

Under the Influence?

Understanding Media's Coverage of
Opinion Polls and their Effects on
Citizens and Politicians

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Sammanfattning på svenska

Ett av de mest centrala inslagen i dagens politiska rapportering är journalistikens frekventa användning av partisympatiundersökningar. Genom att beställa och publicera opinionsundersökningar ger medierna sig själva en chans att agera uttolkare av folkets röst med den precision och auktoritet som kommer med siffror och statistik. Samtidigt är resultaten från mätningarna en aldrig sinande källa för att skapa nyheter med högt nyhetsvärde. Mätningarna ger också betydande möjligheter till journalistisk tolkning, där de senaste opinionsresultaten lätt kan användas som en fond, utifrån vilken det är möjligt att porträttera partier som vinnare eller förlorare. I den här avhandlingen undersöks olika aspekter av hur opinionsundersökningar används inom den politiska journalistiken samt vad denna rapportering har för konsekvenser för två av demokratins mest centrala aktörer, väljare och politiker. Empiriskt undersöks detta i fyra separata delstudier.

Den första delstudien tar sitt avstamp i frågan om hur vi ska bedöma kvaliteten i hur journalister rapporterar om opinionsresultat. Mer specifikt så undersöks i vilken utsträckning journalister tar hänsyn till de osäkerhetsfaktorer som är behäftade med slumpmässiga urval när de rapporterar om och förklarar förändringar som skett i opinionen. Studien baseras på samtliga huvudartiklar där Dagens Nyheter (DN), Svenska Dagbladet (SvD) och Expressen redovisar sina regelbundna partisympatiundersökningar under 2010/2011 samt under 2014/2015. Resultaten visar, kanske föga förvånande, att journalister har mycket liten respekt för statistiska osäkerheter i sin rapportering. Ett exempel är att i drygt hälften av fallen då journalisten torgför en förklaring till varför ett parti har stigit eller sjunkit i opinionen, så är den förändring som förklaras så liten att den kan ha uppstått av slumpen.

Ämnet för den andra delstudien är också nyhetsmediernas användning av opinionsundersökningar. Här är fokus på vilka konsekvenser undersökningarna kan få för den partipolitiska rapporteringen mer generellt. Flera framstående forskare har argumenterat att nyhetsmedias stora intresse för den rådande opinionsutvecklingen riskerar att få som konsekvens att ett partis stöd i opinionen färgar av sig på hur partiet porträtteras i den övriga journalistiken. Logiken bakom resonemanget är att partier som går bra i opinionen får en mer fördelaktig nyhetsrapportering medan partier som presterar sämre i opinionen blir utsatta för en mer negativ nyhetsrapportering.

Detta resonemang prövas på ett datamaterial bestående av mer än 7500 nyhetsartiklar insamlade under en fyraårsperiod (2014-2018). De empiriska analyserna

visar ett blandat stöd för hypotesen att tonen i opinionsundersökningsnyheter spiller över på den övriga nyhetsrapporteringen. Negativa opinionsundersökningsnyheter för ett parti verkar inte spela någon roll för tonen i den efterföljande nyhetsrapporteringen. Däremot kan partier som är i centrum för positiva opinionsnyheter förvänta sig en mer positiv nyhetsrapportering under de efterföljande dagarna.

Ända sedan opinionsundersökningens stora genomslag för snart 70 år sedan har det debatterats huruvida mätningarna i sig själva riskerar att påverka den opinion som de försöker spegla. I den internationella litteraturen kallas detta fenomen för bandwagoneffekten. Bandwagoneffektens giltighet inom opinions- och valjärforskning har framförallt studerats genom experiment där man manipulerat opinionsstödet för ett parti, en kandidat eller en sakfråga. Därefter har man undersökt huruvida det finns skillnader, i exempelvis röstintention, mellan de som har och de som inte har exponerats för opinionsresultatet. Att undersöka denna dynamik under verkliga former har dock varit behäftat med en rad metodologiska utmaningar. Därutöver kommer mycket av forskningen på området från länder med majoritära tvåpartisystem. Detta har inneburit att de flesta bandwagon-studier konceptualiserat bandwagoneffekten genom att undersöka huruvida väljare föredrar det parti som har störst stöd i opinionen. Även om detta kan ses som ett rimligt antagande i valsysteem där vinnaren får alla mandat, vilket är fallet i exempelvis USA, så är det inte lika relevant i flerpartisystem likt Sveriges. Vad som borde vara mer centralt här är snarare huruvida ett parti har en positiv eller negativ utveckling.

Det är mot den här bakgrunden som den tredje delstudien undersöker vilken roll väljarnas uppfattning om partiernas opinionsutveckling spelar för partiutvärderingar och röstningsintention. Empiriskt undersöks detta genom en panelundersökning där samma individer ($n \approx 1900$) intervjuas flera gånger under 2018 års valrörelse. Respondenterna har tillfrågats om hur de tror att de olika partiernas opinionsstöd har utvecklats den senaste tiden. Genom svaren är det möjligt att analysera hur uppfattningar om opinionsutveckling samvarierar med skattningar och förändringar av sympatier gentemot och röstningsintentioner för respektive parti. De huvudsakliga resultaten visar stöd för bandwagonhypotesen. Väljare som anser att ett parti har gått framåt i opinionen säger sig också gilla partiet i högre utsträckning och är därtill mer benägna att uppge att de kommer rösta på partiet i fråga. Detta även då man kontrollerar för både röstningsintention och partigillande i ett tidigare stadium.

Den fjärde delstudien fokuserar på huruvida nyhetsmediernas rapportering av valjarbarometrar påverkar politiker och politiska partier. Studien bygger delvis på tidigare forskning om politiska elitors uppfattningar om nyhetsmediernas inflytande över politiken. Utgångspunkten är att, om politiker anser att medier har ett stort inflytande över strategiska mål som de ämnar uppnå; exempelvis att maximera partiets röststöd; genomdrivandet av förslag i parlamentet; eller att undvika

interna konflikter, så kommer de agera både proaktivt och reaktivt gentemot media för att uppnå dessa mål. Med det här som bakgrund undersöks i vilken utsträckning politiker anser att nyhetsmedias publicering av väljarundersökningar påverkar olika aspekter av det politiska arbetet.

Det material som används för att besvara denna frågeställning är en stor frågeundersökning med svar från mer än 2400 politiker från samtliga administrativa nivåer i den svenska representativa demokratin. Resultaten visar att nyhetsmediernas publicering av opinionsresultat ses som en inflytelserik faktor, men att det varierar mellan de olika arenor som politiska partier agerar på. Nyhetsmediernas publicering av opinionsresultat ses som mest inflytelserikt när det kommer till hur partiet och dess frågor rapporteras om i medierna, samt för partiinterna aspekter så som graden av entusiasm bland medlemmarna. Undersökningarna ses däremot som mindre betydelsefulla när det gäller framgång i det parlamentariska arbetet. Studien visar också att, på flera av arenorna, så kan politikernas uppfattning om hur inflytelserika opinionsresultaten är förklaras med hur politikerns parti har presterat i opinionen. Politiker som upplevt att deras parti haft motgångar eller framgångar i opinionen anser att mätningarna har ett större inflytande jämfört med de politiker som tror att deras partier stått still i opinionen.

List of papers

- I. Oleskog Tryggvason, P., & Strömbäck, J. (2018). Fact or fiction? Investigating the quality of opinion poll coverage and its antecedents. *Journalism Studies*, 19(14), 2148–2167.
doi:10.1080/146167X.2017.1330665
- II. Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2020a). The winner-loser spiral in political news coverage: Investigating the impact of poll coverage on subsequent party coverage. *Political Communication*.
doi:10.1080/10584609.2020.1843571.
- III. Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2021). Taking perceptions seriously: Bandwagon effects in multi-party systems. *Unpublished Manuscript*.
- IV. Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2020b). How Mediated Opinion Polls Influence Political Parties: Revisiting the Arena Framework. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 32(2), 243–265.
doi:10.1093/ijpor/edz021.

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1. Introduction

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how the news media covers horse race polls and how this coverage can influence the political process. News media's fascination with reading public opinion dates back to at least the 1820s, but started to take its current shape at the beginning of the twentieth century (Brettschneider, 2008). The best-known example was the straw polls conducted by the current affairs magazine *Literary Digest*. The Digest had been successful in predicting the winner in all five US presidential elections between 1916 and 1932. They had done so by sending out millions of ballots to a register of telephone and automobile owners (Gallup & Rae, 1940; Lusinchi, 2015). Heading into the 1936 election, 2.3 out of 10 million ballots had been returned. Based on these, the Digest could make a confident prediction that challenger Alf Landon was going to win a comfortable majority, beating the incumbent president Roosevelt.

However, in the years leading up to the election, there had been considerable developments in sampling methods that called into question the soundness of the Digest's approach. One of the largest proponents of the new method was survey pioneer George Gallup. Gallup felt so confident in the superiority of the new method that he offered a money-back guarantee to the *Washington Post* if his poll couldn't outperform the Digest's. Instead of a Landon win, Gallup's poll – based on a sample of only 50,000 respondents – correctly predicted a Roosevelt landslide (Lavrakas, 2008; Traugott, 2009). Needless to say, the *Literary Digest* never recovered from the fiasco and the popularity of the scientific poll among news media continued to grow.

In their seminal book *The Pulse of Democracy*, Gallup and Rae (1940) make an optimistic case for how the new method behind scientific polling has the potential to revitalize the democratic process. Through the polls, the people could make their voice heard on which issues they perceived as most pressing for the nation and have their say on specific policy proposals. In the foreword, the authors end by expressing their gratitude to the newspapers that had stood by the institute, stating that by publishing poll results to the public, they “act as the twentieth-century weathercocks for a vast democracy” (Gallup & Rae, 1940, p. viii). Thus, Gallup seemed to be under the impression that the news media were to act as mere mediators of poll results and did not reflect upon the jeopardy that the democratic promise of the new technique risked being distorted when poll results were filtered through the lens and logic of the news media.

Since then, the news media's relationship with opinion pollsters and use of opinion polls have only increased (Brettschneider, 2008), and today, opinion polls constitute a key feature of contemporary political reporting (Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012; Patterson, 2005; Toff, 2016). Over time, it has however become increasingly apparent that the news media do not just act as mere mediators of poll results. They have instead come to play a more active role, both in shaping and constructing public opinion (Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012; Searles, Ginn, & Nickens, 2016). As a consequence, the academic and public debate related to the media's coverage of opinion polls and its effects has been recurring.

In these debates, there are a number of optimistic ideas on how the news media's publication of opinion polls can aid the quality of the democratic process. Some have argued that poll coverage has the potential to generate interest and engagement among the public, as journalists can frame the political process in a more exciting and dramatic way (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). This is in line with work showing how exposure to poll coverage can raise turnout among young voters by increasing interest in the political campaign (Stolwijk & Schuck, 2019). Moreover, from a journalistic perspective, polls can enhance the quality of democracy by both functioning as a tool for journalists to establish their independence from political actors and elevating the opinions of the people onto the public agenda (Lavrakas & Traugott, 2000).

Finally, some have even argued that responding to opinion surveys ought to be judged a form of political participation that is considerably more egalitarian than other more traditional forms of political participation (Holmberg, 2008). For example, Verba (1996) points out that "[s]urveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce – equal representation of all citizens. The sample survey is rigorously egalitarian; it is designed so that each citizen has an equal chance to participate and an equal voice when participating" (Verba, 1996, p. 3). If this is true, news media's coverage of polls has the potential to provide a link that strengthens democratic responsiveness during in-between election periods – this by offering elected officials a way to listen to the public as a whole and not only to "clamoring minorities" (Gallup & Rae, 1940, p. 266).

Those who emphasize the potential democratic virtues of polls tend to focus on cases when news media elevate the voice of the people with respect to which issues are the most pressing for the nation, or how voters feel toward specific issues or policy proposals. However, the type of poll dominating news media's coverage of politics is not issue polls, but those that focus on vote intention (Strömbäck, 2009; Toff, 2016), often referred to as "horse race polls". It is also the news media's use, and the potential effects, of these types of polls that are of focal interest in this dissertation. Furthermore, it is against horse race coverage and its potential consequences that most critics have focused their attention.

Here, one theme of critique has to do with widespread perceptions that polls are simply not up to the task of accurately capturing public opinion and predicting

elections. These arguments have gained in prominence as polls have been on the wrong side of the outcome in several high-profile elections, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's upset in the 2016 US presidential election (Prosser & Mellon, 2018). While the political consequences of these events are enormous, it should be noted that there is no evidence that polls, overall, are any worse today than they were in the past (Jennings & Wlezien, 2018; Oleskog Tryggvason, 2018). While the accuracy of pre-election polls appears stable over time, it is despite of increasing methodological challenges where the survey industry has had to tackle declining response rates and increasing coverage problems (Lavrakas, Shuttles, Steeh, & Fienberg, 2007; Keeter, Hatley, Kennedy, & Lau, 2017). As a consequence, there are several reasons to be skeptical toward Verba's (1996) optimism of polls as an egalitarian form of political participation. One example is recent work from Sweden. While participation in polls were relatively evenly distributed among the interested and uninterested in the 1990s, poll participation in today's high choice media environment instead appears to emulate factors predicting traditional forms of political participation (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2017). A similar conclusion is reached by Althaus (2003), who criticizes the notion of equating polls with the voice of the people since those who make their voices heard in polls deviate considerably from the public at large with respect to education, income and political knowledge.

While the accuracy and representativeness of polls are of practical and democratic importance, what also matters is how news media cover polls and to what extent they are transparent in acknowledging the uncertainty behind the methodology they seek to reap the fruits of. Here, it has been pointed out that journalists often fail at providing sufficient information to their news audience (Brettschneider 1997; Strömbäck, 2009) and that it is a common practice that they do not pay respect to statistical limitations in the underlying data (Bhatti & Pedersen, 2016; Brettschneider, 2008; Larson, 2003), thereby disregarding the journalistic norm of reporting only that which is true and relevant (Patterson, 2013). The question of how the news media cover opinion polls is moreover theoretically important, as it is news media's dissemination of poll results, in contrast to polls that never see the light of day, which forces political actors to act and react in relation to thus coverage (Pereira, 2019; Strömbäck, 2012b) while also having the potential to affect the general public (Moy & Rinke, 2012).

This relates to a second theme of critique which has to do with the sheer volume of polls in the news (Patterson, 2005) and how the news media's large reliance on them has contributed to the framing of politics as a strategic game. This way of portraying the political process has been linked to a number of normatively negative consequences. For example, by focusing on the political game instead of more substantive issues, journalists risk depriving news consumers of important political information they need in order to make informed political decisions and hold political actors accountable (Patterson, 1993). As noted by Bartels (1988).

“In covering a presidential campaign, the media tells us more who is winning and who is losing than they do about who is fit to be president” (p. 31). Moreover, by portraying the political process as a game, journalists give prominence to strategic considerations and the self-interest of political actors, something that has the potential to decrease the level of political trust and engagement among the public at large (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Shehata, 2014; Zoizner, 2018).

Finally, there are also widespread concerns that the news coverage of poll results risks contributing to self-fulfilling prophecies, inadvertently affecting the same opinions they seek to mirror (Aalberg & Van Aelst, 2014; Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012). The argument here is that exposure to poll results or poll stories has the potential to induce more support for popular issues (Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014; Toff, 2018) and parties (Barnfield, 2020; Van der Meer, Hakherdian, & Aldering, 2016).

The review above demonstrates that news media’s poll coverage can have both positive and negative impacts on the democratic process. How we assess these consequences is however contingent on our, often implicit, normative assumptions of what constitutes a healthy democracy and consequently what expectations we have on citizens, politicians, and news media alike. For example, depending on which normative models of democracy one departs from, there are diverging views on what is considered sufficient, or desirable levels of i.e. political knowledge and engagement. There are also different ideals of when and how the people should make their voices heard during the political process (e.g. Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). Relatedly, there are diverging views on the role of the news media in what type of information they should provide in order for citizens to be sufficiently informed and what role the news media should play in encouraging civic engagement and political participation (Zaller, 2003; Bennett, 2003; Strömbäck, 2005). Finally, there are also contrasting models of democratic leadership, where some models emphasize the importance of acting on the mandate provided by the voters, staying steady on course independent of the ebbs and flows of public opinion, while others highlight the importance of being responsive to public opinion by listening and adapting to one’s constituency on a continuous basis (Geer, 1996; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Pitkin, 1967). However, to be able to evaluate these at times competing values, we need empirical studies related both to how the news media actually covers opinion polls and the effects thereof.

It is against this backdrop that the overarching purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how the news media use horse race polls and how this coverage can influence the political process. More specifically, the aim of this dissertation is threefold. First, to examine how news media use opinion polls in their political coverage. Second, to elaborate on how this coverage can influence opinion formation and political behavior among voters. Third, to theorize and examine how news media’s poll coverage can affect elected officials and political parties. By

addressing these three aspects, the ambition is to contribute to an increased understanding of the important role played by opinion polls in democratic processes. I will return to the more specific research problems later in this introductory chapter, but first I will spend some time presenting the framework of mediatization of politics and put forth an argument for how this theoretical perspective can help us to study and understand why and how news media use opinion polls, and in what ways this coverage can affect citizens and political actors.

2. The Mediatization of Politics

Mediatization has originated as an increasingly influential perspective in understanding the influence of news media in society in general and in politics in particular (Asp & Esaiasson, 1996; Hjarvard, 2014; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Schulz, 2004). At its heart, mediatization refers to the process of how news media has developed into an independent institution, with its own set of logics, which has become increasingly integral for other social institutions when performing their various functions (Asp & Esaiasson, 1996; Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). In the realm of politics, the media gets its influence as, today, almost all of our encounters with the political world are through mediated experiences. This means that political actors in general, and politicians and political parties in particular, are dependent on the news media to reach the public. Consequently, it has become increasingly important for political actors to cater to the needs and values of the news media in order to receive as favorable visibility as possible. This has led some scholars to suggest that media has colonized politics (Meyer, 2002) and that mediatization has led to a politics that has “lost its autonomy” (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, p. 250).

Even if the concept as such has received a lot of scholarly attention (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Kepplinger, 2002; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008), some have voiced concerns that theoretical assertions are rarely operationalized and subjected to empirical scrutiny (Deacon & Stanier, 2014; Strömbäck, 2011; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). For example, while it is widely acknowledged that mediatization refers to “a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors has increased” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, p. 6), very few studies have employed longitudinal research designs that are able to speak to these propositions (Deacon & Stanier, 2014).

In an attempt to transform mediatization from being a sensitizing concept that is loosely defined and primarily used for exploratory purposes (Hjarvard, 2014) into a more refined theory, where it is possible to evaluate the empirical validity of the theoretical claims, Strömbäck and Esser (2009, 2014) have suggested that mediatization ought to be conceptualized into four separate, yet interrelated dimensions, which can all be more or less mediatized (see also Esser & Matthes, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008).

The first dimension concerns the degree to which the media are the most important source of information about politics – that is, the extent to which politics

is experienced first-hand, or through mediated experiences. The second dimension relates to media autonomy and whether the news media are mainly independent from, or dependent on, other societal institutions. The first two dimensions, which can also be seen as historical phases (Asp & Esaiasson, 1996; Strömbäck, 2008), serves as preconditions for the third dimension. This dimension deals with the extent to which the news media's coverage of politics and current affairs is guided by media logic or political logic – that is, the extent to which coverage attends to the commercial and professional needs of news media, rather than those of political actors and the informational needs of citizens (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009): for example, the extent to which journalists choose to frame stories (de Vreese, 2014), the use of storytelling techniques such as dramatization, or the degree to which media make themselves part of the news in order to get control over news content (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). The fourth dimension concerns the degree to which political actors and institutions are influenced by the operational logic of the media (Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014) and is thus highly contingent on mediatization along the third dimension. The target group here includes politicians, parties and other political institutions, but also how mediatized political coverage affects “people’s knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors” (Esser & Matthes, 2013, p. 178). The distinction between the four separate dimensions makes it possible to create operational indicators along each dimension. This in turn can enable scholars to make cumulative contributions to the mediatization literature also when employing synchronic research designs. Moreover, as will be argued throughout the next section, each of the four dimensions can be related to news media’s use of opinion polls and their potential effects.

3. Mediatization and News Media's use of Opinion Polls

We begin with the first dimension. Even though it is widely assumed that the main source of information about the political process is through the news media (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014), it is by no means the only channel of information. People discuss politics with their friends, family and at the workplace, they attend demonstrations, interact with elected officials and party activists. People's experiences of public opinion, on the other hand – conceptualized as opinion polls – cannot be experienced first-hand, it has to be mediated (Mutz, 1998). While governmental agencies and private pollsters have the opportunity to circumvent the media and spread results from polls online, it is reasonable to assume that these channels of communication are of secondary importance, compared to reading or hearing about public opinion through the news media – especially when we consider that news media organizations are the main sponsors of political polls (Brettschneider, 2008; Toff, 2016).

Mediatization along the second dimension concerns media autonomy, and the degree to which media is dependent on, or independent from, political institutions. This is mainly a question of the historical development of the news media since the end of the Second World War, when news organizations transitioned from having close links to traditional institutions such as the church or political parties to becoming more commercially oriented (Strömbäck, 2008). During this transition, new journalistic norms and practices evolved, becoming more critical and more focused on inserting a journalistic voice in an interpretive manner (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2008). News organizations increasing reliance on, and more integrated use of, opinion polls (Brettschneider, 2008) can from this perspective be understood as a manifestation of, and a tool for, becoming more autonomous from political institutions and actors.

The third dimension of mediatization focuses on news content and asks questions on how and why journalists cover the political process and to what extent this coverage is governed by political or media logic. According to Esser (2013), the two most central components of media logic are professionalism and commercialism. To understand what is featured in the news, we first need to recognize that news organizations – with the exception of public service organizations – are commercial enterprises. The implication of this is that journalists have strong in-

centives to focus on subjects and use angles that cater to their audience (Hamilton, 2004). News media's frequent use of polls can from this perspective be understood by the idea that horse race news sells (Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn, 2004), something that is not least demonstrated by how poll coverage drives web traffic during election campaigns (Toff, 2016; Westwood, Messing, & Lelkes, 2020).

News media's frequent reliance on polls can also be understood as they speak to a number of important professional norms and practices within news journalism. For example, horse race polls fulfill several important criteria for high news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; O'Neill & Harcup, 2009; Strömbäck, 2012a). They are timely, or at least presented as such, easy to visualize and deal with powerful elites. Polls are also seen as highly important as they speak to the central question in our democratic process of who is likely to grab, or hold onto, legislative power. Another important professional norm within journalism is independence. When a news organization commissions a poll, it can function as a way to enhance its autonomy and power in relation to political actors, as they thereby take control of the whole line of news production, acquiring a triple role in the form of buyer, distributor and interpreter of public opinion (Petersson, Djerf-Pierre, Holmberg, Strömbäck, & Weibull, 2006). Coverage of polls moreover allows reporters to combine two at first glance contradictory positions. They can take on the role of the neutral observer, who is merely reporting the numbers as such, similar as when reporting the score in a football game. At the same time, polls create opportunities for journalists to insert their own voice into the reporting (Patterson, 1996; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012; Zaller, 1999), often by providing explanations and interpretations of why the horse race has developed as it has (Bauman & Lavrakas, 2000).

Finally, the zero-sum nature of horse race polls, the fact that one party has to lose for another party to gain support, means that polls are the perfect vehicle for covering the political process as a game (Aalberg, de Vreese, & Strömbäck, 2017; Patterson, 1993). Horse race polls, and the winner-loser frame that frequently accompanies them, can thus function as a way to structure other types of political coverage. This is clearly articulated by Rosenstiel (2005), who notes that journalists' and editors' reliance on polls "create a context for journalists to explain and organize other news. In short, the news media culture has intensified the degree to which polls become the lens through which reporters see and order the news in a more interpretative news environment" (p. 707).

Empirical work on mediatization along the third dimension has used different indicators, such as the active role of journalists in framing stories (de Vreese, 2014), the degree of journalistic meta-coverage (D'Angelo, Büchel, & Esser, 2014), the extent to which journalists have an active and visible role in news reporting, the length of politicians' sound bites and the degree of interpretive accounts by journalists (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). Several of these studies have either operationalized or argued that poll coverage should be equated with

mediatized coverage (Elmelund-Præstekær, Hopmann, & Nørgaard, 2011; Esser & Matthes, 2013; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). Based on the arguments above, such an operationalization might seem warranted. However, I would argue that it is too blunt to equate poll coverage with mediatized political coverage per se. Poll coverage that adheres to statistical uncertainties and discourages from feeding into a coverage of the political process as a cynical game can in fact serve to inform the public, and provide them with the kind of information they need as “citizens rather than as consumers” (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013, p. 343). What should be important from a mediatization perspective is thus not only *if* polls are covered, but *how* they are used in political reporting. More specifically, it is important to study how polls are reported, explained, and in what way they are used to structure other types of political coverage. Only by doing so is it possible to evaluate to what extent we should view news media’s poll coverage as an indicator of mediatization and only by systematically studying these practices is it possible to assess impact of poll coverage more broadly.

While the third dimension of mediatization relates to how the news media covers politics, it is intrinsically linked with the fourth dimension, which concerns the consequences of such coverage. These consequences can be evaluated with respect to both political actors (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014) and the general public (Esser & Matthes, 2013). Starting with the latter, it is widely assumed that news media’s coverage of politics and current affairs can have a considerable influence on the public’s perception of social reality (Potter, 2012). What is of particular interest with respect to this dissertation is the news media’s role in portraying public opinion. Research on the effects of perceptions on public opinion has studied a large variety of outcomes, such as who chooses to express their opinions in public (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), when people contribute to political campaigns (Mutz, 1995) and how we evaluate policy proposals (Moy & Rinke, 2012; Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014; Toff, 2018). In the context of elections, where polls on vote intention are most numerous, the main line of influence is through the so-called “bandwagon effect” (Gallup & Rae, 1940; Simon, 1954). The bandwagon hypothesis suggests that voters’ attitudes towards a political party, and consequently the likelihood of voting for that party, is affected by how popular the party is perceived to be. More specifically, it suggests that we are more likely to vote for a party that is performing well in the polls than for a party that is doing poorly (Barnfield, 2020). Recent work, however, suggests that it is not merely poll figures in themselves that affect vote intention. In a sophisticated survey experiment conducted in the midst of a Dutch election campaign, Van der Meer and colleagues found that the bandwagon effect was contingent on news frames that accompanied the poll numbers (Van der Meer et al., 2016). A central aim for mediatization research along the fourth dimension should thus be to evaluate the

impact of how the news media's portrayal of politics and framing of public opinion is processed in the minds of voters and how this in turn affects attitude formation and political behavior.

Turning to the potential consequences for political actors, one of the main goals of politicians and political parties is to maximize their electoral support (Downs, 1957; Sjöblom, 1968; Strom, 1990). To do this, they need to be able to reach, convince and mobilize voters. As the media constitutes the main arena for reaching voters, it is considered crucial to attain positive media attention for oneself and one's key issues. The main argument of mediatization along the fourth dimension is that to achieve this, political actors have adopted (or to some extent internalized) this operational logic of the media – presenting themselves and their issues in ways that are likely to get picked up in the news media. However, considering that journalists do not want to be steered or manipulated by politicians, this has led reporters to try to create alternative sources for news stories, such as the commissioning of opinion polls, with the purpose of getting the upper hand in relation to politicians (Zaller, 1998). The longitudinal implication of this process is well illustrated in a quote from Asp and Esaiasson (1996) in what they label the “spiral of mediatization.” “In the struggle for the voters’ attention, the politicians first adapt themselves to the conditions placed by the media and the techniques used by the media for reaching their voters. In this way, politicians learn how the media think and how they can be exploited, but the media, in turn, also learn how to defend themselves against the politicians’ manipulation, which leads to the politicians having to use even more refined methods to gain media attention, and so on” (p. 88).

The driving force behind this process of self-mediatization among politicians is thus assumed to be widespread perceptions that the media has a strong causal influence over public opinion and over other strategic goals that they want to achieve (Esser & Matthes, 2013; Tsfati, 2017). The rationale of studying perceived media power is further strengthened as research shows that perceived media influence is a strong predictor of how political elites seek to obtain media coverage (Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheaffer, 2008). Conceiving media's coverage of horse race polls as an indicator of mediatization along the third dimension, it thus becomes highly relevant to investigate how political actors perceive the influence of media's poll coverage as an indicator along the fourth dimension. This is of special relevance when we consider that attaining high support in published opinion polls can serve to aid, while low support can risk spoiling, political parties' opportunities to achieve a number of important party strategic goals (Strömbäck, 2012b).

4. Four Research Questions

The argument thus far has been that we can use the four-dimensional conceptualization of mediatization as a framework for understanding how and why news media use opinion polls and how poll coverage can influence different aspects of the political process. I will now proceed to specify four research questions that are the focal points in each of the studies that constitute the main body of this dissertation. Departing from the four-dimensional conceptualization of mediatization discussed in the previous sections, two of these research questions are connected to the third dimension, focusing on news media's use of polls, while the two remaining questions are connected to the fourth dimension, focusing on the consequence of poll coverage for both voters and politicians.

A key issue along the third dimension is the extent to which poll coverage is conducted so that it can inform the news audience in a manner that they need to be knowledgeable citizens (Esser & Matthes, 2013; Landerer, 2013), or, put differently, the extent to which poll coverage is in line with the commercial and professional needs of news organizations and individual journalists (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). One of the major appeals of using polls in the news is that the science behind random sampling allows journalists to say something about the general public by asking only a small number of randomly selected individuals (Lavrakas & Traugott). As such, journalists are able to write stories about what the most important problems facing the country are, the popularity of a new bill, or how the political parties would fare if there was an election held today. However, this prospect of reporting on the state or development of public opinion comes with clear restrictions. If a change, or a difference, is so small that it falls within the margin of error, the journalist ought to refrain him or herself, even if the result is in line with an established narrative (Bauman & Lavrakas, 2000). To date, however, there are only a few studies that have looked into this question in a systematic manner (Andersen, 2000; Bhatti & Pedersen, 2016; Larson, 2003; Pétry & Bastien, 2013). Moreover, there is no work examining how journalists adheres to statistical uncertainties when providing causal explanations of development in public opinion. It is against this background that my first research question is as follows: **RQ1:** *To what extent do journalists account for statistical uncertainties when covering and explaining horse race polls?*

News media's poll coverage does not only serve to inform, or in the case of inadequate poll coverage misinform, the public. It can also function as an organizing principle, a heuristic or a narrative structure that affects other aspects of

political reporting (Rosenstiel, 2005). Therefore, it is often seen as an important explanation of the increased framing of the political process as a strategic game (Aalberg et al., 2012; Patterson, 1993). A general observation in several prominent studies is that the journalist's reliance on poll results is so great that the standing in the polls has direct implications for how political parties and candidates are covered (Patterson, 1993, 2016; Sides & Vavreck, 2014). Here, the most general argument has been that parties that are faring well in the polls receive more positive coverage, while the coverage for parties that are faring less well is more negative (Entman, 2010). Empirically, however, this has only been tested in a very small number of studies, primarily in the US (Patterson, 1993, 2016; Sides & Vavreck, 2014; Wlezien & Soroka, 2019), and it has never been evaluated outside the short-term context of electoral campaigns. In light of this, the second research question in this thesis is as follows: **RQ2:** *Are there spillover effects of media's poll coverage onto subsequent political coverage?*

According to Esser and Matthes (2013), a central requirement of mediatization research is to investigate the consequence of mediatized coverage for news audiences. Much of the debate surrounding the news media's use of opinion polls departs from the perception, and often fear, that poll coverage can influence the same opinion it seeks to mirror (Gallup & Rae, 1940; Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014). The most crucial issue has to do with the role of polls during electoral campaigns, and the extent to which the publication of polls can alter electoral outcomes by creating a so-called "bandwagon effect," where voters are more likely to vote for parties that are performing well in the polls (Barnfield, 2020).

While experimental work has been relatively successful in designing studies that speak to different mechanisms behind the bandwagon effect (Dahlggaard, Hansen, Hansen, & Larsen, 2017; Van der Meer et al., 2016), this has proven much more of a challenge in observational studies (Barnfield, 2020). Moreover, due to a predominance of studies from first-past-the-post systems, there has largely been a failure to recognize that the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect is likely to differ across electoral systems (Barnfield, 2020). What is key here, then, is using appropriate study design and operational indicators that are able to capture the bandwagon process in multi-party systems. To address this gap in the literature, my third research question is the following: **RQ3:** *Does news media's horse race coverage, or the perception thereof, affect attitudes towards, and voting intention for, political parties?*

Ascribing news media to have considerable influence over various aspects of the political process is argued to be both a precondition for (Strömbäck, 2011), and the prime driver of, mediatization along the fourth dimension (Asp, 2014; Esser & Matthes, 2013; Tsfati, 2017). Mapping and explaining how political actors perceive the power of the media is pivotal as these perceptions are thought to have real-world consequences when it comes to how political actors behave in relation to the news media (Cohen et al., 2008; Mutz, 1998). However, existing work has mainly conceptualized and operationalized perceived media power in a

unidimensional fashion, where the focus has been on general assertions of media power and perceptions of news media’s agenda-setting ability (e.g. Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008). This is somewhat puzzling, given that work by Vesa and colleges (2015) demonstrate how elite perceptions of the news media’s agenda setting ability appears to vary considerably depending on whether they are asked about more general, or more specific aspects of the news media’s influence on politics. Hence, by only looking at perceived media power on the front stage of politics, we might miss that these perceptions differ across political domains. This might also be the case with respect to the perceived influence of news media’s publication of horse race polls (Strömbäck, 2012b). To assess the influence of news media’s poll coverage for political actors, we need to investigate what power political actors ascribe to news media’s use of polls in different domains in the political process, i.e. how parties are portrayed in the news media (in line with RQ2) or the citizens’ vote choice (in line with RQ3). It is against this backdrop that my fourth research question is formed: **RQ4:** *How do politicians perceive the influence of media’s poll coverage on different aspects of the political process?*

Table 1 below provides an overview of how each of the four studies relates to the framework of mediatization. The research questions outlined above are by no means an exhaustive list, either from a mediatization perspective or, with respect to the many different ways that media’s publication of polls can influence the political process. However, they represent four central and interrelated debates on news media’s use of polls and its effects, targeting the three most important actors in our democracy, namely the news media, citizens and politicians.

Table 1 Overview of the actors in focus in the four studies along the different dimensions of mediatization

Actors	Dimension of Mediatization		
	Third		Fourth
News media	Study 1	Study 2	
Citizens			Study 3
Politicians			Study 4

Note: **Study 1:** Oleskog Tryggvason, P., & Strömbäck, J. (2018). Fact or fiction? Investigating the quality of opinion poll coverage and its antecedents. *Journalism Studies*, 19(14), 2148–2167. **Study 2:** Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2020a). The winner-loser spiral in political news coverage: Investigating the impact of poll coverage on subsequent party coverage. *Political Communication*, online early. **Study 3:** Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2021). Taking perceptions seriously: Bandwagon effects in multi-party systems. *Unpublished manuscript*. **Study 4:** Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2020b). How mediated opinion polls influence political parties: Revisiting the arena framework. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 32(2), 243-265

5. The Importance of Case Selection: The Swedish Case

Much of the early literature on news media's use of opinion polls and their potential consequences for the political process originates from the other side of the Atlantic (Gallup & Rae, 1940; Patterson, 1993; Simon, 1954). While contemporary work has studied these questions in a number of different settings, there has often been a lack of reflection with respect to the role of contextual factors that can be of relevance when assessing news media's poll coverage and its potential effects. With respect to the overarching purpose of, and the outlined research questions in this dissertation, there are at least three system-level factors that are relevant to discuss, namely the role of the Swedish media system, the electoral system and the party system.

Using Hallin and Mancini's (2004) classic typology of media systems, Sweden is considered a typical case of the Democratic Corporatist Model, where two of the main characteristics are a historically high newspaper circulation and a strong public service (Weibull & Jönsson, 2008). This can be contrasted with the United States, which is often seen as the archetypal case of the Liberal Model, where two of the main characteristics are a high degree of commercialism and negativity. These elements are of potential importance as there is work connecting news media's use of opinion polls and the framing of the political process as a strategic game to contextual factors such as the market share of public service (Aalberg et al., 2017) and the level of market competition between news outlets (Dunaway, 2008). An additional important difference, compared to, for example, the United States, is the lack of partisan fragmentation or polarization in political reporting (Stroud, 2011). Content analysis of political coverage during electoral campaigns has traditionally found no systematic bias toward either side of the political spectrum (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). This is important as work conducted in the United States suggests that there is a partisan bias regarding which polls are covered depending on the ideological leaning of different cable news channels (Groeling, 2008).

In Sweden, coverage of politics and current affairs can be divided into broadcast, radio and newspapers, all of which have a considerable online presence. On the broadcast side, the main actors are Swedish Public Television (SVT), Swedish Public Radio (SR) and TV4, the only commercial TV channel that covers news and current events. The largest newspapers with a national audience are the two

tabloids, Aftonbladet and Expressen, and two major broadsheet morning papers, Dagens Nyheter (DN) and Svenska Dagbladet (SvD). Each of these outlets has had one or more formal collaboration with pollsters, commissioning monthly polls on (among other things) voting intention. Hence, polls on party preference constitute a regular feature in the overall coverage of politics, but it is not as extreme as is the case in e.g. the United States (Patterson, 2005; Toff, 2016). The role of media system factors is relevant for all four studies but most significant when discussing Study 1 and Study 2.

While mediatization along the third dimension suggests that journalists have a large and increasing autonomy in how they can portray the political process, it is also structured by the specific institutional arrangements in a country. One such institutional feature that has implications for how opinion polls are covered is the role of the electoral system. In majoritarian systems, where the party or candidate with the highest vote share gets all the mandates, there is a natural inclination to focus on winners and losers in terms of who is ahead and who is behind in the polls. In multi-party systems with proportional allocation however, it is much less clear-cut who is to be considered a winner or loser. It is not self-evident that the largest party, which in the Swedish case usually receives around 30 percent in the polls, is going to be portrayed as the winner. Arguably, it is just as likely, or even more so, that journalists will focus on the recent trajectory of specific parties, or on a party's standing in relation to the electoral threshold. Thus, it is much more up to the discretionary power of journalists and editors to choose who is going to be framed in a positive, or negative, way (Meffert & Gschwend, 2011; Van der Meer et al., 2016). Furthermore, by recognizing that there are crucial differences between how polls can be used to portray the horse race in majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, it becomes apparent that the role of opinion polls in opinion formation is likely to differ as well (Barnfield, 2020). This is a question that is central in my third study, which focuses on how we can conceptualize and operationalize the bandwagon process in multi-party systems.

In Sweden, national, regional and local elections are held in September every four years. This means that there is a comparatively long period without elections. As such, polls have the potential to serve as an important feedback mechanism for elected officials (Pettersson, 2008). Over the past four decades, the Swedish party system has become increasingly fragmented, transitioning from five to eight parties represented in the parliament. In this dissertation, I use data from a number of distinct episodes over a period of eight years (2010–2018). During this time, Sweden held three elections. The 2010–2014 government consisted of four center-right parties, the Alliance, consisting of the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, the Center Party and the Christian Democrats. After the 2014 election, the Social Democrats formed a minority government together with the Green Party and had a budget collaboration with the Left Party. The 2018 election ended in a historic deadlock. After drawn-out negotiations, the Social Democrats and the Green

Party were able to hold on to power, but they now have a policy and economic cooperation with the Liberal Party and the Center Party. The most important factor influencing both the overall structure of the party system and coalition building has been the continual growth of the anti-immigration and nationalist party the Sweden Democrats, which increased its share of the votes from 5.7 percent in 2010 to 12.9 percent in 2014 and 17.5 percent in 2018 (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016; Oscarsson & Strömbäck, 2019).

One final aspect that is important in discussing the role of poll coverage in the Swedish context is the historical accuracy of Swedish pollsters. While there has been some debate with respect to differences in accuracy between probability-based and nonprobability-based polls (Sohlberg, Gilljam, & Martinsson, 2017), Swedish pollsters have a fairly good track record in accurately reflecting the final election tally. Since 1991, the mean average error (MEA) per party has fluctuated around 1 percentage point (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2018), something that is reasonably good from a comparative perspective (Jennings & Wlezien, 2018).

Having provided this brief background to the Swedish context and introduced the overarching theoretical framework of mediatization and the specific research questions, I will now proceed to present four sections of previous research. The purpose of these sections is to provide an overview of the cumulative body of knowledge that my studies are built on, and to which it seeks to contribute. In conjunction with each section, I will also provide a short description of each of the four studies and how they add to existing literature.

6. Assessing the Quality of Poll Coverage

For decades, the main criticism of how the news media covered polls centered around the frequent lack of statistical information published adjacent to polls (Brettschneider, 1997, 2008; Strömbäck, 2009; Welch, 2002), the argument being that the news audience must be able to independently judge the validity and reliability of poll results. These studies generally found that news outlets commonly failed to provide basic poll information, such as sample size, field dates and the margin of error (Brettschneider, 2008; Donsbach, 2001; Strömbäck, 2009). However, there was variation between quality and tabloid papers and between in-house and rewritten poll stories (Brettschneider, 2008).

Descriptive studies of this sort are valuable since they pinpoint transparency regarding the methodological information about the poll as an important factor. All else being equal, transparency is better than not providing methodological information. However, as an indicator of quality in the coverage of opinion polls, such an approach is far too limited. The inclusion of methodological information tells us nothing about how the journalists actually cover the poll, or the extent to which journalists take statistical uncertainties into account when covering changes across, or making comparisons within, opinion polls. Moreover, as noted by Traugott and Kang (2000), we know that the public has very limited knowledge of statistical concepts such as the margin of error, which means that most news consumers won't be able to process the information presented in a correct manner. Finally, the most convincing argument for why methodological information should not be seen as an indicator of high poll coverage quality comes from work by Bhatti and Pedersen (2016). They found that journalists were no better at avoiding covering changes that were inside the margin of error in articles that included methodological information.

What is arguably more relevant – from the perspective of providing the news audience with what is true and relevant – but much less well researched, is how the news media actually cover polls, and the extent to which they adhere to the limitations (uncertainty) of the methodology that they seek to reap the fruits from. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, there is only a little more than a handful of studies that have looked into this question from a systematic perspective (Andersen, 2000; Bhatti & Pedersen, 2016; Larsen & Fazekas, 2020; Larson, 2003; Pétry & Bastien, 2013; Vögele & Bachl, 2020). Overall, these studies found that it is a widespread practice to disregard statistical uncertainties. For example, Bhatti and Pedersen (2016) found that in Denmark, in two thirds of the cases, journalists

reported on differences that were so small that they were likely the product of sampling error.

Moreover, journalists not only report on changes in poll numbers but are also often willing to put forth causal explanations for why these changes have occurred. This is noted by Bauman and Lavrakas (2000), who point out that “if reporters propose interpretations (e.g., make attributions about the cause and/or effects of poll results) that are unsupported by adequate evidence, they may inadvertently harm the very processes we would hope they enhanced” (Bauman & Lavrakas, 2000, p. 166). Finally, while there seems to be a broad consensus among existing empirical work that journalists often fail to take statistical uncertainties into account in their coverage, there is little to no work on what might explain differences in poll coverage quality.

It is against this backdrop that the purpose of my first study, an article titled “Fact or fiction: Investigating the antecedents of opinion poll coverage” (Oleskog Tryggvason & Strömbäck, 2018), was to examine the quality of Swedish poll coverage. The empirical focus was on poll coverage in three of the major Swedish newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Expressen*, all of which at the time had longstanding collaborations with pollsters using probability samples. The study analyzed all main poll stories in these outlets covering a period of four years (2010/2011 and 2014/2015). The research design was to combine manually coded data of the main poll stories in each outlet with a data set of all corresponding polls. This design allows us to analyze the extent to which journalists adhere to the convention of 95% level of significance when covering changes across time and noting differences against the electoral threshold. The study contributes to the existing body of scholarly work in several important ways. First, it confirms what has been found in other contexts (Andersen, 2000; Bhatti & Pedersen, 2016; Larsen & Fazekas, 2020; Larson, 2003; Pétry & Bastien, 2013; Vögele & Bachl, 2020), i.e. that Swedish political journalists often fail to take statistical limitations associated with polls into account in their coverage. It is a commonplace practice that journalists put emphasis on changes within the margin of error, without mentioning the statistical uncertainty to the readers. Second, it constitutes the first empirical study of how journalists adhere to statistical uncertainties when they provide its audience with causal explanations for changes in public opinion. The results show that journalists in more than half of the cases provide explanations for why a change occurred, even though the change was so small that it could be a product of sampling error. A third contribution is that the study is the first to look into factors that can explain differences in the quality of poll coverage. By analyzing the extent to which there are differences between nonelection-periods and electoral campaigns, between quality morning papers and tabloids, and between positive and negative stories, we relate to existing work that seeks explanations for news coverage on macro-, meso- and event-level (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The findings suggest that the main difference in poll coverage quality is

across different types of newspapers, where the tabloid paper was considerably more likely to both offer statistically inaccurate poll coverage and provide its readers with causal explanations for changes that had occurred within the margin of error.

I will discuss some of the democratic implications of our findings in the final section of this chapter. But now we turn to another aspect of news media's use of opinion polls, namely its role in framing the political process as a game and the question of whether there are spillover effects of poll coverage onto other aspects of political coverage.

7. The Influence of Horse Race Polls on Party Coverage

One key feature in contemporary political reporting is the news media's large reliance on the game frame when covering the political process (Aalberg et al., 2012; Patterson, 1993). Here, one central element is the frequent use of horse race polls. The zero-sum logic of the horse race poll, the fact that one party has to increase its support for another party to lose support, creates incentives and opportunities for journalists to portray some parties as winners while depicting other parties as losers. This coverage is not just important due to its representation of positive and negative visibility for the parties themselves, but more importantly, this coverage can influence subsequent coverage of the same party.

The latter is something that has been hypothesized by a number of prominent scholars. For example, in his classic book *Out of Order*, Patterson (1993) puts forth and corroborates a hypothesis that the way news media covers US presidential and primary candidates is colored by their standing in the horse race. He writes: "Since the press is focused so tightly on the candidates and their standing in the game, it has for the most part only four stories to tell: a candidate is leading, or trailing, or gaining ground, or losing ground" (Patterson, 1993, p. 117). Focusing on the 2012 Republican primary race, Sides and Vavreck (2014) use a similar argument of how polls played a central part in how journalists covered candidates in what they call a process of discovery, scrutiny and decline. Using a less context-specific explanation, Entman (2010) argues for how news frames in general, and the game frame in particular, function as a heuristic in how journalists process new political information. When journalists perceive a candidate as popular or having momentum in the polls, they will be more likely to look for, or emphasize, news stories that cast the candidate in a positive light. Correspondingly, when journalists perceive a candidate as unpopular or slipping in the polls, they will be more likely to emphasize negative aspects in their subsequent coverage (Entman, 2010).

The arguments presented above of how poll coverage can influence general political coverage are explained through more or less deliberate decisions, made either by individual journalists or due to newsroom policies. While these theoretical arguments are compelling, I argue that they can be complemented by also considering the psychological and cognitive processes behind framing theory,

something that has largely been neglected in the cumulative work on determinants of news coverage (Donsbach, 2004).

While there is a strong theoretical case for how the standing in the polls can influence subsequent party coverage, there are only a few studies looking into this dynamic and none have investigated this beyond electoral campaigns. Moreover, most work has been conducted in the rather unique context of US primary and general elections (Patterson, 1993, 2016; Wlezien & Soroka, 2019). It is thus unclear to what extent the findings in these studies are applicable to countries with other media and political systems. One exception to work done in the US, and who did not find any supporting evidence for the overarching argument, is Stolwijk (2017), who attempted to replicate Patterson's findings in the context of the German Bundestag election. There is thus an apparent gap in the existing literature with respect to both studies outside the United States and outside electoral campaigns.

It is against this background that the purpose of my second article, "The winner-loser spiral in political news coverage: Investigating the impact of poll coverage on subsequent party coverage" (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2020a), was to examine whether there were spill-over effects of news media's poll coverage onto subsequent party coverage.

This question was addressed by relying on an extensive data set of top political news stories ($n = 7553$) for eight of the major news outlets in Sweden. The material was collected on a daily basis by the analytic firm Kantar Sifo over a period of 48 months (January 2014 – January 2018). Each news story contains information on positive and negative visibility of political parties and party representatives for both poll-centred and general political news stories. The analytical strategy was thus to model the positive and negative coverage of the political parties, with the lagged value of positive and negative poll stories for these parties, while also controlling for lagged dependent variables. Through this approach, I was able to test two general hypotheses, namely that: **H1:** *More negative poll stories about a party will lead to an increased number of negative general news stories about that party*; and that **H2:** *More positive poll stories about a party will lead to an increased number of positive general news stories about that party*.

Moreover, as there is extensive work that has documented that there is a negativity bias in political coverage (Esser, Engesser, Matthes, & Berganza, 2017; Soroka, 2012) and work that suggests that negative news stories elicit stronger reactions than positive ones (Soroka & McAdams, 2015), I also expect that: **H3:** *The effect of negative poll stories should be stronger than the effect of positive poll stories*.

The initial empirical analysis suggested support for both H1 and H2, showing a significant effect of both negative and positive poll coverage on the tone in subsequent party coverage. However, after conducting a series of robustness checks, adding additional lags and leads into the model, there appeared to be no support for H1. There was, however, persistent support for H2, meaning that

parties featured in positive poll stories received more favorable coverage in the subsequent days.

The study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, by covering a period of four years, the study was the first of its kind to examine the question of spillover effects of polls outside the short-term context of election campaigns. Secondly, it represents one of the few studies conducted outside the rather unique context of the US primary and presidential electoral system. Finally, while previous work has proposed theoretical explanations that give most agency to the role of news frames and conscious editorial choices (to cover in line with established narratives), this study contributes by arguing for a complementary explanation, heeding the call by Donsbach (2004) to consider psychological and cognitive factors in news decisions and to recognize that journalists are also an audience of news framing (Scheufele, 1999).

8. The Influence of Polls on the Public

In her seminal book, *Impersonal Influence*, Mutz (1998) argues that one important factor in understanding attitude formation and political behavior among citizens is considering not only how we are affected by our peers – as suggested in Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) classic *Personal Influence* – but also how people are affected by how they perceive the opinions of mass collectives.

With respect to the potential influence of opinion polls in electoral politics, the most famous example of such influence is the so-called “bandwagon effect.” This refers to when voters become more likely to support a political party, or a political candidate, that is either expected to win or is portrayed as increasingly popular in public opinion (Barnfield, 2020; Hardmeier, 2008).

The debate around the existence of the bandwagon effect entered center stage shortly after the introduction of the scientific opinion poll. In 1940, Gallup and Rae proclaimed that there was no empirical support for the bandwagon effect as there was “absolutely no tendency for voters to herd together in order to be on the winning side” (p. 255). However, they remained open to the contrary if new empirical evidence were to emerge, noting that “[f]inal proof, or disproof, of this band-wagon theory must await future research. It is possible that the use of a “panel” technique will make possible more precise knowledge of the fundamental causes behind shifts in sentiment” (pp. 255–256).

The question of the existence of a bandwagon effect has remained on the scientific agenda to this day, and there is still no established consensus (Moy & Rinke, 2012). I would argue that there are two main explanations for this. The first has to do with how the theory is tested, that is, the research design. The second has to do with the conceptualization and operationalization of the bandwagon effect and most importantly that there has been a failure to recognize that the phenomenon is likely to vary across electoral systems.

Beginning with conceptualizations, in first-past-the-post systems, such as in the US, it is quite clear what it means to side with the expected winner. It means voting for the party that one perceives will get most votes. In multi-party systems, on the other hand, declaring who is a winner is much more complicated. Here, both large and small parties can be viewed as winners or losers, depending on their recent trajectories in published polls. Hence, conceptualizing the bandwagon effect in terms of recent trajectory is thus helpful as it better captures how polls are covered in multi-party systems, while also making the theory applicable in cases when small and medium-sized parties are having surges in the polls.

The second controversy focused on appropriate research design. Studying the bandwagon effect in experimental settings has proven quite straightforward. The research strategy has been to use vignettes that show the support or trajectory for a party or an issue. Exposure to this experimental manipulation has then been used to explain differences in attitudes towards the subject or actor at hand. A large number of recent studies shows how exposure to poll numbers, or poll stories, has a clear effect on how people evaluate issues (Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014; Toff, 2018) and political parties (Dahlgard et al., 2017; Van der Meer et al., 2016).

The transition to testing the theory in real-world settings has, however, proven to be challenging. While there are a few notable exceptions – all of which are discussed at length in Study 3 (see Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2006; Faas, Mackenrodt, & Schmitt-Beck, 2008; S. B. Stolwijk, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2017) – the vast majority of studies have used a cross-sectional survey design (Bartels, 1985; Evrenk & Sher, 2015; Meffert, Huber, Gschwend, & Pappi, 2011; Schmitt-Beck, 1996). Moreover, even in multi-party systems, researchers have conceptualized the bandwagon effect in terms of intention to vote for a party that respondents expect to be in the majority. Using such a conceptualization and research designs not only fails to capture the essence of the bandwagon process in a multi-party system, but the lack of a longitudinal component also undermines any attempt at causal inference (Barnfield, 2020).

It is against this background that my third study, “Taking perceptions seriously: Bandwagon effects in multi-party systems,” seeks to make a contribution to the bandwagon literature in general and to bandwagon studies set in observational settings in particular. In this study, I rely on representative survey panel data ($n = 1889$) following the same voters during the 2018 Swedish general election campaign. I test the bandwagon hypothesis by introducing a novel survey instrument aimed at measuring how respondents perceive that each of the competing parties has fared in recent opinion polls. More specifically, the respondents were asked “If you consider the recent poll trajectory of the political parties, how has the support for the following parties changed in public opinion?”, where the response options were, “Decreased a lot”, “Decreased somewhat”, “Neither decreased, nor increased”, “Increased somewhat” and “Increased a lot”.¹ This question was posed at two different time points during the campaign. As such, it was possible to obtain repeated measures of how participants perceive the trajectory of the different parties and model how this affects favorability and voting intention for

¹ The original formulation in Swedish reads as follows: ”Om du ser till partiernas opinionsutveckling den senaste tiden, hur uppfattar du att följande partiers stöd i opinionen har förändrats? Stödet har...”Med följande svarsalternativ: ”Minskat kraftigt”, ”Minskat något”, ”Varken minskat eller ökat”, ”Ökat något”, ”Ökat kraftigt”.

each party. The panel design of the study provides for much greater analytical leverage than previous observational work (Bartels, 1985; Evrenk & Sher, 2015; Meffert et al., 2011; Schmitt-Beck, 1996) as it allows an examination of the role of perceived poll development by (a) controlling for lagged dependent variables and (b) examining within-person change using fixed effect regressions.

Overall, the empirical analysis provides support for the bandwagon hypothesis when it comes to both party evaluations and voting intention. Voter's perceiving a party to have increased its support in recent polls are more favorable towards, and say they are more likely to vote for thus party, also when controlling for previous attitudes and vote intention. In the final step of the analysis, when performing a series of fixed-effect regressions modeling change in perceived poll development in party evaluations, I find a positive and significant effect of perceived poll development in subsequent party evaluations for six out of eight parties, and five out of eight parties with respect to voting intention.

Altogether, then, the results indicate the importance of studying perceived poll development in opinion formation while highlighting the theoretical importance of conceptualizing the bandwagon process so that it is applicable to the specific context of multi-party systems.

9. The Influence of Mediated Polls on Political Actors

The literature on how political actors relate to opinion polls has many facets. There is work on how politicians use information gathered from opinion polls as a tool to act in a responsive manner (Geer, 1996; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2005) and how poll results can have a direct impact on legislative behavior among elected officials (Butler & Nickerson, 2011). Even more is written about political professionalization and political marketing, focusing on how polls are used to map the needs, wants and values among the public (O'Cass, 1996). Such information can subsequently be used by political parties to produce, market and sell their political policies in order to maximize opinion support (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Less is known about how political actors are influenced by the fact that polls are a key feature of political reporting.

As argued in the mediatization section, one way to address the influence of media's poll coverage on political actors is to relate to the literature on elite perception of media power (Asp & Esaiasson, 1996). While there are relatively few studies of this sort, there appears to be unanimous agreement on the fact that politicians perceive media as highly influential (Johansson, 2004; Maurer, 2011; Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Vesa, Blomberg, & Kroll, 2015; Walgrave, 2008). Mapping and explaining elites' perception of media power is important as work shows that these perceptions are strong determinants of how politicians act in relation to the news media (Cohen et al., 2008). Given this strong link between perceptions and action, it is somewhat surprising that most previous work has focused on the extent to which political elites subscribe to general ascription of media power (Strömbäck, 2011) and on perceptions about media's agenda-setting ability (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Van Aelst et al, 2008). This unidimensional conceptualization of media power risks concealing the extent to which politicians perceive media's influence as more intrusive in some domains than others (Vesa et al., 2015).

One way to investigate how media in general (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013), and news media's coverage of opinion polls in particular, can influence political parties beyond the front stage of politics is to use the arena framework first coined by Sjöblom (1968) and which since has been developed by, among others, Strömbäck (2012b). This framework suggests that political leaders act not on one

but on four political arenas: the internal arena, the electoral arena, the parliamentary arena and the media arena. Moreover, there are good theoretical arguments to expect that the success of achieving the goals on each arena is influenced by how the party in question has fared in recently published opinion polls (Strömbäck, 2012b).

Hence, in my fourth article, “How mediated opinion polls influence political parties: Revisiting the arena framework,” (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2020b) I set out to operationalize and evaluate a framework proposed by Strömbäck. Empirically, I use a unique data set of more than 2400 Swedish politicians’ active at all administrative levels across the Swedish government. More specifically, I asked the politicians how much they perceived that news media’s publication of horse race polls influenced i.e. the atmosphere in their party (the internal arena); the vote choice of the public (the electoral arena); the image of their party in the media (the media arena); and the ability of their party to achieve success in the parliamentary process (the parliamentary arena). This allowed me to analyze to what extent media’s publication of opinion polls were seen as more intrusive in some domains compared to others. The empirical results show that published opinion polls were seen as highly influential, but also that the perceived influence varied between the internal, electoral, media and parliamentary arenas on which political parties act. More specifically, the news media’s publication of horse race polls was perceived as most influential on the media and internal arenas and least important on the parliamentary arena. This is in line with previous work suggesting that the political process is more resilient to media intrusion when it comes to aspects such as backdoor negotiations and the crafting of policy (Vesa et al., 2015) compared to areas which are more dependent on the active involvement and support of citizens (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). These findings provide credence to the argument that we should not take the news media’s influence for granted, but that we need to investigate it in a systematic manner also beyond the front stage of the political process.

Moreover, several scholars have identified perceptions of media power as key for understanding the process of mediatization (Asp & Esaiasson, 1996; Esser & Matthes, 2013; Tsfat, 2017) in part as it is the strong belief that news media has a causal influence over the public which drives political actors to adopt different media management strategies and tactics. However, much less attention has been paid to what factors might explain these perceptions in the first place. This is somewhat surprising given that without theoretically grounded antecedents to why some politicians perceive the news media as more powerful than others, there is a considerable gap in understanding the chain of events leading to mediatization at an individual level.

In Study 4, I address this gap by suggesting that one relevant antecedent when explaining perceived poll influence among political elites is how the politicians’ party has performed in the polls. More specifically, I argue that the perceived

influence of media's poll coverage on each of the arenas ought to be dependent on personal experience of how one's own party has fared in public opinion. The main argument is that those who had experienced positive and negative poll development should perceive polls as more influential, compared to those who perceived that their party had stood still in the polls. I examine this by asking the respondents "In your opinion, how has the support for your party changed in the polls since the 2010 General Election," where the response options were "Worsened significantly," "Worsened somewhat," "Neither improved nor worsened," "Improved somewhat," and "Improved significantly." These answers were then used to explain variation in how influential they thought media's poll coverage was for their party on the four arenas.

The empirical analysis showed that the level of influence ascribed to published opinion polls appeared in part to be a function of how the politicians' party had performed in the polls. More specifically, on the electoral and media arenas, politicians who thought that their party had either increased or decreased its support in the polls viewed polls as more influential than politicians who assessed that their party had not moved in the polls. As such, the study is able to contribute to the existing literature by tying personal experiences of news media's coverage to the perceived influence of this coverage, something that had been implicitly assumed, but never corroborated in previous work on elite perceptions of media power. As such, it is argued to provide a missing link in a longer chain of events leading to self-mediatization among political elites.

Table 2 below provide an overview of the main research questions, the methods and data used and a short description of the main results of each of the four studies.

Table 2 Summarizing the main research questions, material and methods used and the main findings of each of the four studies

	Main research question	Material and methods	Main findings
Study 1: Fact or fiction	To what extent do journalists account for statistical uncertainties when covering and explaining horse race polls?	Material: Newspaper articles (n = 142) from three leading newspapers covering a period of four years (2010/2011 to 2014/ 2015) Method: Logistic regression	In about half of the cases, journalists comment on and provide causal interpretations of changes in the polls that are not supported in the statistical material. There are large differences between outlets.
Study 2: The winner-loser spiral in political news coverage	Are there spillover effects of media's poll coverage onto subsequent political coverage?	Material: News and poll stories (n ≈ 7500) covering a period of four years (2014–2018) Method: Time series analysis	Positive poll stories affect the number of general positive stories in subsequent coverage. There are no corresponding effect of negative poll stories on subsequent coverage.
Study 3: Taking perceptions seriously	Does news media's horse race coverage, or the perception thereof, affect attitudes towards, and voting intention for, political parties?	Material: Representative panel survey (n ≈ 19000) during the 2018 Swedish national election campaign Method: Panel regression	Voters' perceptions of how parties have fared in the polls are positively related to both party evaluations and voting intention, where parties that are perceived to have been performing better in published opinion polls are evaluated more positively and receive higher voting intention.
Study 4: How mediated opinion polls influence political parties	How do politicians perceive the influence of media's poll coverage on different aspects of the political process?	Material: Survey of Swedish politicians (n ≈ 2400) collected in 2013 Method: OLS regression	Politicians perceive the news media's publication of horse race polls as influential in each political arena, but less so in the parliamentary arena. On the media and internal arenas, polls are perceived as more powerful by politicians who think their party has either increased, or decreased their support, compared with those who think their party has not moved in the polls

Note: *Study 1:* Oleskog Tryggvason, P., & Strömback, J. (2018). Fact or fiction? Investigating the quality of opinion poll coverage and its antecedents. *Journalism Studies*, 19(14). *Study 2:* Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2020a). The winner-loser spiral in political news coverage: Investigating the impact of poll coverage on subsequent party coverage. *Political Communication*, online early. *Study 3:* Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2021). Taking perceptions seriously: Bandwagon effects in multi-party systems. *Unpublished manuscript*. *Study 4:* Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2020b). How mediated opinion polls influence political parties: Revisiting the arena framework. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 32(2), 243–265.

10. Materials, Methods, Limitations and Generalizations

The four studies focus on different aspects of what has been described as the third and fourth dimensions of mediatization. The two questions dedicated to the third dimension focus on how the news media use opinion polls and the two studies along the fourth dimension focus on the consequences of poll coverage for citizens and politicians. Given the different research problems, it has been necessary to use a multi-method design, using different empirical materials and analytical methods that are tailored to the questions at hand. Each of these approaches has a unique set of qualities but is also associated with some limitations. It is hence important to take into consideration both the strengths and weaknesses when evaluating the merits and limitations of the studies and the thesis as a whole.

The focal question in Study 1 (“Fact or fiction”) was to investigate the extent to which Swedish news media adheres to statistical limitations in their poll coverage. To do this we analyzed all of the main poll stories ($n = 142$) in three of the major Swedish news outlets (Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet and Expressen) covering a period of four years (2010/2011 to 2014/2015). The justification for selecting these outlets was that they were the only national outlets that at the time had longstanding collaborations with pollsters that used probability-based samples, a prerequisite for calculating the extent to which they covered and explained changes inside or outside of the margin of error. Another important aspect of this study – and one of its main strengths – is that it covers a long time period, i.e. four years. More importantly, it looks into poll coverage both during nonelection periods and during intense electoral campaigns. The practice of analyzing political coverage outside electoral campaigns is hopefully getting some traction (e.g. de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2017), something that is important as we know that electoral campaigns are rather unique events when it comes to political coverage.

While the analytical strategy has several advantages, as with all research designs it has its shortcomings that need to be taken into consideration when discussing the overall generalization of the results. While we investigate coverage in three of Sweden’s major news outlets, it is worth noting that they were all newspapers, and that our study did not include other media outlets such as poll coverage on TV and the radio. As we found such a stark difference in adherence to statistical uncertainties between the two morning papers and the tabloid, it would be relevant to investigate whether journalists at public service news programs are equally, or

even more accurate in their coverage of polls. This is at least something that we would expect based on the argument that poll coverage quality is affected by journalistic norms and commercial incentives. One way to expand on this hypothesis would thus be to increase the number and diversity of outlets investigated in future coverage. Moreover, some time has passed since the empirical material from this study was collected. Since then, news organizations have accelerated their digital transformation. It is an open question if this transition has affected the extent to which news organizations adhere to statistical uncertainties, in the few cases that they still use probability samples, when covering poll results. For example, it is possible that the differences found across outlets are even more pronounced in today's media environment where some news organizations have sought to establish financial models via online subscriptions, while others have primarily focused on revenues from online advertisement. One task for future research could thus be to examine the role of poll coverage depending on different financial models used by news media organizations.

Finally, when discussing the generalizations of the main results beyond the Swedish case, it is worth once again noting that the results found here appear to be in line with similar studies that preceded it (Bhatti & Pedersen, 2016; Larson, 2003; Pétry & Bastien, 2013) and those that have been conducted since (Larsen & Fazekas, 2020; Vögele & Bachl, 2020). While some of these studies have been carried out in countries with similar media systems (e.g. Bhatti & Pedersen, 2016; Larsen & Fazekas, 2020), others are from very different settings (e.g. Larson, 2003; Pétry & Bastien, 2013). Hence, there appears to be some commonality in how journalists adhere to statistical uncertainties that transcend a number of otherwise important contextual factors.

The empirical material in Study 2 ("The winner-loser spiral in political news coverage") is also news content data, albeit of a somewhat different character. Here I make use of a large data set of daily top political news stories. The strength in this data set comes both from the extensive nature (it includes more than 7500 news stories) and the detail of the data, in that each party is coded in terms of prominence and tone. Moreover, the data set covers a period of four years, a time period that is considerably longer than in any similar study. This means that Study 2 is the first of its kind to look into the hypothesized spillover dynamic outside the unique context of an election campaign. Another contribution is that the study is one of the few set outside of the United States. This aspect, the role of country selection and more specifically the role of the media system are worth highlighting when discussing one of the main findings of the study. Using Hallin and Mancini's (2004) classic typology, Sweden is considered a corporatist media system, with a strong public service influence. In contrast, the United States, where most previous work has been carried out, is often considered the archetypal case of the liberal model, where one of the main characteristics is a high degree of commercialism. It could be that the relatively low degree of commercialization in Sweden,

together with the structuring influence of a strong public service, can help explain the somewhat surprising finding that there appears to be a spillover effect of positive poll stories onto subsequent coverage, but no corresponding effect with respect to negative coverage.

That said, it is worth acknowledging that the structure of the data also has some limitations. During the covered period, there were nine parties that held representation in either the national parliament or in the European Parliament. Given that the daily data were restricted to two news stories per outlet and day, this naturally means that some parties have a rather low visibility both in poll- and nonpoll-related news stories. It might therefore be a more robust test of the theory if there was a larger number of articles per day covering a shorter period of time.

Another issue that can be raised with respect to the material of Study 2 is that it is unable to speak directly to the proposed mechanism behind the main theoretical arguments, that the tone in poll coverage can affect subsequent party coverage by making positive and negative considerations more available in the minds of journalists. While there appears to be partial support for the outlined hypothesis, the spillover effect of positive poll stories onto subsequent party coverage, the news stories themselves are merely artifacts that are, of course, not able to speak to the actual mechanism at hand. To fully understand the sociological and/or psychological processes that produce these results, we would need to rely on other types of research design. One way forward would be to conduct in-depth interviews with political journalists or to perform ethnographic observations in newsrooms. Such an approach would go a long way toward uncovering in what way, if any, poll results affect gatekeeping and framing decisions of subsequent coverage. Another approach would be to conduct survey experiments with journalists to evaluate the extent to which manipulation in the tone of poll stories affects, for example, their evaluations of newsworthiness.

In his overview article on recent empirical work, Barnfield (2020) makes a comment on the current state of bandwagon studies outside experimental settings, noting that “[t]he issue here is quite simple: both the conceptual focus and often the data used are insufficient for the bandwagon effect to be reliably pinned down” (p. 15). In Study 3 (“Taking perceptions seriously”), I seek to remedy this shortcoming by relying on a representative online panel, tracking the same voters over the course of the 2018 Swedish general election campaign (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2019). The panel structure of the data is argued to be a prerequisite for addressing the question of whether there is any change in the dependent variable(s). My argument is that by introducing a novel survey question, asking respondents how they perceived that each of the competing parties had fared in recent polls, it is possible to perform a more appropriate (from a conceptual perspective) and conservative (from a modeling perspective) test of the bandwagon hypothesis than in the majority of studies conducted in observational settings (e.g. Evrenk & Sher, 2015; Meffert et al., 2011; Schmitt-Beck, 1996).

It is, however, worth noting that I was only able to ask the question about perceived poll development in two of the five waves. A major contribution of future studies would thus be to pose the question on perceived poll development in more waves and with less time in between. This would greatly enhance the opportunity to make more sophisticated and appropriate evaluations of the role of perceived poll development in opinion formation and electoral behavior. Another way that future work could build upon this study would be to pose more questions on how voters perceive parties to be performing during electoral campaigns, e.g. in debates, etc. This would create opportunities to disentangle the potential effect of perceived poll development compared to other campaign-related events. Finally, it is worth remembering that while one of the selling points of Study 3 is that the empirical indicators used are tailored to fit multi-party systems, it is a single-country study. In order to test the feasibility and robustness of the proposed new operational indicator, I would ideally be able to move to a country-comparative research design, studying the potential impact of perceived poll development on voting intention in several countries with both proportional and first-past-the-post systems.

Study 4 (“How mediated opinion polls influence political parties”) relies on a unique data material of more than 2400 Swedish politicians, located at all legislative levels. Studies measuring media power among politicians and political elites are rare, probably due to difficulties in getting elected officials to participate (Tsfati, 2017). Hence, it was a privilege to be able to pose questions that were tailored to test a theoretical framework in the Panel of Politicians, a research panel at the University of Gothenburg. One major benefit with this data set, compared to previous studies of how political actors perceive the power of the media, is the large number of respondents (Aalberg & Van Aelst, 2014; Maurer, 2011; Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). This allows for more advanced multivariate tests of the proposed hypothesis. Another benefit is that I have information on who among the respondents has, or has had, a seat in parliament. As such, it is possible to investigate not only how Swedish politicians in general perceived the influence of the media's publication of poll results but also how the impact of this genre is seen among political elites.

One of the main theoretical arguments in the study is that we can use (perceived) poll development as an explanatory variable for how influential the politicians perceive poll coverage to be, the rationale being that those who have experienced hardship and success in the polls would ascribe more importance to media's publication of poll results based on these experiences. According to the empirical analysis, this seems to be the case on at least two of the four arenas. However, it is worth noting that we should not overstate our confidence in this dynamic, as the analysis is based on a cross-sectional sample. To conduct a more appropriate test of the theoretical argument, we would need to add a panel component, asking the same questions on several separate occasions. Doing so would

allow us to investigate how accurate politicians are at accurately gauging the development for their own party, while providing us with an opportunity to analyze how change in perceived poll support affects how much power can be attributed to media's poll coverage.

Finally, one factor that is worth highlighting with respect to generalization of the results beyond the case at hand is the role played by case selection. In fact, there are reasons to expect somewhat different results in countries with other settings. One example is that the news media's publication of opinion polls might play a more prominent role on the parliamentary arena in countries that allow the government to announce when the next election is going to be held. Another example is that the news media's publication of poll results might play a less significant role on the electoral arena in countries that have embargoes on the publication of pre-election polls during the week(s) running up to the election. To explore questions such as these, there is a need to move beyond the Swedish case into a comparative research design on the perceived effects of the news media's publication of opinion polls – and their antecedents.

11. Mediatization of Public Opinion?

Mediatization can be viewed as the long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spillover effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors has increased (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014 p. 6). It can moreover be divided into four separate, yet highly related, dimensions. In this introductory chapter, I have argued that we can use the third and fourth dimensions – that is, how news media covers politics, and how this coverage affects citizens and politicians – to study and understand how news media use opinion polls and how they can influence the democratic process. Study 1 and Study 2 speak to different aspects of mediatization along the third dimension, that is, how news media covers politics and current affairs.

Study 1 adds to a growing literature on how news media covers horse race polls. Taken together, the results of these studies show that the media is far away from acting as a neutral mediator of poll results. Poll coverage is instead characterized by an extensive focus on deviant numbers (Searles et al., 2016), an emphasis on change, even though the overall data indicate stability (Larsen & Fazekas, 2020), and, in the case of Study 1, an apparent disregard of statistical uncertainties when covering and explaining changes across polls (Oleskog Tryggvason & Strömbäck, 2018). Conceptualizing mediatization along the third dimension as coverage that aligns with news media's professional and economic interest provides backing for the notion that media's poll coverage is rightly labeled as mediatized. This conclusion is bolstered by the finding that there appears to be a significant difference in the quality of poll coverage across outlets, where the tabloid, which is argued to be more commercialized, was considerably more inaccurate in its poll coverage.

One of the main manifestations of how news media dictates political communication is through its ability to frame political issues and events (de Vreese, 2005). Framing occurs when journalists “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Here, the type of framing that has been most heavily linked to the mediatization literature is the media's tendency to frame the political process as a game (Aalberg et al., 2012; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). By reporting on horse race polls, journalists can use the zero-sum logic to portray political actors as either winners or losers. At the same time, it provides journalists with the opportunity to insert their own voice when explaining or commenting upon these changes.

Study 2 makes a contribution to this literature by articulating a theoretical argument and empirical examination of how the news media's extensive focus on the standing in the horse race can have effects beyond poll coverage itself. The main finding, that positive poll coverage spills over onto subsequent political coverage, extends the idea that poll coverage ought to be considered not only as an indicator, but also a driver, of mediatized coverage as the winner-loser frame that frequently accompanies horse race polls appears to function as a vehicle that enables a spillover effect on subsequent political coverage.

The first two studies, how polls are used by the news media, serves as the foundation when we transition to mediatization along the fourth dimension, focusing on the potential consequences of this coverage. For citizens, media's coverage of polls and the apparent spillover effect on other aspects of political coverage is part of the overall information environment (Stolwijk, 2017) and can thus have a considerable influence on how the public evaluate political actors (e.g. Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Eberl, Wagner & Boomgaarden, 2017; Johann, Königslöw, Kritzinger, & Thomas, 2018). Moreover, the information polls provide to the electorate can be of direct consequence for electoral expectations (Mutz & Soss, 1997; Mefert, Huber, Gschwend, & Pappi, 2011; Zerback, Reinemann, & Nienierza, 2015), strategic voting or, what has been the focus of Study 3, opinion formation through a bandwagon process. There is a growing body of experimental work that shows how exposure to opinion polls, or more specifically media's framing of poll numbers, has an effect on how citizens evaluate both policy proposals and political parties (Dahlgaard et al., 2017; Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014; Toff, 2018; Van der Meer et al., 2016). Study 3 approaches this question from a slightly different perspective, focusing not on poll coverage per se but on perceptions of the competing parties' trajectories in the polls in a real observational setting. The main theoretical argument proposed in this study is that it is important to consider the role of the electoral system when assessing both the way polls are covered and, most importantly, which mechanism is most likely to bring about a so-called "bandwagon effect" among voters. More specifically, it is argued that in multi-party systems, such as in Sweden, the most relevant bandwagon mechanism ought to operate through perceptions of recent trajectories in the polls. The confirmation of the outlined hypothesis, that perceptions of growth increase favorability and voting intention for several parties, underlines the importance of continued work on the role of media's poll coverage in opinion formation and political behavior.

The findings that there appears to be spillover effects of horse race coverage on the tone of subsequent political coverage and that perceptions of party success are a strong determinant of party favorability and voting intention are also highly relevant when discussing the main results and implications of the fourth and final study. Here, the main research question is how political elites perceive the impact of news media's publication of horse race polls on a number of key aspects of the political process. Elites' perception of media power has been identified as one of

the most important aspects of understanding media's influence on the political process in general (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011, 2017; Vesa et al., 2015), and the mediatization along the fourth dimension in particular (Strömbäck, 2011). Several scholars have pointed out that it is through the study of how political elites perceived the power of the media that we can start to understand anticipatory effects of media influence (Asp, 2014; Cohen et al., 2008; Strömbäck, 2011; Tsfati, 2017).

Overall, the study confirms previous findings, extending the current bank of knowledge of perceived media power among political elites to perceived influence of poll coverage. Political elites are convinced that media's poll coverage affects the image of the party in the media, and that poll results affect the voting choice among the voters. Theoretically, this is important, as if politicians perceive that poll coverage is a strong determinant of how one's party is covered in the media, and if politicians view media's poll coverage as important for how voters form their opinions and choice to vote, then parties are likely to employ communication strategies that attempt to mitigate negative aspects, and exploit opportunities associated with poll coverage for their own success. In fact, this is what Pereira (2019) found in his recent work on party communication in response to positive and negative poll coverage. From a long-term perspective, these anticipatory behaviors might ultimately lead to a continued professionalization of political parties and political campaigns. Moreover, given that it goes against the journalistic ethos to become political mouthpieces, such actions could contribute to more framing on behalf of journalists, leading to an increasing spiral of mediatization in line with the one suggested by Asp and Esaiasson (1996).

12. News Media's Use of Opinion Polls and Democracy

Both the public and scientific debates about the virtues and malaise of opinion polls have been going on ever since the advent of the first poll, and in all likelihood they won't end anytime soon. This dissertation has provided empirical answers to several key questions that are at the center of these debates. However, how one chooses to evaluate these results and their democratic implications is in no way self-evident. It is very much contingent on our, often implicit, normative assumptions of what type of democratic model we envisage, which consequently has implications for our expectations towards citizens, elected officials and the news media. Hence, I want to end by briefly discussing the main findings from different democratic vantage points. While there are several normative models of democracy (e.g. Ferree et al., 2002), I will focus on the implication for what scholars have labeled competitive electoral (Satori, 1987), or realistic democracy (Schumpeter, 1942; Strömbäck, 2005).

While all models of democracy assume that the news media has a special function in informing citizens, there is, however, little consensus on what kind, and what level, of information ought to be provided (Strömbäck, 2005). In his 2003 article *A new standard of news quality: Burglar alarms for the monitorial citizen*, Zaller put forth the controversial argument that the standard set by many scholars is in dire need of being re-evaluated and that this has to be done in relation to realistic expectations on the part of both citizens and news media. While it might be hard for scholars of media and politics to admit, there are things that ordinary people might want to do with their time besides being engaged in, and paying attention to, politics. The standard we set for evaluating news media's performance must thus relate both to what news media are willing to produce and citizens willing to consume. From this perspective, the main objective of journalists should be to act as burglar alarms, sounding when there are acute problems (Zaller, 2003). Employing this standard, it can hardly be seen as too problematic that journalists do not take the margin of error into account when covering opinion polls. In fact, Zaller goes as far as to say that it can be justifiable for journalists to "use simulated drama to engage public attention when the real thing is absent" (p. 122) in order to create engagement among the uninterested – a behavior that, against the back-

ground of the main results of the first two studies, in combination with the cumulative body of scholarship on news media's poll coverage, appears to be the *modus operandi* within the genre.

While Zaller raises a number of important points, his view is still seen as somewhat of a fringe opinion and it has received fierce criticism (Bennett, 2003). One commonly agreed-upon factor when assessing news media's performance is that what is reported should be accurate and relevant (McQuail, 1992; Patterson, 2013). Taking this perspective instead, the results presented in Study 1 ought to be seen as highly problematic. It appears to be more the rule than the exception that journalists disregard statistical uncertainties when reporting and explaining the political process through coverage of horse race polls. As such, it is easy to agree with Patterson (2013) in his critique that "it is hard to justify errors that occur repeatedly and stem from the unreflective use of reporting tools" (p. 90).

The apparent disregard for statistical limitations in poll coverage is not just normatively problematic, in so far as it risks misinforming the general public. It also raises questions on the integrity of political journalism more broadly. To borrow a quote from the discussion section in Article I: "If journalists are not able to account for uncertainties when they are easily accessible, quantifiable and verifiable, how are they fulfilling their role as information providers in other respects of political reporting?" (Oleskog Tryggvason & Strömbäck, 2018, p. 2163). We would probably have a hard time imagining an editor deciding to lead with a story that depicts a political actor in a negative way, knowing that there is a 10, 20 or 30 percent risk that the source of the story is lying.

Another decades-old and inherently normative debate concerns the question of how we should assess the potential impact of published poll results on opinion formation and voting intention (Gallup & Rae, 1940; Simon, 1954). The long list of countries that have enacted embargos, prohibiting publications of poll results during the week(s) leading up to Election Day is testimony to the severe nature of these concerns (Petersen, 2012). In fact, in countries where there are no restrictions, such as Sweden, there also appears to be considerable support among members of parliament in favor of prohibiting poll publications leading up to elections (Aalberg & Van Aelst, 2014).

One of the reasons why the influence of polls is looked down upon is that it goes against the ideal of the consciously informed citizen, who formulates his or her opinion in an independent way, in contrast to mimicking the opinion of others (Donsbach, 2008). However, even if there is a widespread bandwagon tendency when voters cast their ballots, does this always undermine the mechanism of political accountability? Mutz (1998) for one, has argued that the democratic implications have to be evaluated according to which type of emotional or cognitive process that is underlying such an effect. If people vote for a party because of a consensus heuristic, or because it is gratifying to be on the winning side, then this can be seen as undermining the idea behind both prospective and retrospective

models of democratic accountability. However, if polls trigger what Mutz calls a “cognitive response model,” where poll exposure initiates a process where a person starts to engage with information about why a party is doing well, something that in turn can trigger a process of self-persuasion, then such an effect is less problematic.

Finally, the central role of polls in media’s coverage of the political process is also relevant when evaluating the impact of polls on the quality of democratic leadership. There is a vast literature on how political leaders should act in relation to those whom they represent (e.g. Geer, 1996; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Pitkin, 1967). Here, two of the most important contrasts are between elected officials acting as trustees or delegates.

The delegate model of representation emphasizes the importance of issue concurrence between elected officials and their voters. From this perspective, polls in general and news media’s coverage of poll results in particular, can serve as an effective, if not a necessary, tool for strengthening the quality of representation (Gallup & Rae, 1940). This is, of course, first and foremost the case for issue polls (Butler & Nickerson, 2011). However, while horse race polls provide less detailed information, they can provide a clear signal if the party is doing something right, when increasing in the polls, or if there is a need for a course correction, when a party is doing poorly in the polls (Pereira, 2019; Schumacher & Öhberg, 2020).

The trustee model, in contrast, suggests that political representatives are elected with the purpose of exercising their own judgment when making political decisions. Too much emphasis on current trends in public opinion could in fact be seen as something negative. This is well illustrated in a quote attributed to Winston Churchill: “Nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup poll, always taking one’s pulse and taking one’s political temperature.... There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right and not to fear to do or to say what you believe to be right” (Hieth, 2004, p. xii).

Seen from this perspective, news media’s large reliance on horse race polls when covering the political process and, most importantly, the finding that elected officials attribute great influence to this coverage are likely to make the role of the trustee more difficult. The extensive focus on poll results might have a constraining effect on the ability of political actors to pursue their long-term projects, as they might feel fettered, one might say, by the chains of the horse race.

Summarizing the main findings in the four studies – i.e. that poll coverage is characterized by little adherence to statistical uncertainties, that the way journalists cover political actors appears to be affected by past poll coverage, that the public’s perception of recent trajectories in the polls is central to explaining change in party evaluation and vote intention, and that political elites ascribe considerable power to published poll results on several aspects of the political process – provides credence to the notion that journalists, voters and politicians, at least to

some extent, are under the influence of news media's continuous publication of opinion polls.

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