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The Exceptional Election

Press coverage of Clinton and Trump in Italy, Sweden and the UK

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1 Introduction

The US presidential election campaign 2016 was in many ways remarkable. For the first time ever, there was a female candidate representing one of the main political parties. Furthermore, the female candidate was challenged by a competitor without any previous political experience. Finally, the two candidates were the oldest candidate duo in a presidential race ever.

Presidential campaigns in the US have considerable importance in an international perspective. As the only remaining super power in the world the US plays a decisive role in world politics and international economy and still has an outstanding military capacity. Consequently, US elections of head of state may have great implications for the global community and it is plausible to believe that that the outcome of US presidential elections attracts worldwide interest, and in some cases may be covered almost as extensively as are national elections.

This study compares press coverage of US presidential election campaign in 2016 in three different European countries: Italy, Sweden and the UK. The countries were selected as they represent three different models of media systems (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Italy reflects the polarized pluralist media system, Sweden represents the democratic corporatist media system and the UK is an example of the liberal media system. In the Swedish and British media models the mass press is a more distinctive feature than in the Italian media model. Additionally, professionalism in journalism is assumed to be more articulated in Sweden and the UK, while the Italian press generally is expected to be associated with a higher degree of political parallelism and partisan political journalism.

Using the three models of media systems as an analytical point of departure, this study intends to compare how British, Italian and Swedish press covered the US presidential election campaign in 2016. The differences between the countries with regard to mass media structures, political linkages and journalistic norms may result in diverging patterns in media coverage of the US elections.

The comparative study analysed three stages of the US presidential election campaign: the convention period in July, the three televised candidate debates in September-October and in two final weeks of the campaign in October-November. Four daily newspapers were selected in each country: two elite morning papers (one liberal and one conservative), the most popular tabloid newspaper and one regional newspaper. All articles, longer than three paragraphs covering the campaign and mentioning at least one of the presidential candidates were included in the analysis. Methodologically, a quantitative content analysis was conducted using a common code book and code instructions. In total, 933 articles were analysed: 309 in Italian press, 289 in Swedish press and 335 in British press.

2 Results

The preliminary results show that overall press coverage of the elections across time followed a similar pattern in all three countries. The newspapers paid considerable attention to the two party conventions where Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were finally nominated. In the following months, press coverage decreased significantly until the final weeks when the number of articles increased again (fig. 1).

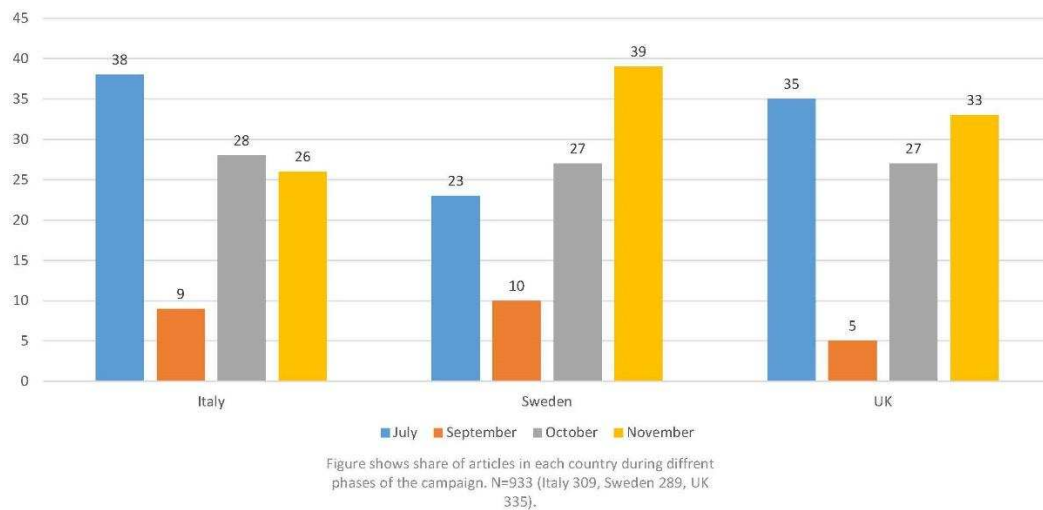


Fig. 1 Press coverage across time (%)

Even if the general pattern was evident, some differences can be noted. Swedish press coverage was significantly more modest during the conventions than British and Italian press. Only 23 % of the total Swedish press coverage related to the convention period, compared to 38 % in Italy and 35 % in the UK. On the other hand, media coverage during the final weeks increased more in Sweden than in the two other countries. In Italy, final week coverage was not as extensive as during conventions and in the UK press coverage was about the same.

Comparing the framing of the two candidates in the press, the overall assessment towards Clinton was generally more positive than the overall assessment towards Trump. Still, no single newspaper in the study could be described as true pro-Clinton as the share of positive articles was very modest in all three countries. 25 % of the articles in Swedish press, 23 % in British press and 19 % in Italian press were generally positive in the overall assessment towards Clinton (fig. 2).

Generally speaking, most articles in Sweden about Clinton were neutral, slightly more neutral than negative in the UK and evenly distributed between neutral and negative items in Italy. Press coverage of Clinton was most favourable during the time period of the televised debates where 34 % of all articles in the study had a positive slant. The most

negative coverage of Clinton occurred during the convention period in July when 30 % of all articles about her were negatively framed.

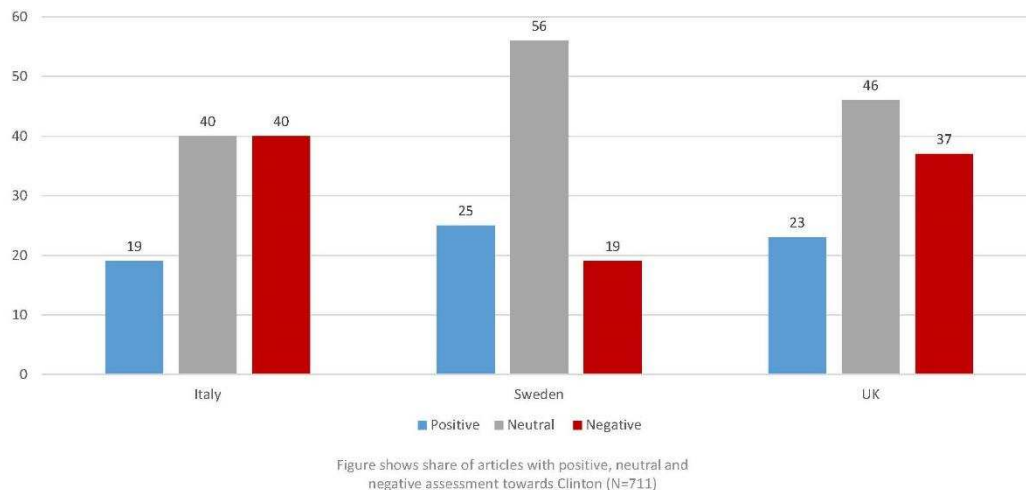


Fig. 2 Overall assessment Clinton (%)

The coverage of Trump was much negative than that of Clinton in all three countries. 66 % of all articles in British were negative of Trump, 62 % of the Italian articles and 49 % of the Swedish articles. Italian newspapers had slightly more negative articles about Trump than newspapers in the two other countries (fig. 3). The most significant difference between national coverage with regard to tone of Trump coverage was the relatively large number of neutral articles in the Swedish press, 46 %, compared to 26 %, both in Italy and the UK. Comparing different types of newspapers, tabloids were slightly more negative towards Trump in their coverage compared to local newspapers and elite morning newspapers of both liberal and conservative orientation. Trump received the most favourable press coverage during the convention period in the summer when 11 % of the articles about him were positively framed.

It also worth to note that Trump was much more frequent in the news than Clinton in all three countries compared. Articles focused more on Trump than on Clinton. About a fifth of all articles in Italy, Sweden and the UK had a main focus on Clinton, while slightly less than the half in every country had a main focus on Trump.

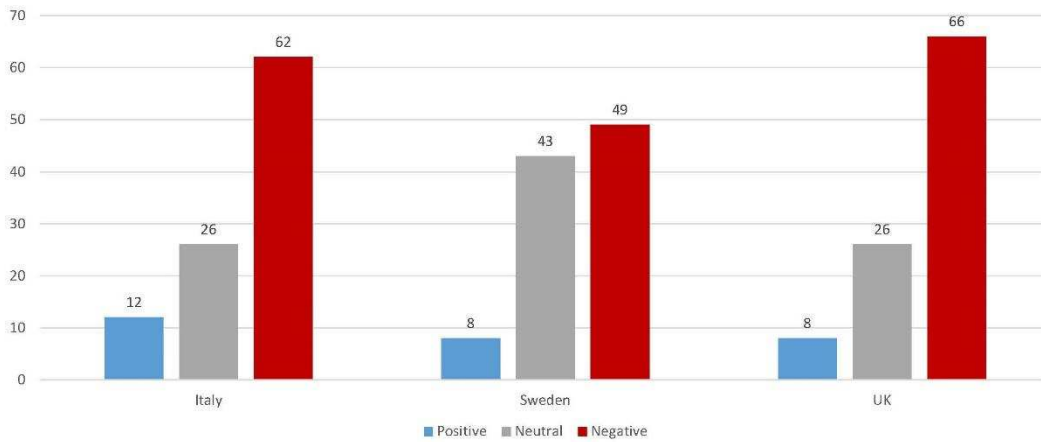


Figure shows share of articles with positive, neutral or negative assessment towards Trump (N=877)

Fig. 3 Overall assessment Trump (%)

Furthermore, Trump was much more associated with policy frames than Clinton in all three countries (fig. 4). In fact, he was associated with policy frames twice as much as was Clinton. Reporting relating Trump to policy issues – such as immigration, Nato, Russia and world trade – was relatively frequent, while Clinton was rarely associated with specific policy areas. Generally, she appeared in the news as a politician without policy. At the same time, Trump was, as mentioned previously, not particularly favourably covered in the news. On the contrary, his policy positions were often criticized and questioned, especially in opinion pieces. Nevertheless, the description of what he wanted to do if elected was much more exposed in press coverage in Italy, Sweden and the UK than the policy program of his Democratic competitor.

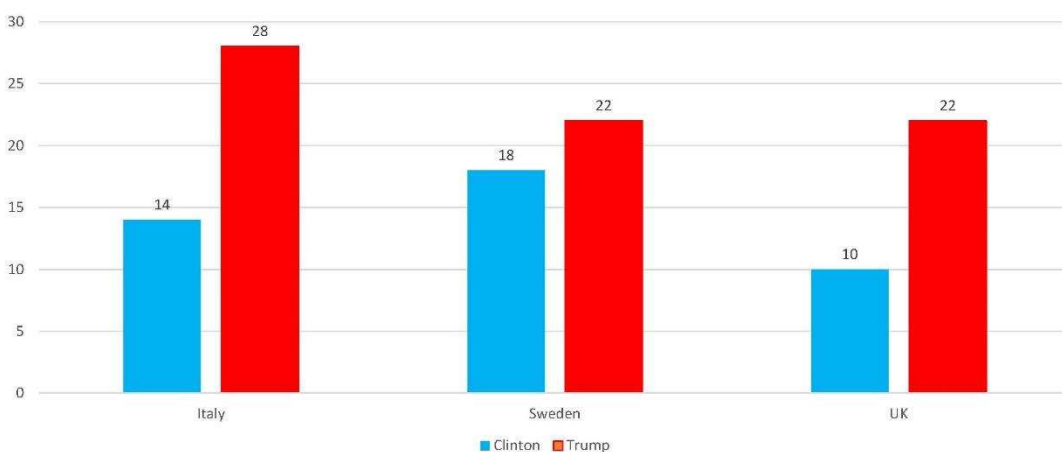


Figure shows share of articles relating candidates to policy issues (N=102-263)

Fig. 4 Policy frames

An overall impression is that Trump was considered much more newsworthy than Clinton. He was more frequently mentioned, he was more associated with policy proposals and his personal characteristics were more often referred to in the articles. Personal images frames of Trump were observed in 56 % of the articles in Sweden, 45 % in the UK and 36 % in Italy. Clinton's personal images frames occurred in 34 % of articles in Sweden, 27 % in Italy and 26 % in the UK (fig. 5).

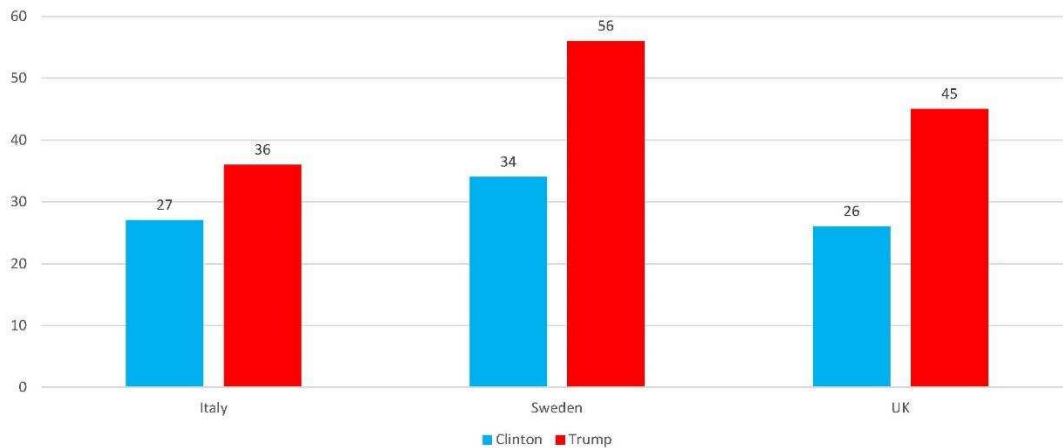


Figure shows shares of articles relating candidates to image (personal appearance, personality traits) (N=268-423)

Fig. 5 Image frames

Personal images frames were frequent in press coverage of the US election, but they were not the most important frame in any country. The most prevailing frame in Italy and the UK was the scandal frame. 25 % of all British articles mainly focused on scandals, and 22 % of all Italian articles. Most prevailing frame in Sweden was the horserace frame, and 23 % of all Swedish articles focused on polls and other predictions of electoral outcome.

Regarding scandal frames, Clinton was more associated with scandals than Trump in both Italian and Swedish press, mainly because of the FBI investigation of her emails. The affair followed Clinton during the campaign and reached a peak in its final days when the FBI director announced that the emails would be further investigated. However, in the UK Trump was slightly more associated with scandals than Clinton (fig. 6).

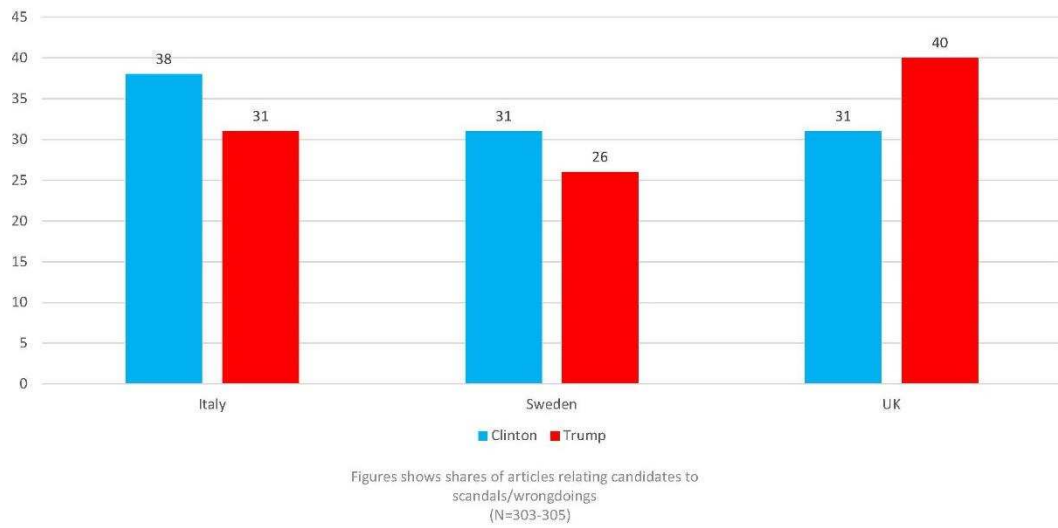


Fig. 6 Scandal frames

These results contrast to horserace frames where Clinton was mentioned positively much more frequently than Trump, mainly because she was ahead in the polls most of the time during the whole election campaign. Poll results appeared in about one-third of articles in all three countries. Clinton was referred to as ahead in the polls in 56 % of these articles in the UK, 55 % in Italy and 48 % in Sweden. More articles described the outcome as unclear than argued that Trump was ahead in the polls.

3 Conclusions

As the most frequent frames used in press coverage were the scandal frame and the horserace frame it can be concluded that US election campaign press coverage in Italy, Sweden and the UK was to a limited extent characterized by policy positions and political issues, but dominated by political scandals and game frames. The results are hardly surprising, as most research on media coverage election campaigns confirm a domination of non-policy frames in the press (Skewes 2007; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). Furthermore, a recent study of the US media coverage of the 2016 election campaign concludes that horserace was the single most prevailing frame (Patterson, 2016). Previous studies have confirmed the importance of repeated, resonant scandal framing in US mainstream media (Entman, 2012).

When comparing the amount of press coverage of the US election campaign between the three countries in this study, the British press showed the greatest interest in terms of the number of articles. The transatlantic links between the US and the UK often have been described as very special and British interest in US elections may be expected to be greater than in Italy and Sweden. On the other hand, the local British newspaper in the study stands out as the single one with least coverage of the election so the overall picture is not that clear.

The single most important result of the study was the newsworthiness of Trump. He dominated election campaign news in Italy, Sweden and the UK. He dominated in most aspects of press coverage. He was more in focus than Clinton, he was much more often associated with policy and his personal characteristics were more commonly referred to. However, this does not mean that press coverage of Trump was favourable. On the contrary, it was overwhelmingly negative both with regard to personal traits and policy positions. While most articles focusing on Clinton were neutral in tone, Trump was most often described in a negative way.

Generally speaking, the two presidential candidates were framed in the same way in all three countries. The picture of Clinton was rather bleak; she appeared as a not-so-interesting, however competent candidate, most of the time ahead in polls but struggling with the email scandal. She was expected to win the election most of the time, and the stories about her in the press were not particularly thrilling. She was not very often associated with breaking and unsurprising news, except for when scandal stories developed further.

Trump was in many ways the opposite candidate in the press. His controversial statements and behaviours during the campaign were most often negatively framed in the European newspapers. Still, he was in the news most of the time because his actions and opinions were considered newsworthy. They met news media demands for dramatic, personalized and unexpected events. While Clinton was the very usual presidential candidate – and perhaps the most usual candidate ever – Trump was definitely the most unusual presidential candidate in modern times. Consequently, he attracted news media much

more because the story of him was much more interesting to tell. He was the emotional and exceptional candidate, and a bright contrast to the (perhaps too) experienced and expected candidate. The situation exposes the dilemma of political journalists more or less trapped in a system that prides neutrality. Trump was positioned as extraordinary and therefore worthy of extraordinary coverage (Carlson 2016).

The overall experiences from this comparative study confirm that election media coverage is more often driven by style than by substance (Patterson, 1993). While it is reasonable to expect political journalism to be relatively audience-oriented in a more competitive and commercialized media environment, it is also important to consider some of the basic functions of journalism in democracies. The need for accurate, fair and true news media coverage of elections is probably more necessary than ever, in times when extreme and partisan views and even fake news are distinctive features of social media flows reaching more people than ever (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010).

The press coverage of the US election campaign 2016 in Italy, Sweden and the UK illustrates that political journalism in the three countries was basically not very informative in nature. There were not many articles focussing on candidates' policy positions and how they were predicted to deal with domestic and international issues. Systematic comparisons of candidates' preferences and proposals were very rare. At the same time, political journalism was very emotional and highlighted candidates' relations to scandals and polls as well as their personal behaviour. As information for possible voters, press coverage was definitely unsatisfactory, while it probably met most entertainment and excitement criteria.

When comparing press coverage of the three countries in the study, similar patterns appeared. Trump was more in focus than Clinton, and scandals frames and horserace frames were more frequent in the press than were policy frames. Media coverage of elections seemed to be determined by the same interest to dramatize, personalize and criticize political actors despite differences in media systems and role of journalists. As concluded in other comparisons of political journalism in different countries, news values seem to determine which stories about politics are reported and how they are framed (Albaek et al. 2014).

Finally, a finding that needs to be further investigated is the fact that Swedish newspapers deviate most significantly with regard to the higher degree of neutral articles about the candidates and relatively high degree of articles balancing the two presidential candidates. It seems to be a more articulated norm in the Swedish press to stay neutral even if candidates are associated with scandal stories and who is ahead in polls. This might be explained by a general high evaluation of non-partisan journalism among Swedish journalists compared to colleagues in other European countries. Values that have been confirmed in previous comparative studies of professional values of journalists (Patterson, 1998).

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