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More Cold Case Than Hot Spot

A Study of Public Opinion on Political Advertising in Swedish Television

Marie Grusell & Lars Nord

Abstract

How does the public perceive televised political advertising when it is introduced as a completely new element of campaign communications? The European Parliamentary Elections in 2009 may be characterized as the first campaign where such advertising appeared on a larger scale in Sweden, but the National Election Campaign in 2006 was the initial breakthrough for political advertising in television. Two major research questions are raised: First, how can public opinion on such political advertising be described? Second, how are these attitudes related to individual and societal factors? The results indicate that attitudes towards political advertising in Sweden are in line with attitudes towards advertising in general. However, ideological beliefs on the individual level seem to be almost irrelevant. Without being on the political agenda, the political TV-advertising issue is mainly considered from non-political perspectives.

Keywords: political advertising, public opinion, television, election campaigns, political communication, political ideology

Introduction

For many citizens living in modern democracies, it is probably hard to imagine an election campaign completely free from political advertising in television. On the contrary, political ads in television are one of the distinctive features of campaign communications in most democratic states with unrestricted freedom of information. Furthermore, controversial messages in televised spots are often at the centre of public and media discourses in the intensive weeks before Election Day. Finally, a considerable share of candidate and political party campaign budgets is generally spent on efforts to produce as effective and persuasive ads as possible, with the intention to catch voter attention and influence voting decisions in desired directions (Plasser & Plasser 2002; Sanders 2009).

However, Sweden has thus far been one of the few outstanding exceptions to this rule. Political advertising in television has until now been prohibited in the main terrestrial national TV channels. The political majority in the Swedish parliament has historically perceived televised political advertising as a negative element in campaign communications. Fears have been expressed that such ads would jeopardize the quality of public discourse in election campaigns by offering overwhelmingly emotional, personal and

negative messages without substance. Both left-wing and centre right-wing politicians in the parliament have supported the critical standpoint on political advertising in broadcast media – in public, as well as in private media (Gustafsson 2005; Author 2008).

Notwithstanding, recent years have seen the emergence of a gradual transformation process. The single main explanation is of course structural media development changes in which commercial TV channels based outside Sweden offer programmes in Swedish that reach Swedish households by cable and satellite. This trend started with the London-based private television company TV3 in 1987 and since then a couple similar private channels have since then operated under comparable conditions (Engblom & Wormbs 2007). However, they did not engage in political advertising, as it is not allowed according to British media regulations.

This situation changed in the latest Swedish National Election campaign in 2006. Due to the planned switch-off of the analogue television broadcast system in 2007 a majority of Swedish households – equipped with digital boxes, cable and satellite – were offered a huge number of digitally distributed television channels in 2006. Some of these channels were not regulated within the existing Radio and TV Act with regard to political "neutrality". Consequently, domestic 'niche' channels could send political spots. Some of them were basically entertainment-oriented, while others offered mainly current affairs programmes, documentaries and international news. Therefore, political advertising in Swedish terrestrial television could appear for the first time during the elections in 2006. However, political ads were only produced by some political parties and appeared in a restricted number of TV channels.[1] Besides public service television, the single biggest commercial channel, the private 'hybrid' TV4, was at this time still not allowed to send political ads (Engblom & Wormbs 2007; Nord 2008).

Still, the National Elections in 2006 may be described as the definite introduction of political advertising in television in Sweden. Being introduced many decades after political advertising in the average Western democracies, political ads in television 2006 played a minor role in campaign communication in Sweden compared to political ads in newspapers, magazines, cinema and outdoor posters. Nevertheless, communication practices and voter behaviour are not fixed, and it is reasonable to consider that the role of televised political advertising will increase in future election campaigns. In the EU Election Campaign in 2009 the main channel TV4 was for the first time able to offer the political parties advertising options. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that this campaign tool will gradually become more important.

Accordingly, political TV ads may be perceived as new phenomena in the Swedish political culture. These circumstances make them particularly interesting to analyse, not in comparison with more mature countries in this respect, but with regard to public attitudes and perceptions of such a brand-new national element in political communication. Thus, the present article focuses on public opinion on televised political advertising in Sweden in 2006. The contemporary Swedish political communication context offers an excellent opportunity to study how public opinion is shaped in this area. Furthermore, analysing public opinion may contribute to a general understanding of whether positions on political TV ads are basically formed by ideological beliefs, socio-demographic conditions or attitudes towards advertising in general. Consequently, the objective of the article is to initiate a discussion about public opinion on televised political ads in their introductory phase. Most research in this area has hitherto been focused on analysing

content and effects of political advertising in countries with long traditions in this field (Kaid 2004). However, as campaign practices seem to become more globalized and harmonized, the reception and evaluation of campaign tools among citizens and voters in different phases of political advertising development should be increasingly interesting to study (Plasser & Plasser 2002; Hallin & Mancini 2004).

Beyond Content and Effect Studies

Televised political advertising has to be analysed within different national political communication contexts. Most of the previous research has been conducted in the U.S. and conditions in Europe differ in many ways: most political systems are multiparty based, election campaigns are shorter and public service media have a stronger position in the television markets, just to mention some examples. In all studies of political communication it is reasonable to consider national characteristics in terms of political system, electoral system, media system, political culture and public opinion (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Most countries in Europe allow political advertising in television, but restrictions with regard to the number of permissible spots, or the appearance in public service broadcast media, vary greatly (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 1995; Plasser & Plasser 2002). Generally speaking, the candidate-oriented campaigning of American elections has gradually become more common also in a European context (Mughan 2000; Kaid 2004).

In most countries in the world, political advertising in general has become "a staple of communication in democracies in the world" (Kaid 2004: 155). Due to this important communicative role, research in this field is also one of the most significant components of contemporary political communication studies (ibid.).

The definitions of political advertising have varied from descriptions of it as a more or less market-oriented "promotional device" for political candidates and parties in election campaigns in U.S. elections to much broader definitions. Today, political advertising is generally described as "any controlled message communicated through any channel designed to promote the political interests of individuals, parties, groups, governments, or other organizations" (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2006: 4). Using this broader definition, political advertising is distinguished from other campaign communication by the source control of the message and the absence of media interpretation or framing, and from interpersonal communication by the use of mass communication channels. Furthermore, the broader definition of the concept applies to different political marketing campaign contexts, not least in Western Europe where party-controlled election TV programmes are more frequent (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 1995; Holtz-Bacha 2003; van Heerde 2007).

Political communication research on televised political advertising has mainly focused on two different aspects: the content and the effects (Kaid 2004; Johnston 2006). Content analyses of political advertising in television have traditionally been dominated by studies comparing issue information and image information in the spots. Widespread beliefs that political advertising emphasizes emotions and images at the expense of rational information have not been completely supported by previous research, which suggests that issue ads dominate election campaigns in many countries, even if content is often blended in a subtle way in modern spots (Johnston & Kaid 2002). In recent decades, more research has been focused on "negative ads", opponent-focused spots

that attempt to describe the other candidate in an unfavourable way with regard to issue positions, personal character or the political agenda (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2006; Iyengar & McGrady 2007).

Additionally, research on the effects of political advertising has been focused on both voter learning effects and candidate/party evaluation effects. Previous studies comparing voter knowledge effects from television news and televised political advertising show contradictory results. However, it is reasonable to argue that such spots may contribute to increased issue knowledge, especially when the interactions with other campaign communications are considered (Holbert et al. 2002). Previous research in the field of candidate/party evaluation confirms that political TV spots matter. They have a significant impact on judgements of candidate likeability and policy positions (Kaid 2004). More attention has also been paid to the effects of the increasing number of negative ads. Some results indicate that voters are turned off by negative advertising and that political cynicism increases following exposure to such ads. However, other studies have showed no evidence of effects on the levels of political trust or political interest (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 2006).

Previous research on televised political advertising suggests that such spots are a major force in many political communication systems. The unique possibility for parties and candidates to control mass disseminated messages remains the great advantage compared to mediated campaign communications. Spots may influence voter learning and candidate evaluation, but effects vary in relation to political culture factors. Thus, the impact of televised political advertising also depends on public perceptions of and attitudes towards such advertising. This is particularly true because political advertising has a persuasive intent that casts doubt on its credibility (ibid.).

Previous research on advertising opinions in general has indicated that our relationship with advertisements can be described as complex and ambivalent, like a love-hate relationship (Scipione 1997; O'Donohoe 2001). We like some advertisements, but love to hate others. Results indicate that we prefer advertisements in morning newspapers, at the cinema and outdoors, while advertisements distributed through email and mobile phones are not at all welcome (Grusell 2008). A more in-depth analysis indicates that mass media context adds dimensions to the public's attitude towards advertising. Where and how we receive the advertisement is of crucial importance to how we perceive it. The public's view of advertising seems to be linked to the mass media context, i.e. the context in which the advertisement is placed. Well-received advertising could be described as being viewed as a matter of personal choice, while dispreferred advertising can be described as being forced upon us by the mass media in general. We like advertising when we feel we have chosen to be exposed to it, but dislike it when it interferes with our primary mass media usage.

But what are the factors that define the public's views on advertising in the mass media? Three major inputs can be observed here: society, properties of advertisement in mass media and personal characteristics. The individual's life status and interests define the foundation for how an advertisement is received, and society in interaction with advertising and the properties of the media's form and content affect its acceptance. This relationship is naturally complex, which leads to the conclusion that the public's general outlook on advertising is a result of the interaction between several different factors.

Little research has been done to provide a theoretical background for televised political advertising that takes such public perceptions and attitudes into account. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to presume that individual, media and societal factors are highly relevant to consider here. Furthermore, such advertising may largely be understood as a manifestation of political culture, and as one of several ways in which a political culture is expressed (Holtz-Bacha 2003: 109-110).

Consequently, the present article is more focused on public perceptions of televised political advertising than on its content and plausible effects. From this perspective, Swedish public opinion on the issue is particularly interesting to study as televised political spots appeared for the very first time during the 2006 National Elections. In the following section, a brief background of the Swedish national context – with regard to political communication and public opinion on advertising in general – is presented.

Advertising and Political Culture in Sweden

Swedish democracy is based on a multiparty parliamentarian system, where the party has traditionally been more important than the candidate in national elections. The election system is strictly proportional, even if recent political reforms have given 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 in which campaign strategies can be developed and practices can be improved (Nord 2006).

As political advertisements in television have generally been prohibited until now, one of the most distinctive features of modern political campaigns has largely been absent from the Swedish election context. Additionally, no free broadcasting time is made available to political parties on either television or radio during the election campaign. 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 Election Day. Accordingly, the most effective direct channels of communication with citizens have historically been excluded from political campaigns in Sweden. Thus, the marginal role of televised political advertising, and the absence of party programmes in the media, put Swedish news media in a very strong position with regard to agenda setting and the framing of political campaign activities (ibid.).

At the same time, advertising in general has become more important in Sweden. This is mainly due to the recent expansion of commercialized broadcast media, and the emergence of new media. In the late 1980s, there was only a small amount of radio advertising, almost no TV-advertising, and hardly anyone knew about the Internet. However, during recent decades advertising in media has practically doubled (Gustafsson 2005). These days radio, TV and the Internet are looked upon as well-known media carriers and they reach a large audience every day (*Nordicom-Sveriges Mediebarometer* 2007/2008). Consequently, the advertising market in Sweden is characterized by the occurrence of dramatic changes during a very brief period of time.

From a historic perspective, the overall advertising tradition in Sweden can be described as one-sided. Traditionally, advertising has mainly been distributed by printed media, and it is only during the past two decades that there has been a structural change

in the domestic advertising market. However, this change has been major. Nowadays, the advertising market has several new operators: TV, radio, Internet, direct mail etc. The advertising market with the most significant economic growth at present is advertising on the Internet.[2]

Previous studies of the Swedish public's views on advertising in general have indicated that the public's different attitudes towards advertisements can be related to individuals' ideological points of view and mass media usage habits (Grusell 2007/2008). This result indicates that if a person has a more liberal and accepting attitude towards the commercial market, he or she may also accept advertisements to a greater extent. Increased acceptance of advertisements may also occur among individuals who are often exposed to them. There is also an age difference; older people are more accepting of morning newspaper advertisement, while younger people are more accepting of TV commercials. Similar results have been noted in U.S. studies. Research on advertising as a phenomenon indicates that younger people are generally more accepting of advertising than older people are (Shavitt et al. 1998).

To sum up, Sweden may be perceived as a country in which a more commercialized media system has increased the amount of advertising to which the public is exposed during recent decades. In this respect, printed media dominance has been replaced by intensified competition and an increasing role for broadcast media and new media. The public attitudes towards advertising in general are largely shaped by individual ideological beliefs and age, as well as by personal media use habits.

Objective, Method and Data

The objective of the present article is to analyse public opinion on political advertising in television as a new communication element in Swedish election campaigns. Two major research questions are asked: first, how can public opinion on such political advertising be described, and second, how can this public opinion be related to individual and societal factors? As no previous research in this field exists in Sweden, the present study may basically be considered as a pilot study.

Methodologically, the data in this study are based on a national mail survey, *Demobarometer 2006*. In the survey a national representative sample of citizens were asked about their perceptions of political communication in Sweden, for example about their exposure to, and opinions on, political advertisements in television. Questionnaires and return envelopes were sent to 2000 individuals between 16 and 80 years of age, and living in Sweden. The net response rate was 50 percent, even though that was less than desirable, an analysis indicates that the respondents were representative with regard to gender and age. With regard to educational level, individuals with a higher education are somewhat overrepresented. The survey was in field during August-November 2006. Consequently, some respondents answered the survey before the National Election and others following it. It is important to note that this may have influenced their opinions on and memories of the political TV spots.

The present results are based on two survey questions. The first survey question asks whether the respondents have been exposed to political advertisements on television during the election campaign. The response scale includes three answers: *Yes, several times, yes*, *at least once* and the possibility to answer *no, not at all*. The second research

question investigates the public opinion on political advertisements in television. Five different statements are used: *Political TV advertising gives me guidelines regarding which party suits me best*, *political TV advertising gives me an oversimplified picture of party standpoints*, *political TV advertising influences my voting decision on Election Day*, *political TV advertising appeals too much to emotions and neglects the facts*, *political TV advertising is too negative in its tone towards political opponents*. A 5-point response scale was used from *I disagree completely* to *I agree completely*. The respondents where also given a possibility to choose an *I don't know* alternative. The results for research question two are presented independently as well as in an index. When political attitudes were examined in the survey, public trust in politicians and public interest in community affairs were investigated using 5-point response scales. The questions asked were: *Generally speaking, how much do you trust Swedish politicians* and *generally speaking, how interested are you in community affairs*. Political party loyalties were examined by asking about voting behaviour: *which party do you intend to/did you vote for in the National Election.* Non-socialist alliance loyalties were presented as right, social democrats and left party loyalties as left and other loyalties as other.

All results presented in Table 1-4 are significant (by Tau b) (cf. Esaiasson et al. 2009: 395). In the result section the index is referred to as the opinion index and is introduced in Table 3. The index construction is based on the second survey question: public opinion on political advertisements in television, including all five different statements: *Political TV advertising gives me guidelines regarding which party suits me best*, *political TV advertising gives me an oversimplified picture of party standpoints*, *political TV advertising influences my voting decision on Election Day*, *political TV advertising appeals too much to emotions and neglect the facts* and *political TV advertising is too negative in its tone towards political opponents*.

To measure the reliability of the index we have calculated the Cronbach's Alpha, one of the standard measures of reliability. Cronbach's Alpha can be interpreted as a correlation of the index with another index that could be constructed to measure the same activities. There is no standard for how high Cronbach's Alpha should be, but results over .80 are considered high quality (Carmines & Zeller 1979). In the present study, the Cronbach's Alpha is .9181.

Results

Nowadays, Swedes are constantly exposed to different forms of advertising. The development of advertising in Sweden has changed dramatically during a relatively brief period. At the present time different forms of media are seen as natural channels for advertisement distribution and reach a large audience on a daily basis. Currently, traditional TV-advertising reaches a substantially larger audience than do other forms of media advertising (see Figure 1 in appendix). Consequently, a majority of the Swedish public is exposed to TV advertising during an average day (*Nordicom-Sveriges Mediebarometer* 2007/2008).

As noticed previously, political advertising in television is a new phenomenon in Sweden. Thus, an initial relevant question to ask is whether the public actually was exposed to such political advertising in Swedish television during the 2006 campaign. The results below indicate that less than half of the public (46 percent) was exposed to

this new form of advertising (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). Furthermore, slightly less than every third person had been exposed at some time, while only 14 percent of the public say that they had been exposed several times. These results may be quite simple to understand and to interpret: the television channels that at the time had the possibility and permission to broadcast this form of political TV advertising did not reach the entire television audience. Accordingly, the Swedish public in general had limited personal experience and knowledge of political advertising in television.

Nonetheless, the overall opinion on advertising can be described as sceptical; a majority of the public does not believe that advertising is trustworthy. In the present article the aim is to examine public opinion on political advertising in television. In order to examine such opinion five different statements, mentioned in the previous section, were introduced for the respondents to evaluate in the survey.

As noted in Table 1 (below), the public judgements of the five presented statements indicate that a majority of the Swedes (55 percent) did not have the impression that political advertising in television gave them guidelines on which political party they should vote for.

Table 1. *Statements of Political TV Advertising (percent)*

	Political TV advertising…				
	… gives me guidelines regarding which party suits me best	… gives me an oversimplified picture of party standpoints	… influences my voting decision on Election Day	… appeals to much to emotions and neglects the facts	… is too negative in its tone towards political opponents
Agree	4	39	4	36	23
Neutral	12	12	8	15	21
Disagree	55	19	60	14	16
Don't know	28	31	27	36	41
Percent	99	100	99	101	101
Number of responses	908	912	911	906	910

Commentary: Data are based on the number of people who have an opinion about political TV advertising.
Source: Democracy Barometer, The Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University.

Furthermore, the results showed that nearly four out of ten Swedes believed that political TV advertising gave them an oversimplified picture of party standpoints. In addition, very few Swedes believed that political advertising in television influenced their voting decision on Election Day. There was also a widespread belief that such advertising appealed too much to emotions and neglect the facts. Two out of ten Swedes also thought political advertising in television was too negative in its tone towards political opponents. Obviously, Swedish citizens in general did not feel that they were influenced by this new form of political advertising. However, the results also indicate that there was a large group of respondents who answered "don't know". In response to the five different statements, this category varied between 27 and 41 percent units.

But what can be observed about the significance of exposure? The results indicate that the overall conclusion is the same; more exposure resulted in a more accepting and favourable opinion. Exposure to this new form of advertising did not discourage public opinion (Table 2). The results also confirmed that individuals who had been exposed

several times were inclined to have an opinion about political TV advertising – a result that can be compared to individuals who have never been exposed. In this non-exposure group, the majority of respondents had chosen the option of answering *don't know*. Interestingly, we note that even if the individual respondent had not been exposed to political advertising in television, he or she in some cases had well-articulated opinions on the new phenomenon.

Table 2. *Statements of Political TV Advertising by Exposure (percent)*

	Political TV advertising…																			
	… gives me guidelines regarding which party suits me best				… gives me an oversimplified picture of party standpoints				… influences my voting decision on Election Day				… appeals to much to emotions and neglects the facts				… is too negative in its tone towards political opponents			
Exposure for political TV-advertising	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't know
Yes, several times	15	26	25	2	17	25	17	3	16	25	18	3	11	28	19	3	18	25	18	4
Yes, some time	41	42	42	11	32	45	44	13	39	40	59	10	36	46	43	15	38	41	43	20
No, never	44	32	32	86	51	30	39	84	44	35	23	88	54	26	38	82	45	34	40	76
Percent	100	100	99	99	100	100	100	100	99	100	100	101	100	100	100	100	101	100	101	100
Number of responses	499	112	40	258	168	108	353	278	549	75	39	243	121	134	323	325	141	189	205	371

Commentary: Data are based on the number of people who have an opinion about political TV advertising.
Source: Democracy Barometer, The Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University.

As indicated above, the public attitudes towards political advertising in television varied with regard to exposure to such advertising. However, it is reasonable to ask whether other variables may have influenced individuals' attitudes. Contemporary research studies of public opinion on advertising indicate that such opinion generally differs depending on a variety of individual and societal factors. Possible factors that may affect such attitudes are for example gender, age, education level and ideological values (Grusell 2008). However, the question may be raised as to whether these factors also have a significant influence when analysing political advertising in television as a new phenomenon, as is the case of Sweden. Additionally, it may be relevant to ask whether public trust in politicians and public interest in community affairs matter when trying to analyse the existing public attitudes towards this new form of advertising. Consequently, an 'opinion index' was constructed to obtain a broader perspective concerning public opinion on political TV advertising in television.

Previous research has indicated that there are small gender differences when analysing public opinion on traditional advertising in Sweden. However, when political TV advertising is considered substantial differences are obvious; males tends to answer more often than women that they are neutral, and they are also less negative than women are. When political advertising in television is analysed, females are generally more negative than men in Sweden are (see Table 3 below).

Age has often proved to be significant when traditional advertising has been studied. Young people generally have more accepting views on advertising than older generations do. However, an interesting difference may be noted when media use is considered;

younger people tend to use commercial media more often than older people do. Therefore, it is fair to assume that age and exposure are interacting in this case. The same pattern is discovered when political advertising is analysed. Young people have more positive attitudes towards this form of new advertising than older generations do. In the young group, 39 percent have positive attitudes towards political advertising compared to 29 percent in the older age segments.

The education factor has been slightly contradictory in traditional advertising research. Generally, highly educated people tend to have more negative attitudes than do those with a lower level of education. However, there are exceptions to this rule: advertising on the Internet, advertising at the movies, and out-door advertising are advertising forms that are more appreciated by the highly educated than by the less well educated (Grusell 2008). However, when analysing political advertising in television the pattern was clear; high-educated people were more negative than low-educated people. The highly educated tended to choose the neutral category and they were less positive than were the other groups. For example, 37 percent of the high-educated people chose the neutral alternative compared to 32 and 31 percent of the low- and medium-educated.

Table 3. *Attitudes towards Political TV Advertising by Population Segments (percent)*

	Gender		AGE			Education level		
	Woman	Men	18-29	30-49	50-77	Low	Medium	High
Positive	31	34	39	33	29	33	39	24
Neutral	30	38	35	33	33	32	31	37
Negative	39	29	26	34	39	35	30	39
Percent	100	101	100	100	101	100	100	100
Number of responses	480	405	171	292	420	171	366	339

Commentary: Data are based on the number of people who have an opinion about political TV advertising.
Source: Democracy Barometer, The Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University.

As stated in the introduction, advertising in general is in many ways a hotly debated and disputed social phenomenon. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that the individual's view of society from a political ideology dimension is of importance when public opinion on advertising is considered. Previous studies of traditional advertising have also indicated that there is a significant difference in this respect. People with a more liberal opinion on the commercial market tend to have a greater acceptance of advertising (cf. Grusell 2008/2007). Consequently, it would be reasonable to predict the same results when analysing political advertising in television. However, this was not the case; on the contrary, there were no significant relations between attitudes toward political advertising in television and the individual's adherence to a certain political ideology (Table 4). Furthermore, other political factors such as public trust and public interest in community affairs also proved to be of less importance in this respect.

Table 4. *Attitudes towards Political TV Advertising by Dimensions of Political Ideology, Politician Trust, Interest in Community Affairs (percent)*

	Public trust in politicians			Public interest in community affairs			Ideological values			
Opinion Index	Little	Some	A lot	Not interested	Some interest	A lot of interest	Left	Right	Others	Haven't made up their mind or a blank vote
Positive	28	33	38	26	36	31	33	34	29	29
Neutral	41	30	28	29	32	35	33	35	42	31
Negative	31	36	33	45	32	34	34	31	29	40
Percent	100	99	99	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number of responses	288	440	158	86	289	512	268	329	38	228

Commentary: Data are based on the number of people who have an opinion about political TV advertising.

Source: Democracy Barometer, The Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University.

Regression Model

As previously noted, a series of possible factors may prove to be relevant when the emerging public opinion on political advertising in Swedish television is analysed. In order to develop the analysis one step further we will now examine how gender, age, education, dimensions of ideological values, public trust in politicians, public interest in community affairs and exposure to political advertising in television are related to each other.

Our preliminary analysis indicated that exposure to political TV advertising led to a more accepting attitude. Furthermore, we noted that women were more negative than men, that younger people were more positive than older people, and that high- educated people had more negative attitudes towards political TV advertising than low-educated people. We have also concluded that there were no significant relations between dimensions of ideological values, public trust in politicians and the individual's interest in community affairs. However, in an effort to examine the relative importance of different factors, we have to analyse them using a multiple regression analysis.

Consequently, we present a regression model (Table 5 below) of the output of the different factors. This model confirms the results of the prior analysis. As previously noted, the result shows that gender (beta= .086 $p< .01$) and level of education (beta= .081 $p< .01$) influence attitudes towards political advertising in television. When it comes to political advertising, women have a tendency to be more negative towards this new phenomenon. In addition, the model also concludes that people with a high education level are more negative towards political TV advertising, than groups with a lower education level. Furthermore, the results confirm the age relation (beta= .073 $p< .05$). Younger people are likely to have a more accepting attitude towards political advertising in television than older people are. This result can be seen as expected; younger people perceive advertising as an integrated part of everyday life, while older generations are more unaccustomed to advertising in this respect.

Table 5. *Analyzing Public Attitudes towards Political Advertising in Television (standardized regression coefficients)*

	Model 1 Opinion Index
Gender	-.086 **
Age	-.073 *
Education	.081 **
Public trust in politicians	-.027
Public interest in community affairs	-.053
Ideological values	.002
Exposure for political TV-advertising	.354 ***
R^2	14.9
Number of responses	858

Commentary: Significance levels =* p<.05, ** p<.01 and *** p<.001. People who have an opinion about political TV advertising.

Source: Democracy barometer, Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University.

However, the multivariate model offers one surprise: the effect for exposure (beta= .354 p< .001). When the attitudes towards political TV advertising are analysed the exposure to such ads is more important than any other factor in the model. Individual and societal factors are of less importance when trying to explain public attitudes towards political advertising in television in Sweden.

Discussion

The objective of the present article was to analyse public opinion on political advertising in television as a new communication element in Swedish election campaigns. Two major research questions were asked regarding public opinion on political advertising in television, and the possible explanations for this public opinion.

The present results indicate that attitudes towards political advertising in Sweden are in line with attitudes towards advertising in general. Thus, most Swedes deny that they are influenced by televised political ads when making voting decisions or informing themselves on party policy positions. Still, a large number of the electorate has not yet been exposed to such ads and has no declared opinion on this matter. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that more solid opinions may be developed in future elections campaigns in Sweden.

When the existing opinions on political advertising in television are further analysed, the exposure to such advertising stands out as the single most important factor related to these opinions. The more people are exposed to these kinds of ads, the more likely they are to express positive opinions about them. Age and gender matter, as young people and men are slightly more positive in their attitudes, and this is also the case with advertising opinions in general in Sweden. However, no other factor seems to be as important in this respect as is exposure to political advertising in television.

Surprisingly, ideological beliefs on the individual level seem to be almost irrelevant when analysing existing public opinion. In previous studies of attitudes towards ad-

vertising in general ideological predispositions proved to be decisive, with right-wing partisans being more positive and left-wing believers expressing more critical attitudes. However, when advertising attitudes in a more political context were examined here, political ideology seemed to lose its importance as an explanatory factor.

Paradoxically, political predispositions seem to matter more when opinions on general advertising are considered, as compared to when attitudes towards political advertising are examined. This should probably not be interpreted as indicating that political advertising in Sweden is a politically neutral topic. On the contrary, it could rather serve as an example of the nature of opinion formation processes in relation to new elements of political communication, where strong ideological positions not yet have been taken.

As such a new phenomenon, political advertising in television obviously does not engage partisans representing different political views. Not being on the political agenda, political TV advertising is mainly considered from non-political perspectives. As with advertising in general, it is affected by individual factors and actual exposure to such advertising. To put it simply, attitudes towards political advertising in television in Sweden are much more about advertising than about politics, at least in the introductory stage analysed here.

Thus, as long as political advertising in television remains a politically 'cold case' in Sweden, individual factors may prove to be more decisive when analysing public opinion in this area. Consequently, individual perceptions of the role of advertising in contemporary societies and the personal acceptance of commercialization processes within the media may be of great importance when analysing public attitudes. When political advertising now becomes a more distinctive feature of election campaigns in Sweden the issue may be politicized in a more traditional way, but until that time political advertising in television will probably be evaluated in accordance with the criteria for public judgements of advertising in general.

To conclude, political advertising in television is definitely one of the main characteristics of election campaigns in many modern democracies. As such, political spots are at the centre of the public discourse and function as essential elements of the political struggle between incumbents and their political opponents. However, as the present study indicates, the central role and potential of political advertising also depend on the existing political culture and the traditions of campaign practices. As a new element in political communication processes, political ads in television are judged more by non-political considerations than by ideological convictions and political standpoints. Thus, the Swedish experience confirms that political ads have to be perceived as politically significant in order to be a central part of the political communication.

Nevertheless, an obvious limitation of this study is of course the focus on one single country, which restricts the possibilities of generalizing the findings. However, the theoretical approach used here when analysing attitudes towards political advertising could be developed further in a comparative research framework. Two methodological problems in this study should also be taken into account. First, the small-scale implementation of political TV spots during the 2006 Elections may explain the relatively high number of respondents without distinct opinion on the phenomenon. Second, data collection took place during different phases of the campaign. These limitations need to be considered when designing forthcoming studies of opinions on televised political advertising during election campaigns.

Finally, the present article argues for more systematic comparative research in this field in the future. The adoption of global campaign practices in different national election settings poses a huge challenge to contemporary political communication research. Consequently, the introduction of televised political advertising in Sweden could serve as an interesting example of a situation in which international trends and national contexts meet, with results that are not always in line with common experiences and that are not easy to predict.

Notes

1. The Christ Democrats, The Liberals and The Moderates produced TV ads during the campaign in TV channels such as TV4 Plus, TV4 Fakta, TV4 Film and TV400.
2. http://www.irm-media.se/irm/(ycd5wl4500iwtj55jqwlh1ui)/default.aspx

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MARIE GRUSELL, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Department of Journalism, Media and Communication / JMG, University of Gothenburg, marie.grusell@jmg.gu.se

LARS NORD, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Information Technology and Media, and Centre for Political Communication Research / DEMICOM, Mid Sweden University, lars.nord@miun.se

Appendix

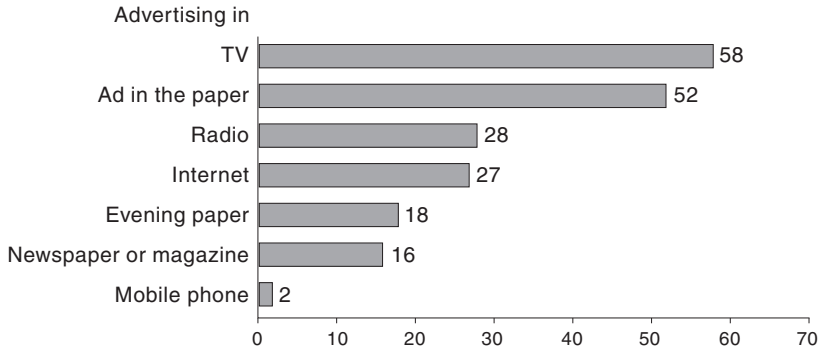
Questions in the survey:
I) Have you seen political advertisements in television during the election campaign?

- Yes, several times
- Yes, at least once
- No, not at all

II) To what extent do you agree with the following statements about political advertisements in television? (1=disagree completely, 5=agree completely, don't know-option)

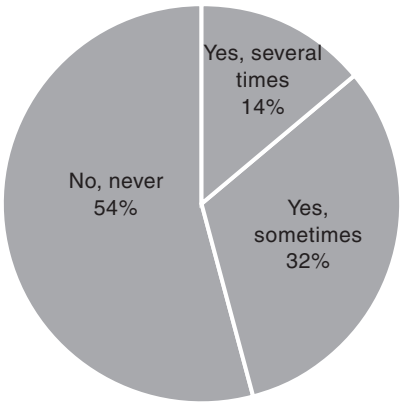
- Political TV-advertising gives me guidelines regarding which party suits me best
- Political TV-advertising gives me an oversimplified picture of party standpoints
- Political TV-advertising influences my voting decision on Election Day
- Political TV-advertising appeals too much to emotions and neglects the facts
- Political TV-advertising is too negative in its tone towards political opponents

Figure 1. *Part of the Public Exposed to Advertising in Different Media an average weekday 2007 (percent)*



Source: Nordicom-Sveriges Mediebarometer 2007 (Nordicom-Sverige).

Figure 2. *Exposure to Political Advertising in TV (percent)*



Commentary: Data are based on the number of people who have an opinion about political TV advertising.

Source: Democracy Barometer, The Centre for Political Communication Research, Mid Sweden University. N= 942