

Most Swedish voters spectators in election campaigns

Few Swedes get personally involved in Swedish election campaigns. Of 24 countries surveyed, Sweden placed last in this regard. Most contacts between parties and voters are indirect. Mass media play a vital role, but the SNS Democratic Audit finds indications that media influence may be ebbing.

In election years in most democracies thousands of volunteers flock to their parties to help arrange meetings, set up posters, hand-out leaflets, canvass neighborhoods... but not in Sweden. Direct contacts between the parties and voters are few, most communication takes place via the media.

Media and elections in Sweden is the subject of this year's report from the SNS Democratic Audit. Members of the Audit team are Monika Djerf-Pierre (Göteborg University), Sören Holmberg (Göteborg University), Jesper Strömbäck (Mid Sweden University at Sundsvall), Lennart Weibull (Göteborg University) and Olof Petersson (SNS - Center for Business and Policy Studies).

Swedish voters are fairly well-oriented regarding public affairs, but they are also fairly blasé spectators of political contests. A growing share of voters are unsure about how they will vote, and many remain undecided until the last days of the campaign. The events of the campaign can be decisive for the election outcome.

Journalists in Sweden today have far-reaching influence over how the campaign takes place in news media. This is a relatively recent development, dating back to the mid-1960s. When journalists took control of the election campaign programming on Swedish radio and television, the parties and politicians became dependent on the media to get their messages across to prospective voters.

Today, however, the total dominance of the media has been broken. Blogs and other new information channels and technologies are beginning to represent viable alternatives to mass media. They may mean a renaissance for the kinds of local and direct contacts between voters and their representatives that prevailed when democracy was young.

News journalists continue to cover elections, but the conditions in which news journalism takes place are changing. The proliferation and commercialization of the media have put quality, in-depth reporting at risk. Personification of the news — in the case of campaigns a more pronounced focus on party leaders — is on the rise. Politics is being popularized, popular culture politicized. The duty to report is frequently supplanted by an interpretive role, where the reporter assumes the role of expert commentator and analyzes political events, speculates about future developments and passes judgment on politicians' actions, competence and ethical standard.

A systematic study of election campaigns questions the frequently heard thesis of an 'Americanization' of Swedish politics. There are several fundamental differences between election campaigning in the two countries, and no evidence of a convergence has been observed.

The Democratic Audit documents significant variations between different countries and periods in time. Election campaigns seldom follow any standard pattern; by and large they

defy prediction. One party may be the media's favorite in one election, but be dubbed a 'loser' in the next. Swedish election coverage shows no bias on a Left-Right dimension. If anything, there is a bias in favor of the media; there are many signs of so-called medialization. Politics is frequently treated as a contest or game.

The campaigns of recent decades have been formed by the influence the media exert, in two senses: The media have had the freedom to choose how to portray the parties and politics as such, and they have had a strong influence on the campaigns. But, as noted above, there are numerous indications that the epoch of journalist-steered mass media may be coming to an end.

The power and influence of mass media and journalists may already have culminated. New channels and media may provide a power base for other groups. Swedish election campaigns face major changes as regards the power relations between media, parties and the citizens.

The SNS Democratic Audit of 2006 in Swedish:

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