completely absent in Britain but present in about one in 10 Swedish news stories ($\chi^2 = 4.04$, $p = 0.045$, df = 1). These results contradict the second hypothesis.

Supporting our third hypothesis, both the politicians as individuals frame and the conflict frame were more frequent in the British election coverage. The politicians as individuals frame was present in 56 percent of the British articles, compared to 28 percent of the Swedish articles ($\chi^2 = 23.50$, $p = 0.000$, df = 1). The conflict frame was present in 70 percent of the British articles, as compared to 45 percent of the Swedish articles ($\chi^2 = 18.30$, $p = 0.000$, df = 1).

The fourth hypothesis was also supported by the results ($\chi^2 = 37.45$, $p = 0.000$, df = 1). The governing frame was present in 26 percent of the Swedish articles but totally absent in the British articles. This difference can be attributed to the different political and electoral systems, where strong majority governments are favored in Britain whereas minority governments dependent on cooperation with other parties are favored in Sweden.

The fifth hypothesis predicted that British articles would originate from events, incidents or statements triggered by political actors more often than Swedish news articles. However, this hypothesis was not supported by our results. As a matter of fact, the results indicate the exact opposite to be true. Whereas about 27 percent of the Swedish articles appeared to be triggered by political actors, the same holds true for only 12 percent of the British news stories ($\chi^2 = 10.09$, $p = 0.001$, df = 1).

We also expected that the British election coverage would follow a more interpretive style of reporting than the Swedish coverage, which in contrast was expected to be more descriptive in its journalistic style. The findings support this hypothesis as 57 percent of British news stories were mainly interpretive in style, compared to 45 percent of the Swedish articles ($\chi^2 = 4.32$, $p = 0.038$, df = 1).

Finally, we posed a question regarding the contextual framing of politics in British and Swedish news stories. The results show no significant differences in episodic and thematic framing in the news coverage between the two countries ($\chi^2 = 1$, $p = 0.316$, df = 1).

In summation, the results show several significant differences between the British and the Swedish election news articles. However, there is a possibility that the relevant line for comparison depends on the different types of newspapers (tabloids versus elite newspapers) rather than between countries. To test for this, we compared the strength of the correlations between each of the variables presented above, on the one hand for country and on the other hand for newspaper type. The results show that the correlations with country are stronger than the correlations with newspaper type. For example, the correlation between the usage of the conflict frame and country is 0.249 (Cramer's V), whereas the correlation with newspaper type is 0.037. There is only one exception, regarding the usage of episodic versus thematic frames. Overall, this clearly indicates that country matters more than newspaper type.

Discussion: Media Systems and Political Systems Matter

The purpose of this article was to compare the election news coverage in Sweden and Britain, focusing on the concept of structural bias and how it was reflected in front page news stories with regards to the Swedish election in 2002 and the British election in 2005. As noted previously, the concept of structural bias is less developed than the concept of partisan bias, but it might also be considered to be a more important and consequential phenomenon. Most importantly, focusing on structural bias and its manifestations offers an opportunity to understand the linkage between the system level and the media content. However, as comparative studies of election news coverage and how structural bias might be reflected on the news pages is still in its infancy, this study should be perceived as exploratory.

Even so, the results show some interesting differences and similarities with regards to how politics was framed in the Swedish and British election news coverage. Some, though not all, of these support the idea of linking the election news coverage to differences between media systems, political systems and journalistic norms and values. For example, the British newspapers were more likely to apply the metaframe of politics as a game and to frame politics as a strategic game, reflecting the commercialized nature of the British media system as compared to the Swedish media system. They were also more likely to apply the politicians as individuals frame and the conflict frame. This could be explained by the fact that Britain has a majoritarian and, relatively speaking, candidate-centered system, whereas Sweden has a consensual and party-centered system and tradition.

The results also show that the interpretive journalistic style was more common in British rather than in Swedish newspapers, as hypothesized. Following the analysis by McNair (2000, p. 71), it is possible that this is because the British media system is more commercialized than the Swedish media system, and that the political public relations industry is more developed in Britain than in Sweden. Following an interpretive journalistic style might be perceived as a kind of journalistic defense against an expansion of political spin-doctoring and political marketing (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999); thus, the necessity for such a defense is more pronounced in Britain than in Sweden.

All differences, however, cannot be explained by structural or semi-structural conditions. The context of each election campaign is also important. Thus, it may be possible to explain the fact that the horse race frame, contrary to expectations, was more common in Swedish newspapers than in British newspapers by the electoral contexts in each country in combination with structural differences. As Sweden has seven significant parties and a higher electoral volatility than Britain (Dalton et al., 2000, p. 41), there is a great deal at stake for all parties in each election. Thus, the horse race is of interest not only with reference to two or three but to seven parties. This might encourage Swedish newspapers to focus more on the horse race than the British newspapers. This might particularly be the case when, as in Britain in 2005, there was apparently little doubt regarding which party would win the election and form the government (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005). However, had the British election been closer, the British newspapers might well have focused more on the horse race, perhaps even more so than the Swedish newspapers.

Some results were more surprising. In particular, we expected more news articles to be triggered by political actors in Britain than in Sweden, but the opposite turned out to be true. However, it is also worth noting that it is rather uncommon in both countries for

articles to be triggered by political actors. This shows that neither Swedish nor British newspapers are content merely to follow the agenda set by political actors.

Another result was the lack of significant differences with regards to episodic and thematic framing. This might be an indication that in this respect, the type of newspaper is more important than the country in which the newspapers are produced and published.

On a general level, however, the results show important significant differences between the election news coverage in Britain and in Sweden. Furthermore, the correlations between the different framings and journalistic styles and in which country the articles were published are stronger than the correlation with newspaper type. This indicates that there indeed is a linkage between the system level and the election news coverage. Thus, political systems and media systems matter, as postulated by Hallin and Mancini (2004), and this appears to be of greater importance than whether the articles are published in tabloids or in elite newspapers.

Conclusions: Biases in Election News Coverage

The purpose of this study was to compare the election news coverage in Britain and Sweden, focusing on the concept of structural bias and its manifestations in the framing of politics in three newspapers in each country. The study has provided some interesting results. It has also indicated the necessity for further research that refines the concept of structural bias and, via that concept and comparative research, attempts to link the system level of media and politics with the actual media content.

The evidence shows that the metaframing of politics as a game was more common in British than in Swedish newspapers and the same is true with regards to the usage of the political strategy frame and an interpretive journalistic style. The evidence also shows that British newspapers applied the conflict frame and the politicians as individuals frame more often than the Swedish newspapers, whereas the Swedish newspapers applied the governing frame and the news management frame more often than their British counterparts. Swedish articles also seemed to be triggered by political actors more often than British articles. Finally, the results showed no difference with regards to contextual framing.

Most of these results can be attributed to the differences between media systems and political systems as well as their interactions in Britain and Sweden, in combination with contextual conditions at work when the two elections were compared. Therefore, the differences can be perceived as manifestations of structural biases in each country, rooted in the circumstances of news production and journalistic norms and values. As an avenue for further research concerning the linkage between the system level and the media content, these results are promising.

However, this study has some limitations that should be addressed in further cross-national research of election news coverage. First of all, the concept of structural bias must be further analyzed and developed. Secondly, cross-national studies of election news coverage can and should be expanded to include more countries, more than one election in each country and a larger sample of the election news coverage in each country at each election. Finally, further research should try to develop a comprehensive framework for comparing and analyzing election news coverage in different countries, belonging to different models of media and politics. In the long run, empirical comparative research requires to be firmly located in a theoretical framework that allows broader generalizations

regarding the linkage between media systems and political systems, on the one hand, and the news coverage of national elections, on the other.

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Jesper Strömbäck (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Department of Media and Communication, Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden. E-mail: jesper.stromback@miun.se

Adam Shehata, Department of Media and Communication, Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden.