

Chapter 11

Elections and political communication in the Nordic countries

David Nicolas Hopmann & Rune Karlsen

Abstract

This chapter is a review of the main features of elections and the related political communication and campaigning in the Nordic countries. The focus is on national election campaigns in Norway, Sweden, mainland Finland, and mainland Denmark, with occasional references to Iceland and to other types of election campaigns. The first part of the chapter begins with a discussion of the rules and regulations governing elections across the Nordics. This discussion is followed by a review of the rules and regulations governing election campaign communication. The second part of this chapter presents the research programmes of voters and voting behaviour in the Nordic countries, as well as research programmes on election campaign communication. The goal of this second part is not to provide a detailed overview of past findings, but to reveal crucial similarities and differences with respect to elections and political communication across the Nordic countries.

Keywords: political communication, election campaigns, electoral rules, turnout, voting behaviour

Introduction

The Nordic countries, and even more so the three Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, are often seen as belonging to one family with roughly similar political and media systems (Knutsen, 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2014). They are often grouped together or provide the basis for comparative research employing a most-similar systems design. Indeed, in many respects these countries are alike. For instance, all Nordic countries have multi-party systems, strong public service broadcasting, and high electoral turnout – at least compared to other countries. In this vein, the Nordic “five party model” has, for example, been given much attention in political science (e.g., Knutsen, 2017), and the concept of the “media welfare state” suggests that the Nordic

countries constitute a distinctive group of countries with respect to their media landscapes (Syvertsen et al., 2014; see also Skogerbø et al., Chapter 1).

When taking a closer look at the Nordic countries, in particular in the context of election campaigns, several major differences emerge, however. For instance, rules for calling national elections vary as much as theoretically possible, from very strict to very liberal. Also, the electoral systems differ in the extent to which voting is personalised. In Finland and Sweden, paid political advertising is allowed on television, unlike in Norway and Denmark. Moreover, some of these differences across countries have been linked to the differences in political communication and campaigning found across the Nordic countries.

In this chapter, we review the main features of elections and the related political communication and campaigning in the Nordic countries. While doing this, we focus on Norway, Sweden, mainland Finland, and mainland Denmark, and we focus on national election campaigns in these countries, with occasional references to Iceland and to other types of election campaigns (e.g., presidential, European, regional, and local). The chapter is divided into two parts. First, we begin by discussing the rules and regulations governing elections across the Nordics. We then move to a review of the rules and regulations governing election campaign communication. In the second part, we turn our attention to the research programmes of voters and voting behaviour in the Nordic countries, after which we present research programmes on election campaign communication and discuss the general findings in recent trends in electoral campaigning. The goal of this second part is to take stock of the research programmes themselves, not to provide a detailed overview of their past findings. However, the presentation reveals crucial similarities and differences with respect to elections and political communication across the Nordic countries.

Electoral rules and regulations in the Nordics

The rules and regulations on elections form the basis for how election campaigns are run. Different rules and regulations create different incentives for politicians, political parties, and other actors, and they define what is allowed and what is prohibited. We begin with the questions of who is allowed to run in elections at various political levels: passive voting regulations.

Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are – unlike Norway and Iceland – members of the European Union (EU). Denmark was the first of the Nordic countries to join (1973), while Finland and Sweden joined much later, in 1995. EU membership entails participation in the elections for the European Parliament, which, since 1979, have been held every fifth year. As shown in Table 11.1, the basic rules for who is allowed to run in these elections are similar across countries. Different from other types of elections, however, is the requirement that candidates must

be nominated by political parties (in Finland, also by constituency associations of at least 2,000 members). Denmark is in the somewhat exceptional situation in which its Atlantic territories – Greenland and the Faroe Islands – are not members of the EU, unlike mainland Denmark. Greenland was in fact a member of the European Community initially, but left in 1985 following a referendum held in 1982 (for an overview of election campaigns, voting rules, and results in Greenland, see, e.g., Ackrén & Lindström, 2012). As a consequence, residents of Greenland and the Faroe Islands do not participate in EU elections.

Table 11.1 *Running in elections in the Nordic countries*

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
EU	Danish citizens residing in the EU, EU citizens residing in Denmark, at least 18 years old, resident, and nominated by a political party (excluding residents of Greenland and the Faroe Islands)	Finnish citizens, EU citizens residing in Finland, at least 18 years old, and nominated by a political party or constituency association	n.a.	Swedish citizens, EU citizens residing in Sweden, at least 18 years old, and nominated by a political party
Presidential	n.a.	Born Finnish citizen (§54 Constitution)	n.a.	n.a.
National parliament	Danish citizens, at least 18 years old, resident	Finnish citizens, at least 18 years old, and nominated by a political party or constituency association	Norwegian citizens, and at least 18 years old in the election year	Swedish citizens, at least 18 years old, nominated by a political party
Regional	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, and regional resident	n.a.	Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, and at least 18 years old in the election year, and regional resident	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, nominated by a political party, and regional resident
Local	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, and local resident	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 2 years residency, at least 18 years old, local resident, and nominated by a party or constituency association	Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, and at least 18 years old in the election year, and local resident	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, nominated by a political party, and local resident

Source: Compiled by the authors based on various sources

Another exception in a Nordic context is that Finland is not a constitutional monarchy. The head of state is an elected president, as is the case in Iceland.

Moreover, the Finnish constitutional rules for running in presidential elections are outstanding in the sense that they require candidates to be born Finnish citizens (Ministry of Justice, Finland, 2019: §54). This rule is equivalent to a similar requirement in the US where candidates running for president have to be born American citizens. There are no similar citizenship-at-birth requirements for running in any other election in the Nordics, including the presidential elections in Iceland (whose constitution requires a candidate to be at least 35 years old, however, see Government of Iceland, 2018: Article 4).

When it comes to who is allowed to run for the national parliament, rules are similar across Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Most importantly, candidates must be citizens and at least 18 years old. Finland and Sweden effectively require candidates to be nominated by political parties (or, in Finland, an association of at least 100 members), while in Denmark, an individual candidate would not need more than 150 signatures from eligible voters (a party needs a certain fraction of prior votes, effectively around 20,000 signatures). Notice also that in Finland, Sweden, and Norway, voters holding certain positions in public duty are not allowed to run in some elections or to combine certain electoral offices. For instance, the Swedish national election law does not allow members of a national parliament to become members of the European Parliament. To mention another example, persons “holding military office” are not allowed to become members of the Finnish parliament (Article 27 of the Constitution).

The rules on running in regional and local elections are an example of an area where the Nordic countries treat citizens of other Nordic countries almost equivalent to their own citizens (most important in this respect is the right to free settlement and an extended entitlement to welfare across the Nordics, compared to third-country citizens). Both local and other Nordic citizens of at least 18 years are allowed to run in regional and local elections, with minor exceptions across the countries. For instance, in Denmark, at least 25 signatures (in the larger cities 50 or 150 signatures) are needed for individual candidates. In the three EU member states, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, EU citizens are also allowed to run. On top of that, other foreign citizens with at least three years (or in Finland, two years) of residency are allowed to run.

Who is eligible to run for office, or passive voting regulations, is only one side of the coin. The other side is who is eligible to vote for a candidate or party running: active voting regulations. As one would expect, passive and active voting rights largely go hand in hand, which is evident from the overview presented in Table 11.2. That is, if you are allowed to run for office, you are also allowed to vote. There are some exceptions or extensions, however. For instance, in European elections, as is the case all over the EU, residents holding a passport from an EU country other than the one they reside in can choose in which country they want to cast their vote (i.e., in their country of

Table 11.2 *Voting across Nordic countries*

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
EU	Danish citizens residing in the EU, EU citizens residing in Denmark, and at least 18 years old (excluding residents of Greenland and the Faroe Islands)	Finnish citizens, EU citizens residing in Finland, and at least 18 years old	n.a.	Swedish citizens, EU citizens residing in Sweden, and at least 18 years old
Presidential	n.a.	Finnish citizens at least 18 years old	n.a.	n.a.
National parliament	Danish citizens, at least 18 years old, and resident (with short-term exceptions)	Finnish citizens, at least 18 years old	Norwegian citizens, and at least 18 years old in the election year	Swedish citizens, and at least 18 years old
National referendum	Danish citizens, at least 18 years old, and resident (with short-term exceptions)	Finnish citizens, at least 18 years old	Norwegian citizens, and at least 18 years old in the election year	Swedish citizens, and at least 18 years old (it is possible for the parliament to expand the right to vote, so the referendum includes EU and Nordic [Norway and Iceland] citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old)
Regional	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, and regional resident	n.a.	Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, and at least 18 years old in the election year, and regional resident (Norwegians abroad: also prior residents)	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, and regional resident
Local	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, and local resident	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 2 years residency, at least 18 years old, and local resident	Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, and at least 18 years old in the election year, and local resident (Norwegians abroad: also prior residents)	EU and Nordic citizens + foreigners with > 3 years residency, at least 18 years old, and local resident

Source: Compiled by the authors based on various sources

residence or in the country of citizenship). In Finnish presidential elections, there is no requirement for Finnish citizenship at birth, unlike the requirement for running for office. In national parliament elections and national referendums, Danish citizens are generally only allowed to vote if they reside in the country, unlike Finland, Norway, and Sweden, which allow citizens living abroad to participate. In regional and local elections, eligibility is also tied to residing regionally or locally.

Another important difference across countries is who voters can vote for. In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden voters vote for a party, but can also give a preference vote to their preferred candidate on the party list – in Finland, a vote is cast for a candidate. However, the right to vote for a specific candidate (rather than a party) may in practice have no consequences. For instance, in Norwegian national elections, more than half of a party's voters have to express a will to change the candidate list defined by a political party in order for the preference votes to alter the candidate list. There is never a case that such a high proportion of voters want to change the party list and, hence, in practice, preferential votes in Norway have no consequence.

Parties in Denmark can run in various ways. Whether, and how, preference votes alter who of a party's candidates are elected depends on the way parties decide to run (Ministry of Social Affairs and the Interior, Denmark, 2020). Casting a preference vote (rather than a party vote) can therefore be without any consequences in Denmark, too. The ballot paper design reveals how parties run. Though most voters arguably have no idea under what rules their preferred party runs, some parties run with candidate lists that can be changed by voters. As a consequence, party candidates face an additional competition in the election campaign – they not only have to convince voters to vote for their party, they also have to compete against their fellow party members running on the same candidate list. Hence, electoral rules, and the rules on preference votes in particular, seem to affect styles of campaigning in the Nordic countries. Candidates running for parliamentary elections in Norway, where preference votes do not influence the candidates' order on the list, have a party-centred campaign style (e.g., Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). Candidates in Finland, where voters vote for candidates, have a more individualised style (e.g., Karvonen, 2014; Moring, 2008). Candidates in Finland need to attract attention on their own candidacy in the campaign to compete with candidates from their own party. Indeed, the consequences of the competition for preference votes are not to be underestimated. For instance, in Denmark, the more preference votes parties attract (proportionally), the larger their overall support seems to be (Thomsen & Elklit, 2007; Thomsen & Sloth, 2013).

That aside, previous research has refuted the commonly held belief that the media – which tend to focus on individual politicians – in general, and television in particular, drives preferential versus party voting, at least in the 2009 Danish

local elections. Rather, (some) media seem to provide information conducive to voting for specific candidates, instead of parties (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012).

Nordic election campaigns: Rules and regulations

Another area where differences between the Nordic countries are larger than likely expected are national election campaigns. An overview is provided in Table 11.3. In Norway, national elections are held on the second Monday of September every fourth year. This date is a fixed date that cannot be changed. Dissolving the parliament, which in other countries would result in early elections, is not possible – this option does not exist in the Norwegian constitution. The opposite to this strict Norwegian corset is found in Denmark. While the Danish constitution requires national elections to be held every fourth year, there is rarely ever four years between two national elections. The minister has the right to call an election whenever they wish to do so. Normally, elections are called three weeks in advance, resulting in a short and intense election campaign. Between these two extremes, we find Finland and Sweden, with the latter most likely having the most notable election framework. In Sweden, early elections can be called, which most recently occurred in 2014. However, these early elections do not alter the election calendar, which has elections every fourth year – the following national elections are not postponed. Logically, early elections are called “extra” elections [*extra val*] in Sweden, as they are held in addition to the fixed national elections. To what extent these very different approaches lead to different dynamics in the election campaigns is difficult to assess (see below).

There is another striking difference across the Nordic countries: whether different types of elections are held simultaneously. However, this difference in formal setup apparently cannot be linked to major differences in how election campaigns are run across the Nordic countries. Since 1970, Swedish local and regional elections are always held on the same day as national parliamentary elections. This approach has triggered substantial debate on the pros and cons of holding elections simultaneously. While a spontaneous assumption may be that local politics has less good conditions and may be overshadowed by national politics when holding joint election days, Swedish reality paints a much more complex picture (Håkansson et al., 2001). Both media coverage and voting behaviour are to a substantial extent “local”. At the end of the day, the attractiveness of holding elections jointly is a question of what kind of democratic ideal one favours (Oscarsson, 2001).

In other countries, it is possible but not common to hold different elections simultaneously. In 1996, this happened in Finland when the first-ever European

Table 11.3 *National parliamentary election campaigns*

	Denmark (Folketinget)	Finland (Eduskunta/ Riksdagen)	Norway (Stortinget)	Sweden (Riksdagen)
Frequency of campaigns	At least every four years, called at the discretion of the prime minister.	Every four years.	Every four years, always the second Monday in September.	Every four years.
Early elections	The prime minister can call an election at their own discretion.	Early elections can be called by the president, upon motivation by the prime minister and after consultation with the parliament.	No early election can be called.	The government and the parliament (by a vote of no confidence against the prime minister) can call an extra election, not cancelling the originally planned election.
Duration of campaigns	Elections are called approx. 3 weeks in advance, initiating the official election campaign. On election day, campaigning close to polling stations is prohibited.	No official regulation.	By tradition, the four to five weeks after the school summer holiday and election day.	No official regulation. Election posters are allowed from five weeks before election day.
Simultaneous elections	Possible, but rarely the case (e.g., in 2001). Regional and local elections are held simultaneously.	Elections are held separately (with the 1996 European Parliament and municipal elections as an exception).	Possible, but rarely the case (e.g., in case of municipality mergers). Regional and local elections are held simultaneously.	National parliamentary elections take place simultaneously with regional and local elections.
Regulations on campaign communication	Political advertising by parties on television is not allowed, advertising with political messages is explicitly prohibited during the election campaign.	No specific regulation of election campaign coverage.	Political advertising on television is not allowed (other media are not regulated).	Political advertising on commercial television allowed.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on various sources

Parliament elections in Finland were held simultaneously with municipal elections (Ankar, 1997). In all subsequent Finnish European Parliament elections, turnout has been lower. In 2001, Danish local, regional, and national elections were held simultaneously. To mention an example of an “overshadowed” election, in 2009, a referendum on the Danish Act of Succession referendum

[tronfølgeloven] was held simultaneously with the European Parliament elections. With the substance of the referendum barely contested, the referendum received limited attention resulting in a low turnout of 58 per cent only. Because of this low turnout, the referendum nearly failed – at least 40 per cent of all eligible voters have to approve of a change to the constitutional laws in order for it to pass. Beyond these examples, however, it is not common to hold different elections simultaneously outside of Sweden.

Finally, communication during election campaigns is regulated in various ways. Most visibly, politicians and parties are not free to set up election posters as they please. For instance, in Sweden, election posters are allowed during the five weeks up to election day. In Denmark, the time period is roughly the same (depending on the weekday the election is held), but in most cases the day from which posters are technically allowed will be before the day election day is actually announced. Hence, from the moment the prime minister calls an election, posters are allowed.

In Denmark and Norway, political advertising on television is, at the time of writing, prohibited. Danish rules go as far as prohibiting any sort of explicitly sponsored political message during election campaigns, precluding, for instance, interest organisations such as trade unions or business associations from buying airtime. In Sweden, political advertising on commercial television (with TV 4 virtually having a monopoly) came with the transition to a digital broadcast system and had its breakthrough with the European 2009 and Swedish 2010 election campaigns, but is seen rather sceptically by Swedish voters (Johansson, 2017). Finland has no specific regulation at the time of writing; political advertising on television emerged in the early 1990s for which substantial proportions of campaign budgets are allocated today – though it is highly debated whether it has the desired effects, if any (Moring, 2017). Remaining bans on political advertising on television are not uncontested, however. In the 2009 Norwegian parliament elections, several local television stations aired paid political advertisements, while other stations offered to air political advertisements free of charge (OSCE, 2009).

Can these differences be linked to differences in how campaigns are run across the Nordic countries? On the one hand, the answer may be affirmative. As Moring (2017: 250) noted in his review, Finland appears to be the country with the most liberal media regulations and, as a consequence, the “biggest differences are seen in the party and candidate campaign budgets and organization of campaigns”. Yet, on the other hand, Moring (2017: 250) also noted that the “most important campaign media are still the candidate debates and current affairs broadcasts on television”. One reason for this balanced conclusion may be that Finnish parties, unlike parties in other countries outside of the Nordics, act cautiously and tend to refrain from negative campaigning.

Campaign focus in electoral research: Background

For a long time, research questions regarding the campaign and communication processes were not part of the research agenda in electoral research, in general as well as in the Nordic countries. When the first election study was carried out in the US in 1940, the campaign was expected to be decisive for the outcome of the election (Lazarsfeld et al., 1969). Based on the successful use of propaganda by the totalitarian states in the 1930s, the mass media was thought to be all-powerful (e.g., Asp, 1986; McQuail, 1994). Much to the researchers' surprise, the study unveiled great stability in the campaign – very little seemed to happen. Indeed, Lazarsfeld's (1944) first article from the Erie County study was called "The Election is over", and the first sentence in the article read: "In an important sense, modern presidential campaigns are over before they begin". Rather than reporting on the campaign effects, the Columbia group laid the basis for the sociological approach in voter research. The minimal effects model of campaigns became the generally accepted view, and consequently, campaigns did not receive much attention for decades (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Schmitt-Beck, 2007).

The sociological approach introduced by Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1969) was supplemented by the socio-psychological approach of the Michigan group (Campbell et al., 1969).¹ The so-called Michigan model soon came to dominate electoral research in the US. In Europe, this model was rivalled by the Lipset and Rokkan (1967) model, which was developed through macro-sociological studies of political cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Rokkan & Valen, 1964).² In addition, Downs' (1957) proximity model, developed within the rational choice tradition, has been influential in electoral research. It assumes that voters and parties are rational and motivated by self-interest and that voters will vote for the candidate closest to their own position (for reviews of models in electoral research, see Evans, 2003; Listhaug, 1989).

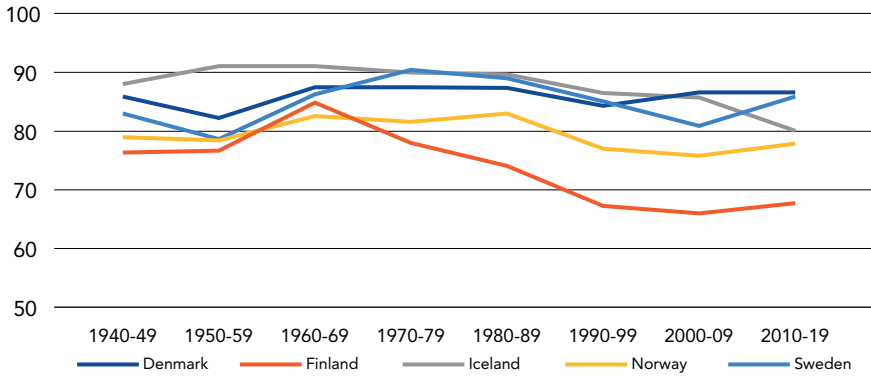
An important backdrop for the renewed interest in election campaigns was the weakening of ties between parties and voters. Moreover, theoretical advances in communication research – most importantly, the agenda-setting approach (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the refinement of agenda-setting through the concepts of priming and framing (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987),³ as well as Noelle-Neumann's (1973, 1980) work on the "Spiral of Silence" – contributed to the return of the concept of powerful media. Combined with the emergence of television, particularly the observation that the new medium most likely contributed to Kennedy's win in the 1960 presidential campaign, this resulted in communication studies increasingly focusing on the influence of the media for vote choice (Holtz-Bacha, 2004).

Nordic research programmes on voters

The Nordic countries, and Norway and Sweden in particular, have a long tradition of research on voters. Sweden has the second longest running election study programme in the world, second only to the US. The Swedish National Election Studies Program was established in 1954 by Jörgen Westerståhl and Bo Särilvik. Indeed, Westerståhl was influenced by the above-mentioned leading American electoral researchers (Lazarsfeld at Columbia and Campbell at Michigan) when he established the election study programme at the University of Gothenburg (Holmberg, 2010). Ever since, Sweden has carried out voter surveys in relation to national elections.

Norway also has a long tradition for electoral research. Like in Sweden, electoral research in Norway was influenced by electoral research in the US. In 1957, the first election study was carried out under the leadership of Stein Rokkan and Henry Valen at the Institute for Social Research in Oslo, and the Norwegian National Election Studies project has been located there ever since. There has been a voter survey at every national election since 1957 (except for the 1961 election). The first election study in Denmark was in 1971, led by Ole Borre and colleagues (Andersen et al., 1999). The organisation of electoral research in Denmark has nevertheless been somewhat more ad hoc than in Sweden and Norway, and the research group behind it has consisted of a consortium of researchers from Aarhus, Aalborg, and Copenhagen. Finland and Iceland have a shorter history of election studies; the first one, for both countries, is from 1983 (Bengtsson et al., 2014). After 2003, there has been a study in relation to each parliamentary election.⁴

All the Nordic election programmes publish comprehensive volumes on voting and voters related to national elections (e.g., Aardal & Bergh, 2019; Hansen & Stubager, 2017; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2013, 2016). The Nordic voter – the Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish voter combined – is most thoroughly investigated by Bengtsson and colleagues (2014). While most comparative research emphasises the similarities between the Nordic countries, the Nordic voter book highlights the differences between them when it comes to electoral behaviour. For example, though they share comparably high turnout rates at national elections (Figure 11.1), there are increasing differences between the Nordic countries. Turnout has been consistently very high in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden, with turnout rates between 85 and 90 per cent. Norway has followed closely with turnout somewhat beneath 80 per cent. Finland has seen the steepest decrease in turnout and has had below 70 per cent participation at national elections since the 1990s.

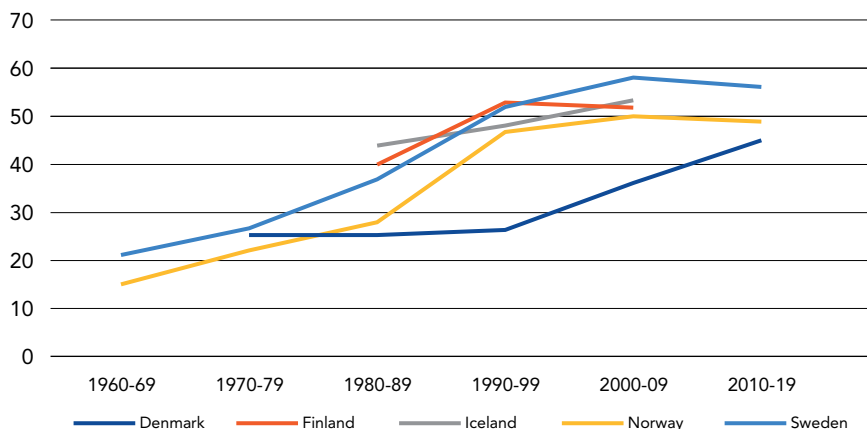
Figure 11.1 Voter turnouts in national elections (per cent)

Source: International IDEA, 2020

As in most established democracies, there has been a weakening of the ties between parties and voters in the Nordic countries. An essential result of this development is the increasing numbers of voters deciding what party to vote for during campaigns. Figure 11.2 reports the proportion of the electorate postponing their vote choice until the campaign. As mentioned, Norway and Sweden have data on voter behaviour back to the 1960s, and during that decade, only 15 per cent in Norway and 21 per cent in Sweden decided during the campaign. From the 1970s through the 2000s, the proportion deciding during the campaign increased considerably. Today, about half the electorate decide (or, more precisely, report that they decide) during the campaign in all the Nordic countries. But there are differences between them. The share is the highest in Sweden: In the first decade after the turn of the century, almost 60 per cent decided during the campaign. Finland, Iceland, and Norway also reached high levels in the 1990s and have seen rather stable proportions since then. In Denmark, the increase has been significantly slower and did not approach the Swedish, Finnish, Icelandic, and Norwegian situation until recently.

The development described in Figure 11.2 gives the impression of quite unstable Nordic electorates. Recent studies using panels – repeated surveys throughout the campaign – moderate this impression somewhat: about half of the late deciders hold on to the same party throughout the campaign (e.g., Haugsgjerd et al., 2019).

The weakening ties between voters and parties and the increasing number of voters deciding during the campaign have contributed to more focus on the effect of the election campaign for vote choice. However, electoral research shows that stable factors, like socioeconomic factors and political values and attitudes, primarily drive vote choice. In 2005, Sweden even had rather strong class voting (Bengtsson et al., 2014). How can stable factors explain changing

Figure 11.2 Proportion of voters who decided what party to vote for during the campaign (per cent)

Comment: The proportion deciding during the campaign is added per decade and divided by number of elections.

Source: Bengtsson et al., 2014; figures kindly provided by Kasper Møller Hansen

party preferences? One reason for this is most likely that such stable factors are decisive in the voter's calculation of which parties they may consider voting for, constituting their party or consideration set. Campaign factors can influence the choice between the parties in the consideration set (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016; Oscarsson & Rosema, 2019).

Nordic research programmes on campaign communication

Research on campaign communication has become increasingly important in the Nordic countries.⁵ Again, Sweden has the most comprehensive research programme. Already in relation to the 1979 national election, Kent Asp established a research programme on media content during election campaigns at the University of Gothenburg (see Asp, 1986). Ever since, at every national election, the Swedish media campaigns have been documented and studied, contributing with essential knowledge about political journalism and the nature of campaign coverage (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019). A couple of decades later, Strömbäck and colleagues established a second research programme on media campaign coverage at Mid Sweden University, focusing more on mediatisation issues. For the 2018 election, the two research programmes merged (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019). Another research effort in Sweden worth mentioning is the studies on election posters, with a database now covering several thousand posters from the past 100 years (Håkansson et al., 2017).

Although the other Nordic countries do not have similar longitudinal research programmes on media coverage of election campaigns, campaign media coverage is given ample scholarly attention. To mention some examples, in Denmark, Albæk and colleagues (2010) studied Danish television campaign coverage from 1994 to 2007. They focused on political bias in election coverage. Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard-Svensson (2014) studied negativity in Danish election campaigns during 1994–2011, including how negative media coverage of parties is. Green-Pedersen and colleagues (2017) studied media coverage of issues and actors in the period of 1984–2003 (see also Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). In Norway, the first comprehensive study of media content during campaigns was carried out in 2001, as part of a project that studied party messages, media coverage, and voter reactions (Aardal et al., 2004). In addition, Sigurd Allern (2011) studied campaign television debate shows from 1961 to 2009. In Finland, Carlson (2017) reviewed prior studies of election posters and presented a longitudinal study with a particular focus on the depiction of children. In addition, a series of studies focusing on campaign media, particularly political advertising on television as well as the Internet later on, have been carried out in all elections since 1992.

One central question is to what extent campaign coverage is mediated (see also Skogerbø et al., Chapter 1). Norwegian and Swedish findings tend to answer this question affirmatively (e.g., Jenssen & Aalberg, 2007; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019). This finding entails that political coverage is based on news media logic and not political logic; media coverage is shaped by the format, resources, norms, and values of the news media, and their need to obtain the audiences' attention (e.g., Asp, 1986). Central to this concept is the focus on so-called game frames, or horse-race journalism. Rather than focusing on the political issues and political differences between parties, much attention is given to the political game as a contest to be won. For example, according to a study of the Norwegian 2001 campaign, 60 per cent of the campaign coverage included a game frame (Waldahl & Narud, 2004). This finding is similar to results reported from Denmark (Pedersen, 2014). Moreover, Danish media appear to increasingly emphasise negative messages from political parties (Elmelund-Præstekær & Mølgaard-Svensson, 2014). At the same time, other Danish results have highlighted the prevailing importance of a political logic for news media coverage (Hopmann et al., 2011).

Overall, the studies find less support for election campaign coverage being politically biased. The longitudinal Swedish studies show that in a campaign, media coverage indeed favours some parties and disfavors others. However, the favoured and disfavoured parties differ from one campaign to the next (Asp & Bjerling, 2014). These findings resonate well with studies from other Nordic countries (e.g., Albæk et al., 2010).

Another important finding across established democracies is that political parties have professionalised their electoral campaigning (e.g., Farrell & Webb, 2000; Plasser & Plasser, 2002), so too in the Nordic countries (Guðmundsson, 2014; Karlsen & Narud, 2004; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2011; Tenscher et al., 2012). Political parties obviously strive for the best possible media coverage during electoral campaigns, which becomes all the more important the more volatile voting behaviour becomes (see above). In part, the professionalisation of campaigns entails that parties integrate sophisticated practices and new technology in their campaign strategy (e.g., Tenscher et al., 2012), and in part, it describes how an increasing number of professionals are involved in the campaigning effort (Farrell & Webb, 2000; Karlsen, 2010).

An important condition for this professionalisation of campaigns in the Nordic countries is the steep increase in state funding of political parties (e.g., Koß, 2011). For example, the total state subventions to Norwegian parties increased from NOK 62 million in 1970 to NOK 515 million in 2012 (adjusted for inflation, based on 2012) (E. Allern et al., 2016). It was not until 1987 that Danish political parties received state funding, and with the so-called Olsen plan in 1995 – named after Erling Olsen, who served as the speaker of the parliament in 1994–1998 – the funding of Danish political parties was increased substantially (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2008). The idea behind the plan was to increase the resources of the parliament vis-à-vis the government and the EU. With increased funding, the parties also had the resources to professionalise their campaigning (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2011). One central source of inspiration in the 1990s and early 2000s was Tony Blair’s campaign strategies in the UK, but also presidential campaigns in the US. In the years to follow, “spin” and “spin doctors” became central in the vocabulary of every political pundit. Anders Fogh Rasmussen became prime minister in 2001 following, by Danish standards, a highly choreographed electoral campaign (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2008). Yet, despite campaigns being planned and prepared more professionally today – such as systematically testing campaign messages before fielding them – and despite many new technological remedies now being used in Danish campaigns, we also saw a re-emergence of the most ordinary approaches to campaigning in the past years, such as ringing doorbells (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2011).

The literature on the professionalisation of campaigning has highlighted that campaigns increasingly become “permanent” (Blumenthal, 1982), in other words, that the difference between routine and campaign periods increasingly become blurred. It is plausible to assume that this is particularly the case in Denmark, given that the date for the next election is not scheduled, unlike the other Nordic countries (see above). To what extent this actually is the case is obviously difficult to establish. In Norway and Sweden, it has traditionally been

distinguished between the short campaign – the four to five weeks leading up to the election, and the long campaign – up to a year (or more) before the election (Esaïasson, 1990; Karlsen & Narud, 2004). However, in Sweden, with fixed election dates, a transition to permanent campaigning is being discussed (Nord, 2013). More generally, Sweden, where state subsidies for political parties were introduced in the 1960s, is another example of a country where over time more resources are being used on campaigning and where campaigning has become more professional. Yet, there seem to be rather stable differences between parties – larger parties run more professional campaigns (Strömbäck, 2015). Moreover, compared to parties in the UK or the US, Swedish parties must be considered less professional, still. Reasons for this include still (comparatively) fewer resources seen, declining membership, and policy focus (Strömbäck, 2015).

In Finland as well, permanent campaigning is discussed in relation to the professionalisation of campaigning (Tenscher & Mykkänen, 2014). Overall, Finland has witnessed increasing professionalisation of electoral campaigning in recent national and European campaigns, yet substantial differences between parties remain, as Tenscher and Mykkänen (2014) noted in their work. Their analyses also reveal that Finnish parties are still less professional than their German counterparts with respect to campaign strategies. A similar tendency is found in Norway, where parties are increasingly utilising new practices offered by new technologies, and in-house campaign professionals, party employees, have strong influence on campaign strategies (Karlsen, 2010; Karlsen & Narud, 2004; Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). Research results from Iceland also document an increasing professionalisation of political communication, where training politicians on how to use the media as well as shielding politicians from the media have also emerged as important trends (Guðmundsson, 2014 ; see also Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, Chapter 3).

In short, it is safe to conclude that electoral campaigning has professionalised across the Nordic countries. However, to the best of our knowledge, no comparative and diachronic investigation of electoral campaigning across the Nordic countries is available. Some of the studies cited above discuss more than one country, such as Finland and Sweden (Tenscher et al., 2012) or Iceland and Norway (Guðmundsson, 2014), but we lack a systematic understanding of the changes in campaign communication within the Nordic countries with data gathered in the same fashion across the Nordic countries enabling us to understand the differences and similarities over time and space.

Conclusion

How similar are the Nordic countries with respect to elections and political communication, after all? On the one hand, the preceding discussions may

leave the impression that the Nordic countries are rather dissimilar. Election dates are set in the most different ways one may think of. Electoral systems vary substantially across the Nordic countries, with some countries, for instance, having European elections, while other countries or territories do not. Finland and Iceland have presidential elections, unlike the constitutional monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. While voting in all Nordic countries can be personalised, whether this has an effect on who is elected varies greatly. And we find huge variation in the extent and continuity in research programmes on electoral behaviour and campaign communication.

Yet, on the other hand, we find many similarities across the Nordic countries, as one may expect. Even where paid television advertising is allowed, it is used cautiously, unlike what we see in many other countries. Turnout in national elections is high, and the trend towards deciding late whom to vote for shows a high correlation across most of the Nordic countries. Providing Nordic citizens with special voting rights within the Nordic countries stresses the similarities across the Nordic countries. Some of these similarities speak to the distinctiveness of the Nordic countries (such as the stable and high turnout) and some are found elsewhere as well (such as the trend toward deciding late whom to vote for). Hence, scholars interested in making the argument that the structures defined by electoral setups and campaign regulations are less important for how election campaigns are conducted can certainly find supportive arguments when studying the Nordic countries more closely. This raises the question of what other factors explain the similarities across the Nordic countries, such as cultural background and media systems, which are addressed in the introductory chapter of this anthology.

In their analysis of the “media welfare state”, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 128) conclude that the Nordic countries have a lot in common with other (developed) Western countries, but they have the most in common with their Nordic neighbours: “To the degree that one can speak at all of regional media and communications structures, Nordic media constitute a distinct entity”. Based on the above review, we are hesitant to support such a bold notion when discussing elections and political communication in the Nordic countries. A “Nordic” model of political communication has been discussed, but – to the best of our knowledge – not yet fully developed (Guðmundsson, 2014). There are substantial differences with respect to the rules governing elections and their campaigns. When it comes to styles of campaigning, the Norwegian party-centred campaign, on the one hand, and the Finnish individualised campaign, on the other, might constitute the two extremes in a Western European context. The electoral campaigning of candidates and political parties changes over time and has become more professional, as it has in many countries. In fact, sources for inspiration regarding new campaign techniques are often countries outside of the Nordics, and not primarily immediate Nordic neighbours. This is

not to say that we are witnessing an Americanisation of elections and political communication in the Nordic countries (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2017). Rather, in line with an analysis of campaigning during the 2009 European elections in the two German-speaking countries Austria and Germany and the Nordic countries Finland and Sweden (Tenscher et al., 2012), the central take-away appears to be that differences in the political communication between political parties are much larger than between countries.

Notes

1. Socio-demographic factors introduced by Lazarsfeld and his group are central to the key concept in the Michigan model: party identification. Hence, one approach did not replace the other. See Converse (2006) for an interesting historical account of the development of the Michigan model and the fusion of the social structure and the socio-psychological perspective.
2. This model is also referred to as the “Rokkan and Valen model” as it was first developed through explorative studies of Norwegian electoral politics. It was later developed into a more general model by Rokkan.
3. For an overview, see, for example, Semetko (2007).
4. See https://www.vaalitutkimus.fi/en/vaalitutkimus_suomessa.html
5. In addition, in recent years, studies of election campaign content have increasingly focused on social media (see Nord & Grusell, Chapter 6).

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