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978-0-521-12584-0 - The Political System Matters: Social Psychology and Voting Behavior in Sweden and the United States

Donald Granberg and Soren Holmberg

Excerpt

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1 Social psychological processes in political context

In the parlance of contemporary social science, the thesis of our book, that “the political system matters,” must be considered as a valence issue rather than a position issue (Butler and Stokes, 1974; McLean, 1981). That is, we do not see ourselves arrayed against some unnamed competitors who are somehow asserting that the political system does not matter. It is rather a matter of emphasis. For it is often the case that social psychologists and political scientists take the political system for granted. Sometimes they act and write *as if* the political system did *not* matter. Yet, if you asked them, most would concede that of course it matters. There are times, however, when analysts become so engrossed in the details of a particular system or type of system that they lose sight of the fact that there are alternatives. In making a series of comparisons between Sweden and the United States, our purpose is to provide a gentle but well-documented reminder. In analyzing political behavior and political psychology, it is essential to bear in mind the nature of the political system in which people are thinking and acting, and which they may be seeking to alter or maintain.

If the political system matters, the obvious question is how it matters. A truly general social psychological analysis of politics would state principles abstractly enough to be applicable to a wide range of political systems and the ways in which people function psychologically within those systems. Truth be told, we may not yet even be close to being able to do that. What we can do, and indeed, what we do in this book, is examine principles, effects, and relationships in a series of comparative empirical analyses. If the political system matters, then at the very least the strength of various effects and relationships might be expected to vary. At most, it is possible that a relationship observed in one system might be absent or conceivably even be reversed in a different system.

It should also be stated at the outset that we take for granted and shall not argue the advantages and benefits of an interdisciplinary approach (Sherif and Sherif, 1969a). In the case of this work, the subject matter is a meeting ground for social psychology and political science. Over the years it has been common to assume that psychology matters in politics, e.g., that the personality of leaders may make an impact on policy, that perception or

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how people define a situation psychologically can affect the outcome. Our focus generally is on the flow in the other direction – namely, the impact of living in a particular political system on how people appear to function psychologically.

Systemic effects on psychological processes

In further delineating our approach, we shall describe briefly what our study is not and then point to what can be regarded as the closest analogue in prior research. First, we do not focus on the differences in the policy making process nor on the policy differences between Sweden and the U.S. (Heclo and Madsen, 1986). Such differences are both real and significant. We also do not focus on a specific issue and how it is treated in the two countries, e.g., air pollution (Lundqvist, 1980), health and occupational safety (Kelman, 1981), or unemployment (Ginsburg, 1983). Nor is our focus on the consequences of political policies on how people live in the two nations, a question of obvious relevance.

While our approach is somewhat broader and more basic in orientation, we do not seek to be exhaustive as to the differences between Sweden and the U.S. We have, for the most part, avoided questions pertaining to stratification and demography. It would, for example, be a relatively simple matter to show that social class has been a far more important determinant of voting in Sweden than in the United States (Korpi, 1981; Lipset, 1981), although within Sweden in recent years ideology may have been increasing in importance and class may have become relatively less important (Holmberg and Gilljam, 1987). Without denying in any way the importance of such abiding issues in political sociology, we have decided to limit the scope of our present inquiry and not to take up such matters.

The comparative analysis of politically relevant survey data is a rich tradition going back to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's (1963) study of the "civic culture" in Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. Strangely enough, however, the closest analogue to what we are trying to do in this monograph may be a study that had practically nothing to do with politics but focused on a matter of basic research in psychology. In 1966, an interdisciplinary team of Northwestern University professors Marshall Segall, Donald Campbell, and Melville Herskovits published a book entitled *The influence of culture on visual perception*. They reported a comparative study of the degree to which people in very different cultures are susceptible to optical illusions. Briefly, they found that people in western, technologically advanced, urbanized, and industrialized societies were more susceptible to some visual illusions (e.g., Müller-Lyer) but less susceptible to others than people in the technologically less advanced non-western

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cultures. Their results were theoretically equivocal. In support of Gestalt or nativist theories of perception, they did not find any culture in which these illusions did not occur at least to some degree. On the other hand, behavioristic or empiricist theories of perception were supported by the fact that the degree of susceptibility to basic optical illusions was affected by the cultural context in which the person had been living (Segall, Campbell, and Herskovits, 1966). For example, people in western cultures who had lived in a “well-carpentered” environment with many straight lines and right angles were more susceptible to the Müller–Lyer illusion but less susceptible to some other illusions.¹ The findings could have been cast as evidence that “the cultural system matters.”

Our approach is similar to that of Segall *et al.* in a couple of important respects. First, we are comparing systems that are very different. While Segall *et al.* studied a large number (23) of cultural systems, their most relevant comparisons were between people from systems that were very different. Among the western democracies, Sweden and the United States are about as different as any two political systems. Thus, in the logic of comparative analyses, we are using the “most different systems” design rather than the “most similar systems” design (Przeworski and Teune, 1970).

The design of Segall *et al.*, though using materials that had been studied extensively in the laboratory, was nonexperimental. That is, their independent variable was not manipulated by the experimenter, and their subjects were, of course, not randomly assigned to the experience of being born and socialized into one of several cultures. Similarly, the data in our analyses are derived from nonexperimental surveys in which people who are citizens of Sweden or the U.S. are asked a series of questions. Closer to home, our approach is similar in design to that of Niemi and Westholm (1984), who compared the attitude stability of people in Sweden and the U.S. Our approach, necessitating a book rather than an article, expands this method by making a series of systematic comparisons between Sweden and the U.S. rather than concentrating on only one.

Building blocks from social psychology

The basic concepts in our analyses are drawn from standard conceptual distinctions in contemporary social psychology (e.g., Eiser, 1986; Myers, 1987; Sears, Freedman, and Peplau, 1985). For years, *attitude* has been a central concept in social psychology. We use attitude to refer to a relatively specific evaluative (i.e., affectively charged) judgment people make which reveals a preference that they hold. Stating that abortion should be legal, that nuclear power should be phased out within ten years, that one likes the

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Liberal Party more than the Center Party, or that one likes the Republican Party more than George Bush reflects attitudinally instigated judgments (Eiser, 1984).

We are also interested in how parties, candidates, and leaders appear to individual citizens. We are using the concept of *perception* to refer to beliefs or cognitions people have about political phenomena. If people think that the Communist Party is against nuclear power, that President Jimmy Carter is opposed to a tax cut, that the Conservative Party is further to the right than the Liberal Party, or that Walter Mondale is more liberal than Ronald Reagan, these would be examples of what we treat as political perceptions. We recognize that our usage is somewhat broader than the classical definition of perception which referred to the more or less immediate organization by the individual of sensory stimulation occurring at a given time (Granberg and Seidel, 1976). However, such relatively broad usage has become more or less standard in political psychology (Conover, 1981; Granberg and Brent, 1980).

Thirdly, we deal with a special kind of belief that pertains to a person's *expectation* about what will happen in the future. Believing that there will be a change in the government after the election, that nuclear power will continue to be used as a source of electricity in the twenty-first century, or that George Wallace will carry one's state are examples of the sort of expectations we have in mind. Since they are usually asked and stated as unqualified and unconditional statements about what will occur in the future, technically these expectations should be regarded as prophecies rather than as predictions (Popper, 1959).

The fourth analytical concept we distinguish and use is *behavioral intention*. This is measured simply by asking people what they plan on doing or think they will do at some designated point in the future. The obvious intention questions in election studies concern whether the person intends to vote in an upcoming election and, if so, for which party or candidate.

Finally, we are interested in the *behavior* of people, what they actually do. In the main, we are limited to self-report as to whether people voted and for what party or candidate. In the Swedish data, there has been a sustained and effective program, using official records, to validate people's reports as to whether they voted. For the U.S. data, such validation is more sporadic but has been improving in recent years. There is no way of directly validating party or candidate selection behavior in either country, although comparing the overall distribution in the sample with the electoral outcome provides indirect hints of validity in that regard (Holmberg, 1981). We also consider how people report voting with a longer interval between behavior and measurement. This can, with panel data, be used to assess the reliability of self-report, and it can also be used as an indicator of *recalled behavior*.

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These concepts – attitude, perception, expectation, intention, and behavior – are the focus of our analyses. They each have been measured in similar ways in several surveys in both Sweden and the United States. How they are interrelated and implicated in social psychological processes is the central problem of this book. Among other problems, we shall examine the degree to which attitudes are interrelated to form an ideology and the link between ideology and voting in the two countries. Perceptions of the parties and candidates are studied to determine the degree of perceptual consensus and the extent to which perceptual distortion occurs in placing liked and disliked political actors. We also examine the linkages among preference, expectation, and behavior in order to test various models. The intention–behavior relationship is analyzed to see how strong it is, whether variables can be identified that intervene to determine this strength, and to identify the characteristics of the intention–behavior changers. Finally, we examine accuracy in recalling one’s prior behavior and whether prior behavior or recalled behavior can be used more effectively to predict subsequent behavior.

Why Sweden and the United States?

There are several reasons why comparisons between Sweden and the United States hold considerable potential for fruitful analyses. Not the least of these is the quality of the data sets that will be described shortly. Hopefully, however, we have even better reasons for proceeding than solely because high quality data are available.

Suppose, by way of analogy, that we do a mental experiment involving random assignment of people who initially know nothing about art to two conditions. In condition A, people are shown works of art that differ from each other on several dimensions but on balance are not very different from each other. The slides of works of art shown to people in condition A are poorly focused, and there are several other things that distract people’s attention from the slides that are being shown. In condition B, the works of art are shown with a clear sharp focus and few distractions. Moreover, in B, the pieces of art differ mainly on one salient dimension and are substantially different from one another.

After being shown the slides people in both conditions A and B are asked a series of questions about their attitudes and perceptions pertaining to art. If a scientist studied only condition A, it would be easy to conclude that the average person does not know much or care much about art, has a hard time articulating any organized view of art, and demonstrates little coherence or stability in artistic preferences. Admittedly, this analogy is a bit overdrawn, but clearly a comparative analysis between conditions A and B

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will tell us more about human inclinations and capacities than concentrating exclusively on either A or B. In Sweden, the strong and stable party system may provide cues used to facilitate the opinion-formation process, leading to coherent ideological views among the citizenry. In the United States, by comparison, such strong cues are by and large lacking.

In concentrating on the differences, it is well to remember that there are several ways in which Sweden and the United States are similar. Both are highly industrialized and urbanized societies in which there is a substantial commitment to civil liberties and a democratic tradition. In recent decades, both nations have enjoyed a high standard of living.

There is, however, more inequality in the United States, and that means the rich people in the United States and the poor people in Sweden are probably better off in material terms than their counterparts in the other country (Hochschild, 1981). Verba and Orren (1985a, 1985b) have shown that the difference between Sweden and the United States on actual degree of economic equality has a parallel finding at the social psychological level of analysis. At both the elite and mass levels, people in the United States express a preference for much more inequality than do people in Sweden.

When people in the two countries are compared as to how they rank the terminal values identified by Milton Rokeach (1973), the rank correlation is +.54 (Reimer and Rosengren 1986; Inglehart, 1985). This indicates that the values are more similar than different but also implies some substantial differences. This seems about right, given the across-time (1968–1981) stability correlation for the United States alone of +.94 (Inglehart, 1985). The largest differences between the two nations by this measure occurred when people in Sweden tended to rank “true friendship” and “mature love” higher, and people in the United States ranked “salvation,” “self-respect,” and “a sense of accomplishment” higher. The latter differences are readily interpretable as reflecting the greater importance of religion and the emphasis on individualism within the United States. Another comparison found local leaders in Sweden to attach greater value to economic equality than do their counterparts in the United States (Strömberg, 1986). Similarly, Swedish youth expressed a consistent preference for the principle of equality over need or equity as a basis for allocating scarce resources. In contrast, U.S. youth gave more mixed responses, but preferred the equity or contribution principle when it came to dividing money (Törnblom, Jonsson, and Foa, 1985).

These value differences are very substantial and obviously are a consequence of socialization into different systems. Our focus, however, is on the political system, and here the differences are quite pronounced. Sweden has a disciplined multi-party system with a unicameral parliament in which seating is based on proportional representation. Most votes within the

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The United States and Swedish election studies

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Swedish Parliament take place strictly along party lines, whereas this is generally not true in the U.S. Congress. The U.S. has a relatively weak and undisciplined two-party system with a bicameral legislature and an independent executive branch headed by a president, and elections based on the principle of winner-take-all. Perhaps related to these differences, participation is much higher in Sweden, roughly 90 percent in Swedish parliamentary elections, compared to about 55 percent in recent U.S. presidential elections.²

With these very substantial differences between Sweden and the U.S., the objection may be raised that comparisons between them are as futile as that proverbial comparison between apples and oranges. In fact, apples and oranges can be meaningfully compared on a variety of dimensions such as nutritional value and costs of production.

The United States and Swedish election studies

The rich sources of data that we use in our analyses are available thanks directly and indirectly to the contributions of many innovators and leaders of research in this area. George Gallup is often granted primary credit for seeing in the 1930s the potential of systematic sample surveys to describe the state of public opinion. By now, his innovations have diffused to many, perhaps most, countries in one form or other (Lipset, 1984). Gallup's contribution was largely methodological rather than theoretical. But his impact on our work and that of many others is very great nonetheless. Theoretically oriented political scientists, such as V. O. Key (1961; 1966), found immense possibilities for secondary analyses in the data being accumulated by Gallup and others (Natchez, 1985).

The advantages of tracing the same specific individuals over time in a panel design were carefully developed and exploited by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in the community panel studies of the 1940 election in Erie County, Ohio by Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1944) and of the 1948 election in Elmira, New York by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee (1954). They sought to analyze the process of opinion formation in an election campaign. The methodology, modes of analysis, and conceptual distinctions we use are heavily influenced, and, in some instances, directly derived from these two landmark studies, *The people's choice* and *Voting*, emanating from the research program at Columbia University.

A short time later, what has become the dominant or focal election studies project was initiated at the University of Michigan under the direction of Angus Campbell and Warren Miller. These studies, though similar in some respects to the Columbia studies, differed in orientation,

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placing more emphasis on social psychological and political concepts and less emphasis on sociological concepts and multi-wave panel analyses. In the Michigan studies, the analysis also shifted from a single community to representative samples of the entire nation. It would be a gross understatement to say that the major works coming out of this research program – *The voter decides* by Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Miller (1954), *Elections and the political order*, by Campbell, Philip Converse, Miller, and Donald Stokes (1966), and especially *The American voter*, also by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) – had a major impact on political science and the study of voting behavior. Much of what has been done since has been in response or reaction to their theses (e.g., Niemi and Weisberg, 1976; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1976; Himmelweit *et al.*, 1981; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983). Moreover, the data archive they gradually accumulated has been subjected to secondary analysis and resulted in numerous books and articles by literally scores of social scientists and thousands of students.

The U.S. data used in our analyses are drawn from the Michigan election studies. Because these data are so well known and widely used, they will be described here only briefly. In each of the nine most recent U.S. presidential elections (1952 to 1984), a large representative sample of U.S. adults was interviewed at length prior to the election and then again after the election. These preelection interviews for the panel took place during the eight-week period just before the election, and the postelection interview as soon as possible after the election. In this series, there are also two across-election panels (1956–1960 and 1972–1976) which we use in our analyses. These people were interviewed five times, before and after two presidential elections and after the intervening congressional election.³

Because they are less well known and have been less extensively analyzed, we shall take care to describe the Swedish election studies in somewhat greater detail. The Swedish election studies project was initiated by Jörgen Westerståhl and Bo Särilvik in the mid 1950s, shortly after the Michigan election studies project began. It was begun in conjunction with the local elections in 1954 and expanded in the parliamentary election of 1956. In the parliamentary elections since then, a large representative sample of adults in Sweden has been interviewed. The basic design is a rolling panel in which a random sample of Swedish adults is interviewed at length before or after the election. Half of the sample will have been interviewed in connection with the previous election, and the other half will be interviewed in connection with the succeeding election. In recent years, the response rate in these surveys (percentage of people in the sample who are successfully interviewed) has been about 75 to 80 percent. Those who are interviewed before the election are sent a brief questionnaire to complete after the election. Swedish voters cast their ballots for slates of candidates

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who have been nominated by a party to be Members of Parliament. Although citizens may delete or add names from the lists provided by the party, practically no one does. So, in effect, nearly everyone votes a straight party ticket. Hence, the questions on the surveys pertaining to voting intention and voting behavior ask only what party people intend to vote for or voted for in the election. In addition to the leadership of Westerståhl and Särilvik, Olof Petersson shared the responsibility for directing the 1973 study and was the principal investigator in the 1976 study. Sören Holmberg has directed the Swedish election studies project since 1979, including the parliamentary elections of 1979, 1982, and 1985, and the nuclear power referendum of 1980. Also, in conjunction with the 1985 parliamentary election study of citizens, a survey was conducted shortly after the September elections of the newly elected Members of Parliament. These data, based on an unusually high response rate of 97 percent, will be used to a limited extent in chapters 4 and 6.

In addition to the parliamentary election studies, we also use data from the 1980 panel surveyed in connection with the national referendum on nuclear power. In that referendum, voters chose from among three alternatives or "lines" (Granberg & Holmberg, 1986c; Holmberg & Asp, 1984). Data from the referendum study are used in chapters 3, 7, 8, and 9. It is important to understand that in the referendum, people voted for one of three alternatives endorsed by the five main parties. By comparison, in regular parliamentary elections, people vote directly for one of the five main parties by casting as their vote the slate of candidates nominated by the parties to be Members of Parliament. Most of our analyses of Swedish data focus on recent parliamentary elections and the associated across-election panels.⁴

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2 Subjective ideology: left–right and liberal–conservative

The left–right dimension in Sweden and the liberal–conservative dimension in the United States form a more or less clear foundation for understanding the politics within these two nations. By and large, these ideological dimensions have focused in recent decades upon domestic policies, questions of a market versus a planned economy, inequality, and the role of government in assuring the welfare of citizens. The relevance of such dimensions and the utility of scales designed to measure them are widely assumed in contemporary political analysis (Sani and Sartori, 1983; Mair, 1986). This is not to say that everything that goes on within these countries is linked to the ideological dimensions. But many things are, and it is a good place to start – provided one keeps in mind the complexity of political realities that ultimately must be incorporated into the analysis.

In both Sweden and the United States, there have been sustained attempts to measure ideology by having people place themselves and the parties and candidates on a scale. At the individual level, it is reasonable to expect a high degree of subjective ideological agreement between a citizen's own political ideology and that of the political party favored by that citizen. Subjective ideological agreement involves the apparent congruence between the ideological position taken by the individual and the position of a preferred political stimulus, whether that be a party or a particular candidate.

Subjective ideological agreement is, however, complex. Several underlying processes may exert a force toward congruence. Three rather distinct processes promote ideological congruence between the self and a preferred political party (Holmberg, 1981; Judd, Kenny, and Krosnick, 1983; Markus, 1982; Page and Brody, 1972; Shaffer, 1981). The first is a tendency for citizens to prefer and choose political parties and candidates that represent an ideological position close to their own views. Second is the tendency for parties and candidates to try to persuade citizens toward their position. And third is the tendency for individuals, in the organization of their cognitive structure, to distort or exaggerate the similarities and differences in political stimuli in relation to their personal ideological views.

We assume at the outset that the actual level of ideological agreement