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The Obama Effect
The Perception of Campaigning 2.0 in Swedish National Election 2010

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents a survey study on attitudes towards political campaigning in social media. During the national election in Sweden in 2010, a considerable amount of resources was invested in online communication with the constituency, not least in social media. Whereas several studies have focused on e-democracy at a macro level, there is a lack of studies examining the phenomenon of campaigning 2.0 as it is perceived by the actual voters. This chapter, therefore, asks the question whether the voters noticed the political campaigning in social media at all, and if so, how they perceived it. The main findings are that respondents who were already interested and politically engaged considered campaigning 2.0, in line with the politicians’ rhetoric, as a way to enhance democracy. Respondents who were neither interested nor engaged in politics, on the other hand, showed little interest in this kind of communication. Consequently, the study confirms assumptions about digital divide and continued fragmentation of the citizenry.

Keywords: Political Campaigning, Social Media, Politics 2.0, Campaigning 2.0, E-Democracy, Young voters

INTRODUCTION
Political campaigning in 2010 is campaigning 2.0. The American president Barack Obama serves as the front figure of this new way of communicating with the constituency – direct and online. Election campaigns often function as test sites for new communication technologies and tactics. At the same time the discourse among campaigners, politicians and the political experts is rather technologically optimistic. Above all, they embrace the democratic potential of the new media. Online campaigning is presented as a possibility to solve the well-known problems of disengaged citizens, decreasing voter turnouts and declining party membership (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2007; Stakston, 2010). Generally, it is claimed that the Internet, and Web 2.0 (social media) in particular, supports the development of e-democracy through fostering direct contact between the political representatives and the citizenry (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 2003). This enthusiastic tone of the discourse is obviously not limited to
campaigns in the US. When Sweden prepared for the national election in September 2010, the expectations on Web 2.0 were high among politicians and campaign workers (Gelin, 2010; Staktson, 2010). The main political parties in Sweden spent a considerable amount of time and money communicating on social media platforms. Numerous employees worked solely with social media campaigning, professionals were hired to coach politicians in different online possibilities, and campaign workers were activated to spread the political message in their online networks.

However, several studies are questioning this celebratory discourse. These studies stress phenomena such as the digital divide (Norris, 2001), simplification (Noam, 2002), commodification and commercialization of political information (Andrejevic, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002), as well as online noise covering the important political discussions (Dean 2010; Noam, 2002). In this binary discussion of the potentialities and actualities of campaigning 2.0, there is still a clear gap: the voters’ perspective on these developments is missing, at least in the Swedish context. The question is whether the potential voters even care about the interactive possibilities following campaigning 2.0 and politics 2.0.

Therefore, this chapter analyzes how users of social media - one of the main target groups of politicians, campaigners and spin doctors - perceive this form of subtle and innovative campaigning. Firstly, the chapter describes how media and politics converge in Sweden, with special focus on the appearance of party campaigns in social media in the national elections 2010. Secondly, and mainly, the study examines the awareness and perception of both political campaigning and politics in general in social media. Based on a survey among students at a Swedish university, the chapter asks whether the addressed citizens notice political campaigning at all in their social networks, and if so; how do they perceive it? The chapter concludes by critically examining to what extent civic awareness is raised by new media.

THE SWEDISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

In order to understand the discussion in the chapter, it is necessary to present the general political and media related background. Sweden is a parliamentary monarchy. The parliament has legislative power, and the government implements the decisions of the parliament. General elections are held every fourth year, on the third Sunday of September. During most of the twentieth century, the party system has consisted of five significant parties organized in two blocks; the Left block and the Right block. Since the 1930s, the Social Democrats, the biggest party within the Left block, has been the party to most often hold the government position as a single-party minority government. When they have formed minority governments they have organized coalitions with other parties (not necessarily another party within the same block). This system of constant cooperation has resulted in a relatively consensus-oriented political climate in Sweden. Towards the end of the 1990s the political landscape changed to some extent with more political parties on the field, but the left-right distinction in politics has remained relevant nonetheless (Strömbäck & Nord, 2008). All in all, Sweden fits well into Hallin & Mancini’s (2004) description of democratic corporatist model which includes, for instance, a rather extensive welfare state, consensus-oriented politics, high levels of political parallelism and active state intervention.

The Swedish parties are mainly financed through public funding. Apart from that, they receive small incomes from member fees, donations, sales and lotteries (Strömbäck & Nord, 2008). The voter turnout is among the highest in the world. In 2006, as much as 82 percent of the population voted in the general election. However, like in many other countries, the voter turnout has been declining since the early 1980s (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2007; Petersson, Djerf-Pierre, Holmberg, Strömbäck & Weibull, 2006). Furthermore, the electoral system in Sweden must be characterized as relatively party-centered. Parties are generally still considered more important than individual candidates, despite the introduction of a system to express preferences for a candidate in 1998 (Martinsson, 1999; Petersson et al., 2006). In Sweden, characterized by strong party identification, individualized campaigns are considered problematic. The politician is meant to represent the voice of the party, hence direct and personal
communication with the constituency might be perceived as pushing one’s own interests instead of that of
the party (Martinsson, 1999; Zittel, 2004). It is important to keep this in mind, since (personalized) social
media is increasingly used as a communication tool which might be seen as contributing to the emergence
of a personalized political system in Sweden.

The most intense phase of campaigning in Sweden normally lasts for three to four weeks. The
previously stable voting patterns have vanished; today people switch preference more easily from one
election to next, but also during one specific campaign (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2007; Strömbäck &
Nord, 2008). The political trust has also clearly decreased. In the past when party allegiance was more
stable, election campaigns were less important. Obviously, they play a bigger role when allegiances are
more volatile; a majority of the voters nowadays claim that they make up their mind during the
campaigna. Nevertheless, Swedes are described as fairly interested in politics, especially during election
times when politicians appear a lot in the media. However, their actual political activity consists mainly of
voting and following the news, contrary to for instance Americans who engage more actively in the
campaigning itself (Petersson et al., 2006; Strömbäck & Nord, 2008). Swedish voters are said to be media
centered, since a majority of the population relies mainly on the traditional media for political information
(Nord, 2006). Strömbäck and Nord (2008) give several reasons for this:

One reason for this is the independence of the news media from politics. A second reason is that the
media are the most important source of information for the people in general. A third reason is that
the parties do not have any real opportunities to communicate directly and in an unfiltered manner
with the citizenry through TV. A fourth reason is that people’s need for orientation has increased
due to the increasing electoral volatility and decreasing party identification [...]. A fifth reason is
the belief among political actors that they must adapt to the news media and their standards of
newsworthiness in order to gain attention [...]. (p. 117)

In terms of political campaigning, it is important to know that the parties could not launch political spots
on TV until quite recently. This direct form of presenting the party program without editorial influence by
journalists became possible for the first time during the election campaign for the European Parliament in
2009. Consequently, Petersson et al. (2006) claim that Swedish election campaigns have been not only
mediated, but largely media-steered. “That is, that they are imbued with and tailored according to the
objectives media set for political journalism and election coverage” (p. 53). Politicians are often used as
sources and hence function as agenda setters, while the journalists frame the stories and therefore have a
comparatively strong influence on the political discourse.

However, this point of view can be made more nuanced. The media logic is built on a struggle for
public attention which affects both the media and the politicians equally. It is therefore hard to decide
who has “the upper hand”, politicians or journalists (Petersson et al., 2006, p. 93). Moreover, with the
Internet and the fragmentation of the media landscape, the struggle for attention has intensified. More
actors, such as different branch organizations, think tanks and a multitude of media channels are now
involved in the business of influencing public opinion. The public relations and lobbying branches have
certainly expanded in Sweden, albeit modestly compared to many other countries. As a result, a
postmodern, market-oriented way of campaigning has evolved, also in the sense that political campaigns
nowadays start out by studying both the voters’ and the opponents’ opinions (Petersson et al., 2006).
Consequently social media is often welcomed as revolutionizing the communication between citizens and
the political elite.

SWEDISH POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING 2.0
In February 2010 the leader of the Social Democrats, Mona Sahlin, initiated the campaign for the Swedish national election by stating that the campaign would build extensively on social media and direct mobilization. The plan was to establish at least one million direct contacts during the campaign. In the aftermath of Obama’s campaign, political spin doctors and consultants reinforced the importance of social media in order to mobilize swing- and non-voters in particular (Gelin, 2009). On the one hand, campaigners stated that the parties were going where the voters are, namely online and especially on social networking sites. On the other hand, they stressed that an integrated campaign, both on- and offline, was crucial. Campaigning 2.0 is therefore based also on offline forms of spreading the political message: door-by-door campaigning, telephone calls and billboards. Although these are rather conventional features of campaigning in the U.S., they are partly new in the Swedish context (Petersson et al., 2006).

Martin Gelin – one of the founding strategists of the Swedish version of campaigning 2.0 - stresses firstly that the main goal of employing social media is to spread political information among the citizenry. Secondly, the political elite and strategists can get information about current matters of concern among the citizens. Thirdly, Web 2.0 provides the establishment of a dialog with and between the citizens (Gelin, 2010). Gelin’s arguments exemplify the dominating celebratory discourse among campaigners and communication strategists (Howard, 2006). By analyzing the national election campaign in the United Kingdom in May 2010, Gelin (2010) draws the conclusion that information spread through social media has more substance than mass mediated communication. He states that traditional media is more spectacle-oriented, thereby supporting negativity as well as cynicism among the voters. Coleman and Blumler (2009) present a similar line of argumentation when stating that the mediatization and professionalization of political campaigns lead to journalists focusing more on the scandals, wrongdoings and personal failures of individual politicians, which in turn contributes to increased cynicism and political disconnection among the citizens. Cynicism and political disenchantment find its visible expression in decreasing voter turnouts and party memberships. All of this adds up to a perceived democratic deficit. As a result, the possibilities of Web 2.0 are celebrated as the master program to solve the problems of contemporary democracy. Political participation is presented as being easy, playful and not linked to any specific ideology.

It is hardly surprising that campaigners saw the future for campaigning in Sweden online, since 65 percent of Swedes use the Internet daily (Carlsson & Facht, 2010). Among 16 to 35-year-olds the rate is even higher, around 80 percent, which is a relatively large number according to the World Internet Statistics 2010iv. The Internet is primarily used for sending e-mails, checking the news and reading online newspapers. Apart from that, practical information such as timetables, product information facts or information about travelling are of great interest (Findahl, 2009). When it comes to social media 26 per cent of the Internet users employ them at least once during an average day. Facebook is among the most popular social media with around 4.09 million Swedish usersv. The amount of Internet users in Sweden who are members of an online community such as Facebook increased from 10 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2009 (Carlsson & Facht, 2010).

One of the problems when dealing with campaigning 2.0 is defining what is meant with Web 2.0, a term coined by Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty in 2004 in order to refer to a new version of the web. In this chapter Web 2.0 and social media are used synonymously. Wu Song (2010) stresses that Web 2.0 is “commonly used to refer to web formats such as blogs and social networking sites that are driven by social connections and user participation” (p. 249). Important proponents are YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Wikipedia, all of which are changing the Internet experience for a wide range of users. Although there is broad agreement that Web 2.0 involves some kind of participatory principle, it is not clear exactly what web applications belong to that category, especially when it comes to an everyday usage of the term (Wu Song, 2010).

Different forms of social media provide different possibilities for political communication and campaigning. In the Swedish context, Facebook was currently used and understood as the primary platform for communication with the voters. Twitter, on the other hand, was not as widely used as is usual
in the US and served more of an elite discussion between politicians, political PR consultants and journalists. Blogs are considered to be a vivid field of political debate and the political parties tried actively to establish contacts with important bloggers (Stakston, 2010). Although there are a number of politically rather influential blogs, lifestyle blogs are dominating in Sweden. According to Findahl (2009), the typical blogger is young, female and writes about her everyday life.

An ad-hoc inquiry among communication professionals of the main political parties confirmed that social media was highly valued in order to reach voters. All parties that responded to our inquiry stressed a high degree of professionalization concerning campaigning in social media. They employed extra personnel to handle the different communication platforms. Furthermore, the political staff was briefed in the correct usage of social media. All informants described this effort as something completely new which had not been important during prior elections, even after the emergence of social media. The Social Democrats was the party most pronounced in its aim to reach out to the voters online, for example, they offered a simple online toolkit for individualized engagement in the campaign, similar to options for participation in the Obama campaign.

Petersson et al. (2006) argue that the ambition of Swedish political parties is to communicate with all citizens, as opposed to the strong segmented campaigns in the US with a typical “focus on ‘most likely voters’ and emphasis on demographic segmentation” (p. 109). However, our ad-hoc inquiry showed that the parties focused on traditional adherents as their target groups even within social media. Interestingly, not one of the informants claimed that the parties aimed to activate new voters or swing voters in particular. They referred to “our voters” in general as the typical party target groups characterized along demographical lines. As early as in 1998, Bimber stated that the Internet might lead to an accelerated pluralism, meaning that it supports the formation of thin issue-based communities rather than more stable thick communities. He argued that the Internet encourages the eroding process of group politics towards less institutionalized, issue-based political activities (Bimber, 1998). Contrary to that argument the Swedish parties were still trying to translate their traditional party perception and core values into the online world in their attempts to activate traditional voter groups. Bimber as well as other more recent studies (Howard, 2006), however, show that the amount of undecided and swing voters among the constituency is steadily growing. Voting is no longer based on long-lasting party alliance, but on current developments within society perceived to be important by the individual voter.

THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING 2.0 STUDY

Politicians clearly have a positive attitude towards the utility of social media in the Swedish context. Web 2.0 is believed to give a voice to the citizens and include them in the political debate. Simultaneously, it offers the politicians an opportunity to get closer to the voters. A case in point is communication consultant Stakston (2010) who calls for ‘politics 2.0’, i.e. removing decision-making processes from the context of traditional parties to new forms of integrated participation.

However, throughout this discourse of positive potential and improvement of civic culture, the citizens themselves hardly ever get a say. Although abstract typologies of new media (non-) users do exist, such as digital natives and digital immigrants, these are mostly limited to a theoretical level (e.g. Prensky, 2001). There is a lack of empirical research on attitudes towards the presence of political parties in social media, at least in a Swedish context. Partial exceptions include Gustafsson (2010) and Findahl (2009). However, their studies differ considerably from our research. Gustafsson (2010) accomplished a small-scale qualitative study with semi-structured discussions about attitudes towards the political presence on Facebook. The results were ambiguous; on the one hand some respondents expressed contempt towards politics on Facebook, whereas others ascribed a certain democratic potential to social media communication, but were afraid of information overload. The scope of the study was too narrow to provide any general conclusions and consequently, the author called for more comprehensive studies to get a broader understanding. Like us, Findahl (2009) obtained his results from a quantitative survey study,
but he was concerned with the Internet in general and not social media per se. His study observed a small increase in interest concerning political information online, and the author consequently anticipated a more inclusive dialogue with citizens in the future.

The study in this chapter examines young peoples’ perceptions about political communication 2.0 and especially political campaigning 2.0. The main questions are: Do the addressed citizens notice the presence of political discussions and party campaigns in their social media networks? If so, what do they think about it? Do they trust political information received through social media more than that of traditional mass media, as is claimed by PR consultants and current handbooks for politicians (e.g. Stakston, 2010)? Do social media offer an alternative to traditional media when it comes to political information and political participation?

RESEARCHING POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING 2.0

In order to investigate how Swedish voters with a high usage of social media perceive political campaigning in their social networks, an online survey was conducted among all students (approximately 7800 registered students) at Södertörn University. The university is located in the southern suburbia of Stockholm and has a rather atypical student profile in the Swedish context: in comparison with other universities in Sweden, the students are younger and more often they have a migrant background. The population is of special interest, since young adults are among the biggest user groups of social media in Sweden (Findahl, 2009). Hence, they are more likely to come across party campaigns online. It also seemed interesting to analyze this particular population’s attitude towards campaigning 2.0, namely that of young adults from a migrant background who might be more inclined towards swing voting rather than stable party loyalty (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2008).

The server-side web survey (Couper, 2008) distributed by e-mail was chosen due to its practicability and efficiency. A link to the online questionnaire was sent out in May 2010. Access to Internet and e-mail accounts can be considered unproblematic since all students receive an e-mail address when registering for studies and they all have access to wireless lan, as well as computer rooms at the campus. The response rate was quite low, only 14 percent (the survey resulted in 1091 completed questionnaires). Compared to other non-solicited online surveys the response rate was nonetheless relatively high since response rates for online surveys tend to be 10 percent or lower (Witmer, Colman & Katzman, 1999). The low response rate might be partly explained by the fact that not all students use their university e-mail accounts regularly. Unfortunately there are no official figures on the usage of the university’s e-mail accounts available. Sax et al. have identified three main reasons for non-response in online surveys which might be applicable also in this case, namely “limited access, difficulties in assuring anonymity and confidentiality, and technical problems” (Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003, p. 413). The authors discuss the growing intensification of online surveys as a bombardment of especially students facing growing time pressure and work load at the same time. Sax et al. state that response rates to national mail-out surveys decreased from 60 percent to 21 percent since 1960. In order to assess a potential non-response bias the low response rate might have caused for our survey, the composition of the sample was matched with the latest data about the students at Södertörn University in regard to area of studies, age and gender, published in the Annual Report for 2009. The comparison showed only marginal discrepancies (see Table 1) but the results should nonetheless be interpreted with caution due to the low response rate.

The online questionnaire was comprised of 31 questions divided into four 4 sections, namely media usage, social media, political campaigning and demography. The quality of the questions, positioning and design was tested with a pre-test among students belonging to the original population. After the pre-test the questionnaire was partly adjusted, mainly by shortening the questionnaire.
In the analysis we will not focus on differences between demographical categorizations such as gender, ethnicity and age. Even though these variables were continually tested, they are not given prominence as analytical categories in the following.

Table 1: Overview over Socio-demographic Facts of the Respondents (in percent)

AWARENESS OF POLITICS 2.0

Social media use

To begin with, it is important to clarify that most of the students take part in social media in one form or another. Only 9 percent declared that they do not use social media at all. Facebook is the most frequently used social medium. 63 percent stated that they use Facebook on a daily basis, with blogs and YouTube reaching approximately 20 percent of the students’ attention daily. However, it was quite common for YouTube to be used as often as a couple of times per week. Only 4 percent used Twitter daily and as many as 85 percent reported to never use Twitter. Those figures reflect well the general statistics of social media usage in Sweden, where Facebook is dominating among the social networking sites. Blogs in general are written by only 5 percent of the Swedish population, whereas 37 percent read blogs from time to time (Hast & Ossiansson, 2010). Furthermore, the students in our survey spent more time - namely between 30 minutes up to one hour - using social media as compared to watching television online, reading newspapers (both online and offline), listening to the radio (both online and offline), as well as reading e-books. Only in reading books and watching television offline did they spend more time on a daily basis. All in all, social media is a part of everyday life for the majority of the students.

Figure 1: Social Media Usage in Percent

Awareness of political content in social media

The students were asked whether they had noticed the presence of political parties in general on the social media platforms. 47 percent answered affirmatively, whereas 44 percent answered negative. When asked whether they had observed that the actual campaign had been initiated, as many as 77 percent gave a positive reply, however only 28 percent of the students indicated that social media had been their source of information. Anyway, the most common ways to encounter political content in social media were through status updates (37 percent), group invitations on Facebook (27 percent), link postings (20 percent) and blog entries (14 percent). Only 5 percent of the respondents had been contacted directly by a party representative in social media. Hence, although the respondents came across political content in social media – albeit in a more general (not election-specific way) - the politicians themselves did not (yet) actively contact them.
The majority of our respondents did not engage to any higher degree with the political information they received from acquaintances in their online social networks. Most often they just briefly skimmed through the requests (27 percent) or alternatively read them closely but without engaging further (18 percent). In that sense we could speak of thin-awareness, meaning a superficial rather than profound awareness, or as Norris (2002) puts it, “people click from one topic to another, this process is more accidental than purposive” (p. 66). Thin-awareness is unlikely to result in any online participation and even more unlikely in offline civic activity.

**Political interest and the awareness of campaigning 2.0**

In order to get a more differentiated picture of the awareness of political communication in social media, several intervening factors, such as political interest, must be discussed. The students were asked to evaluate their political interest in general, i.e. even during non-election periods. 24 percent declared that they were very interested in politics, with an additional 40 percent stating that they were fairly interested. Only 6 percent were not interested at all. Regarding the awareness of campaigning 2.0 there is a clear difference between those who described themselves as being politically interested and those who were not. Students who were interested in politics were more aware of the presence of political campaigning online, whereas politically disinterested students were less likely to be aware of it. Moreover, politically interested students were more likely to be aware of political jokes and parodies, which might be understood as a certain form of political awareness. Peterson (2008) states that humor “can give us information and insight that enhances our ability to fulfill our roles as citizens in a democracy” (p. 22). In that respect our findings confirm well-established theories of knowledge gap and digital divide, describing an enhanced gap between already well-informed and interested citizens and those who are neither informed nor interested (Norris 2000, 2001, 2002; Trichenor, Donohue & Olien 1970). Furthermore, it is likely that politically interested students associate with other politically interested individuals and consequently receive more political information than disinterested students. Hence the virtuous circle of political communication described by Norris (2000) is even more pronounced.

**Political engagement and the awareness of campaigning 2.0**

Not surprisingly, not many of the respondents were politically active within party politics. Only 4 percent stated to be active members within a party, whereas 7 percent were passive members. These results correspond well with other reports, showing young people in particular to be hesitant towards active membership in organized political movements, instead preferring alternative forms of activism (Fenton, 2010; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2007). Similarly to the previous findings, there was a significant difference between students who were party members (active and passive) and those who were not party members, in regard to their awareness of campaigning 2.0. Students who were party members were more likely to be aware of the presence of political parties in social media. Among the students 63 percent are considered swing voters, i.e. they have changed their party preference since the last election. However, the tendency towards swing voting has no significant influence on the awareness of campaigning 2.0.

**Civic engagement and the awareness of campaigning 2.0**

In order to widen the perspective and not only focus on political party membership as a crucial variable representing political engagement, we analyzed the awareness of politics 2.0 in connection with a broader civic engagement. While the respondents were not particularly interested in politics regarding party membership, a more nuanced picture emerged when applying this broader understanding of politics. When the students were asked about their concern with certain societal issues, such as migration, gender equality and environmental issues, many of them showed great involvement. Approximately 40-60
percent stated that the issues listed were very important, with an additional 30-40 percent replying that they were rather important.

Besides showing interest in such topics, we asked whether they ever discussed the stated topics with friends and acquaintances. Most of the students were not only (passively) interested, but also discussed the issues. Naturally, the next question was whether they not only discussed the issues, but also acted according to their stated opinions by, for instance, consuming environmentally friendly products or donating money or things to humanitarian organizations. Even regarding this the students must be described as highly active with between 50-90 percent stating to be very active. In that sense, our survey confirms Fenton’s argument that we should speak of a displacement of traditional politics rather than political withdrawal. The students are not politically engaged in a traditional, but rather a post- or late modern, sense (Fenton, 2010).

Analytically it is possible to make a distinction between institutionalized civic engagement and non-institutionalized civic engagement. Here institutionalized civic engagement is understood as passive or active membership in a non-government or non-profit organization or interest group, but not a political party. Non-institutionalized civic engagement takes the shape of societal activities such as environmentally friendly consumption, voluntary work, donations, signing petitions, participating in protests, initiating and becoming members of political groups within social media and actively discussing and commenting current issues, however not within the frame of an organization. The analysis shows that students who were engaged both in an institutionalized and a non-institutionalized way were more likely to be aware of political communication within social media than students who were not civically engaged at all. Nonetheless, it is important to notice that only civic engagement in a non-institutionalized sense matters for the awareness of campaigning 2.0 statistically. 95 percent of the students that noticed campaigning 2.0 were engaged in a non-institutionalized manner.

PERCEPTION OF CAMPAIGNING 2.0

Perception of the mediation of political campaigns

Apart from the awareness of politics 2.0 and campaigning 2.0, we were also interested in attitudes towards them. One part of the questionnaire therefore focused on the students’ perceptions of different ways politicians communicate with citizens. The respondents were asked how receptive to political content through different communication methods they considered themselves to be. The findings confirm previous research that Swedes regard mass media as a relatively satisfying source of political information (Nord, 2006). The majority of the students who were asked about their preferred media channels when it comes to political information clearly considered traditional mass media as both professional and trustworthy. 61 percent agreed completely or almost completely with the statement that they were well-reached by mass media since mass media is impartial. Similarly, 64 percent agreed with the statement that they were well-reached by mass media because mass media handles information professionally. When asked about communication via social media, campaign rallies and political advertising, the support is significantly lower. These findings speak against the celebratory tone of political communication practitioners such as Stakston (2010). However, the most critical attitudes were displayed by the students towards direct telephone calls by campaign workers. Only 10 percent stated to have a positive attitude towards telephone calls as a campaigning tool. This is in line with a general critical attitude towards direct political marketing in Sweden. Previous studies have shown that among the possible forms of direct contacts between campaign workers and voters, visits or calls at home are clearly the least popular (Petersson et al., 2006).

Perception of political content in social media
In order to map out the general attitude towards political communication in social media, we created a cumulative social media attitude index, consisting of eight items. The focus was on political issues in general, not campaigning per se. The degree of positive attitudes expressed towards politics in social media determined the placement on the social media attitude index. For the sake of clarity we created four subgroups after the cumulating the index items.

**Figure 2: Social Media Attitude Index**

As figure 2 shows, the respondents were overall rather negative towards political communication in social media. When applying a more nuanced analysis it became clear that very active social media users were more likely to be positive towards politics 2.0 than students who did not use social media at all. Those who were used to the communication patterns in social media were thus able to see a certain democratic potential. Their frequent use of social media indicates a general approval of social media induced communication. In addition, they are presumably more used to selecting relevant information.

**Political interest and the perception of politics 2.0**

Just as political interest was a crucial factor when analyzing awareness of campaigning 2.0, it was relevant also concerning the perceptions. As the table below shows, students that were interested in politics were more likely to be positive towards political communication in social media, whereas students who were disinterested in politics tended to be less positive. The difference between these groups when it comes to the perception of politics 2.0 is highly significant. Linking this back to the aforementioned finding that politically disinterested students were less likely to be aware of political communication in social media, one could argue, in accordance with other studies, that interested students really do see a democratic potential in social media (Gustafsson, 2010; Norris, 2002). Our data speak against a mobilization of students that are disengaged from politics in social media. For them social media is more about networking with friends. In that sense the gap between students who are already involved and aware and those who are not is reinforced.

**Figure 3: Political Interest and the Perception of Politics 2.0**

**Political engagement and the perception of campaigning 2.0**

When it comes to political engagement in a narrow sense, here operationalized as passive or active party membership, those who were politically active were more positive towards politics 2.0 than those who were non-active. Gustafsson (2010), who has investigated politically active and non-active Facebook users, found similar tendencies, and suggested that politically non-active Facebook users find it hard to take information on Facebook seriously, and therefore assume that political participation in social media networks hardly can be seen as meaningful.
Civic engagement and the perception of campaigning 2.0

We also found a correlation, although weak, between civic engagement and the perception of campaigningxviii. Active and passive members in non-governmental or non-profit organizations (that is, institutionalized civically engaged) tended to be rather positive towards political campaigning in social media, whereas non-members were less positive. Non-institutionalized civically engaged students, i.e. those who for example donate or consume environmentally friendly products, were also more positive towards politics 2.0 than students that were not civically engaged. This too supports Gustafsson’s (2010) findings stating that politically active participants perceived Facebook as a helpful extension of communication possibilities. This tendency was confirmed when looking at the correlation between the awareness and the perception of politics 2.0xix. Those students who were aware of political content in their social media networks were more likely to be positive towards it than those who were not aware of politics 2.0.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Figure 5: Institutionalized Civic Engagement and the Perception of Politics 2.0

CONCLUSION

In brief, students who were politically and civically interested and active were more sensitive to political communication in social media. At the same time they valued political communication in social media higher and anticipated the democratic potential of new ways of communicating with the political establishment. Another assessment emerged when turning to the politically and civically disinterested and non-active students. They were less aware and less positive towards political communication in social media. One explanation might be that they were not as sensitive to political communication as politically interested students, i.e. even if they came across similar content in their social networks they might not label it as political. Apart from this explanation one could employ the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974), as Norris (2002) does. She argues that already existing patterns of engagement and participation are reinforced in the online environment, since “Internet users have certain predispositions and needs that motivate them to seek different programs and sources […]“ (Norris, 2002, p. 60). This statement is supported by the main finding of the study namely an apparent gap between those who were already politically interested and those who were not, which is vital to pay attention to. In this respect political communication might contribute to further fragmentation of the citizenry rather than to an integration of broader social strata in an equal dialogue. At present, political parties seem to reinforce this gap by focusing on communicating with the voters who are already involved and interested, thereby, as Norris (2002) states, “preaching to the choir” (p. 76).

Politicians and campaigners embrace the Internet revolution (Howard, 2006; Norris, 2002) and celebrate it as a general solution to problems such as democratic deficit and the decreasing engagement of citizens in traditional politics. The Internet revolution promises a more even and equal relationship between the political elite and the “ordinary” citizens. Thereby, democracy is supposed to be strengthened. Nonetheless, politicians and campaigners are not able to involve formerly disinterested and non-engaged citizens. Instead, they focus on people who are already civically active and interested. This is reflected in our findings, which go in hand with earlier ideas such as Norris’ (2000) virtuous circle of political communication. Rather than the Internet revolutionizing political participation, we found old
patterns reinforced. The rhetoric of e-democracy and direct interaction is not (yet) living up to its promises.

Instead of uncritically celebrating e-democracy and the Internet revolution, future research should ask for new mechanisms for participation in online environments. New possibilities of communication between citizens and politicians do not automatically result in more intense and direct communication, since the possibilities for interaction continue to be limited. For instance, the amount of time available for individual politicians will not dramatically increase. Even if it might be easier for the individual citizen to send a question or a comment using social media, the respective representative will not be able to respond personally to each and every citizen’s request Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler furthermore state that although interactivity as such is praised “many politicians lack confidence in entering into public discussion beyond the protective walls of the broadcasting studio”(2009, p. 174).

Another important mechanism concerns online selection procedures. The lack of time makes it necessary to structure online content according to relevance. New selection mechanisms organizing social media communication are actually already in place. Today it is the collecting and ranking of information that structure the awareness and importance of weblogs and fan pages. Just as journalists and editors previously functioned as gatekeepers, rankings (such as knuff.se) now structure the awareness and impact of for example weblogs among the political elite and the citizens. As a result, the flow of endless online communication, even without hierarchies, is pre-structured in one way or another. To this new mechanisms of selecting, linking and processing should be paid more attention in order to be able to judge the democratic potential of web, politics and campaigning 2.0. Otherwise the structural gap between active and interested, and so responsive citizens, versus disinterested and non-responsive citizens will only increase.

REFERENCES


Gustafsson, N. (2010). New hopes for democracy or a pirated elite?: Swedish social media users and political mobilisation. Paper presented at the Western Political Science Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, USA.


**ADDITIONAL READING SECTION**


Comparing political communication. Theories, cases, and challenges (pp. 25-44). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

The Obama effect: The Obama effect refers to the way in which political parties have been inspired by the American president Barack Obama’s extraordinary success in engaging grassroots supporters in the presidential campaign of 2008 by the use of direct contacts and social media.

Social media: Social media are networking web sites driven by the logic of social connections and user participation. In the chapter, the terms social media and Web 2.0 are used synonymously.
**E-democracy:** E-democracy stands for a more active citizen participation in political matters, enabled by modern information and communication technologies.

**Politics 2.0:** With politics 2.0 we refer to one of the buzz terms in political communication nowadays. The term encapsulates the celebratory understanding of Internet-mediated communication that removes decision-making processes from the isolated context of traditional party politics to new forms of integrated participation.

**Campaigning 2.0:** Campaigning 2.0 is understood as political election campaigns largely performed online with the help of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and weblogs.

**Civic engagement:** Civic engagement is a contested term and one clear definition is hard to find. In the chapter we distinguish between institutionalized civic engagement and non-institutionalized civic engagement. Institutionalized civic engagement includes passive and active membership in parties as well as interest groups, non-governmental and non-profit organizations. Non-institutionalized civic engagement refers to civic activities that are part of everyday life, such as environmental friendly consumption, volunteering, donating, and signing petitions.

**Thin-awareness:** Thin-awareness is understood as shallow awareness. The recipient is not engaging in-depth with the content. As a result of clicking or sapping through several topics (for instance on a website), the process of reading information is more or less accidental rather than purposeful.

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2. On the ballot the voter can only choose between parties but can express his/her preference for a candidate in case the party wins the election.
3. In 2006 58 percent of the voters reported that they decided about whom to give their vote to during the campaign. This number has increased continuously since 1964 (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2007).
6. We contacted all big parties that are running for election. Six out of ten answered, namely Feministiskt initiativ (the Feminist Initiative), Sverigedemokraterna (the Sweden Democrats), Folkpartiet (the Liberal Party), Miljöpartiet (the Green Party), Socialdemokraterna (the Social Democrats), Kristdemokraterna (the Christian Democrats).
7. For example Parliamentarian elections 2006 and elections for the European parliament 2009.
9. Half of the students are younger than 25 years.
10. 37 percent of new students come from a migrant background, i.e. both parents are born in another country.
11. These formats are used between 15 and 30 minutes on an average day.
12. $\chi^2=27,031$, $p=0.00$, $N=950$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between political interest and the awareness of political jokes and parodies.
13. $\chi^2=39,618$, $p=0.00$, $N=1084$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between non-institutionalized civic engagement and the awareness of campaigning 2.0.
14. a) social media provide true and trustworthy information b) through social media the contact with politicians is improved c) social media have a political function for me d) with social media I can discuss politics with my friends e) social media offer the possibility to be political in an amusing way f) politicians should use social media because they are trustworthy g) politicians in social media are of interest to me
15. $\chi^2=69,085$, $p=0.00$, $N=987$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between political interest and the perception of politics 2.0.
16. $\chi^2=39,618$, $p=0.00$, $N=1084$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between non-institutionalized civic engagement and the awareness of campaigning 2.0.
17. $\chi^2=17,632$, $p=0.007$, $N=910$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between party membership and the perception of politics 2.0.
18. $\chi^2=11,889$, $p=0.06$, $N=990$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between institutionalized civic engagement and the perception of politics 2.0.
19. $\chi^2=85,766$, $p=0.00$, $N=919$, null hypothesis: there is no correlation between awareness of social media and the perception of politics 2.0.