

## ■ *Academic Paper*

# Do campaign strategies and tactics matter? Exploring party elite perceptions of what matters when explaining election outcomes

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In research on political campaign communication, it is often assumed that campaign strategies and tactics are highly important for explaining election outcomes. In contrast, most research in political science tends to emphasize the importance of political substance, long-term factors such as party identification, and real-world conditions for explaining election outcomes.

Although political parties in practice treat election campaigns as highly important and consequential, there is virtually no research on how party elites perceive the importance of campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes. Hence, drawing on a survey among Swedish members of parliament, this study investigates party elite perceptions of what matters when people decide which party to vote for and of what matters when explaining election outcomes. In brief, the results show that members of parliament perceive campaign strategies and tactics as significantly less important than the substance of politics. In the concluding analysis, the implications of the results are analyzed. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## INTRODUCTION

The essence of campaign management is to use scarce resources as effectively as possible (Shaw, 2006). To facilitate effective campaign management, political parties need to have some idea or working theory about the importance of different campaign strategies and tactics when shaping election outcomes. This, in turn, requires some idea or working theory about what matters when people cast their votes.

Despite this, and despite extensive research on political marketing and parties' use of different campaign strategies and tactics (Harris *et al.*, 1999; Newman, 1999; Baines *et al.*, 2001; O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2002; Johnson, 2008; Lees-Marshment, 2012), there is virtually no research on party elite perceptions of voting behavior or the importance of

campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes (Rohrschneider, 2002; Ekengren and Oscarsson, 2011a, 2011b). After every election, a number of books are usually published, analyzing the campaigns and the outcomes, but to the extent that these deal with campaign strategies and techniques, they often rest on personal experiences and anecdotal, rather than systematic, evidence. At the same time, political science research repeatedly casts doubts on the importance of election campaigning for explaining election outcomes (Gelman and King, 1993; Holbrook, 1996; Wlezien and Erikson, 2001), in sharp contrast to research in political marketing and political communication (Wring, 2005; Johnson, 2011). This also raises the question of how party elites perceive the importance of campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes.

Against this background, the purposes of this article are, first, to map and investigate party elite perceptions of what matters when people decide which party to vote for, and, second, to map and investigate party elite perceptions of what matters when explaining election outcomes.

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## WHAT MATTERS WHEN PEOPLE DECIDE WHICH PARTY TO VOTE FOR

When people in party-centered democracies enter the voting booth on Election Day, their main decision is which party to vote for. That voting decision is, however, only the final phase in a process where many different considerations may have had an impact. Political parties are multifaceted organizations; hence, the vote decision requires that voters assess different aspects of the parties and their relative importance when they decide which party to support. For some voters, the parties' ideological values may be what matters most. For other voters, the party leaders may matter more than both ideologies and policy positions.

Political scientists thus continue to investigate and debate the importance of parties' ideological values, policies and policy positions (Downs, 1957; Klingemann *et al.*, 1994), the party leaders or main candidates (King, 2002; Aarts *et al.*, 2011), what issues are salient on the parties' and the public's agenda (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik *et al.*, 2003), retrospective versus prospective evaluations (Miller and Wattenberg, 1985; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000), and of voters' party identification (Bartels, 2000; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008), for explaining voter behavior.

Whatever the actual merits of these and other theories of voter behavior, most members of party elites are hardly experts on research into different models of voter behavior. Still, party elites need to have some working theory about what matters to voters when they cast their votes. Otherwise, it would be difficult for them to develop their strategies for winning elections and to use scarce resources effectively. As noted by Ekengren and Oscarsson (2011b: 1), the perceptions of party elites are 'essential for explaining the strategic actions taken by party elites.' For example, if party elites believe that most voters base their voting decision on the parties' ideological values, they are likely to emphasize their ideological values in their campaign communication. If, on the other hand, they believe that most voters base their voting decision on the party leader, they are likely to develop campaign strategies emphasizing the party leader and his or her competence and trustworthiness. Political elites are no different than other groups in that their perceptions guide their thinking and their behavior. As the Thomas theorem famously holds, 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Watzlawick, 1976).

Despite this, there is virtually no research on party elites and their perceptions or working theories of voting behavior. The only exception is a couple of studies by Ekengren and Oscarsson (2011a, 2011b), based on internal documents from the two major Swedish parties, the Social Democratic party and the Conservative party, between 1964 and 1991.

These studies suggest that both parties tend to perceive voters as mainly coherent and predictable, driven by overall rather stable predispositions, and as generally speaking well-informed and interested in politics. Furthermore, in these respects, no major changes across time could be discerned, except that the media are perceived to have become more important across time (Ekengren and Oscarsson, 2011b: 17–20).

Equally important, though, is that both parties tend to stress the importance of ideologies and policy preferences, in conjunction with the media coverage, for explaining voter behavior. According to these results, it is not mainly how the parties run their campaigns and what campaign techniques they use that matter but the positioning of the parties with respect to the issues that are salient in the media coverage of the campaigns and in the minds of voters (Ekengren and Oscarsson, 2011b).

These two studies notwithstanding, to date, there is insufficient research to guide any particular expectations with respect to what party elites perceive to be important for voters when they decide which party to vote for. Hence, instead of posing hypotheses, our first research question is

EQ1: How do party elites perceive the importance voters attach to different factors, related to the parties and their values and behaviors, when they decide which party to vote for?

Although related, what matters when voters decide which party to vote for does not equal what matters for explaining election outcomes. Most voters are, for example, not likely to think much about the parties' strategic use of opinion polls or voter databases, but these factors may still have an impact on election outcomes. This raises the question of the importance of election campaigning.

## IMPORTANCE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

For every election cycle, political parties and candidates worldwide appear to devote ever-greater resources toward election campaigning. Scholars may continue to debate the extent to which election campaigns impact the final outcome of elections (Gelman and King, 1993; Holbrook, 1996; Wlezien and Erikson, 2001), but political parties appear to carry no doubts: Election campaigns matter. As every vote counts, and even small shifts can be decisive for individual parties and which party or parties form the next government, parties successively attempt to improve how they run their campaigns (Plasser and Plasser, 2002; Shaw, 2006; Johnson, 2011). Within the literature on political communication, political marketing and the political public relations, there is also no questioning that campaign strategies and tactics and campaign communication

matter (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Trent and Friedenbergh, 2004; Burton and Shea, 2010; Manheim, 2011; Strömbäck and Kiouisis, 2011).

The development of political campaigning is usually described as a process of professionalization (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Farrell and Webb, 2000; Norris, 2000; Gibson and Römmele, 2001; Plasser and Plasser, 2002; Negrine *et al.*, 2007; Negrine, 2008; Johnson, 2011). Although different scholars have different approaches, there is a general consensus that campaigns, over time, have become increasingly capital-intensive and that the skillful use of different campaign strategies and tactics has become increasingly important. Among important campaign strategies and tactics are opinion polls and focus groups, voter segmentation, micro targeting, opposition research, positioning, message development and testing, as well as strategies and tactics for the effective use of both old and new, controlled and uncontrolled, and paid and unpaid media (Newman, 1999; Johnson, 2007; Hillygus and Shields, 2008; Burton and Shea, 2010; Medvic, 2010; Maarek, 2011). Because it takes specialized expertise to make full use of these and other strategies and tactics, political consultants or in-house expertise has become increasingly important (Plasser and Plasser, 2002; Johnson, 2007, 2011; Maarek, 2011). In fact, the essence of professionalization can be described as the 'specialization of tasks' and the 'increased use of experts' (Lilleker and Negrine, 2002: 102).

Although research on election campaigning is extensive, there are only a few studies that systematically investigate the extent to which parties make use of various campaign strategies and tactics. On the basis of the party-centered theory of professionalized campaigning, Gibson and Römmele (2009) investigated the extent to which German parties in the 2005 election made use of 12 campaign strategies and tactics, summarized into a professionalized campaign index: telemarketing, direct mail, internal Internet communication system, email sign-up or newsletters, outside campaign headquarters, continuous campaigning, outside public relations/media consultants, computerized databases, opinion polling, and opposition research. Strömbäck (2009, 2010) made use of a very similar index when investigating the extent to which Swedish political parties in the 2006 election ran professionalized campaigns. Both studies showed variance across parties, and that there was a relationship between the size and resources of the parties and the extent to which different campaign strategies and tactics were used. This may also explain why German parties, overall, tend to make greater use of the investigated campaign strategies and tactics than Swedish parties (Gibson and Römmele, 2009; Strömbäck, 2009).

However, the extent to which parties use different campaign strategies and tactics may not necessarily reflect how important they are perceived to be.

Rather, the use of campaign strategies and tactics should be conceived of as a matter of perceived utility in combination with the costs and need for expertise associated with them (Shaw, 2006), within the confines of the regulatory environment and the political culture in which political parties operate (Plasser and Plasser, 2002; Lees-Marshment *et al.*, 2010). The rules for paid political advertising, for example, differ across countries, as does the acceptance of hiring outside political consultants as opposed to relying on in-house expertise. Similarly, not all parties can afford to make as extensive use of opinion polls or voter databases as other parties.

In essence, then, the importance attached to different campaign strategies and tactics needs to be examined independently from the actual use of them (Rohrschneider, 2002). Our next research question is based on this:

RQ2: How do party elites perceive the importance of different campaign strategies and tactics for explaining election outcomes?

The key question, however, is not only how party elites perceive the importance of different campaign strategies and tactics *per se* but also how important different campaign strategies and tactics are perceived to be *in comparison* with the parties' ideologies, policies, and representatives. When scholars in political science question the importance of election campaigns, one of the main reasons is that the substance of politics and real-world conditions is considered *more* important (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008). When scholars in political marketing and political communication argue that election campaigns and campaign communication are crucial, one of the main reasons is that the substance of politics and real-world conditions matters less if the parties are not able to communicate this effectively (Negrine, 2008; Medvic, 2010). In addition, the distinction between product-oriented, sales-oriented, and market-oriented parties and campaigns also highlights that the relative importance ascribed to campaign strategies and tactics versus the parties' ideologies, policies, and representatives may vary (Shama, 1976; Newman, 1994; Lees-Marshment, 2001).

Different schools of thought thus perceive the importance of campaign strategies and tactics versus the parties' ideologies, policies, and representatives differently. The unexplored question is where party elites stand on this issue. Hence, our next research questions are

RQ3: How do party elites perceive the importance of the parties' policies, ideologies, and representatives for explaining election outcomes?

RQ4: Do party elites perceive the importance of the parties' policies, ideologies, and representatives as greater than the importance of different campaign strategies and tactics for explaining election outcomes?

## ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Thus far, it has implicitly been assumed that there are no major differences across party elites belonging to different parties. Such assumptions cannot be taken for granted, however. As suggested by research on political marketing and the professionalization of political campaigning, historically speaking, right-wing parties have had a stronger tendency to professionalize their campaigning and marketing efforts, whereas left-wing parties have usually been more reluctant to do so (Gibson and Römmele, 2001; Scammell, 1995; Wring, 2005). Although there are many exceptions to this tendency, and there may be differences across countries, it may be the case that party affiliation helps explain how party elites perceive the importance of campaign strategies and tactics versus the parties' policies, ideologies, and representatives when explaining election outcomes. Hence, our final research question is

RQ5: Does party affiliation have an impact on party elites' perceptions of the importance of campaign strategies and tactics versus the parties' policies and ideologies for explaining election outcomes?

## RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA

Designing a study of party elite perceptions is challenging, not least because there is no clear-cut definition of party elites and because accessibility to party elites usually is very restricted. Having said this, within most parties, there are three loci of power: the party leadership, consisting of the party leader and his or her inner circle; the party board or executive, elected at party conventions; and the parliamentary groups.

In this study, 'party elites' are operationalized as members of parliament (MPs). There are several reasons for this: MPs belong to the party elite, their fortunes are directly linked to the party being successful at Election Day, they are among the ones running the campaigns in their constituencies, and they have a significant influence as representatives for the party as well as within the parties. In addition, the larger number of MPs compared with other party elites allows quantitative analyses, of which there are only few in the literature on political marketing and political campaign strategies and tactics.

In addition to focusing on MPs, this study focuses on Sweden. Because there is virtually no quantitative research on party elites' perceptions of voting behavior or the importance of campaign strategies and tactics, the case selection could not be guided by any previous framework. At the same time, some tendencies make Sweden an interesting case.

First, Sweden represents a typical case of a democratic corporatist country, distinguished by, for

example, a consensual political culture, proportional electoral system, organized pluralism, a highly party-centered political culture, and an active but legally limited role of the state (Åsard and Bennett, 1997; Petersson *et al.*, 2000; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The case of Sweden is thus a case of democratic corporatist countries. In addition, the level of campaign professionalization and use of political consultants are modest, although rising over the last election cycles (Nord, 2007). All this might, in theory, serve to limit the importance attached to campaign strategies and tactics and strengthen the importance attached to the parties and their core values and policy positions. Second, and in contrast, during the last decades, the former stability among the electorate has been replaced by decreasing party identification and number of party members, increasing electoral volatility, and several new parties in parliament (Petersson *et al.*, 2000; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). For example, in 2006, 58% decided which party to vote for during the election campaign, and 37.1% switched party between the 2002 and 2006 elections (Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008). It has also become increasingly common that one or a couple of parties make major headway during election campaigns, in some cases more than doubling their vote share over the 4–6 weeks that election campaigns run in Sweden (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). This suggests an increasing importance of short-term influences and might, in contrast, serve to increase the importance attached to campaign strategies and tactics and weaken the importance attached to the parties and their core values and policy positions.

On the basis of the aforementioned statement, this study draws upon a survey carried out among all members of the Swedish parliament. The survey was conducted between November 2007 and February 2008, using a written questionnaire. Three reminders were sent out, which resulted in a net response rate of 45% ( $N = 158$ ). Important to note is that the sample represents not a random sample but the entire population of MPs. For an elite survey, a response rate of 45% must also be considered as good (cf. van Aelst *et al.*, 2008). In addition, a comparison of the distribution across parties with the distribution of seats in the parliament shows no major deviations (Table 1). Overall, we thus consider the response rate acceptable and the responses largely representative for members of the parliament at the time of the survey.

## RESULTS: WORKING THEORIES OF VOTER BEHAVIOR

The first research question asked how party elites perceive the importance voters attach to different factors, related to the parties and their values and behaviors, when they decide which party to vote for. To investigate this, we asked MPs to rate the

Table 1. Share of seats in parliament and response rates per party (%)

	Share of seats in parliament	Share of respondents
Left party	6.3	8.2
Social Democratic party	37.3	31.0
Green party	5.4	4.4
Center party	8.3	11.4
Liberal party	8.0	9.5
Christian Democrats	6.9	8.9
Conservative party	27.8	26.6
Sum	100	100
N	349	158

importance of different factors on a scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). The factors were derived from the literature on factors that may help explain voter behavior, ranging from the party's core values to how it has performed since the last election and the party's image (for overviews, see van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008). The results are presented in Table 2, ranged by importance (mean values) attached to the factors by the MPs.

The results show that a majority of MPs perceive all factors except, interestingly, the party's candidates to be very important when voters decide which party to vote for. This relative lack of importance of the party's candidates reflects the highly party-centered nature

of Swedish politics (Pettersson *et al.*, 2000). The single most important factor is perceived to be the party leader's trustworthiness, followed by the party's promises for the future. A dependent sample *t*-test shows that the difference between the importance attached to these two factors is significant [ $t(155)=3.036$ ,  $p=0.003$ ]. That voters identify with the party and the issues and opinions at the top of the party's agenda follow next. In these cases, the mean values exceed four, and more than 85% of MPs consider these factors very important. The fifth most important factor is perceived to be the party's core values, followed by the party's ability to keep its promises and the party's image. The party's image is considered significantly more important than the party's performance since the last election [ $t(155)=3.819$ ,  $p=0.000$ ], which, in turn, is considered significantly more important than the party's candidates [ $t(155)=2.865$ ,  $p=0.005$ ]. Interesting to note is that MPs perceive the party's promises for the future as more important than how the party has performed since the last election, despite all talk about widespread political distrust (Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008). This also suggests that MPs subscribe to the idea that prospective evaluations are more important than retrospective evaluations (Miller and Wattenberg, 1985).

Although there were some significant differences between how important MPs considered the various factors to be when voters decide which party to vote for, a principal component analysis reveals that their responses constitute a single dimension (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.963$ ). Hence, some factors are considered more

Table 2. Perceptions of members of parliament of what matters when people decide which party to vote for

	Mean —— (SD)	Very important	N
The party leader's trustworthiness	4.43 (0.79)	88.5	157
The party's promises for the future	4.20 (0.68)	88.5	156
That voters identify with the party	4.16 (0.70)	86.0	157
The issues and opinions at the top of the party's agenda	4.15 (0.63)	87.9	157
The party's core values	4.03 (0.80)	76.3	156
The party's ability to keep its promises	3.98 (0.87)	73.2	157
The party's image	3.94 (0.70)	76.4	157
The party's performance since the last election	3.63 (0.86)	63.5	156
The party's candidates	3.39 (0.88)	46.5	157

Note 1: The exact question asked, 'On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents "not at all important" and 5 "very important", how important do you think the following factors are when people decide which party to vote for?' Note 2: 'Very important' refers to the share of members of parliament ranking the importance of the factor as 4 or 5.

important than others, but this cannot be explained by the variables belonging to different dimensions. It is thus not the case that MPs think there is a contradiction between stressing the importance of, for example, the party leader and the party's core values, when explaining how voters decide which party to vote for.

## RESULTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

In the literature on political campaigning and elections, an assumption is often that either the substance of politics *or* political campaigning matters most when trying to explain election outcomes. Whereas scholars in political campaigning and marketing stress the importance of campaign strategies and tactics (Newman, 1999; Lees-Marshment, 2001, 2001; Burton and Shea, 2010), other scholars in political science tend to stress the importance of election manifestos, political substance, and matters on the ground (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008). Further, others focus on the importance of the parties' candidates or leaders (Mughan, 2000; King, 2002; Aarts *et al.*, 2011), occupying a middle position between the political substance and the parties' campaign strategies and tactics.

How party elites perceive the importance of these factors is less clear. The same holds true for whether they perceive any contradictions between stressing the importance of political substance, political leaders and candidates, and campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes.

To investigate this and answer RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, we included in the survey a question asking MPs to rate the importance of altogether 19 factors when explaining election outcomes or, more precisely, for 'whether a party is successful in an election'. The scale ranged from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). Four of the factors are related to the substance of politics or political leaders and candidates, whereas the remaining factors focus on different campaign strategies and tactics highlighted in the literature (Gibson and Römmele, 2001, 2009; Plasser and Plasser, 2002; Strömbäck, 2009). The results are presented in Table 3, where the factors are ranged by importance (mean values) attached to them by the MPs.

The results show that MPs perceive that the single most important factor when explaining election outcomes is the party leader, followed by the party's policies on different issues. A paired sample *t*-test shows that the difference between those two factors is significant [ $t(155) = 2.194$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ], although the share of MPs ranking the party's policies as very important actually is higher than the share ranking the party leader as very important. In the third place come the media and how they cover the election campaigns. These are the only factors with a mean

value exceeding four, but none of these focus directly on campaign strategies and tactics. The same holds true for the fourth most important factor, which is the party ideology. The difference between the importance of the media coverage and the party ideology is significant [ $t(154) = 2.818$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ]. From the perspective of MPs, the party leader, the party's policy positions, the media coverage, and the party ideology all matter more for explaining election outcomes than any of the campaign strategies and tactics.

Although perceived as significantly less important than party ideology [ $t(154) = 2.338$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ], effective identification of target groups is the most important campaign tactic according to MPs. About 64% consider this as very important. The party's candidates, door-to-door canvassing, the party's webpage, the use of focus groups, the use of defense strategies to counter attacks, and telemarketing follow next. These campaign tactics all have a mean exceeding three. After that—with mean values less than three—follow campaign tactics such as use of opinion polls, access to and use of voter databases, election posters and ads, and the use of campaign consultants (it should be noted though that at the time of the survey, political ads on television were banned, so political ads refer to ads in newspapers).

Overall, these results suggest that MPs perceive the substance of politics and the party's leader and candidates as significantly more important than campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes. Campaign strategies and tactics may matter and in some cases be perceived as important but not as important as the substance of politics or the political leadership. In this respect, the results support research that emphasizes the importance of core political factors when explaining election outcomes, and fit with previous research on party elites' perceptions (Ekengren and Oscarsson, 2011a, 2011b).

To further investigate how MPs perceive the importance of the substance of politics, the party leader and candidates, and different campaign strategies and tactics, respectively, we ran a principal component analysis. The idea behind this analysis is to explore whether MPs' responses load on different dimensions. The results are displayed in Table 4.

The results show that MPs' responses load on six different and theoretically meaningful dimensions. The first dimension might be labeled *campaign organization*, because it stresses the importance of factors related to the party's campaign organization: when the party begins campaigning, how the party organizes its campaign headquarters, the party's webpage, the use of voter databases, and the use of campaign consultants (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.768$ ). The second dimension might be called *proactive planning*, because it stresses the importance of using opinion polls and focus groups, effective identification of target groups, and using defense strategies

Table 3. Perceptions of members of parliament of how important different factors are when explaining election outcomes

	Mean —— (SD)	Very important	N
The party leader	4.45 (0.75)	89.8	157
The party's policies on different issues	4.28 (0.62)	92.3	156
How the media cover the election	4.16 (0.66)	85.3	157
The party's ideology	3.92 (0.87)	71.1	156
Effective identification of target groups	3.69 (0.81)	64.3	157
The party's candidates	3.57 (0.91)	52.9	157
Door-to-door canvassing and meeting directly with voters	3.51 (1.05)	55.4	157
The party's webpage	3.32 (0.86)	42.7	157
Use of focus groups	3.20 (0.86)	37.4	155
Use of defense strategies to counter attacks from opponents	3.16 (0.93)	37.6	157
Telemarketing	3.05 (1.00)	34.6	156
Direct mail	2.98 (0.83)	25.3	158
Use of opinion polls	2.97 (0.81)	23.4	158
Access to and use of voter databases	2.93 (0.88)	22.9	153
How well in advance the party starts its campaigning	2.77 (1.01)	21.0	157
How the party organizes its campaign headquarters	2.74 (1.06)	23.6	157
Election posters and ads	2.70 (0.83)	15.3	157
Use of campaign consultants	2.46 (0.90)	11.7	154
Use of attack strategies to undermine opponents	2.41 (0.93)	11.5	156

Note 1: The exact question asked, 'On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents "not at all important" and 5 "very important", how important do you think the following factors are for whether a party is successful in an election?' Note 2: 'Very important' refers to the share of members of parliament ranking the importance of the factor as 4 or 5.

to counter attacks from opponents (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.679$ ). The third dimension is labeled *direct contact*, because it emphasizes the importance of direct mail, telemarketing and door-to-door canvassing, and direct contact with the voters (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.746$ ).

The fourth dimension is labeled *political leaders*, because the only variables loading high on this dimension are the importance of the party's leader and candidates (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.670$ ). The fifth dimension stresses the importance of the party's ideology and the policies and is labeled *policy orientation* (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.594$ ). Interestingly, there is a negative correlation between stressing the importance of the party's policies and ideology and stressing the use of campaign consultants as well as the use of attack strategies to undermine opponents.

The final dimension is labeled *sales orientation*, because the variables loading on this dimension are election posters and ads, direct mail, and how the media cover elections. This dimension fails to reach acceptable levels of reliability, however (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.335$ ). Taken together, these six dimensions explain 63.6% of the variance.

To answer RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, the results consequently show that MPs tend to perceive political leaders and a policy orientation as more important when explaining election outcomes than the use of different campaign strategies and tactics. There are great differences across how important MPs perceive different campaign strategies and tactics, however, with effective identification of target groups being perceived as most important, followed by door-to-door canvassing and direct contact with

Table 4. Principal component analysis of the perceptions of members of parliament of what matters for explaining election outcomes (factor loadings)

	Campaign organization	Proactive planning	Direct contact	Political leaders	Policy orientation	Sales orientation
How well in advance the party starts its campaigning	0.620	0.017	0.326	0.199	0.245	-0.056
How the party organizes its campaign headquarters	0.799	0.042	0.117	0.064	0.034	0.004
The party's webpage	0.699	0.003	0.067	0.022	0.127	0.322
Access to and use of voter databases	0.713	0.351	0.142	0.120	-0.097	0.104
Use of campaign consultants	0.467	0.189	-0.077	0.330	-0.404	0.309
Effective identification of target groups	0.366	0.637	-0.114	0.203	0.030	-0.195
Use of opinion polls	0.003	0.822	0.018	-0.064	-0.077	0.040
Use of focus groups	0.102	0.667	0.268	0.230	-0.084	-0.003
How the media cover the election	0.043	0.492	-0.296	-0.149	0.259	0.502
Use of defense strategies to counter attacks from opponents	0.045	0.525	0.276	0.161	-0.202	0.005
Direct mail	0.105	0.043	0.621	-0.004	-0.061	0.471
Telemarketing	0.197	0.123	0.826	-0.063	0.081	0.085
Door-to-door canvassing and meeting directly with voters	0.104	0.092	0.795	-0.041	0.017	-0.059
The party leader	0.025	0.133	-0.090	0.839	0.028	0.135
The party's candidates	0.305	0.124	0.005	0.726	0.209	-0.012
The party's policies on different issues	0.188	0.086	0.018	0.198	0.693	0.164
The party's ideology	0.131	-0.148	0.184	0.222	0.637	0.096
Election posters and ads	0.201	-0.139	0.190	0.209	0.085	0.720
Use of attack strategies to undermine opponents	0.045	0.270	0.231	0.257	-0.642	0.135
Explained variance	14.0	12.5	11.7	9.2	9.1	7.0

Note: Principal component analysis using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization.

voters. In these cases, a majority perceives these factors to be very important when explaining election outcomes. In contrast, less than 20% of MPs think election posters and ads, campaign consultants, and attack strategies to undermine opponents are very important when explaining election outcomes.

Can these perceptions be explained by MPs' party affiliations? Do MPs belonging to different parties perceive these dimensions as equally important, or are there differences across parties? To investigate this, we ran a series of bivariate analyses comparing mean values across parties. The results are presented in Table 5.

The results show that there are some differences across parties. More specifically, there is a significant correlation between party affiliation and how important *direct contact* is perceived to be [ $F(6) = 2.70$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ], where MPs belonging to the Social Democratic party are most likely to emphasize the importance of direct voter contact. This is in contrast with MPs belonging to the Green party, who are the least likely to emphasize this dimension. There is also a significant correlation between party affiliation and how important *political leaders* are perceived to be [ $F(6) = 2.39$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ], with MPs belonging to the Center party being most likely to emphasize the importance of party leaders, and MPs belonging to the Left party least likely to do so.

Although there are some differences across parties with respect to the other dimensions as well, they fail to reach significance. Although this may partly be due to the low number of MPs from the smaller parties, it does not change the overall results. Perhaps most important, there is no significant correlation between party affiliation and how important the parties' ideology and politics are perceived to be.

The general answer to RQ5, then, is that party affiliation has some, although limited, impact on how important various campaign strategies and tactics are perceived to be when explaining election outcomes, but no impact on the importance attached to the parties' policies and ideologies when explaining election outcomes. There are differences in how important different campaign strategies and tactics are perceived to be, *per se* as well as in comparison with how important the parties' ideologies, policies, and leaders are perceived to be, but in most cases, such differences cannot be explained by party affiliation.

Can they be explained by MPs working theories of voter behavior? On one level, the answer is yes. Not surprisingly, a regression analysis (not displayed) shows that there is a strong correlation between how important the party leaders' trustworthiness and the party's candidates are when voters decide which party to vote for and how important *political leaders* are when explaining election outcomes.

Table 5. Party affiliation and dimensions of what matters for explaining election outcomes (mean values, standard deviations within parentheses)

	Campaign organization	Proactive planning	Direct contact	Political leaders	Policy orientation	N
	(0–25)	(0–25)	(0–15)	(0–10)	(0–10)	
Left party	14.58 (3.77)	16.67 (2.18)	9.38 (2.10)	7.15 (1.95)	8.30 (1.25)	12
Social Democratic party	15.23 (3.39)	16.86 (2.82)	10.42 (2.21)	7.76 (1.49)	8.69 (1.18)	43
Green party	11.86 (1.77)	16.00 (3.11)	7.57 (1.99)	7.86 (0.90)	7.86 (1.57)	7
Center party	14.65 (3.44)	17.94 (2.30)	8.59 (2.45)	8.88 (0.78)	7.94 (1.34)	17
Liberal party	14.28 (4.08)	16.15 (2.61)	8.78 (2.15)	8.28 (1.07)	7.78 (1.19)	13
Christian Democrats	13.36 (2.71)	17.08 (3.20)	9.64 (2.31)	7.71 (1.32)	8.00 (0.88)	13
Conservative party	13.73 (3.19)	17.90 (2.58)	9.48 (2.48)	8.14 (1.49)	8.07 (1.35)	41

Similarly, there are strong correlations between how important the party's core values and the party's ability to keep its promises are when voters decide which party to vote for and how important *policy orientation* is perceived to be. Such correlations are very close to being tautological, however. Hence, although they support the notion that parties and political elites need some working theory of voter behavior to develop or assess different campaign strategies and tactics, the explanatory value of such analyses and results is clearly limited.

## DISCUSSION

From the perspective of research on political campaigning, political marketing, and political public relations, the perhaps most striking result of this study is the limited importance attached by MPs to different campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes. Comparing the importance attached to campaign strategies and tactics on the one hand and the substance of politics and party leaders on the other, it is evident that MPs' overall perception is that campaign strategies and tactics do not matter nearly as much for explaining election outcomes as political substance and leaders. The single most important factor is the party leader, followed by the party's policies on different issues. The only campaign strategies or tactics considered to be very important by a majority of MPs are an effective identification of target groups and door-to-door canvassing and meeting directly with voters.

This does not mean, however, that MPs consider all forms of political communication unimportant. This is most evident with respect to the importance

attached to the news media and how they cover elections. This is considered the third most important factor when explaining election outcomes; 85% of MPs consider this very important, almost rivaling the importance attached to the parties' leaders and policies (Strömbäck, 2011).

This emphasis on the media may be a reflection of the fact that the mass media constitute the most important source of political information in the Swedish case, that other forms of communication (interpersonal, digital, etc) only reach limited groups of people, and that political advertising on TV, at the time, was not allowed (Strömbäck, 2010). It may perhaps also reflect the traditional, although mistaken, understanding of political public relations as equaling media relations (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2011).

Reasons for the emphasis on mass media notwithstanding, what these results suggest is that overall, MPs do not consider campaign strategies and tactics as very important, at least not if they are not related to influencing the media coverage.

From one perspective, these results may not be surprising. Extensive research in political science has repeatedly suggested that other factors beyond political campaigning and campaign communication are what ultimately decide election outcomes. Among such factors are, indeed, the parties' ideological values, policies and policy positions as well as real-world factors such as the state of the economy (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008).

From another perspective, these results are highly surprising. Whatever the importance of political policies and ideologies, there is no politics without political communication (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1975); and for political policies or leaders to have an impact on Election Day, they have to be effectively

communicated and marketed through controlled as well as uncontrolled media, paid as well as unpaid media, and through mass media as well as other channels of communication (Johnson, 2007, 2008; Lees-Marshment, 2012). If we look at party behavior, it is also evident that political parties worldwide perceive election campaigning as highly important, as witnessed by increasing campaign expenditures and continuous efforts to improve how they plan and run their campaigns (Plasser and Plasser, 2002; Negrine, 2008).

Important to note, though, is that MPs are not the ones planning and running the campaigns in party-centered political systems such as the Swedish. Rather, this is the responsibility of the central party headquarters, under the supervision of the chief campaign manager, the chief communications officer, or, as the title may be in the Swedish case, the party secretary (Strömbäck, 2010). Although MPs form an important and powerful part of the party elite, they may not constitute the part of the party elite that is most likely to emphasize or even realize the importance of campaign strategies and tactics.

Their perceptions are still important, however, as MPs have an influential role within the party hierarchies. This holds particularly true in party-centered democracies. If MPs, as suggested by this study, do not consider different campaign strategies and tactics as very important, this may affect the party's effectiveness in political campaigning in several ways. First, as influential within the party hierarchies, they may not support or even hinder further efforts at developing and professionalizing the use of different campaign strategies and tactics. Second, as prominent campaigners at the regional and local levels, they are less likely to implement different campaign strategies and tactics, thus leading to less effective regional and local campaigning. Third and related, they may contribute to less effective allocation of resources before and during election campaigns.

This may be particularly the case because MPs' perceptions of what matters when deciding election outcomes at times may be questioned. For example, according to MPs, the most important factor is the party leader. However, virtually all Swedish (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004; Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008) and international (King, 2002; Aarts *et al.*, 2011) research suggests that the impact of party leaders on party voting is, at best, limited. Compared with what research has shown, MPs hence appear to be exaggerating the importance of the party leader. As another example, research suggests that the use of opinion polls and focus groups is necessary for the development of effective campaign messages as well as for voter segmentation and targeting (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Shaw, 2006; Hillygus and Shields, 2008), all linked to the outcome of elections. In this example and compared with what research

has shown, MPs appear to be underestimating the importance of opinion polls and focus groups.

From another perspective, the results of this study may be interpreted as suggesting that MPs tend to be product rather than sales or market oriented (Shama, 1976; Newman, 1994; Lees-Marshment, 2001a, 2001b). As MPs, in their everyday parliamentary life, their attention is directed toward different policy problems and proposals for how to solve them and toward finding solutions that may garner a majority within parliament. In essence, their main focus is on political substance, and this may foster a product orientation that also influences their perceptions of what matters for explaining election outcomes. This may perhaps even foster attitudes that consider too sophisticated uses of different campaign strategies and techniques as carrying negative connotations, creating incentives for them to deemphasize the importance of different campaign strategies and tactics.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study shows that Swedish MPs consider the substance of politics and the party leader as significantly more important than different campaign strategies and tactics when explaining election outcomes. In doing so, the perceptions of MPs are at odds with the literature on political campaigning, political marketing, and political public relations, stressing the importance of campaign strategies and tactics such as effective identification of target groups, use of opinion polls and focus groups, and extensive use of campaign expertise.

For campaign managers, these results suggest that a major challenge might be to convince other parts of the party elites of the importance and effectiveness of campaign strategies and tactics—or of centralizing the power of election campaigning to those parts of the party most likely to emphasize the importance of effective uses of different campaign strategies and tactics. On a theoretical level, the results suggest that the pace at which parties increase and professionalize their use of various campaign strategies and tactics may be conditioned not only by party type, resources, and whether the parties have suffered any shocks (Gibson and Römmele, 2001), but also by how important these are perceived to be within different parts of party elites.

Before firm conclusions can be drawn, more research is, however, needed. As one of the first to investigate elite perceptions of what matters when explaining election outcomes, this study is by necessity exploratory. Among other things, further research should develop a theoretical framework for investigating and explaining party elites' perceptions of what matters for explaining election

outcomes, include more countries, compare the perceptions of different parts of party elites, and further probe the antecedents and consequences of party elites' perceptions empirically.

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