Still the Middle Way: A Study of Political Communication Practices in Swedish Election Campaigns

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This article focuses on the process of hybridization of political campaigns, using Sweden as a case study, and raises three main research questions. First, how do global campaign practices influence the national campaign context in Sweden? Second, how does the Swedish political structure and political culture influence the adaptation of global trends in this area? Third, how can a possible hybridization of political campaigning be characterized in Sweden? The data in this study are mainly based on structured interviews with party secretaries and campaign officials in all seven parties with seats in the Swedish Parliament. The results indicate that the hybridization of political communication practices in Sweden is characterized by a growing use of global campaign practices. Marketing tools are frequently used for opinion analyses, but there are substantial obstacles to a complete implementation of modern practices. To some extent this can be explained by existing laws and regulations but, above all, by public perceptions of parties, politics, and elections. Sweden is a country with a structural framework where global campaign features can be transformed to a large extent. However, a political culture more influenced by a national campaign context somewhat curtails this transformation process.

Keywords: *election campaigns; political marketing; hybridization; Americanization; party strategies*

In many countries, both industrialized and developing, PR and political marketing have become more important elements of election campaigns (Kavanagh 1995; Norris et al. 1999; Noelle-Neumann et al. 2000; Jönsson and Larsen 2001). A professionalization of political communication is taking place, as indicated by campaign centralization, increasing use of political consultants, and new relations between media and political parties (Negrine 1996: 150–51).

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However, distinct features in individual countries such as laws and regulations, the nature of political systems, media structures, and political culture still matter (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 1995). Thus, it seems productive to consider the interplay between international trends and national traditions in this field (Plasser and Plasser 2002; Hallin and Mancini 2004).

The main objective of this article is to examine and discuss the characteristics and typical components of such a "middle-way" model of political communication in Sweden. What is the result of a mixture of globalization and traditional factors? Which international trends have been borrowed, and which domestic characteristics endure? To what extent can international and domestic distinctive features coexist? How important are national laws and regulations, electoral system, party and media systems, and political culture in shaping this political communication "hybrid"?

After "Americanization"

Americanization is a concept that appears quite regularly in contemporary academic literature about changes in political communication systems (Negrine 1996; Norris 2000; Plasser and Plasser 2002). It is used mainly because the changes in the current political communication processes first appeared in the American context (Negrine 1996). The thesis assumes a directional one-way convergence process in campaign practices, where other countries are adopting U.S. actions of political communication (Plasser and Plasser 2002: 16). The most important elements of this process are election campaigns focused on political personality and character, frequent use of opinion polls, a central role for PR consultants and political marketing, a television-driven media agenda, and a professionalization of the roles of communication actors, where politicians and journalists closely interact (Negrine 1996; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999).

However, all these trends cannot be taken as categorical evidence that an Americanization of political communication actually has taken place. The basis of the changes could as well be found in technological advances making it easier to administer modern election campaigns or analyze voter segments and candidates' positions (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001: 400).

Moreover, comparative social research indicates some universal changes in the advanced democracies. Among the most important are an ongoing fragmentation of public opinion and a growing mistrust of politicians and political institutions (Pharr et al. 2000; Norris et al. 1999). In the most advanced democracies, electoral outcomes are being decided more often by accidental occurrences during the last weeks of election campaigns; thus, the impact of campaigning is growing.

"Hybridization" and Marketing

The idea of a one-sided adoption process where U.S.-inspired campaign practices prevail at a global level nowadays seems quite obsolete and is generally rejected by international scholars in this field. "It conveys a false impression of an unchanging U.S. system, to which the rest of the world is inexorably adapting" (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001: 400). On the contrary, most studies suggest national election campaigns to be a mixture of global campaign influences and national contexts. The variations can be explained by a series of environmental factors such as media structure, party system, electoral law, and regulations. This theory of modernization assumes a process of nondirectional convergence in communication practices (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 1995; Blumler and Gurevitch 2001; Plasser and Plasser 2002; Hallin and Mancini 2004).

This process of convergence and integration can be explored in many ways, but the concept of "hybridization" seems to be particularly promising. The hybridization process differs from a standardization process where country-specific campaigning is gradually phased out. On the contrary, hybridization is based on a "shopping model" where country-specific elements coexist with select features of global campaigning. Thus, both exogenous and indigenous conditions are considered (Plasser and Plasser 2002: 19; Esser and Pfetsch 2004).

A possible model for predicting the characteristics of a hybrid political communication process in a country should thus account for variances of market orientation in the structural frame of campaigning and for variances of market orientation in actual campaign practices, as well as in campaign practitioners' behavior and in values and perceptions of the nature of elections campaigns among political actors and the public. Sometimes global campaigning may be allowed but not practiced, sometimes practiced but not acknowledged.

Thus, in exploring the mixture of exogenous and indigenous campaigning practices, it is first of all important to ask whether global practices are allowed according to laws and regulations. Second, it is essential to know whether party officials and political consultants actually are executing such practices. Finally, it should be considered whether such practices are openly described and defended in the national public debate. If there is little public acceptance for these practices, they probably face the political parties with a dilemma, where election-winning strategies can turn out to be counterproductive both in the internal and in the electoral arena.

Thus, the variety of hybridization of political campaigning in a country should depend on the legal possibilities of political parties and candidates to use global practices, their willingness to actually use them in campaign, and their openness with them in the public debate. Accordingly, a variety of hybrid campaigns are possible to imagine, taking into consideration both national differences in

political structure and political culture and party-level differences between political organizations.

Research Questions, Material, and Method

This article focuses on the process of a hybridization of political campaigns, using Sweden as a case study. Most of the data in this study are based on structured interviews with party secretaries and campaign officials in all seven parties with seats in the Swedish Parliament. The total number of people responsible for election campaign strategies is very limited. The sample of interviewees covers the total population extensively. The interviews were conducted in two waves, the first in November 2002, focusing on activities during the national elections held during that autumn; and the second in April 2003, focusing on general party strategies, personal resources, the use of marketing experts, and communication strategies. The interviews followed a common interview protocol, which was designed to address party campaign practices and campaign philosophy. In total, fourteen interviews lasting one to one-and-a-half hours on average were conducted. The interviews all took place at the party offices in Stockholm. They were taped and transcribed before the material was analyzed in a qualitative content analysis.

Setting the Stage

The adaptation of global campaign practices in Sweden faces limits. Swedish democracy is based on a multiparty parliamentarian system, where the party traditionally has been more important than the candidate in national elections. The election system is strictly proportional, even if recent political reforms have offered voters the option of choosing a single candidate on the party ballot. Furthermore, national, regional, and local elections are held on the same day, which, in essence, means fewer elections where campaign strategies can be developed and practices can be improved.

Some important regulations also exist, which obstruct the production of party campaign messages in the broadcast media. First and foremost, political advertisements are prohibited, both in public service broadcasts and in commercial channels. Thus, one of the most distinctive features of modern political campaigns does not exist in Sweden. It is also unlikely that it will exist in the foreseeable future, as the political majority in Parliament supports the belief that political ads actually reduce the quality of public discourse, given their often superficial and negative character. Of course, political ads do reach Swedish viewers through cables and satellites from TV stations based abroad, but they play only a marginal role in political communication aspects.

Second, no free broadcasting time is made available to political parties on either television or radio during the election campaign. The fact that not even public service companies allow such political party presentations is unique to Sweden. Instead, the tradition in public service media is to have journalist-led questioning and special programs with party leaders during the final weeks before the elections and a final debate between the party leaders two days before the actual election.

However, a further glance at political communication in Sweden modulates the picture and offers some arguments for the emergence of a modernization of political communication. There have been considerable changes during recent years in political and media systems and among the electorate. At the present time, opinion shifts are more dramatic than ever in Swedish politics, and the political de-alignment process is evident. Party identification is going down, and voting behavior is far less predictable (Holmberg 2000). A huge majority of the political parties have reached historical "drops or tops" in voting results during the four most recent elections in Sweden 1998 (national parliament), 1999 (EU Parliament), 2002 (national parliament) and 2004 (EU Parliament).

Thus, the former political stability, regarded as an important part of the "Swedish Model," is to some extent challenged by a more volatile public opinion (Asp and Esaiasson 1996; Holmberg 2000). These changes must be viewed from a societal context where the welfare state, characterized by a huge public sector and high taxes, has gradually been replaced by more market-oriented policies based on the conditions of the international economy, not least since Sweden joined the European Union in 1995.

If the political system has gone from stability to volatility, the same can be said about the media system. Deregulations and technological advances, as well as a more liberal media policy, have introduced more market-oriented broadcast media companies. At the same time, there have been enormous changes in the newspaper market, which has seen a market-driven development with more owner concentration, joint ventures, and takeovers, with both vertical and horizontal integration processes taking place (Hvitfelt 2002; Alström and Nord 2003). Media people, as well as political people, now have to adjust to new conditions where marketing logic and highly volatile public opinion are distinctive features.

In terms of citizen communication behavior, Sweden is undoubtedly a media-centered democracy. According to recent national surveys, about 80 percent of the population relies primarily on the media, and particularly television, for their political information. Personal information and personal experiences play only a marginal role in this aspect (Nord 2003).

Thus, although Sweden could be described as a media-centered democracy, televised political ads and party programs are excluded from its political campaigns. Successful TV strategies thus require careful media management and the

ability to achieve publicity. Without ads and party programs, it is vital to appear favorable in both the TV news and in ordinary programs. There is thus a constant battle within the news, where political parties and other organizations are busy creating newsworthy political stories, and the media companies are as busy trying to evaluate the real newsworthiness of these stories (Nord and Strömbäck 2003). This obviously gives plenty of room for dramatic and superficial political news focusing on the political game and scandals, as confirmed in recent content analyses of national political news in Sweden (Strömbäck 2004).

So even if political parties cannot be involved in direct communication activities in television, they certainly need both professional skills and financial resources in the field of news management. The need to utilize free media to maintain voters' support then becomes a daily priority of government and party officials.

Results: Campaign Practices and Practitioners

With reference to changes in communication practices at the party level, these can be examined both by analyzing the people working with communication within the party organizations and by focusing on the techniques used by the parties in their communication activities. The elite interviews confirm that the political parties in Sweden are slowly adapting to new communication practices, as more people are now working with such activities than previously. Today, all party representatives confirm their use of marketing techniques and admit their need for professional skills. There are, in most cases, specialists employed by the parties working with opinion analyses, campaign activities, and media strategies. They are also not the only ones who have to consider the communication aspects of politics.

> Everyone working within the party organization has to know how media works as mediated communication is decisive in political communication today. (Party secretary, the Social Democrats)

The overall figures concerning party employees also indicate a tripling of political marketing professionals, as measured by their share of total staff, between 1993 and 2003 (see Figure 1).

The parties now employ people in (and also between) election campaigns to conduct party opinions polls, handle media relations, work with the party Web site, and, in some cases, administer focus groups and voter segmentation analyses. They are paid by the party organization and usually have an academic background as well as work experience within the party.

The overall trend is probably more substantial than the figures suggest. The ruling Social Democratic Party, for example, has access to huge communication

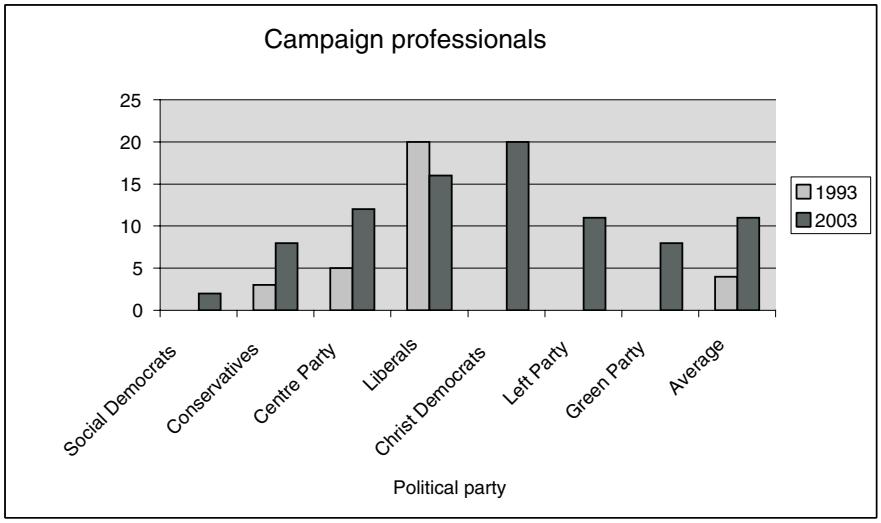

Figure 1
Political Marketing Professionals in Swedish Political Parties, 1993 and 2003 (percentage share of total staff)
Source: Interviews with party secretaries, 2002-2003.

resources outside the party organization. There are about twenty-five Social Democratic ministers in the government, each with his or her own staff including press secretaries and assistants. These employees are not officially integrated within party activities but actively prepare leading politicians with arguments and media advice.

To conclude, there are more party people than ever before engaged in modern communication practices in Sweden. At the same time, the majority of party officials still work as *ombudsmen* within traditional areas such as recruiting and training party members and articulating and consolidating the political interests of party supporters. The fact that both party identification and party membership have been going down has not as yet affected internal party work. Despite a more volatile electorate, it appears that it is still easier for officials to depend on organizational competence rather than on political marketing skills. The main explanation for this may be the system of public financing, based on voting figures, whose aim is to maintain the existing party structure. All parties within Parliament receive the majority of their incomes from the fiscal budget, while member fees or private money offer only a marginal contribution (Nord 2004).

Marketing tools have been used regularly in Swedish party politics during recent decades (Petersson and Holmberg 1998). The breakthrough was during the 1980s and 1990s, and there has been no real increase in the number of polls

since. All political parties use opinion polls, most commonly during election years.

> We conduct opinion polls every month during the election year, and every day during the last month before the elections. About seven to eight focus groups are conducted half a year before the real election campaign starts. In total, I think we spend about 1.5 million SEK [approximately US$200,000] on these activities. (Party secretary, the Conservative Party)

However, while Social Democrats and the Non-Socialist Opposition Parties each conduct a number of polls annually and employ people to prepare and analyze the polls, the Left Party and the Greens only buy a few questions in an external survey in election years (see Table 1).

The leveling off in the use of opinion polls may be surprising but can be explained by the fact that many polls exist. Many leading media companies publish monthly polls about party support or confidence in party leaders. In addition, many polls are conducted by interest organizations, lobbyists, private companies, and public authorities for the purpose of influencing public opinion and setting the political agenda. Exit polls are also conducted in Sweden. However, due to voluntary restrictions accepted by parties, marketing companies, and media, they are only published after the voting procedure is completed.

Focus groups are another tool that is widely used. The Social Democrats and the Centre Party both conduct focus groups five or more times annually. Among the larger parties the same people are responsible for all marketing tools, and no special departments exist for different analytical instruments. The professionals working with these tasks usually possess more all-around skills rather than expertise in any one particular communication field. It is, however, unclear as to the extent polling data are considered when election platforms or media strategies are decided. In the interviews, only two of the seven party secretaries openly admitted the use of polling in policy making.

To conclude, the interviews with the party secretaries generally confirm a widespread use of advanced marketing tools during the last decades. Media and opinion activities still do not occupy most people working within the party organizations, but the situation is gradually changing.

Opinions on Campaign Philosophy and Strategy

The party secretaries argue that classic party strategies are much more important than political marketing. Both the government party and opposition parties stress the need for ideological identification and recognition within the electorate. The danger of losing party identity in a marketing-orientation process was addressed by a majority of the interviewees.

Table 1
Use of political marketing tools in Swedish political parties, 1993 and 2003

	1993				2003			
	Polls	Focus Groups	Voter Segment	Opposition Mapping	Polls	Focus Groups	Voter Segment	Opposition Mapping
Social Democrats	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Moderates	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Centre Party	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Liberals	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Christian Democrats	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Leftist Party	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
The Greens	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Source: Personal interviews, 2002-2003.

> We know today that it is very important for our party members and supporters to recognize the party and see the connections between the party congress, party manifestos and party leader debates. If they don't see the connections here, the party will face difficult problems. The professionalization of politics could thus be dangerous as it reinforces a development where you are distancing yourself from voters and partisans. (Party secretary, the Social Democrats)
>
> We are based on the idea of liberalism. Our members believe in this idea about pluralism, equity, freedom and individual civil rights.
>
> If we forget about the ideology of the party, then the whole party would be destroyed. (Party secretary, the Liberal Party)

A general theme in the interviews was attention to internal party work and the risk of being too focused on campaign strategies at the expense of party democracy and the collective interests of party members. Most party secretaries acknowledged a tension between party goals and election-winning strategies. They claimed it is important to keep in touch with internal party opinion:

> As parties become more campaign-focused, important party decisions are taken more rapidly and by fewer people in top of the party organization. You have to be aware of this development and try to build-up the internal party structure in order to maintain a grass root-level influence in party affairs. This definitely reflects an internal party problem for us. (Party secretary, the Christian Democrats)
>
> If we find an issue where the party has another opinion than the public we have to ask ourselves: Is the issue important in the election campaign? Do we have to tell the voters that it is necessary for them to change their mind by selling our idea to them? And we have to be aware that such a strategy could reduce our support in the electorate. (Party secretary, the Conservative Party)

Discussion

The overall picture of changing political communication practices in Sweden is thus mixed. Media are becoming more important both as an arena and an actor in the political communication process. As a reflection of partisan de-alignment, a volatile electorate, and limited possibilities for direct communication, news management is more important than ever. These developments have encouraged a market orientation of the political parties as is the case in many other advanced democracies.

The transformation process in Sweden is, however, rather slow and does not correspond in any way to the dramatic changes taking place within the electorate and the media system. Some party activities are centralized, more polls are used, and more people are working with media and public relations, but parties still

spend more resources on internal affairs than on voter mobilization and opinion formation.

It seems reasonable to describe Sweden as a country where a degree of modernization of political communication has taken place, but in a rather "lighter" manner than in other comparable countries. The campaign party has not as yet replaced the party of ideas or the issue party, but all parties are gradually becoming more market-oriented and more professionalized. An apposite term proposed for this process used here is "hybridization," meaning a development in political communication where traditional national campaign practices exist together with select transnational features of postmodern campaign based on marketing logic (Plasser and Plasser 2002: 348–51).

There are several reasons for Sweden's particular version of hybridization. First, the political and electoral context has to be considered; Sweden has a multiparty political system and, basically, a proportional and party-based electoral system. Thus, a possible global diffusion of campaign and marketing techniques based upon a two-party system and candidate-centered, first-past-the-post electoral system is less applicable. In a multiparty system smaller parties can be successful without using political marketing intelligence and "catchall" strategies (Lees-Marshment 2001: 222).

Second, the traditional media structure in Sweden can still be described as "politics-friendly." Even if most newspapers are now more or less independent of political parties and there is a dualistic broadcast system, most of the national media still pay close attention to political affairs, particularly during the run up to an election. Polls, power plays, and scandals are becoming more frequent news items, but much time and space is nevertheless spent on more substantial political coverage (Strömbäck 2004: 73–177). Commercial TV channels are slowly increasing their share of the audience, but public service channels are still highly popular.

Finally, political culture and political behavior tend to be counterforces in the modernization process. The Swedish political parties still thrive on party platforms and manifestos in their campaign activities, while they officially play down political marketing practices, partly because of negative attitudes among members and voters. Most parties were founded as popular movements, and this has probably encouraged a nonprofessional party "self-image" in Swedish political culture (Mancini 1999: 243; Gilboa 2004: 28–29).

In sum, the hybridization of political communication practices in Sweden is characterized by a growing use of marketing tools, although substantial obstacles to the complete implementation of modern practices exist. This can be explained by existing laws and regulations and, even more, by public perceptions of parties, politics, and elections.

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