

CHAPTER 5

How Journalists Portray Political Leaders: The Personalization of Prime Ministers and the Connection to Party Affiliation in Swedish News Coverage

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Journalists not only represent political leaders in terms of their policies and political competence. The personalities and private lives of leaders have also become an important component in mediated stories and narratives crucial for voter identification and interest. This chapter explores how the Swedish press reports on prime ministers' social backgrounds, personal appearance and leadership characteristics in relation to party affiliation. The empirical material consists of news reporting on four former Swedish prime ministers: two from the Swedish Social Democratic Party; and two from the Moderate Party. The findings show that it is not only party affiliation that is of interest to journalists in reporting on prime ministers. Broader societal trends of what it means to be a politician in a certain time and era also influence reporting.

Keywords: personalization, political journalism, Sweden, narrative, personalities

Introduction

The personalization of politics has been widely discussed in recent years, both in academic literature as well as in the public debate. Politicians are not only understood in connection with the policies they make and their political competence, but also through their personal characteristics and lives. The personalities of politicians have become a key part of mediated stories and narratives crucial for voter identification, emotional connection and interest (Alexander, 2011; Langer, 2010; Stanyer, 2013). Political leaders also apply personalization strategies themselves, creating an appealing image based on attractive personal traits and characteristics in order to seize media attention and market their policies (Campus, 2010; Helms, 2012). Personalization has been further triggered by social media, which allow politicians to bypass journalists and to communicate directly with the public, and in so doing more freely create the desired image. The newly elected American president, Donald Trump, is the obvious example. Not only leaders but also political parties can be understood as brands providing recognition and cohesion for voters through their policies, history and ideology. Therefore, the increasing focus on political leaders as individuals not only means that they act more often as spokespersons for their respective parties, but also that they embody the party brand through their personal life and personality. Parties and leaders thus engage in a constant interaction of positive, or negative, reinforcement.

The personalization of politics is closely intertwined with the notion of media logic and its focus on dramatization, conflict, and a tendency to avoid complexity in highlighting political actions and leaders (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni & Schultz, 1999). In addition, the ideal of subjectivity in journalism, as a way for journalists to create a sense of identification and explain complex reality, contributes to the personalization of political actors (Steensen, this book). Personalization has contributed to make journalistic products out of anonymous and complicated policy processes, where politicians draw upon their private sphere as an asset in manufacturing their political identity (Smith, 2016). Corner (2000) uses the concept of mediated persona in stressing that political identity is always constructed and negotiated in relation to societal values: “The projection of an optimal political self will often require careful attention to

popular values in light of the range of possible projections, which any given politician has available to them” (p. 394). Advantages and disadvantages in this process can be age, gender, ethnicity, appearance, class or other time specific qualities.

In Sweden, the change towards a more media oriented political scene started in 1976 when the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) lost the election after 40 years in power (Premfors and Sundström, 2007). For example, SAP prime ministers Ingvar Carlsson and Göran Persson put an increasing emphasis on media experience when recruiting ministers and other political staff as compared to their precursors (Sundström, 2009, p. 154). This trend has coincided with journalism becoming more investigative and independent, which amongst other things has contributed to blurring the distinctions between public and private (Petersson et al., 2006). The role of PR and news management was for example crucial for rebranding the Swedish conservative party, the Moderate Party. The rebranding started with Fredrik Reinfeldt taking over the role of leader in 2003. The transformation of the party involved the acceptance of parts of the traditional Social Democratic welfare state. This was, for example, manifested in the party borrowing rhetoric from the SAP by emphasizing the importance of labor, something that was clearly articulated when the Moderate Party called itself a party for working people (Ekengren & Oscarsson, 2015).

This study explores how four Swedish prime ministers were portrayed in four leading newspapers, and how personal characteristics were described as embodying values and norms belonging to their respective political parties. This will be done by focusing on social background, personal appearance, and leadership characteristics, identified as important categories in previous research. Two of the chosen prime ministers are from the SAP (Göran Persson and Ingvar Carlsson) and two from the Moderate Party (Carl Bildt and Fredrik Reinfeldt).

Previous research

The personalization of political leaders can be ascribed to general trends in contemporary society such as the decline in party identification and political ideology as well as the rise of celebrity culture and identity politics. In such an

environment, the personal becomes a fruitful way to attract voters who are not interested in formal politics. At the same time, the personalization of politics can be a double-edged sword. For example, Foley (2008) argues that the increased focus on political leaders may contribute to a leadership decline since the attention given to leaders distances them from their party base. Moreover, the personalization of politics creates a situation in which politics is embodied within leaders and as such becomes a source of direct competition between political parties. This embodiment tends to fuse policy initiatives with leaders' personal characteristics, making it difficult to differentiate between critics of policies and the leaders themselves.

The notion of personalization has been widely discussed in the literature from various perspectives. For example, Langer (2006, p. 23) makes a distinction between presidentialization and personality politics. Presidentialization refers to individual politicians' exposure at the expense of political parties, whereas personality politics focuses on leaders' personalities in political discourse involving aspects such as family, competence, personal appearance, personal qualities, and upbringing (Langer, 2007). Regarding presidentialization, Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis (2000), in their study on the coverage of political leaders in Dutch media, show that although political leaders play an important role, political parties still dominate news coverage. Similarly, Reinemann and Wilke (2001, 2007) found no evidence of an increased individualization in German news, stating that the news media's focus on the Chancellor has always been high. Based on a comparative study on media coverage of election campaigns in six European countries (Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), Kriesi (2011) did not discover an increased focus on individual leaders, the Netherlands being the exception. Also studies made by Karvonen (2010) and Adam & Maier (2010) confirm this picture. Based on a comparative study on the personalization of politics in Germany and the UK, Holtz-Bacha et al. (2014) show that references to political or professional qualities outnumbered personal references in recent general elections. At the same time, personal life and personal qualities played a bigger role in the UK than in the German coverage.

Other studies find an increase in personalization. Langer (2007) demonstrates in her study on British prime ministers that political leaders have become more visible in news coverage in the twenty-year period she studied. Moreover, references to personality have shifted from foremost leadership qualities to

aspects related to leaders' personal lives. A key period was the Blair Era, which altered expectations regarding the exposure of private persons in public discourse (Langer, 2010). At the same time, leaders differ in their will and talent to make strategic use of personal qualities and personal life in public (*ibid.*). For example, Tony Blair's personality was used to strengthen the image of the Labour Party, whereas Gordon Brown assumed a more private role. David Cameron had a similar ambition to Blair when he started off as leader for the Conservative Party. He acknowledged the party's image problem in representing the rich and privileged few, and its need for change. In order to come off as an ordinary modern man, Cameron was reported cycling to work, wearing designer sneakers, and using fair-trade products (Smith, 2008). David Cameron shows similarities to Blair in emphasizing the link between the family life orientation in his private life and his launching of various family and environmental policies as a way of "authenticating his political positions" (*ibid.*, p. 67).

Moreover, the personalization of politics is closely connected to the notion of celebrity politics. From a feminist perspective Van Zoonen (2006) argues that celebrity politics works against female politicians who are not, compared to their male counterparts, able to benefit from the opportunity provided to fuse the personal, political and popular into an attractive political image due to the inherent polarization of femininity and politics. According to Smith (2016) the early 1990s saw a new type of masculinity, which embraced traditional feminist domestic attributes with a special emphasis on fatherhood. During this period, the "new man" category appeared, where political leaders were keen to appear "like ordinary people" with an active family life, friends and other interests beyond politics (p. 103). This was also a point in time when the personalization of politicians and celebrity culture in general made an upswing. "Personalization, celebrity and fatherhood all come together in British politics, most notably in the persona of Tony Blair" (*ibid.*, p. 103). The trend continued with the American President Obama. One component of the new type of politician was the ability to relate to voters by being one of them. This strategy involves the delicate balance of being an ordinary "one-of-us" person while at the same time someone extraordinary, in an age that promotes egalitarian values yet expects unusual leadership qualities and competence (Smith, 2009).

In a Swedish context, there has been limited research on the subject. Johansson (2008) conducted a study on the prominence of Swedish party

leaders in election campaigns. The study showed a weak trend of increased personalization in tabloids but not in broadsheets. Bjerling (2012) demonstrates that the amount of personal characteristics mentioned in Swedish news coverage increased between 1979 and 1988, but after that remained the same. For example, references to family increased dramatically throughout the years studied, whereas references to physical appearances decreased. News reporting related to personality characteristics, competence, conviction and morals increased over this time period (p. 179-180). This study aims to increase knowledge on the personalization of politics and in particular in connection with party identification in a Swedish context.

Material and Method

The empirical material consisted of news, opinion and feature articles from the four major newspapers in Sweden: two tabloids (*Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*); and two daily morning newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*). The following prime ministers and mandate periods were included in the analysis: Ingvar Carlsson, *SAP*, 1994–1996; Göran Persson, *SAP*, 1996–1998; Carl Bildt, *Moderate Party*, 1991–1994; and Fredrik Reinfeldt, *Moderate Party*, 2006–2010.

The prime ministers were selected based on party affiliation. Time periods were chosen so as to incorporate their first time in office except for Ingvar Carlsson, where the empirics cover his last period. As a result, part of the coverage is focused on summing up Carlsson's political career, which may make journalists less inclined to attribute negative characteristics. The selection of his last period was due to the fact that he entered office by replacing Olof Palme who was assassinated in 1986. In light of this fact, his first period was quite special compared to the other prime ministers. Beyond that, for practical reasons it was also difficult to use his first period in office since the digital database I used first started keeping an archive of articles from these newspapers in 1995.

In collecting the articles, I used the database *Mediearkivet* which is owned by *Retriever*. The search was made based on the name of each of the respective prime ministers during the selected mandate periods. The first 64 search pages of links to articles, based on relevance, were selected for analysis. The material was thereafter categorized and analyzed based on information related to upbringing,

appearance and leadership characteristics. The analysis is based on the entire text corpus related to these three aspects, but the presentation highlights the most commonly identified characteristics. The analysis focuses on the descriptions and judgements provided by the journalists; that is, not the statements given by the prime ministers themselves or by other actors such as other politicians, experts or opinion polls. This is the case since I am interested in the journalists' descriptions of political leaders and their subjective notions. The number of articles in the analysis includes the following: Bildt, 168 articles; Reinfeldt, 132; Carlsson, 72; and Persson, 130. One shortcoming is that the material collected for Carl Bildt did not include *Aftonbladet* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, and as a result the empirical material for him is dominated by *Expressen*.

Analysis

Upbringing

SAP

Ingvar Carlsson is described as having a traditional Social Democratic upbringing. His father was a warehouse worker and his mother a cleaner and seamstress. When Ingvar was 12 his father died, and he had to contribute to the family economy by taking various part-time jobs. After finishing compulsory education, he pursued a master's degree in politics and economics at Lund University, where he also became chairman of the SAP student club and met Prime Minister Tage Erlander. Carlsson's career kicked off when Erlander asked him if he wanted to come to Stockholm to work as his political secretary. Ingvar Carlsson's journey towards becoming prime minister is often summarized in headlines like "From a Wooden Shanty in Borås to the Sager Palace," in this case followed by an ingress saying that "It has never escaped Ingvar that he belongs to the working class. Deep down he hates the upper class, instinctively and morally" (*Expressen*, 19 August 1995). Carlsson's journey can be understood as not only a personal journey, but also as a symbol for the Social Democratic Party making anything possible, and where background no longer determines people's destiny. As summarized in the following quote:

Ingvar Carlsson personifies, both through his background and his work, the Social Democratic dream. He started off with a poor upbringing and significant social hardships but succeeded in becoming a diligent student, a member of the Swedish

Parliament and the leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League. He also assumed several arduous political assignments and ministerial posts and later became party leader and finally Prime Minister (*Aftonbladet*, 8 October 1995).

Compared to Carlsson, there are few mentions of Göran Persson's social background in the empirical material. In one article, we get to know that his father was a construction worker, who was occasionally unemployed. One specific story, which according to the journalists was often told by Persson himself, is that his father could not afford to visit the dentist and as a result had to have his teeth extracted (*Aftonbladet*, 30 May 1998). Within the SAP there is a long standing tradition of the party leadership role being narrated through personal experiences of social injustice, in order to emphasize a working class background (Pauli, 2012). In telling the story of his father, Persson could demonstrate that he shared party members' backgrounds and ideals, something that made him a legitimate representative for the working class. However, this class narrative never really takes off and Persson's personality receives more journalistic attention than his family background. For example, we get to know that he did his military service at the lowest possible rank, and that military officers and friends remember Persson as "the man with the enormous body" (*Expressen*, 30 March 1996). Furthermore, Persson is portrayed as a person who is not afraid of authorities. For instance, Persson called the Minister of Defense himself, explaining his legal rights, when military superiors did not give him permission to attend political meetings (ibid). Persson's background is not described as embodying the Social Democratic Party in the same way as Carlsson's, even though journalists, if they wanted to, could have created such a narrative based upon his upbringing and social class. Thus, journalistic descriptions of political leaders are not automatically based on party affiliation, but may well be based on other frames of references and interests.

The Moderate Party

In the coverage of Carl Bildt's upbringing and background there are numerous references to his aristocratic background, such as accounts of family reunions at the aristocratic Nobility House in Stockholm. We also learn that Bildt was not the first in his family to become prime minister, since his great, great grandfather held the office between 1888-89 (*Expressen*, 24 May 1993). In this

way, Bildt fits nicely into the stereotypical description of the conservative party as a party for the privileged and rich. In regard to his early years and his personality, he is in general described as being something of a nerd:

The good little boy already from the outset. A guy who drew fire trucks and fighter planes during lessons. [...] His father was a major, his mother a housewife. Calle¹ himself was a boy sitting with his nose in American aviation magazines (*Expressen*, 16 September 1991).

Another article about his upbringing states that: “There was not much glue sniffing and smoking” (*Expressen*, 14 November 1993). Beyond the nerd image, he is also at times depicted as having an arrogant personality, such as in the article with the headline “Carl Casts His Shadow over Others” (*Expressen*, 19 April 1992). Compared to the practice of scholars emphasizing the “ordinariness” of political leaders, Bildt is interesting since descriptions of his background, interests and personality stress the opposite.

The media image of Reinfeldt differs from Bildt in some key aspects. Similar to Persson, there is limited information on Reinfeldt’s early years and social background. One of the few remarks is about how his mother was “absolutely convinced” that her son would become prime minister one day, since he had always been structured and well-organized (*Expressen*, 18 September 2006). The reasons for the lack of class related information, compared to Carlsson and Bildt, is of course difficult to know. It could well be that class was no longer discussed in society in the same way that it had been, or that Reinfeldt has a less stereotypical and therefore, from a journalistic perspective, less interesting background. The only references to social background are made by Reinfeldt himself, complaining that the Moderate Party is perceived as a party for rich people:

And he adds that despite the fact that he carried out one of the biggest transformations of a Swedish political party ever, that work has still not managed to make up for decades of stereotypical images of Moderates as rich men’s kids. [...] “ I myself have felt that sometimes. I have a simple background, with parents who had no higher education degrees when they met. I have lived in simple apartments and townhouses. Nevertheless, the stereotype is ascribed to me as well. Anders Borg and Sven Otto Littorin have

1 A common Swedish nickname for a boy named Carl.

similar backgrounds to me, and we have all noticed that people did not want to accept us as common people. That weighs us down” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 14 June 2010).

As can be seen, Reinfeldt emphasizes that he and his fellow colleagues are ordinary people, and in doing so he distances himself from the traditional image of the party, personalized by Bildt’s aristocratic and privileged background. This should also be understood in light of Reinfeldt’s project of rebranding the party into the “New Moderates”, aimed at attracting working and middle class voters. Similarities can here be drawn to David Cameron’s ambition to modernize the Conservative Party and to shed its right-wing image by utilizing his private life as a way of becoming more authentic and thus modifying the party brand (Langer, 2010, p. 67).

Personal appearance

SAP

In the empirical material, there are few references to Ingvar Carlsson’s appearance, except for one where his face is drawn in the shape of a foot. Several humorous references are made to this. In contrast, Göran Persson’s appearance is often mentioned, and in a negative way:

Göran Persson looks like a prime minister from the old days, and that is one of his problems: His image is wrong, out of tune with the subtle signals of what is socially correct in our time. They who socially set the agenda today are slim and fit, and yesterday’s workers who are round and pudgy are stigmatized (*Aftonbladet*, 22 March 1997).

Persson’s appearance here becomes one explanation for his inability to attract voters. Moreover, the frequent remarks about Persson being overweight can be understood in relation to class. Obesity is often connected to descriptions of working class people and their lack of self-control (Olivia, 2014; Skeggs 2004, pp. 99–105). Persson’s appearance is also linked to actual political decisions and to the negative caricature of Social Democrats as old-fashioned and pompous.

This bodily continuity is, I think, one of the reasons why Persson manages to pursue a political agenda that at the time was unthinkable to a large majority of the people

[...]. Only a real “Sosse”² can make the great system shift. Göran Persson is the real “Sosse” embodied. Visually, I mean. He looks exactly the way I always pictured a Social Democratic municipal politician would. [...] No matter how much he speaks of budget cut downs and misery, when one sees Göran Persson one starts to think of the authoritative gavel and firm handshake, and newly built residential areas, large-scale road projects and increased pensions (*Expressen*, 10 April 1995).

That Persson is as outdated and not in touch with his time resonates with a study by Langer (2007) on British prime ministers, which showed that journalists showed much more positive interest in the appearance of Blair and Cameron than Major and Brown, where the first two were described as modern and trendy and the latter as outdated “last century” styles (p. 66). Even more interesting is how descriptions of Persson’s appearance work as a way of understanding both his personal characteristics and political actions.

The Moderate Party

Both Bildt and Reinfeldt are portrayed as young-looking and well dressed. The news article below describes a meeting between Bildt and a group of younger people on a TV show.

Carl Bildt, 44 in July, works between 80 and 100 hours a week, traveling as a big shot around Sweden and the world, making speeches, giving interviews, trying to hold the government together, battling the galloping budget deficit and growing unemployment. Yet he looks like a confirmation candidate. This became particularly evident yesterday when he went up against ten young people on Channel 1. There was no visible difference [in their appearances], but the guy in glasses rules the country³ (*Expressen*, 17 May 1993).

In general, there are few connections made between the appearance of Bildt and his political work, in contrast to Persson.

When it comes to Reinfeldt, the journalists describe how he goes to the gym on a regular basis and that he lost 14 kilos before the election campaign. Also Reinfeldt’s clothes are discussed, for example, in relation to how statesmanlike they make him look: “It was Fredrik Reinfeldt’s fifth summer speech as party leader. [...] yesterday he wore a new gray suit to emphasize that he is Prime

² The Swedish nickname given to members of the Social Democratic Party.

³ Referring to Carl Bildt.

Minister and statesman” (*Aftonbladet*, 10 August 2008). There are few negative remarks regarding his clothing. The only time Reinfeldt is criticized is when he and his wife dress too casually during a state visit in China (*Aftonbladet*, 14 April 2008). It can also be noted that the Moderates, as part of their re-branding, recommended party members to wear causal clothing, which meant “leave the tie and the pearl necklace at home” (c.f. Gustafsson, 2013).

Leadership characteristics

SAP

The descriptions of Carlsson as a person are fairly consistent. He is in general portrayed as “a stubborn working ant with a strong sense of duty, meticulous, Lutheran and professional” (*Expressen*, 19 August 1995), all characteristics of the traditional working class ethos. Another frequently repeated story, which ties neatly into the Social Democratic tradition, is that he never aspired to become prime minister. Rather, he took the assignment out of duty and loyalty to the party when Olof Palme was assassinated in 1986. He never adjusted to being constantly monitored by the media and his political opponents, and was happy to resign and “finally be free” to do whatever he wanted (*Aftonbladet*, 19 August 1995). Carlsson is seen as an ordinary man who wanted nothing more than to lead an ordinary life. This narrative fits nicely into a working class tradition in which anti-pretentiousness has been central and where party leadership is seen as impersonal, that is, no one is indispensable (Skeggs, 2011, p. 11; Gaffney and Lahel, 2013, p. 498).

Another often referred to characteristic of Carlsson is his high sense of morals. Again, the story fits nicely into the Social Democratic movement where enriching oneself is one of the worst things a leader can do, and where any sign of such behavior inevitably leads to a loss of confidence and eventually an end to one’s political career (Barrling Hermansson, 2004). During the time period studied, Carlsson’s morality was tested in one of the most remembered political scandals in Sweden. His “crown princess” Mona Sahlin got caught using a government credit card, and the scandal put an end to her chances of succeeding Carlsson. Instead of being associated with Sahlin and her lack of morality, the scandal seemed to strengthen the image of Carlsson as a man of strong morals. In the coverage, he is described as torn between two principles: his moral standards when it comes to the use of taxpayers’ money

and the loyalty that comes with friendship. “Ingvar Carlsson is burning with eagerness to save a friend and a close co-worker. But he cannot hide his strong morals [...] ‘One shall not use a business card [for personal purchases]’” (*Expressen*, 19 October 1995). This means that Carlsson “will fight like a tiger for Mona Sahlin” in various situations “but not when he thinks that she has acted incorrectly” (*Expressen*, 23 October 1995). Carlsson is portrayed as the opposite of Sahlin, “A man who rather takes the bus than a rental car, and pays for his beers at the hotel with crumpled banknotes rather than using plastic cards” (*ibid.*). Not only Sahlin, but also other SAP politicians at the local level have been indicted for tax evasion. Again, Carlsson is portrayed as their opposite and as “the last prime minister from the old days [...]. An honest statesman who pays with his own money for taxis when on business trips, and who took a five hour bus trip home after his final party meeting rather than ordering champagne and the government plane” (*Expressen*, 9 March 1996). In this way, Carlsson’s high moral standard is not only ascribed to him as a person, but to a traditional Social Democratic type of ideal leader, driven by loyalty to society and party and subordinating him/herself to the collective (Barrling Hermansson, 2004; Madestam, 2009). The descriptions of Carlsson’s character work as a way to strengthen the image of the traditional Social Democratic Party, and at the same time show that the party and its representatives are changing.

Turning to Persson, the image of him is more negative. His personality and leadership style attract considerable media attention. At times, Persson is directly compared to Carlsson. For example, journalists report that Carlsson used the pronoun “we” when talking about the government, whereas Göran Persson says “I think,” “I have decided,” and “my government” (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 28 June 1996). Another story describing the difference between the two prime ministers is highlighted by the obligatory photo sessions in connection to EU summits; Persson is said to “always place himself in the center of the picture, whereas Carlsson was on the end” (*Aftonbladet*, 23 June, 1996). They also differ in terms of morals. For example, Persson is often interrogated about his travelling both for and outside of work (*Expressen*, 25 November 1997; *Aftonbladet*, 16 December 1997), and is also portrayed as stingy. For example, as a child he was constantly looking for bottles to recycle as a way of making money, which earned him the nickname “the bottle” (*Expressen*, 2 September 1994). In more recent stories, Persson is often seen stealing candy at a shop

near the parliament, and he often claims to have no cash as a way of forcing co-workers to pay for his coffee and cakes (*Expressen*, 8 April 1996).

The most recurrent theme of Persson is his “bossiness”. In the article “Blunt Persson”, he is said to “cause discontent and uncertainty” among the people around him (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 February 1998). Apparently, Persson’s nickname is “HSB” (“He Who Decides” translated from Swedish), which according to sources dates back to his time as a local politician in Katrineholm (*Expressen*, 2 September 1994). Yet on the flipside of being accused of being bossy is the fact that he makes things happen. However, this negative coverage of him dominates the news, and even the journalists themselves comment on it. One journalist summarizes the news coverage of Persson while he is still Prime Minister:

A person who does not think, does not read books, is educated in “Katrineholm-politics”, provincial, a loser, one who feels sorry for himself when being criticized and who gets bored at EU meetings. It seems like Persson can only be described through clichés. This is probably due to the fact that he personifies all of the old traditional prejudices about Social Democratic leaders – uneducated, authoritarian and pompous – who are at best capable of ruling their municipalities, but who are not capable of behaving themselves in more sophisticated settings (*Aftonbladet*, 20 January 1997).

Persson’s media image is also interesting compared to political leader ideals stating that politicians should be loving, easy going and friendly, embodied by politicians such as Tony Blair (Smith, 2016). Persson’s alleged bossiness resonates badly with this image. He is also described as having problems with female voters and party members (*Expressen*, 15 December 1997).⁴ “Women did not like him. One female party member said that he could make remarks such as ‘I think that you have gained weight, sweetie’” (*Expressen*, 6 September 1998). His inability to attract female voters was seen as problematic within the SAP. Persson tried to change this image but failed. According to one journalist, Persson “hugs voters and is calm and thoughtful in front of the cameras and microphones. But then he forgets [...] and is captured on the spot as the self-centered male decision maker”. This reporter also describes how leading female Social Democrats were “crushed by Persson’s leadership”, describing Persson as

4 It should however be noted that Persson, as did Carlsson, stuck to the strategy “every other seat for a woman” when appointing ministers (Sundström, 2009, p. 154).

a man who is “unable to control his instincts, which makes him just take the lead and push others to the side” (*Expressen*, 10 September 1998). In response to the negative media coverage, PR strategists were called in to work hard on building a more attractive image of Persson. “It is the reasoning and listening Persson the Swedish people should see, preferably women” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 20 March 1996).

Some articles describe Göran Persson’s merits in the EU and other international settings. One recurrent story is that Persson finds EU meetings boring and as a result is not very engaged. Often he comes off as “uncertain” compared to when he was Minister of Finance and knew “everything” (*Expressen*, 12 January 1997). Yet, descriptions of Persson on the international scene are not only gloomy. For example, when Persson visited Merrill Lynch (the world’s biggest investment firm) in the capacity of Minister of Finance, he said he was mocked for Sweden’s poor finances by “grinning financial puppies”. Yet, after his contributions to reforming the Swedish economy, he is praised for his self-confidence and political skills (*Expressen*, 4 November 1997). It can be noted that his media image became more positive during his second term of office, something that can at least partly be explained by Persson’s skillful management of the Swedish EU presidency, but also by his increasing ability to handle the media (Sundström, 2009, p. 165). Also worth noting is that the leadership ideals characterizing the SAP have traditionally been two-fold: authoritarian; and democratic. An authoritarian style is needed in order to avoid internal conflict and keep the party together, whereas the more democratic, listening ideal is a way of connecting with the members. Over time, these ideals have been challenged. Persson continued to apply both. Even though he was heavily criticized for his authoritarian leadership, he managed to keep internal party conflicts at bay. According to Pauli (2012), questioning the traditional ideals within the SAP did not result in any clear ideas on what to replace them with. Instead, more weight was given to the leader’s personality and how it matched the party’s needs. One explanation for the critical media coverage may well be that a lack of clear ideals, and the subsequent emphasis on personality, unleashed criticism both from the party itself and from journalists. In comparing the two SAP leaders, Persson can be understood as the flipside of Carlsson, who is portrayed through a positive traditional Social Democratic ideal of being modest, moral and loyal. In Persson’s case, the journalists rather play on the negative connotations of Social Democratic Party leaders as uneducated,

authoritarian and pompous. In any case, both images build upon traditional stereotypical ways of understanding the party and its leaders.

The Moderate Party

Carl Bildt is described as a fact-seeking politician who knows policy issues in miniscule detail. He is portrayed as interested in history, technology and foreign policy but uninformed about sports and popular culture. Moreover, he is regarded as “always busy”.

Visits, telephone calls, letters, meetings, trips, lunch with the government at noon, a press conference, a foreign newspaper that would like to ask some questions, speeches, opinion articles, Helmut Kohl calls and wants to talk for a while. “Carl cannot keep this pace forever. No one can,” says one of his collaborators in confidence (*Expressen*, 3 January 1992).

Bildt is also described as bad at connecting with people, which makes him come off as cold (*Expressen*, 7 December 1993). He is portrayed as self-confident to the extent that he lacks compassion and regret, a typical “qualified technocrat” (*Expressen*, 7 September 1994). News reports also stress that he is self-aware and has a sense of “untouchability, derived from his upper class inherited arrogance and verbal, witty elegance” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 6 September 1994). On the EU, and the international, scene he is described as successful, and he apparently really enjoys it, as reported during a visit in Germany: “Carl Bildt is happy. He is out in the big wide world, away from the little Swedish pond” (*Expressen*, 23 June 1993). In another account from an EU setting, one journalist describes how he experiences “150 journalists listening impressed to the self-confident Swedish guy in the spotlight. He speaks perfect English without a script. Quickly and without hesitation, he answers all the questions” (*Expressen*, 23 October 1991). In addition, he reportedly socializes well with his international counterparts, where his “genuine knowledge regarding security policy is respected” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 6 February 1992). In contrast to the other prime ministers, there are limited references in the empirical material when it comes to his leadership style. One of the few things mentioned is that Bildt is often surrounded by a group of old friends from the Moderate Party, who all adore him, something that indicates a group-think mentality (*Expressen*, 19 April 1992). In many ways, Bildt is portrayed as the opposite of Reinfeldt’s ordinariness and inclusive leadership.

Reinfeldt's leadership style is often referred to as "listening" and "modern" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 14 September 2008).

Fredrik Reinfeldt is a soft, modern boss who, in contrast to Göran Persson, listens to his co-workers. Furthermore, he is said to be straightforward with what he wants but allows his co-workers to work independently. Internally, he comes off as a thorough, humble and matriarchal leader as opposed to the arrogant patriarch Göran Persson (*Aftonbladet*, 11 July 2008).

Reinfeldt built his role as politician on being balanced and ordinary (Forsild, 2012). This is also illustrated in the coverage, where he is seen as a:

[...] Controlled politician who seldom allows himself to be pushed out of balance. He came off, for the most part, as an initiator who after much reflection came to the conclusion that Sweden is not on the right path. And he has taken on the heavy task of turning the country in another direction (*Aftonbladet*, 4 September 2006).

Reinfeldt is also contrasted to Persson in relation to female voters and politicians. Apparently, female voters had a lot of confidence in him, as illustrated in the following headline published on International Women's Day: "Women's Choice: Fredrik" (*Expressen*, 8 March 2008). When it comes to morals, there are a few articles dealing with the fact that he had employed au-pairs and nannies at very low salaries. "The pattern is clear. The 'contractual and real wages' that the Moderate leader speaks so amply about, do not apply when he himself employs people. Both his political and his private morals reveal shortcomings" (*Aftonbladet*, 14 September 2006). Yet, in general, Reinfeldt's morality is not a recurrent theme. It is possible that he would have been criticized more if he had been a Social Democrat. There are only a few negative remarks regarding Reinfeldt's leadership style, such as one made by a journalist who claims that "there is a significant trait of egocentric hubris in this eternal 'listening'" (*Expressen*, 9 August 2009). A few times, it is mentioned that he looks troubled and too serious, clearly addressed in one article: "He has sometimes been accused of lacking both humor and charisma, but here – along with six of his closest aides – he is relaxed and enjoys a few laughs" (*Expressen*, 9 November 2008).

One way of giving credit to Reinfeldt is to compare him to other popular leaders such as the iconic former SAP leader, Tage Erlander.

Fredrik Reinfeldt is like a modern "Father of the Nation". Calm and secure. More youthful in his appearance than his role model Tage Erlander. He is just what a nice

father in the most modern country in the world should be. [...] He vacuums the house, makes beef stew and is involved in his children's lives. Beyond that, he builds confidence and speaks with a firm and clear voice (*Expressen*, 23 May 2010).

In the passage above, the traditional Social Democratic role of the “Father of the Nation” is interwoven with the notion of the modern man who takes an active part in his children's lives and in the home. Reinfeldt's emphasis on ordinariness can be connected to what Smith (2016) refers to as the “new man” category where political leaders are keen on appearing “like ordinary people”. References to traditional, popular SAP leaders are also interesting in relation to Reinfeldt's ambition to rebrand the Moderate Party into a party for the middle and working class.

Conclusions

The study at hand sets out to explore news coverage of Swedish prime ministers and their personal characteristics from the perspective of party affiliation. In general, the news texts show that leaders' personalities are frequently interwoven into journalistic narratives, which is one indicator of a shift in media coverage towards more personally oriented coverage of political leaders (Smith, 2008). Moreover, similar to findings in the British context, the study shows that in Swedish media coverage personal characteristics are frequently connected to political parties, foremost in discussions of upbringing and leadership style.

Yet the study reveals no clear patterns in terms of how leaders from the respective parties are reported on or understood. The issue of upbringing is interesting since it is not only a way for journalists to portray the prime ministers, but also a way for the prime ministers to market themselves by embodying traditional party ideals. The prime ministers are described as embodying their respective parties, their ideologies and policies, in various ways and degrees. Carlsson provides the best example of how personal characteristics are directly linked with the party, in a positive way, embodying the notion of the “good Social Democrat”. This is done through stories of his modest upbringing, success despite structural obstacles, honesty, and low-key personality. Persson aspires, through his personal experiences of a class society, to take on a similar role. However, no such journalistic narrative is created. In contrast, Persson is portrayed as embodying traditionally negative perceptions

regarding the Social Democratic Party, and described as a greedy, patriarchal person with an old-fashioned and “trade union boss” mentality. In general, the bullying character of the news coverage of Persson raises questions regarding journalistic norms and ethics. The two Moderate leaders are also portrayed differently, mirroring the re-branding of the party. Whereas Bildt is depicted as embodying a traditional stereotypical view of the Moderates as a party for the rich and privileged, such descriptions are lacking when it comes to Reinfeldt. Rather, Reinfeldt prefers journalists to highlight his ordinary background, interests and life. This narrative fits much better with the re-branding of the Moderates as a party for working and middle class people. The strategic and deliberate use of personal characteristics and life styles as a way of authenticating the party brand is interesting and underlines the need for more research in the intersection between public relations and journalistic studies in the Swedish context.

The study demonstrates that there is not one standardized way in which prime ministers have been portrayed in terms of party affiliation and personal characteristics. This does not mean that journalists do not use preconceptions about the various parties and their histories when reporting on political leaders. For example, both Carlsson and Persson are reported on and understood through the lense of what it means to be a Social Democrat, but also in light of contemporary trends in leadership ideals. One such trend is what Smith (2016) refers to as the “new man” category, which emphasizes ordinariness in terms of interests, habits and taste. This ideal fitted nicely into how Reinfeldt was and wanted to be portrayed, which coincided with the re-branding of the Moderate Party. This highlights the fact that not only party affiliation plays a role in assessing and understanding prime ministers, but also the broader societal trends related to what it means to be a politician. Thus, journalists’ subjective notions become channeled through the prisms of societal norms and common knowledge. It should also be noted that other aspects beyond journalistic attitudes and trends have an impact, such as the strength of the opposition, the prime minister’s position within his/her own party, as well as the success of various public relations efforts. Moreover, there is a need to further explore the role of journalism, including the lack of journalistic scrutiny, in an era characterized by an increasing use of social media and the ability for political actors to communicate directly with their audience.

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