

Election Campaigns in Sweden and the United States: Convergence or Divergence?

By Erik Åsard

Uppsala University

It is not easy to imagine two countries in the Western, industrialized world as different—culturally, politically, and socially—as Sweden and the United States.* On the one hand we have a nation which to many people embodies the very notion of a social welfare state, with a strong labor movement and a large public sector.¹ On the other hand we find the quintessential capitalistic society, where "welfare" is a dirty word and where ideas of individualism, careerism, and free enterprise—even in the post-Reagan period—reign as forcefully as ever. Whereas Sweden is small, homogeneous, and unitary, the United States is vast, heterogeneous, and federal. Whereas the former is a parliamentary democracy, based on several competing parties, the latter has a presidential system with a structure of divided powers and checks and balances. To say nothing of the great diversities of nature, economy, ethnicity, religious beliefs, etc.²

However, this is only one side of the story. An opposing argument, just as frequently made, runs as follows. Sweden may be known to the outside world for its neutrality and its distinctive model of economics and labor relations. During the past couple of decades the country has nevertheless undergone extensive "Americanization" in various ways. American values and practices are highly visible in Swedish business, science and technology, communication, and art. Most evident is the dominance of American popular culture—music, movies, television, books and magazines, even clothing. Far from being independent and strictly neutral, Sweden, like so many other European countries, has fallen prey to the greedy jaws of U. S. capitalism.³

What we are faced with here, clearly, are two incompatible theses, one stressing the uniqueness of the Swedish case, the other emphasizing—on a perhaps more normative note—the effects of super power dominance over a small, dependent nation. In this essay I want to scrutinize the validity of the "Americanization" thesis, as it pertains to the Swedish political scene. I will do this by focusing on an important but, admittedly, limited area, namely the field of electoral politics.

Voters in Sweden and the United States went to the polls in the fall of 1988. Incumbency turned out to be an asset in both countries. In Sweden the ruling Social Democrats, who have been in government for 51 out of the last 57 years, managed to retain power despite some turbulence in parts of the electorate. In the United States the Republicans for the third time in a row won the Presidency, while the Democrats at the same time strengthened their majority in Congress. In what ways were the two campaigns similar or dissimilar? Which issues were the most significant ones? What strategies were used and which overall trends were dominant? Based on what happened in the campaigns, is it correct to talk about a convergence or divergence of political tendencies in the two countries?

The Swedish Election Campaign

The political situation in Sweden has long been characterized by a remarkable stability. The party system is almost identical with the one existing 60 years ago. The parties in Parliament have remained the same ever since the early 1920s.⁴ Changes in voter behavior are rare and minor. Pragmatism and incrementalism are essential features of the system. A spirit of compromise—some would say dullness—pervades the political atmosphere.⁵

This spirit was momentarily shattered in the election campaign of 1985. For the first time in recent memory, the biggest opposition party—the Moderates (formerly Conservatives)—launched a vigorous attack against the Social Democrats, arguing for a fundamental revision of the whole social welfare system. The attack did not win voter approval. The Moderates lost support, and the Social Democrats retained government power despite a slight set-back in popular votes.⁶ The 1988 campaign, in contrast, was noticeable for its lack of divisive issues and for the mostly low-key tone of the debates. One reason for this turn of events may well have been that the 1988 election was the first one since the assassination of the Swedish prime minister, Olof Palme, on February 28, 1986. Ingvar Carlsson became the new chairman of the Social Democratic party and, soon after, prime minister.⁷ The long-term effects of the assassination remain unclear. But there is no doubt that it affected the political climate and contributed to a calmer election debate. Another reason for the absence of divisive issues was the Social Democrats' strategy to remove such issues from the political agenda, either by ignoring them or by simply co-opting them.

However, the 1988 campaign did not lack controversial issues altogether. During the summer preceding the election, two broad and complex questions caught the media's attention: The first contained burning environmental issues (concern for algal bloom, acid rain, and mass deaths of seals in coastal waters).

Not since the 1980 referendum on nuclear power have environmental issues figured so prominently in a campaign. The Ecology Party (or "the Greens"), formerly a rather insignificant political grouping, benefitted from this heavy media exposure and suddenly did very well in the polls.⁸ The second issue was the Ebbe Carlsson "affair." Ebbe Carlsson (no relative of the prime minister), a publishing executive in Stockholm with close ties to the Minister of Justice Anna-Greta Leijon, had for months been conducting a private search for Olof Palme's assassin with the active support of the national police leadership. When the news broke in early June, 1988, Anna-Greta Leijon, who had authorized Carlsson's investigations, was forced to resign. The ensuing televised committee hearings most likely increased people's general mistrust of politicians. This, too, benefitted the Greens and helped pave the way for the first new party to enter the Swedish Parliament in 70 years.⁹

Apart from the success of the Greens, the most remarkable thing about the election was the poor showing of the three non-socialist parties (Moderates, Liberals, and the Center Party). Together they amassed only 41.8 percent of the votes cast, their worst result since the abnormal election of 1940.¹⁰ Paradoxically, the Social Democrats, despite a loss of three seats in Parliament, thus strengthened their position and retained their dominant role in Swedish politics.¹¹

Party	Percent		Seats	
Moderates	18.3	(-3.0)	66	(-10)
Center	11.3	(+1.4)	42	(-2)
Liberals	12.2	(-2.0)	44	(-7)
Social Democrats	43.2	(-1.5)	156	(-3)
Left Party Communists	5.8	(+0.4)	21	(+2)
Ecology Party (Greens)	5.5	(+4.0)	20	(+20)
Others	3.5	(+0.6)	-	(-)

Table 1. The 1988 Swedish Parliamentary election.

The table shows each political party's percentage of the votes cast and the number of parliamentary seats won. Figures in parentheses indicate changes from the 1985 election. The total number of eligible voters was 6,329,508. Voter turnout was 86 percent. Source: *Inside Sweden*, no. 34, 1988, p. 4.

The American Election Campaign

Few politicians have so dominated the American political scene as did Ronald Reagan during most of the 1980s. The Reagan program signified the most sweeping set of policy changes in the United States since the *New Deal*.

However, Reagan was not successful in altering the Republican Party's standing as the "permanent minority party" in American politics.¹² The GOP remains primarily a "presidential" party with a strong base in the South and Rocky Mountain states. It has made few inroads at the state and local level and has not been able, according to recent polls, to surpass the Democrats in terms of party identification. There was no party realignment during Reagan's eight years in office.¹³

The 1988 campaign was based on the Reagan legacy. George Bush, who ran as heir apparent to Reagan, seems to have had two principal aims. One was to present himself as a man of unquestionable leadership and experience, thus contradicting the common image of him as a "wimp." He constantly evoked the blessings of "peace and prosperity," a theme which always works to the advantage of the incumbent administration. Occasionally Bush talked substance, and he did so by deliberately preempting the Democrats on all of their major issues—day-care, education, the environment. This strategy could be called the positive side of Bush's campaign.¹⁴

Bush's second goal was to portray Governor Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee, as a reckless Great Society-liberal totally out of touch with the American "mainstream." For the first time in many decades, the words "liberal" and "liberalism" were turned into something menacing and dangerous in a national campaign, almost on a par with foreign doctrines like socialism and communism. The Vice President and his handlers relied heavily on television advertising to get their message across. Several controversial commercials branded the Massachusetts Governor as soft on crime and unreliable in dealing with defense and foreign affairs. This negative side of Bush's campaign enabled the Republican candidate to focus on national symbols and traditional values—not exactly the ideal battle ground for today's Democrats.¹⁵

Michael Dukakis' choice of campaign theme—"Competence, not ideology"—suited the Republicans perfectly. In trying to hide his ideological convictions, Dukakis made a grave strategical error. The idea seems to have been to present the Governor as an effective "doer" who could produce for the whole country what he had already done for his home state (the "Massachusetts miracle"). But politics is not only about competence; it is also about vision and ideology, about the candidates' ideas for building a better society. By avoiding these aspects throughout most of his campaign, Dukakis gave his opponent a free hand in defining him ideologically. The result was devastating. Little did it matter that Dukakis during the last few days of the campaign belatedly declared that he was "a liberal in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and John Kennedy."¹⁶ Little did it matter that he also laid out a number of rather specific proposals on various issues. Once again the Bush camp preempted him and turned media attention towards symbolic questions like prison furloughs, the Pledge of Allegiance, the American Civil

Libe ties Union, etc. Thus the early lead that Dukakis had enjoyed in the polls was quickly reversed.¹⁷

The election produced two winners—George Bush and the Democratic Party. Bush won the presidency with 54% of the popular vote as opposed to 46% for Dukakis. The governor only managed to win 10 states with 112 electoral votes, whereas Bush carried 40 states representing 426 electoral votes. But the Democrats increased their already substantial majority in Congress, gaining one seat in the Senate and five in the House. In fact, Bush became the first 20th-century Republican President to lose net party strength in Congress in the same election that put him in office. The GOP even had a net loss of state legislative seats, unprecedented for a year when a Republican won the White House. The outcome had analysts wonder about Bush's mandate and reaffirmed what has been called the "extraordinary split-level character of American politics."¹⁸

The Trend toward "Mass Media Elections"

The influence of the mass media in electoral processes has increased dramatically over the past decades. For most voters in Western countries, the media—especially the electronic media—are now the main sources of information about election campaigns.¹⁹ Many factors have contributed to the expansion of the media, one being the continuing deterioration of the party structure, the principal link between candidates and voters.²⁰ Of course, parties and candidates are well aware of the media's pivotal role and plan their campaigns accordingly. They have to communicate a persuasive message, and the most effective means of doing so is through the media.

In the United States, a presidential election today is a television election. A *New York Times* reporter even summed up the whole 1988 campaign by enumerating the most crucial events on television:

There was George Bush fighting with Dan Rather on the evening news. Michael Dukakis in a Boston studio claiming yet another victory over Jesse Jackson. Mr. Dukakis embracing his wife after pulling off a convention speech better than television commentators had told the audience he could deliver. Balloons. Mr. Bush and President Reagan passing each other on a tarmac in New Orleans during the Republican convention. More balloons. Dead fish floating in Boston Harbor. Mr. Bush on a stage with a hundred police officers. Lloyd Bentsen lecturing Dan Quayle on the Kennedy legacy. Mr. Dukakis in a tank. Sinister criminals marching through a revolving door. George Bush on another stage with another hundred cops.²¹

George Bush and Michael Dukakis spent more money on television advertising in 1988 than campaigns have ever spent before. Some experts went as far

as saying the difference in the last campaign was that Bush outmaneuvered Dukakis on television. Said pollster Louis Harris: "The simple story of this election is that the Bush commercials have worked and the Dukakis commercials have not."²²

In Sweden there is no overt political advertising in the electronic media (radio and television). In other words, parties and individual candidates are not allowed to buy time for commercials. This does not diminish the role of the media in Swedish politics. The way parties are covered in the mass media—whether negatively, positively, or neutrally—is of great importance to the election results. Different socio-economic factors still determine, to a significant degree, how Swedes vote in general elections. But the relation between occupation and party affiliation is not as strong today as it was in the early 1960s. Increasingly, voters tend to cast their ballots according to their positions on specific issues. They also tend to postpone their choices to a later stage in the campaigns.²³ All these tendencies reinforce the importance of the mass media.

The media affect parties and politicians in a number of ways. They influence how candidates speak, what issues they choose to concentrate on, what rallies they attend (and where), what kind of television props and sets they use, etc.²⁴ Politicians all over the Western world seem to adjust to the media's demands. As a result we are faced with a growing personalization of politics, shorter and more simplified messages ("sound-bite politics"),²⁵ positions unsupported by arguments (what columnist George F. Will in another context calls "attitudinizing"),²⁶ and even more of a focus on gaffes, mistakes, visuals, and controversy.²⁷

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the media's influence is their agenda-setting power.²⁸ Journalists, particularly television journalists, have become powerful players in the political arena. But how do they exercise their power? How do journalists go about questioning candidates on national television? The object of the following analysis is not to measure the media's influence or to weigh "media power" against the power of other important actors (parties, candidates, interest organizations, etc.). Instead I will briefly compare parts of the televised debates and question-and-answer programs in the two campaigns in order to determine how journalists operate in two different political cultures.

Bush and Dukakis had two presidential "debates," each lasting 90 minutes with four journalists on the panel.²⁹ In the Swedish case, each party leader was interviewed in seven separate 50-minute programs by two selected journalists. Even if there were noticeable differences in the way these programs were set up and conducted,³¹ they invite a number of broad questions:

1) What issues were brought up in the different programs?

2) What kind of questions were asked by the journalists? Were they primarily *ideological* in nature, i.e., focusing on the fundamental ideas and principles that the parties ran on? Or were they rather *issue* questions, i.e., dealing with particular issues that the parties promoted in their platforms?

3) What perspectives did the journalists use in questioning the candidates? Did they use a *neutral* perspective, an *opposing* one, or did they make use of the *same* perspective as that nurtured by the candidates themselves?

The following table relates the most common issues in the Swedish programs to broadcasting time in minutes:

	kds	mp	m	fp	vpk	s	c	total
Taxes	8	12	18	18	18	18	18	110
Budget cuts	-	-	20	14	-	-	-	34
Environment/energy	-	5	4	2	1	2	17	31
Family policy	6	5	-	3	-	-	-	14
Trade policy	-	11	-	-	-	-	-	11
Workers' standard	-	-	-	-	-	10	-	10
Defense	-	-	-	1	7	-	1	9
Schools/Education	1	-	-	1	-	7	-	9
Leijon/Malm	-	-	-	1	1	6	1	9
Abortion	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
Traffic policy	-	-	-	-	5	-	-	5
Research	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	5

Table 2.

The 12 most common issues in the seven Swedish programs as detailed by Hans Bergström in "Televisionens val" (Stockholm: Näringslivets mediainstitut), report no. 8, 1988, p. 18. Total air time was 344 minutes (after adjustments) and the average time per party leader was 49 minutes. The parties are: kds=Christian Democrats; mp=Greens; m=Moderates; fp=Liberals; vpk=Communists; s=Social Democrats; c=Center Party. The "Leijon/Malm" category refers to the former Minister of Justice Anna-Greta Leijon and to the head of the blue collar union (LO) Stig Malm, who both became issues in the campaign.

What is noteworthy here is the dominance of the tax issue, which alone accounts for 32% of total air time. It was the only issue to be brought up with all seven party leaders. It should be noted that the budget cut issues, which came in second, were only discussed in two of the programs. It should further be noted that the journalists' choice of issues clearly deviated from the voters' own preferences in this regard.³²

The American journalists, in contrast, chose to focus on the following issues (numbers refer to air time in minutes):

	Bush	Dukakis	Total
Defense	11	15	26
Social security/welfare	5	7	12
Deficit	5	6	11
Campaign quality	8	2	10
Selection of Vice President	5	4	9
Taxes	3	4	7
Inner-city programs	4	3	7
Drugs	4	3	7
Housing/homelessness	3	4	7
Abortion	4	2	6
Crime/death penalty	2	3	5
Dukakis' image	1	3	4

Table 3.

The 12 most commonly featured issues in the two U. S. presidential debates, 1988. Total air time here, after adjustments, was 157 minutes. Dukakis had a total of 79 minutes and Bush 78 minutes. The calculations pertaining to American material, based on video tapes of the debates, were done by Richard Holm, a graduate student in the Department of History, Uppsala University.

By a sizeable margin, defense was considered to be the most important issue by the journalists. However, more air time was devoted to particular issues such as the quality of the campaign—what came to be known as "negative campaigning"—and Dan Quayle's qualifications to be on the ticket than to the housing situation, the drug problem or the plight of the homeless. In the same vein, Dukakis' image as being "passionless" was given more consideration than the development of U.S./Soviet relations or environmental problems (those came in 14th and 15th respectively).³³ This way of prioritizing the issues is a further sign of the great importance attached to the candidates' character in American politics.

Let us now see how the Swedish journalists balanced the questions they asked:

	kds	mp	m	fp	vpk	s	c	total
Ideological questions	14	4	0	1	16	0	0	35
Issue questions	31	40	45	44	32	44	44	276

Table 4.

Type of questions asked in the Swedish "media election." Bergstrom, "Televisionens val," p. 14. Bergstrom also has a third category, "power questions," which refer to the parties' attitudes vis-8-vis the formation of a government. This category, which accounted for 33 minutes of air time, has been excluded here, because it is primarily applicable to the Swedish case.

More than 80% of total air time was thus devoted to issue questions. Most interesting of all is that the ideological questions were reserved exclusively for minor parties (Christian Democrats, who are not even in Parliament, the Greens, and the Communists). Roughly one third of the smaller parties' time dealt with their basic values and ideas. In stark contrast, the journalists saw no reason to touch upon these aspects when questioning the leaders of the big and influential parties.

Much the same was true in the United States:

	Bush	Dukakis	Total
Ideological questions	0	0	0
Issue questions	78	79	157

Table 5. Type of questions asked in the American "media election."

During a total of 180 broadcast minutes, the American journalists did not ask one single question pertaining to the candidates' fundamental beliefs and values. Does this mean, then, that ideology, just as was suggested more than thirty years ago, has lost its power and significance in today's affluent democracies?³⁴ Clearly not; the American election campaign, at least, showed that values and beliefs still matter a great deal.³⁵ To neglect this dimension as patently as was done here can hardly be justified.

Regarding the question of journalistic perspective the parties and candidates were treated fairly similarly in the two countries. In Sweden there was no consistency in the use of any one perspective. Two of the party leaders were primarily questioned from an opposing perspective (the Liberal and the Moderate leaders), whereas three others were mostly given the same-perspective treatment (the Communist, the Social Democratic, and the Center Party leaders).³⁶

In the American case, the figures for Dukakis were quite evenly divided. Bush on the other hand, possibly because of his status as an "incumbent," received more questions from an opposing perspective than did his rival.

	Bush	Dukakis	Total
Neutral perspective	16	20	36
Same perspective	13	31	44
Opposing perspective	49	28	77

Table 6. Type of question pertaining to the American debates.

Judging from the televised debates and hearings under consideration here, there were no visible differences as to journalistic techniques or the type of perspectives used in the two campaigns. It is true, though, that of the twelve most common issues brought up, only three were more or less identical (defense, taxes, and abortion).³⁷ This is due to perfectly understandable political differences and circumstances in Sweden and the United States. Further, the focus on individual candidates was arguably more pronounced in the American campaign, which is what one might expect in a presidential system. But the trend toward a more "personalized" campaign is very visible in Sweden also. In fact, one of the main complaints against the Swedish media's campaign coverage in recent years has been their inclination to follow in the footsteps of just a few leading politicians.

The Trend toward "Negative Campaigning"

Late in May, 1988, a new Gallup Poll showed Vice President Bush 16 points behind Mr. Dukakis. The numbers were not the worst of it. The survey also found that while roughly an equal number of voters liked Mr. Bush as disliked him, no less than five voters liked Mr. Dukakis for every one who did not. Alarm-bells began to ring at Bush's headquarters. The Massachusetts Governor had just captured the Democratic Party's nomination more swiftly and skilfully than they had anticipated. To make matters worse, the national headlines had been dominated, all spring, by Ed Meese, Manuel Noriega, and White House astrologers. Now something definitely had to be done.

Members of the Bush high command arranged for two groups of 15 "Reagan Democrats" to be assembled in a New Jersey town, where they conducted the first "market test" of campaign material on the Democratic nominee. One of the researchers told the groups in no uncertain terms about Massachusetts' prisoner furlough program, about pollution in Boston Harbor, about the Governor's veto of legislation requiring classes to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and about other unpleasant things. All 30 of the New Jerseyites had been Dukakis supporters at the start of the evening. By the end of it, half of them had defected. "I realized right there," said the Bush campaign manager

Lee Atwater, "that we had the wherewithal to win, and that the sky was the limit on Dukakis's negatives."³⁸

The Bush team found, after having worked with the test groups, that a campaign attacking Mr. Dukakis, rather than lauding their own candidate's strengths, was indeed effective. What followed was wave after wave of commercials more negative than in any presidential campaign since the dawn of television. To be sure, presidential contenders have certainly attacked each other in past campaigns; Lyndon Johnson's famous "Daisy Girl" commercial in the 1964 election easily comes to mind. But that particular ad, branding Barry Goldwater as a dangerous warmonger, was broadcast only once. The Bush—and later Dukakis—ads were on the air night after night, to the dismay of enlightened voters. The 1988 campaign is the first one where the candidates have used advertising at least as much to bash the other side as to promote themselves.³⁹

The Vice President's camp took a deliberate risk when embarking upon a strategy of negative campaigning. The traditional view has been that a candidate who attacks his opponent harshly or unfairly will inevitably see his personal ratings drop. For some reason Bush managed to defy that political convention.⁴⁰ A series of polls actually indicate that the attacks contributed significantly to Bush's ultimate victory. The emotionally charged issues of the death penalty and the furlough of murderer-rapist Willie Horton, Jr. were especially effective in swinging key voter groups to the GOP candidate.⁴¹

The Swedish campaign, in comparison, was quite tame and calm. To the untrained eye, it almost seemed to convey a picture of a "kinder, gentler nation." But there is more to Swedish politics-as-usual than meets the eye. One episode in the campaign merits special attention, since it tells us something interesting about campaign tactics in general and hegemony in Swedish party politics in particular.

In every campaign, the Social Democrats pick a main adversary, usually one of the three non-socialist parties (or all of them). This is not only a way of combatting indifference and rallying the party faithful against an especially insidious enemy. Above all it gives the Social Democratic leadership an opportunity to determine the *pattern of conflict* in a campaign, which is tantamount to determining, by and large, how the election will be covered in the media. This may be just as important for a political party as being able to influence what issues are brought to the fore in a campaign.⁴²

The Social Democrats have traditionally been highly successful in determining the pattern of conflict in Swedish elections. In 1988 the Liberals were chosen as the chief adversaries, partly because of their tax proposal which was described as an unjust give-away to the rich. The Liberals were subjected to harsh criticism by Social Democratic candidates all across the country in what looked like a carefully orchestrated campaign. Some leading Social Democrats

made fun of the Liberal Party leader's technocratic image and accused him of having a poorly programmed brain. The Liberal leader did not take this critique lightly. In a series of speeches he attacked the ruling party for using sleazy campaign tactics unworthy of a free and democratic society. He warned that, because of their behavior, the Social Democrats had ruined every chance of continuing the cooperative spirit in domestic affairs for a long time to come.⁴³

The episode just mentioned by no means dominated the Swedish election campaign, but it is still indicative of what seems to be a common trend in many contemporary Western democracies. Candidates and parties increasingly tend to focus on their opponents' vices first and on their own virtues second. This tendency is magnified in a presidential system such as the American one, where so much time and effort is put into promoting individual candidates through television advertising. In a political culture like Sweden, devoid of television commercials and with an established party system, negative campaigning still, in the main, takes the form of criticizing issues and ideologies rather than personalities.⁴⁴

What will be the shape of campaigns to come? Will the negative tactics continue, or will there be a backlash against this technique? The prospects for "cleaner" campaigns seem gloomy. With so much at stake, with television playing such a dominant role, and with an apparent lack of crucial, substantive issues, the trend toward negative campaigning is likely to continue. In the United States, the mass media's intense interest in covering attacks and controversy may be particularly decisive. By his effective use of television, Mr. Bush may very well have set a precedent for many campaigns to come.

The Trend toward a Depolitization of Politics

Another trend worthy of some attention is the tendency toward a depolitization of politics, noticeable in both the United States and in Sweden. The trend takes three principal forms to be considered briefly in turn: the moralization of politics, the avoidance of complex, long-term issues, and the co-optation of controversial issues.

Former U. S. Senator Gary Hart, twice a candidate for the highest office in the country, will most probably be remembered not for his policies or position on the issues but rather for his acquaintance with model Donna Rice. "Do American politicians have private lives in the media age?" asks the *Washington Post* reporter Jim Hoagland.⁴⁵ The answer, it seems, is a resounding no. Everything about a candidate's personal life is now up for grabs, especially problems related to alcohol abuse, drugs, sexual habits, and illness. Examples abound. Recent Defense Secretary-designate John Tower had to forswear alco-

hol in a desperate attempt to save his nomination. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett had to pledge to give up cigarettes for fear of not being confirmed as the new "drug czar." And Governor Dukakis, taking a good look ahead at 1992, found it prudent to hold a press conference to tell the world that his wife Kitty was entering an alcohol-treatment clinic.⁴⁶

Thus, today it seems that private morality is more important to a candidate than his or her public achievements or declared stand on the issues. Candidates have to be beyond reproach in almost every aspect of their personal lives, present and past, in order to qualify for higher office. If they are not, they will pretty soon be subjected to "prolonged scrutiny by the media and other agents of the new American public morality."⁴⁷

In the wake of the assassination of Olof Palme and the many investigations and "affairs" that followed, the Swedish mass media, too, have shown a growing inclination to publish stories about public officials' personal lives and habits. But it is hardly correct to describe this recent development as akin to the American situation. In general, the Swedish public and media still take a more relaxed and lenient view of questions of personal lifestyles and morals.

As for the two other aspects—the avoidance and the co-optation of issues—both are routinely common in today's election campaigns. For example, the candidates in the American campaign seemed to operate on the assumption that the electorate neither knew nor cared about the great issues of the day. Both candidates concentrated largely on symbolic and emotion-charged issues such as crime, drugs, abortion, the environment, and ethics in government. Virtually no attention was paid to more long-term issues such as American policy in Latin America, *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, political turmoil in Eastern Europe, famine in Africa or economic development in Asia.⁴⁸ In the case of co-optation, George Bush preempted Michael Dukakis on a number of issues, catching the Democrats off guard. In comparison, the Swedish Social Democrats developed a "strategy of silence" some time after the death of Olof Palme. One controversial issue after another was politically defused (drugs, social services, the Common Market, and others). The aim, in essence, was to cool off the debate and disarm the opposition by co-opting many of their issues.⁴⁹ It was a strategy of "competence, not ideology," Swedish style, which proved quite effective in the ensuing campaign.

The trend toward a depoliticization of politics is not a very clear-cut or uniform one. The advent of the "green issues" has changed the political landscape in many Western countries and brought new life to a withering ideological debate.⁵⁰ It remains to be seen, however, whether these issues are lasting ones or if they, too, like several of the old left-right questions, will soon be co-opted, avoided, or otherwise depoliticized.

Convergence or Divergence?

There are both similarities and dissimilarities between Swedish and American election campaigns as revealed in the analysis of selected trends in the campaigns of 1988. Swedish politics is still pretty much *sui generis*, even if there are clear signs of change. It is still a political culture devoid of balloons and the usual hoopla connected with the standard American election. It still puts a premium on being factual and fairly decent, all within a old and ingrained party system.

However, several features also point in a converging direction. The most important of these are the crucial role of the media, the increasing personalization of politics, and the trend toward negative campaigning. All of these features are in turn connected with what could well be a general converging tendency, namely that of depoliticizing the issues. This trend may be an inevitable one in highly advanced democracies, especially in times of economic well-being and in a political atmosphere with no overriding issue. But in the long run it nevertheless represents an ominous development that threatens the very soul of a democratic society: the open and vigorous debate on the issues. If parties and candidates keep this up, they may breed further passivity among the electorate and ultimately undermine their own legitimacy.⁵¹ Thus no one would have won, except those who seek the continued subordination of politics in society.

NOTES

* This paper was first presented to the workshop on "The Americanization of European Politics," European Consortium for Political Research, Paris, April 1989. I thank the workshop participants for their comments and suggestions.

1. Public expenditure at all levels of government now amount to roughly two-thirds of Sweden's GNP. The number of people employed in the public sector of the economy steadily grows and is approaching the forty percent mark. Hugh Heclo and Henrik Madsen, *Policy and Politics in Sweden: Principled Pragmatism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 4.
2. Cf. H. G. Nicholas, *The Nature of American Politics*, Second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 1.
3. This argument, in different shapes and forms, is by no means new. For instance, Bruno Kreisky, the former Austrian Chancellor, writes in his memoirs about his experiences of Sweden during World War II: "Educated people in Sweden were generally oriented toward the West—most notably the intellectuals; Sweden could be viewed as the most Americanized country in Europe." *Skiftande skeden: Minnen*

- från fem årtionden* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1988; German title: *Zwischen den Zeiten: Erinnerungen aus fünf Jahrzehnten*, 1986), p. 269.
4. Evert Vedung, "The Swedish Five-Party Syndrome and the Environmentalists," in Kay Lawson and Peter Merkl, eds, *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations* (Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 77–81.
 5. Cf. Stig Hadenius, *Swedish Politics during the 20th Century* (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute, 1988), pp. 180–82.
 6. The then–prime minister Olof Palme spoke glowingly of the election as "a substantial defeat for neo–liberalism" in Sweden. Soren Holmberg and Mikael Gilljam, *Väljare och val i Sverige* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1987), p. 25.
 7. For a profile of Carlsson's political and ideological views, see Erik Har d, "A loyal party man, but one who listens," *Inside Sweden*, no. 3–4, 1986, pp. 8–9.
 8. During the campaign the Greens got more television news exposure than any other party, excepting the Social Democrats. Kent Asp, "Sveriges Radios nyhetsbevakning av 1988 års val" (Department of Political Science, Gothenburg University, 1988), p. 4.
 9. Stig Hadenius, "The 1988 parliamentary election: great turbulence, small changes," *Inside Sweden*, no. 3–4, 1988, pp. 3–4; Evert Vedung, "Green light for the Greens," *ibid.*, pp. 6–7. Early studies show that the Greens almost quadrupled their votes in the 1988 election. About a third of their votes came from the non–socialist parties, and another third of their votes came from the Social Democrats and the Communists. Åke Ekdahl, "De gröna lockade fram soffliggarna," *Dagens Nyheter*, March 17, 1989, p. 12.
 10. Cf. Stig Hadenius, Björn Molin, and Hans Wieslander, *Sverige efter 1900: En modern politisk historia*, 11th ed. (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1988), pp. 166–67.
 11. Cf. the editorial "En ovanligt framgångsrik valförlost" ('An unusual successfully election defeat') in *Tiden* (the journal of the Social Democratic Party), no. 9, 1988, pp. 498–502.
 12. Thomas E. Mann, "The Permanent Minority Party in American Politics," *The Brookings Review*, Winter 1988.
 13. Harvey C. Mansfield, "The American Election: Another Reagan Triumph," *Government and Opposition*, no. 1, 1989, pp. 28–29; E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Polls Depict U. S. Electorate as Fickle," *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, August 8, 1988; Paul Taylor, "Success of the Reagan Years: Too Much of a Good Thing for Bush?" *IHT*, August 15, 1988, p. 6.
 14. Cf. Alan Pell Crawford, "George Bush: Deep Down, the Moderate," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1989, part V, p. 1.
 15. Lloyd Grove, "Slick vs. Slick: Dukakis Ads Hit Bush's Image Men," *IHT*, October 6, 1988, p. 3; William Schneider, "The Arena for a Honeymoon," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1989, part V, p. 1; Robert Kuttner, "Democrats in Search of an Ideology," *The Guardian*, September 18, 1988, p. 19.
 16. T. R. Reid, "For Dukakis, a Metamorphosis to Populist from Technocrat," *IHT*, November 1, 1988, p. 1.

17. "Color It Republican," *Time*, November 21, 1988, pp. 20–23; Michael Riley, "Anatomy of a Disaster," *ibid.*, pp. 24–25. The selection of conservative Texan Lloyd Bentsen as vice presidential candidate did not help Dukakis much. On the other hand, Bush's only major mistake in the campaign—choosing Senator Dan Quayle as his running mate—did not prove to be the liability most observers had thought.
18. Brookings scholar Thomas Mann in "Election 1988," United States Information Service, November 21, 1988, p. 6 (mimeo). See also Kevin Phillips, "The Republican Victory Rests on Shaky Legs," *IHT*, November 18, 1988, p. 6; and Thomas B. Edsall, "As the New President Takes Office, His Party Faces Critical Problems," *ibid.*, November 20, 1988, p. 3.
19. Cf. F. Christopher Arterton, *Media Politics: The New Strategies of Presidential Campaigns* (Lexington Books, 1985), p. 1.
20. This seems to hold true for both the United States and Sweden. See Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952–1984*, enl. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), esp. ch. 6; and Olof Petersson, Anders Westholm, and Göran Blomberg, *Medborgarnas makt* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1989), esp. ch. 4.
21. Michael Oreskes, "TV's Role in '88: The Medium Is the Election," *New York Times*, October 30, 1988, pp. 1 and 19.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
23. Kent Asp, "Politisk journalistik: Studier i mediernas partiskhet och makt," in Ulla Carlsson, ed., *Forskning om journalistik: En antologi från NORDICOM–Sverige* (Göteborg: NORDICOM/NYTT/SVERIGE, no. 4, 1988), passim; Holmberg and Gilljam, *Väljare och val i Sverige*, chapters 9–13.
24. For a fine study of how radio and television have reshaped political discourse in America, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
25. On the changes in the public language in Sweden after World War II, see Eva Mårtensson and Jan Svensson, *Offentlighetsstruktur och språkförändring* (Lunds Universitet: Småskrifter från Institutionen för nordiska språk i Lund), no. 14, 1988, pp. 94–96.
26. George F. Will, "Bush: High-Minded Form But What's the Substance?" *IHT*, January 26, p. 7. See also Mansfield, "The American Election," pp. 36–37.
27. Roger Ailes, the mastermind of Mr. Bush's media campaign, thinks that the way candidates behave on the stump is a direct result of the dictates of television: "There are three things that get covered," he says, "visuals, attacks and mistakes. You try to avoid mistakes and give them as many attacks and visuals as you can." Oreskes, "TV's Role in '88," p. 19.
28. See, i.e., T. E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President* (New York: Praeger, 1980).

29. There was also one debate between the vice presidential candidates, which we will not consider here. Each candidate had two minutes to respond to every question followed by a one minute rebuttal by the opponent. The format resembled more that of a normal press conference than a real debate.
30. In addition, there were two specific debates on the economy and the environment, respectively, and a concluding debate between the party leaders two days before the election.
31. For example, the seven Swedish programs were of a regular question-and-answer type and there was no time limit on the party leaders' responses. Also, in the United States, but not in Sweden, audiences were present in the studio, sometimes cheering or booing and thus infringing upon the candidates' time.
32. In an August, 1988, poll, a sample of eligible voters rated the issues in the following order: Environment 75%; Care for the sick and the elderly 51%; Taxes 28%; Peace 26%; Employment 22%; Law and order/Legal rights 17%; School and education 17%; Family policy 14%; Prices and wages 11%; Pensions 10%; Housing 10%; Energy 6%; No Opinion 1%. Bergstrom, "Televisionens val," p. 20.
33. The American voters ranked the issues of the election in this way: the Economy 21%; Defense, arms control, and foreign policy 18%; Health, education, and the needy 15%; the Federal deficit 10%; Other social issues incl. crime, drugs, and abortion 9%; the Candidates' experience, character, and ideology 6%; Other issues 3%. No opinion 18%. See *New York Times*, October 30, 1988, sec. 4, p. 2.
34. For an early statement of this position, see Daniel Bell's celebrated *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, new ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
35. The debate on the so-called "L-word" (liberalism), meagre as it was, is just one case in point.
36. Bergstrom, "Televisionens val," p. 37. Note that questions asked from the same perspective as the respondent may be just as critical and efficient as those emanating from an opposing perspective.
37. Note that in Sweden, the abortion issue was only discussed briefly with just one party leader, the head of the Christian Democrats.
38. Paul Taylor and David S. Broder, "Perfecting a Negative Campaign," *IHT*, October 29-30, 1988, pp. 1, 4 (quote).
39. Oreskes, "TV's Role in '88," pp. 1, 19; Michael Oreskes, "Candidates Get Rough in New Crop of TV Ads," *IHT*, October 11, 1988, p. 1.
40. One such reason, often mentioned in the post-election debates, is that Dukakis and his handlers waited far too long in responding to the Bush ads. And when they finally did it was too little too late.
41. E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Voters Dissatisfied with Tactics, but Bush's Rating Soars," *IHT*, October 27, 1988, p. 3; Thomas B. Edsall, "Poll Finds 'Negativism' was Key to Bush Victory," *ibid.*, November 17, 1988, p. 3.
42. Kent Asp, "Sveriges Radios nyhetsbevakning av 1988 års val," p. 9.

43. like Ekdahl, "Fp slår tillbaka mot s: Nej till alla nya inviter," *Dagens Nyheter*, September 11, 1988, p. 8.
44. In the United States, the White House, at an early stage in the campaign, even went as far as stirring up suspicions about Michael Dukakis's possible mental illness. Such trashy innuendo would not get official approval in Sweden. Kevin Phillips, "A Team of Old Pols, Pals ... and Many Peccadilloes," *Los Angeles Times*, part V, March 12, 1989, p. 1.
45. Jim Hoagland, "Public Men, Private Lives: Where to Draw the Line?" *IHT*, February 11–12, 1989, p. 4.
46. Susan F. Rasky, "The Tower Vote: A Double Standard on Drinking?" *IHT*, February 27, 1989, p. 5; Charles Krauthammer, "This Role-Model Theory of Government is Inane," *IHT*, March 2, 1989, p. 5.
47. Hoagland, "Public Men, Private Lives," p. 4.
48. Cf. David E. Rosenbaum, Andrew Rosenthal and Louis Uchitelle, "The Campaign Issues: A Bush-Dukakis Primer," *IHT*, November 5–6, 1988, p. 3.
49. like Ekdahl, "Passiviteten borjar vacka oro: Omstridd s-taktik," *Dagens Nyheter*, June 5, 1988, p. 15.
50. On this recent development, see Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, ed., *New Politics in Western Europe: The Rise and Success of Green Parties and Alternative Lists* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1989).
51. In Sweden, voter turnout, while still high by any standard (86%), was the lowest in 24 years. Voter turnout in the recent U. S. election was barely above 50%, the lowest since 1924. Cf. Walter Dean Burnham, *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 11 and sec. II.