

When the media matters for electoral performance

Abstract

In this article, we analyse the connection between media exposure and opinion polls for political parties or “the media influence”. We compare two parliamentary periods in Sweden: 2006–2010 and 2010–2014. Our results show that the media is important for the anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats (SD) in the first period. This is not the case, or at least less so, for the other parliamentary parties. In the second period, media exposure wanes in importance for explaining poll fluctuations as well as shifts from national to regional media for the Sweden Democrats. These findings are in consonance with previous research which underlines that the media’s influence on electoral performance differs before and after the party has crossed the electoral threshold to the national parliament.

Keywords: media, party politics, polling behaviour, life cycle

Introduction

In today’s public debate, the suggestion is made that people have lost interest in politics. Established parties are losing members and, if people do vote, they vote for populist parties. In Sweden, to some extent, these tendencies are also visible in politics. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for not jumping to hasty conclusions.

When it comes to waning engagement, people also tend to pursue political action outside the immediate realms of party politics. For instance, research shows that people are engaged in demonstrations to make their voices heard (Wennerhag 2017). Besides, more frequently than ever, various institutes are producing poll results for each individual party. Considering the multitude of poll surveys nowadays, the only figures which convey complete accuracy for each individual party are the actual election results.

With this article we explore how opinion polls for individual parties fluctuate over time in correlation with their exposure in the media. Politics is disseminated by the media primarily and, following the polarised features of politics as such, people tend to select their information sources in consonance with their own political preferences. One simple question arises: what influences what? Does media reporting on political issues and standpoints reflect public opinion or does it, conversely, actively shape it? How we as citizens acquire information, formulate our opinions and make our party choices does not take place in a vacuum but is partly filtered through the channels of the mass media, even if we increasingly select our own information. As noted in

a recent study by Berning *et al.* (2018), little research attention has been devoted to encompassing the correlation between the media and poll fluctuations for individual parties. Our analysis contributes by compensating, to some extent, for this omission.

Aim of the study

Our aim is to demonstrate that the media matters for electoral performance in the period before a new party has crossed the electoral threshold to the national parliament and acquired seats. We do this by a simple investigation of the correlation between media exposure and opinion polls for political parties – hence a *media influence*.

The media influence, of course, varies over time, as does the saliency of particular issues in the electoral competition. Whether or not, for instance, the question of immigration is picked up by individual parties and used in their rhetoric depends on how this fits with their general party strategy (see Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008:629). According to recent research on opinion polls, the most recognisable change in the Swedish party-political landscape the recent years is the rise of the Sweden Democrats in the national polls (Oscarsson 2017). Our argument is that the media had a significant influence on the poll fluctuations of the Sweden Democrats (but not on the other parliamentary parties) before it was big enough to hold seats in the national parliament (2006–2010). In the subsequent parliamentary period (2010–2014) the Sweden Democrats crossed the electoral threshold but, by then, the media effect had started to have less influence, since the party had become a “normal” party. As Berning *et al.* (2018:2) argue concerning Radical Right Wing Political Parties (RPPs):

Drawing on agenda-setting theory, mass media coverage is expected to provide the necessary political opportunity for the rise of RPP parties, perhaps even from the political fringe to government participation. The idea is that RPP parties thrive on visibility and prominence and that they depend on media attention as a breeding ground for electoral mobilization.

We thus suggest that it is more important to consider media exposure when explaining party performances in the parliamentary period *before* the party crosses the electoral threshold to the national parliament compared to the period *after*. More precisely, we have two expectations. First, we expect a selective *media effect* – that is, the degree to which media exposure correlates to opinion poll fluctuations for the Sweden Democrats in the period 2006–2010 but not 2010–2014 and not for the other parliamentary parties. Second, we expect that this selective *media effect* holds true to a similar extent in all the newspapers put under scrutiny in this study. Although prominent claim-makers in the public debate highlight differences between the individual newspapers (see, for example, Wingborg 2016), we here suggest that these differences do not have a significant effect on fluctuations in the opinion polls. Previous research has shown that the tone (negative, neutral or positive) of the media is far more negative in Sweden towards its anti-immigration party compared

to the media comments on equivalent parties on the editorial pages in the other Scandinavian countries, in the period 2009–2012 (Hellström 2016; Hellström & Lodenius 2016). The differences in tone between the countries were much higher than those between the individual newspapers in each country. In other words, the tone towards the Sweden Democrats was much more negative than, for instance, the tone towards the Danish People’s Party in the Danish mainstream press editorials. That said, previous research has shown that, the negative tone employed to categorise the RRP parties may still have positive effects on public opinion and increase voter support for RRP (Berning *et al.* 2018:5).

We are aware that the causality can go in either direction; hence, our analysis seeks to establish a correlation between the media exposure of political parties and party poll fluctuations. Nevertheless, whereas other factors might affect the electoral fortunes of individual parties, the appeals and poll results of each party are communicated through the press.

The Sweden Democrats lifespan in Swedish politics

In her doctoral thesis, Meret (2009) suggests a lifespan model to study shifts in party ideology, and specifically focusing on the RRP parties. She explains: “Being at the margins and in opposition gives other possibilities and challenges in terms of the attitudes, beliefs and politics developed than those that emerge from being a party in office” (2009:84). As an anti-establishment party, “the underdog”, ends up in a precarious situation since the party is actually part of the establishment. To balance this tightrope effectively, it is good to simultaneously have one foot in and one foot out of government (Christiansen 2016).

Meret’s framework distinguishes between three phases:

1. a formative phase, breakthrough;
2. a consolidation and maturity phase and
3. government responsibility and policy impact.

The idea to study shifts in party ideology from a lifespan perspective is not completely new. For instance, Mogens Pedersen (1982) suggested a similar model in which he emphasised the importance of considering the temporal dimension of minor parties in order to provide an impact on the party system at large; for us, it suffices to say that, when the media matters for polling behaviour, it has to be related to various stages in party development and thus to its lifespan.

Even if commentators and opinion-makers express different views on whether the Sweden Democrats is a normal party like all the others or not, the other parliamentary parties have acclimatised their politics and rhetoric. However, it is almost unanimously agreed that the party has an extremist background (see, for example, Hellström 2016). As indicated by Backlund (2011), the Sweden Democrats is economically centrist but highly authoritarian. It lacks a clear position on the socio-economic left–right scale, but

attracts voters from both camps who unite in an authoritarian outlook of socio-cultural issues such as immigration.

The Sweden Democrats developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s from an organisation of angry young men with clear neo-Nazi influences (both in terms of persons then active and in their rhetoric) to a party, today, for the prudent, ordinary worker, attracting voters from all other parties, including those who previously abstained from voting. The party has long aspired to move out from the murky shadows of the extreme right to become a mainstream party for the “common man”. This is not a new ambition. The process of normalisation to attain enough credibility to attract the mainstream to vote for the party has been ongoing for the last two decades. For the electorate, the party now represents a valid alternative for voters who prefer assimilation to integration. The party radicalises mainstream worries about immigration and problems of integration in, for example, housing, schools and hospitals.

In September 2010, the SD crossed the electoral threshold to participate in Sweden’s parliament with 5.7 per cent of the total votes; in the 2014 election they went on to achieve 12.9 per cent of the total votes and secured 49 seats in the national parliament. During and in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis, which peaked in the autumn of 2015, the party’s opinion poll showed even higher potential electoral support (see Figure 1).

Looking into the Sweden Democrats ideological positioning in Swedish politics, we can distinguish between four different periods (two before and two after their electoral breakthrough) in terms of media exposure. The first stage corresponds to the period before 2006 when the party had very limited media exposure. The second stage takes place between 2006 and 2010 when media interest increased considerably and mainstream political actors and political commentators started to voice concerns about the presence of the party. Many representatives of the mainstream parties and journalists alike emphasised the importance of debating with them but, in so doing, the Sweden Democrats was generally dismissed as a devil in disguise. The voters are considered to be rational but not racists, therefore there must be other reasons for voting for them (see Hellström & Nilsson 2010). Even if the party has an extremely shady past and has since transformed into a more conventional party, its history continues to haunt it. These two stages constitute the first period in our analysis. The third stage occurs between 2010 and 2014, our second period in the analysis, when the Sweden Democrats had crossed the electoral threshold into the Swedish parliament. The fourth stage concerns the period after 2014 and a more polarised media landscape, where the party is no longer stigmatised to the same degree as before. It is noteworthy that the Sweden Democrats has not yet entered into the third stage, as envisaged by Meret (2009) – government responsibility and policy impact.

Polling behaviour

Zaller (1992) develops a model for explaining how people convert political information into political preferences. The argument is that the individual, based on, for example, his or her normative presuppositions and degree of political awareness, does not start formulating opinions about an individual party until the mainstream press starts engaging with it as a relevant political actor. Yet it is important to recognise that the space in which people formulate their opinions is not based on one unitary public space (Hellström & Edenborg 2016). Roger Silverstone (2007) shows how the media is integrated into the fabric of everyday life, making up an essential part of our life world. The media, in this understanding, serves as an opinionated space, which form the basis for an intricate process when we categorize our experiences and formulate our opinions about, for instance, a particular party.

The individual media consumer focuses on structural injustices and imbalances between the people and the elite of the system, frequently referred to as the populist divide (see, for example, Hellström 2016). The media and populism are thus intrinsically linked. However, rather than labelling individual parties as mobilising, for example, populist sentiments, this issue has encroached on larger issues such as how we view ourselves and how we draw borders between our communities and theirs. Populism is increasingly a reality but also an overused concept; any opponent who does not share a person's or a party's opinions or world view tends to be pejoratively ascribed to the populist label.

Much research have treated the so-called populist parties as extreme pathologies in modern society; however, the populist parties no longer appear at the fringe of mainstream societies but instead occupy the centre (Mudde 2004). This is also confirmed by Wodak (2015) in her discussion on the normalisation of extremism in contemporary European politics.

In a recent study on how the Swedish media reported on immigration during the period 2010–2015 it was suggested that the published articles were more negative than positive and that the term “immigration” was predominantly associated with refugees and not, for instance, with labour migration (Strömbeck *et al.* 2017). These findings do not necessarily imply that more voters will become more prone to vote for the Sweden Democrats, but do indicate a strong polarisation in the electorate.

To explain the Sweden Democrats electoral fortunes, our hypothesis suggests that the mere quantitative media exposure of the party determines to some extent its electoral performance, prior to its electoral breakthrough. Even if there were a (growing) demand in the electorate for a radical right wing party, the Sweden Democrats could not have achieved electoral gains if their presumptive voters had not heard of them. As put by Herbert Kitschelt (2013:224, quoted in Hellström 2016:52–53): “Only where demand and supply meet will socio-cultural dispositions translate into actual vote choices”. The relative significance given to the party in the mainstream press thus potentially motivates the individual media consumer (and voter) to formulate an opinion on the party.

However, Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008) claim that the media plays a less-dominant role in explaining why RPPs improve their electoral fortunes after their initial breakthroughs. According to Ellinas (2010:18; cf. Berning *et al.* 2018:5): “[m]edia exposure can push minor parties into mainstream debate, give them visibility, and legitimate their claims”.

Ellinas relies on the Sartorian notion of *threshold of relevance*, which is based on the premise that “once parties become electorally relevant, their electoral fortunes are determined by different factors than before” (2010:15). He thus suggests a two-stage approach: before and after the initial breakthrough. In the first stage, before RPPs have grown large enough to play a central role on the electoral market, it is the most appropriate to focus on the behaviour of mainstream parties to determine poll fluctuations. Once in parliament, it is difficult to maintain the underdog position. In other words, being anti-establishment rhetorically is easier when you are *de facto* not part of it. Now, for the Sweden Democrats it is not merely about attaining voting maximisation in the electoral arena, but also about transforming rhetoric into policy – for which co-operation with other parties in the parliamentary arena is required. Sometimes these two concerns (voting maximisation and influence) clash. The *media effect* responds predominantly to the former concern.

Previous research has shown that greater media attention – thus visibility – correlates with stronger support for RPP parties (Berning *et al.* 2018). This certainly varies depending on which issues the media gives priority to and on what the voters prioritise.

Van der Pas *et al.* (2011) show how voting support for RPP parties relates to the so-called *leadership hypothesis*, focusing on Geert Wilders in the Netherlands as a most likely case with which to test this hypothesis. Without having a stable party organisation behind him, Wilders depends heavily on his media performance to mobilise voters. Operationalising leadership as vision and self-confidence, the article concludes that “the effects of the representation of political leaders in the media are more limited than often assumed” (2011:471).

In fact, as the article shows, “a rise in the polls actually causes media attention for Wilders to *drop*” (Van der Pas *et al.* 2011:469). The causal relationship is not always easy to elucidate and may display inconclusive results. In the way of illustration, a set of scandals negatively affected the party in the autumn of 2012 (see below); however, at and especially after the polls, the party grew stronger. This confirms our assumption that it is not primarily a question of *whether* the media matters for electoral performance but more significantly of *when*.

Method and material

We examine the association between the results of the SIFO (*Svenska Institutet För Opinionsundersökningar*, the Swedish Institute for Opinion Surveys) survey of opinions for political party preferences that are conducted every month and the number of mentions each Swedish parliamentary party receives in articles in the most important

newspapers in Sweden in the period October 2006 to September 2014. The reason for using the SIFO poll is that, due to its large sample size, it has established itself as one of the most reliable monthly opinion polls on political preferences in Sweden. However, one caveat with this data source is that it is not conducted during the month of July. To adjust the opinion time series, we impute the missing July months by taking the average outcome of June and August. The statistics for the time series of the number of newspaper articles written on a particular party are based on searches by month in the Swedish digital archive for 2017 (Mediearkivet),¹ filtered by newspaper and political party and matched through keywords. We analyse the six leading newspapers based on their circulation rate: two tabloids – *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet* – two Stockholm-based yet nationwide newspapers – *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* – and two regional newspapers – *Göteborgs-Posten* in the Gothenburg region and *Sydsvenskan* in the Malmö/Scania region.

Our method is straightforward and the idea is to assess whether there is a connection between the opinion poll results and the media attention for all eight parties and in particular the Sweden Democrats. First, we start by scrutinising the opinion poll series as well as the media exposure in a more descriptive way and connect the development of these series to specific political occurrences. At this stage, the analysis covers discussions relating to the party's lifespan.

Second, we correlate the first differences of a political party's opinion poll monthly levels both with those of the number of published articles in the same month and for the two time periods October 2006–September 2010 and October 2010–September 2014.

Third, we lag these series on the number of published articles in one month to assess whether there is a lag in the effect of the media reporting on a particular party and its opinion poll. Using series with first differences ($t-t_1$), these are not affected by either an upward or downward trend, neither in the opinion poll nor in the number of articles published in this period. This may be the case especially concerning the number of articles published, since the number of monthly articles on the political parties will most probably increase in the run-up to the elections.

Fourth, we conduct an ordinary least-square regression analysis to investigate the extent to which the published articles affect the SD opinion poll. We run regression analyses for each newspaper, including first-difference and lagged series as well as an analysis including all series for all newspapers. We used vector autoregressive models for establishing the causal direction. The analysis showed that increased media coverage resulted in a higher opinion poll for the Sweden Democrats. Regressions, including the first differences of fluctuations of international migration to Sweden and the share of unemployed, did not yield any significant results.

There is also, hypothetically, a media influence for the other, smaller parties in the Swedish parliament but the combination of the saliency of the immigration issue

1 We are grateful to Hedvig Obenius for collecting the necessary data from Mediearkivet for this article.

in Swedish politics, public debate and popular concerns and the continuous rise of Sweden’s anti-immigration party in the period under study make our focus on the Sweden Democrats as an example particularly relevant.

In the analysis, we focus on the correlation between media exposure and the Sweden Democrats voting poll fluctuations in two parliamentary periods (2006–2010 and 2010–2014), including all the other parliamentary parties for reference.

Analysis

A first look at the descriptive Figures 1 and 2 reveals that only two parties were close to the electoral threshold in the first period (2006–2010) – namely, the Christian Democrats and the Swedish Democrats – whereas, in the second period, only the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party were close to the threshold. We also observe that, in the first period (Figure 1) there is an increase in opinion for the Green Party starting about a year before the actual September 2009 election. The Green Party also consolidates a higher level of votes in the opinion polls at about 10 per cent on average in the second period. It is in this second period that the opinion poll for the Swedish Democrats increases its average level.

In certain months in the period between September/October 2012 and the election month, September 2014, the opinion poll for Swedish Democrats reached 10 per cent of the potential electorship.

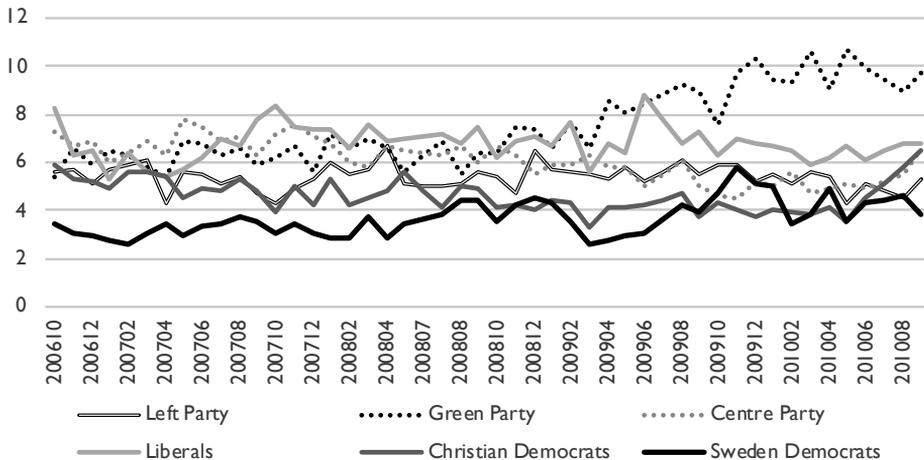


Figure 1. Opinion polls of smaller political parties, per month, 2006–2010. Source: SIFO, opinion polls, 2006–2010.

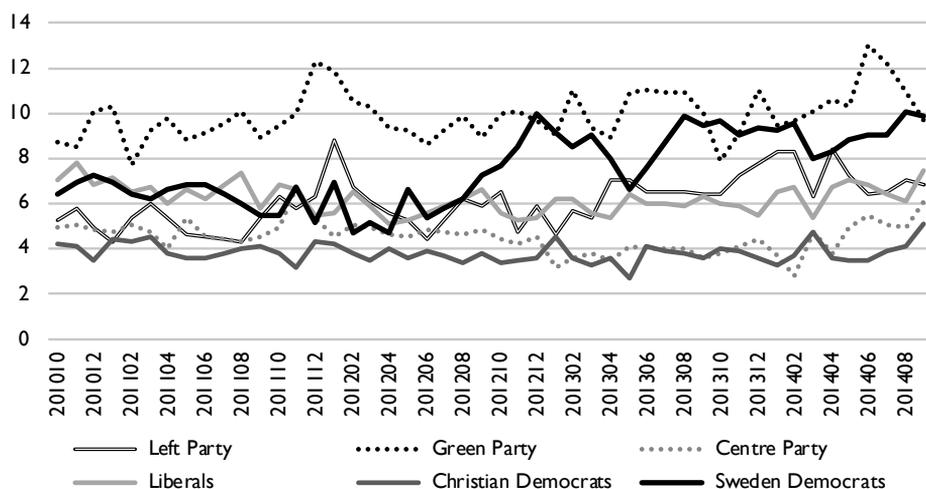


Figure 2. Opinion polls of smaller political parties, per month, 2010–2014
 Source: SIFO, opinion polls, 2010–2014.

Figure 3 shows the number of articles on the Sweden Democrats during 2006–2014 and the opinion poll for the Swedish Democrats in the same period. The peaks are connected to the actual elections can be clearly seen and 2010 was the top year for articles on the SD due to its entrance into the national Swedish parliament. Summarising the descriptive results of the first period, the party's opinion polls and the number of articles appear to be conducive to a positive upward trend.

In the first period, on two occasions, both the opinion polls and the number of articles published peaked at the same time. What is more, the overall number of articles seems to increase during the second period – especially during the later years – and could be connected to the increase in the opinion polls for the Swedish Democrats during this particular phase. More detailed analysis of the peaks indicates the following results.

The first event relates to an article published by the SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson in one of the evening tabloids, *Aftonbladet*, on 19 October 2009. In it Åkesson posits that “Muslims are the greatest threat to Swedish society”. In October 2009, the SD opinion poll rises, for the first time, above the electoral threshold (4.4 per cent) and increases to 5.4 per cent in November 2009. Over the following months it gradually drops to earlier levels of just below the threshold. The second event is the elections, when the party's opinion polls found themselves in the fortunate position of tipping the scales in favour of either of the two political blocs.

Concerning the second period, the peak in the autumn of 2012 is connected to the many articles in the media archive which dealt with the question of whether the party

ambition to kick out members who did not follow the party’s official policy of zero tolerance against racism and xenophobia was actually seriously meant or something which the party board were indulgent about. Sometimes, specific scandals attracted much media attention. In November 2012, the tabloid newspaper, *Expressen*, published a mobile phone footage featuring the party’s economic spokesperson, Erik Almqvist and at the time justice policy spokesperson, Kent Ekeroth. Recorded in 2010, the three were seen verbally abusing the Swedish-Kurdish comedian Soran Ismail, before arming themselves with scaffolding poles from a construction site and wandering the streets of Stockholm. The film shows a discussion between Almqvist and Ismail, and Almqvist rejecting Ismail’s right to present himself as Swedish, despite the fact that he carries a Swedish passport. A young woman intervenes on Ismail’s behalf and is later dismissed by Almqvist as a “little whore”. Following the publication of the film, a huge wave of protests took place in Sweden, with many journalists writing negative articles about the party and the incident. Jimmie Åkesson, chairperson, immediately removed the two members of parliament, Almqvist and Ekeroth, from their positions as spokespersons (see Hellström 2012).

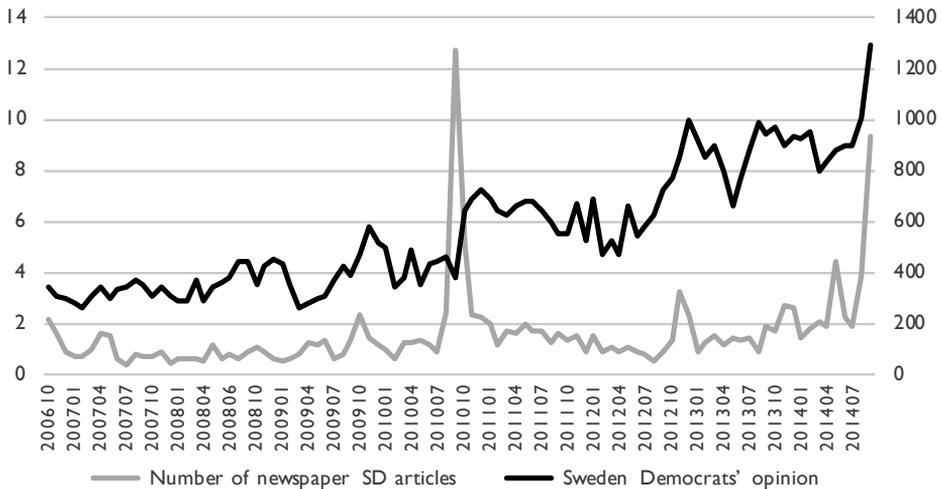


Figure 3. Articles on the Sweden Democrats in the six largest newspapers and the opinion poll for the Sweden Democrats, per month, 2006–2014.

Source: SIFO and Mediearkivet, 2006–2014.

Figure 3 suggests that turmoil within in the party created greater media exposure. Apart from the scandals, the Sweden Democrats attracted increased media attention during the autumn of 2013 due to its positioning on the budget and other intra-parliamentary matters. Figure 3 also shows that the increase in media exposure in May 2014 relates to the fact that many articles dealt with the then-upcoming elections to the European Parliament, not least because there were many articles on the party groups in the parliament and much interest over which group the Sweden Democrats would join.

Although it is very interesting to see how media exposure of certain events can be connected to opinion poll results, this does not mean that there is a general influence of media exposure on opinion poll outcomes for parties. We therefore continue our analysis of the correlation between the number of articles published by individual newspapers, and the opinion poll of the SD and the other political parties, in order to verify the expectations described earlier. In Table 1, the correlations between the SIFO monthly opinion polls for the parliamentary parties and the Sweden Democrats and the six largest newspapers are shown. The table shows that, in general, few significant correlations are established. Those that can be discerned are for three small parties – the Liberal Party, the Christian Democrats and, during this period, the upcoming party, the Sweden Democrats. For the Liberal Party the correlations are relatively weak but are found for all newspapers and are connected to the month after the party's appearance in the newspaper – the so-called lagged correlations. Higher correlations, again for all newspapers, are found for both the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats. For the Christian Democrats, it is during the actual month of an article's publication in the newspaper that a correlation is found with higher or lower opinion polls for the party. From a causality perspective, this result is more difficult to explain than if the correlation is with the lagged observations.

When it comes to the correlations found for the Sweden Democrats, the interesting feature shown in Table 1 is, first, the relatively strong negative correlation during the actual month of the opinion poll and, second, the relatively strong positive correlation with the number of articles published the month before. The second result could simply be that the result of the number of articles on the Sweden Democrats the month before does induce higher or lower political preference for the party. The first result, however, indicates that, during the month of higher or lower publications on the Sweden Democrats, the opinion poll for the party goes in the opposite direction.

Table 1. Correlations between SIFO monthly opinion polls and the number of published articles, October 2006–September 2010.

	Sweden Demo- crats	Christian Demo- crats	Green Party	Centre Party	Liberal Party	Left Party	Moderate Party	Social Demo- crats
All articles	-0.44**	0.52**	0.15	0.22	0.13	0.12	-0.21	-0.03
All articles lagged	0.53**	-0.14	-0.16	-0.30	0.39*	-0.13	0.14	-0.22
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	-0.45**	0.50**	0.15	0.22	0.16	0.14	-0.24	-0.01
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> lagged	0.57**	-0.09	-0.16	-0.28	0.32*	-0.16	0.13	-0.22
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	-0.40**	0.47**	0.15	0.23	0.23	-0.03	-0.15	0.00
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> lagged	0.52**	-0.16	0.21	-0.25	0.32*	-0.06	0.21	-0.22
<i>Expressen</i>	-0.38*	0.31*	0.14	0.15	0.07	0.12	-0.08	-0.05
<i>Expressen</i> lagged	0.50**	-0.07	-0.19	-0.25	0.34*	-0.08	0.06	-0.22
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	-0.41**	0.43**	0.12	0.23	0.07	0.16	-0.23	-0.09
<i>Aftonbladet</i> lagged	0.53**	0.00	-0.04	-0.25	0.36*	-0.04	0.17	-0.24
<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i>	-0.50**	0.32*	0.11	0.03	0.14	0.07	-0.20	-0.03
<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i> lagged	0.49**	-0.01	-0.11	-0.14	0.45**	-0.08	0.09	-0.24
<i>Sydsvenskan</i>	-0.45**	0.56**	0.18	0.26	0.07	0.15	-0.21	-0.02
<i>Sydsvenskan</i> lagged	0.49**	-0.30	-0.17	-0.34*	0.36*	-0.18	0.13	-0.13

**= significant on 0.05 level, *=significant on 0.10 level.

Both the Sweden Democrats and the Christian Democrats show significant correlations in the same month but only the former displays an even stronger correlation effect on the poll results in the month after (Table 1). Our results, then, indicate that the long-term impact of increased media effects induces positive benefits for the Sweden Democrats in subsequent polls. For the Christian Democrats, however, there was no such effect. One possible explanation for the positive and significant correlation for the Christian Democrats could be the fact that this party has been close to the electoral threshold of the national parliament for a long time and that prominent voices in the public debate discuss the opinion outcome to a greater extent than for other parties. We encourage further research to come up with more detailed analyses of the opinion poll results of the Christian Democrats.

Our subsequent period, 2010–2014, shows far fewer correlations overall and, in general, the results are random for both parties and newspapers. We find some weak correlations for the Sweden Democrats opinion poll results with the lagged number of articles for the newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* only. Furthermore, a couple of random results were found for the opinion polls for the Liberal Party and the Moderate Party with *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Göteborgs-Posten*, and for the Liberal

party with *Aftonbladet*.² Since all these later correlations are within the same month that the opinion poll was conducted, it is again difficult to know in which direction the correlation goes. From this, it is safe to conclude that quantitative media exposure by the six newspapers in this analysis did not influence the opinion poll between 2010 and 2014.

Table 2. Correlations between SIFO monthly opinion polls and the number of published articles, October 2010–September 2014.

	<i>Sweden Demo- crats</i>	<i>Christian Demo- crats</i>	<i>Green Party</i>	<i>Centre Party</i>	<i>Liberal Party</i>	<i>Left Party</i>	<i>Moder- ates</i>	<i>Social Demo- crats</i>
All articles	-0.16	0.28	-0.29	-0.03	0.42**	0.20	-0.36*	-0.01
All articles lagged	0.28	-0.15	0.12	0.03	-0.18	-0.15	-0.06	-0.07
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	-0.18	0.18	-0.30	0.09	0.38	0.02	-0.28	0.02
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> lagged	0.31*	-0.10	0.21	0.04	-0.19	-0.12	-0.10	-0.10
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	-0.20	0.15	-0.13	0.02	0.45**	0.25	-0.45**	0.02
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> lagged	0.32*	0.02	-0.19	-0.12	-0.10	-0.13	0.00	-0.08
<i>Expressen</i>	0.30	0.29	-0.29	-0.07	0.31	0.30	-0.15	-0.10
<i>Expressen</i> lagged	-0.16	-0.06	0.13	-0.14	-0.14	-0.16	-0.18	0.06
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	-0.17	-0.22	-0.28	-0.27	0.39*	0.12	-0.23	-0.10
<i>Aftonbladet</i> lagged	0.30	-0.22	0.30	0.08	-0.11	-0.06	-0.17	-0.17
<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i>	-0.04	0.27	-0.18	0.10	0.41**	0.21	-0.40**	0.00
<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i> lagged	0.19	-0.25	-0.03	-0.07	-0.21	-0.10	0.11	0.00
<i>Sydsvenskan</i>	-0.17	0.28	-0.16	0.05	0.25	0.19	-0.38	0.11
<i>Sydsvenskan</i> lagged	0.15	-0.13	0.09	-0.01	-0.08	-0.18	0.06	-0.11

**= significant on 0.05 level, *=significant on 0.10 level.

2 In this period, the leadership question in both the Liberal Party and Moderaterna attracted much media attention, as can be seen in Table 2. However, the effects of media exposure on the electoral performances are inconclusive and go in opposite directions. Both parties experienced internal controversies about party leadership. Whereas the Liberal Party (which changed its name from Folkpartiet Liberalerna in this period) had a leadership struggle, Moderaterna displayed discrepancies between its members and the current leader of the party and the role which the party should have, in particular, in relation to the SD.

Finally, we include an additional regression analysis in order to control for both the number of articles published series and its lagged version (Table 3). In addition, Table 4 shows which newspaper most affected the opinion poll for the Sweden Democrats in the two periods. The separate regressions, including lag before opinion poll measurement, show that all newspapers have an impact on the opinion polls of the Sweden Democrats in the period 2006–2010. In particular, the beta coefficients are higher for the lagged series of *Svenska Dagbladet* (0.018), *Aftonbladet* (0.013) and *Dagens Nyheter* (0.010). Moreover, the adjusted R-squared which indicates the fitness of the model is at least 0.25 or more. In comparison, the regressions for the second period, 2010–2014 show no significant correlations between the number of articles published and the opinion poll for the Sweden Democrats, and the adjusted R-squared for the separate regression show very low levels of model fitness. In our opinion, these results confirm the earlier correlation analysis and indicate a connection between the Sweden Democrats’ media exposure and opinion poll fluctuations in the first period, 2006–2010, whereas this connection is lacking for the second period, 2010–2014.

Table 3. OLS regressions on SIFO monthly opinion polls and number of published articles in the same month and the month before for Sweden Democrats, by different periods. Regression by newspaper.

	2006–2010	Sig.	Adj. R-sq.	2010–2014	Sig.	Adj. R-sq.
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	-0.004	*	0.343	0.005		0.017
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> lagged	0.010	**		-0.005		
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	-0.008	**	0.284	-0.007		0.049
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> lagged	0.018	**		0.010		
<i>Expressen</i>	-0.004		0.259	-0.003		-0.013
<i>Expressen</i> lagged	0.010	**		0.004		
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	-0.006		0.283	-0.005		0.023
<i>Aftonbladet</i> lagged	0.013	**		0.007		
<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i>	-0.006	**	0.274	-0.001		-0.035
<i>Göteborgs-Posten</i> lagged	0.010	*		0.003		
<i>Sydsvenskan</i>	0.007	**	0.282	-0.005		-0.012
<i>Sydsvenskan</i> lagged	-0.004	*		0.002		

**= significant on 0.05 level, *=significant on 0.10 level.

In Table 4, we analysed which of the newspapers had the most impact. We found that *Dagens Nyheter* is the most important newspaper and the lagged series of articles on the Sweden Democrats had a positive and significant effect on the opinion poll of the party in the period 2006–2010. In terms of effect on the party’s opinion poll, if *Dagens Nyheter* published ten or more articles on the party, its opinion poll rose almost by 0.3 per cent the following month.

Interestingly, in the subsequent period, 2010–2014, it was rather the regional papers that had an impact on the opinion poll of the Sweden Democrats. *Göteborgs-Posten*, in particular, shows a positive significant effect on the opinion poll of the Sweden Democrats during the same month that the opinion poll was conducted, whereas the number of articles published in the regional Scanian newspaper e.g. *Sydsvenskan* – the month before the opinion poll had a negative significant effect on the Sweden Democrats’ opinion poll. These results could indicate a shift in salience from national to regional media outlets and opinion poll results for the party.

Table 4. OLS regressions on SIFO monthly opinion polls and number of published articles for Sweden Democrats, in the periods 2006–2010 and 2010–2014. All newspapers.

	2006–2010	Sig.	2010–2014	Sig.
Dagens Nyheter	0.005		-0.008	
Dagens Nyheter lagged	0.032	**	0.029	
Svenska Dagbladet	0.010		-0.008	
Svenska Dagbladet lagged	0.015		0.021	
Expressen	0.009		-0.016	
Expressen lagged	-0.015		-0.026	
Aftonbladet	-0.018		0.021	
Aftonbladet lagged	-0.016		0.020	
Göteborgs-Posten	0.001		0.040	**
Göteborgs-Posten lagged	-0.007		0.006	
Sydsvenskan	-0.011		-0.016	
Sydsvenskan lagged	-0.002		-0.030	**
Constant	0.021		0.088	
Adj. R-squared	0.266		0.117	

**= significant on 0.05 level, *=significant on 0.10 level.

Conclusion

In the 2010 Swedish national elections, the Sweden Democrats crossed the parliamentary threshold and, in the 2014 elections, the party had more than doubled its voting share. A number of factors are understood to be relevant in explaining this. One of these factors and focus of our study, is the degree of media exposure in established and mainstream Swedish newspapers.

The correlations obtained between the number of articles on the Sweden Democrats and its opinion polls suggest that the party benefitted from this publicity. However,

and importantly, the two periods differ. There is a selective media effect for the Sweden Democrats in the first period, which seems to be less important in the second period. To be more precise, in the first period the articles published by the leading newspaper in Sweden, *Dagens Nyheter*, had a significant effect on the SD's opinion polls. In the latter period, 2010–2014, individual newspaper correlations were insignificant, and further analysis shows that the media effect shifted to regional newspapers instead. These findings confirm previous research which found that, in the phase preceding the electoral breakthrough, media exposure is important for the entry of new parties into the national parliament (Ellinas 2010); however, once in parliament, the degree of media exposure (the sheer number of articles) subsides in importance.

Getting back to our initial discussion at the beginning of this article, people have not ceased to care about politics. Today, the discussion of what should demarcate the national community (migration), how many refugees a country can accept given its population size, and how quickly newly arrivals should be integrated, stirs up emotions and spills over to the policy areas too. Based on the differences in the results of the two studied periods, our findings reveal that the Sweden Democrats was normalised in the established media before the 2014 national elections. Our results are no doubt open to speculation but, more importantly, they should motivate further research in this field.

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