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Data-Driven Campaigning in Data-Dense Small Multiparty Systems: A Party-Level Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines data-driven campaign (DDC) practices in Sweden. We explore the extent of data-driven practices adopted in Swedish political campaigns, and parties' motivations to adopt them. Since this is a comparison of domestic parties, we test the importance of four party-level factors—resources, structure, attitudes toward data use, and ideology—using extensive interviews with key campaign managers in Sweden during the 2022 election year. Our results show that the differences among the eight parties studied are rather small, and that systemic factors are more important than party variables to explain the adoption of data-driven approaches. Zooming in on these finer differences we distinguish between top DDC adopters (Social Democrats, Center, and Conservatives) and a lower tier with lower levels of DDC implementation. To explain the differences between the two tiers, we find that economic resources are important, with richer parties being more advanced in DDC use. Party structure, attitudes to data, and ideology do not affect the likelihood of a Swedish party using data analytics in their strategic decision-making. Instead, we suggest party type (catch-all vs. niche) is a potentially more useful party-level factor in explaining variation.

Keywords

data analytics; democracy; election campaigns; political communication; political parties

1. Introduction

Big data is the fuel powering the new economy ("The world's most valuable resource," 2017). Big data may also power politics. Striving to improve their electoral performance, political parties have increasingly

deployed data to their service. Using the availability of new technologies that quickly process large quantities of information about their electorate, parties can send directed and personalized messages to voters. In the US, both Democrats and Republicans have constructed over time large datasets about their own registered partisans. They have also purchased commercial data from social media and credit card companies to create digital "typical" voters (Kreiss, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2019). In Canada, Australia, and even the more data-shy Germany (Kefford et al., 2023), parties have started to gather information more systematically about voters, in the same vein as in the US. In general, research in the European context is not extensive. Based on the analyses so far, European countries have been found to be less extensive and sophisticated in their campaigns compared to the US because of systemic, regulatory, or party traits (Dobber et al., 2017; Dommett et al., 2024; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017).

In this article, we want to explore the extent of data-driven practices adopted in Swedish political campaigns, and parties' motivations to adopt them. Sweden is a good case study for data-driven campaigning (DDC) for two reasons. Firstly, given its high level of digitalization, Sweden could be expected to adopt DDC. Secondly, the similarity in regulations between European countries, coupled with variations in outcomes, warrants a focus on party-level factors. By engaging with the Swedish case, we find that, indeed, all Swedish parties adopt DDC practices, and that the small differences between them are a matter of resource inequality rather than ideology, structure, or attitudes toward data.

2. Data's Place in Political Campaigns

DDC has been defined as practices that access and analyze voter and/or campaign data to generate insights into the campaign's target groups and/or to optimize campaign interventions. The mere use of data is by this definition therefore not enough to be DDC. To be considered data-driven, campaigns must use the data to inform decision-making in either a formative and/or evaluative capacity. DDC may occur in the form of voter communication, resource generation, policy development, and/or internal organization (Dommett et al., 2023, p. 2).

Here, we see campaigns as data-driven if (a) they systematically collect or statistically model large amounts of information that can be then (b) used to make decisions about the campaign, which potentially influence policy formulations or the internal processes and the organizational structures in the party.

While most research on data in campaigns has used the US as the empirical locus, there is work done in Europe, albeit mainly focused on large European countries (Anstead, 2017; Dommett et al., 2024; Kefford et al., 2023). Findings from the UK indicate a significant adoption of data-driven techniques among its major political parties, similar to trends observed in the US. This includes the use of sophisticated data analytics to inform campaign strategies and voter targeting.

In contrast to the UK, Germany has very strict data protection laws that significantly limit the scope of DDC. German parties are restricted from creating detailed voter profiles, which is a common practice in the US and less stringently regulated countries like the UK. This limits the depth and sophistication of data-driven techniques that can be legally employed. The cultural acceptance of data-driven practices in the UK contrasts with the skepticism and resistance seen in Germany, further influencing the DDC strategies in each country (Dommett et al., 2024).

Sweden would be placed between the UK and Germany in terms of the strictness of regulatory frameworks and the cultural acceptance of doing data-driven work. However, the differences across these European cases pale when contrasted with the US. We can assume the systemic and regulatory factors (e.g., the electoral system and the campaign finance laws), identified in the model by Dommett et al. (2024) as affecting the differences in DDC adoption across countries, to be similar, allowing us to focus on parties as actors facilitating the DDC process.

2.1. Party-Level Factors and DDC

The literature on DDC in a national context looks at party-level variables for understanding differences in how extensive and sophisticated data practices are. Chu et al. (2024) look at party age and distinguish between new parties and established parties, but do not find that in practice this distinction is significant for online ad microtargeting. New parties do not benefit more from online ads since they do not necessarily base their success on social media use. Dommett et al. (2024) identify four party properties that can affect DDC: resources, organizational structure, attitudes toward data use, and party ideology. We provide a brief overview of the literature on each of these factors below.

Among the four factors, resource availability has been the most studied, as it was deemed crucial in determining a party's ability to engage in any form of campaigning, including data-driven ones (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, pp. 45–76). Party communication is based on acquiring facts about key issues, monitoring rival campaigns, and producing campaign materials within tight timeframes. This demands a well-equipped party infrastructure. Parties with ample resources enjoy greater flexibility in selecting campaign issues, allowing them to include more ads on multiple topics and target specific sub-constituencies through organized subgroups (e.g., youth organizations, women's organizations, etc.; Meyer & Wagner, 2016). In contrast, parties with limited resources are constrained in their ability to communicate multiple messages and are more likely to concentrate on a few core constituencies.

Looking more specifically at DDC, parties with more substantial financial backing are able to invest in the necessary technology and hire specialists, which facilitates more sophisticated data operations. Moreover, parties that invest in training their staff on data analytics can leverage their human resources more effectively, enhancing their campaign strategies (Dommett et al., 2024). Access to rich financial resources allows parties to purchase more data from social media platforms to commission customized opinion polls and run more targeted ads. Thus, there is a difference between large and small parties' capacity for DDC (Kefford et al., 2023).

Apart from resources, party organization has been known to play a role in successful campaigning. In the Swedish context, all parties are centralized; their campaigns are also centralized, with managers being represented in the party leadership (the party secretary and a steering committee are leading the national campaigns for all eight parties; Bolin et al., 2022, p. 43). Parties with a more centralized structure tend to implement data-driven strategies more effectively. Centralization allows for a unified approach to data handling and strategy implementation, which can be critical in coordinated campaigns (Dommett et al., 2024, pp. 38–39).

Third, and connected to the point above, the attitudes of party leadership toward data privacy, technology, and innovation significantly affect the adoption of data-driven strategies (Dommett et al., 2024, p. 40). Leadership that prioritizes data security and ethical considerations might be more cautious, potentially slowing down adoption but ensuring General Data Protection Regulation compliance and ethical campaigning. Leadership that values aggressive expansion and rapid adoption of new technologies may push for more innovative, albeit riskier, data strategies. Moreover, party leadership might propose different areas for DDC deployment, such as strategy, policy development, or outreach and communication.

Fourth, party ideology may also affect the extent to which parties implement data-based approaches. In Canada, Dommett et al. (2024) find that the Green Party is explicitly opposed to using personal data for microtargeting. Also in Germany, the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Left Party had an internal opposition to microtargeting (Dommett et al., 2024, p. 187). Due to the small number of studies examining DDC practices in multiparty systems, it is difficult to anticipate which parties may utter these concerns that reduce the influence of DDC.

In sum, resource abundance, centralized structures, and forward-thinking leadership attitudes generally correlate with more advanced and effective use of data-driven strategies. These factors not only determine the extent of data utilization in campaigns but also influence how data-driven innovations are integrated into broader campaign strategies. The ideological orientation of parties may also play a role. Since there is so far little scholarly evidence about how these factors play out in European multiparty systems, and since the Swedish DDC practices specifically have not been analyzed before, we cannot formulate any hypotheses. We therefore ask the following research questions: How extensively are data-driven practices adopted in Swedish political campaigns, and what motivates parties to adopt them? What party-level factors influence the variation of DDC strategies in Sweden?

3. The Swedish Political Circumstances

Population data availability and data quality in Sweden are very high. Systematic data about the inhabitants of the country started to be gathered already in 1749 using church registers; in 1858 the national statistics bureau was founded, and data gathering has expanded ever since. Today, for example, voting data is finetuned to include electoral result maps at street block level. Not only is there a lot of data collected, but this information is also easily available. Sweden has transparency laws that make population data open (in many cases cost-free) for individuals and organizations. Finally, Sweden has a high-quality and very broad internet infrastructure, almost fully digitized public services, high social media use, and frequent electronic purchasing behavior (the country has among the highest scores in the European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index). In sum, a large volume of high-quality, consistently measured historical and contemporary data is readily available on numerous social, economic, and voting parameters. Thus, the preconditions exist for Swedish parties' adoption of a data-driven approach in their political activities.

The Swedish electoral system is based on two-tier list proportional representation, with a threshold of 4% of the vote nationally, in which the majority of seats are elected directly in Sweden's 29 constituencies. The remaining seats are decided by national vote totals to correct any disproportionality. This distinguishes Sweden from other European countries studied in the DDC context, such as the UK (majoritarian voting system) and Germany (combination of majority voting and proportional representation).

From a European perspective, Sweden has a high share of state subsidies, and Swedish parties place high on an average party strength index (Webb & Keith, 2017). Public funds are allocated based on past performance: "Parties that have received at least 4 percent of the votes nationwide receive one full basic support amount for each year covered by the election" (Government of Sweden, 1972, amended in 2004, art. 6). As public funding is spread in proportion to size, smaller parties tend to have fewer resources, except for the Center Party which has its own investment fund.

Still, due to its more liberal campaign financing laws, differences between parties could in theory become larger. Swedish campaign finance laws are liberal in that there are no limits put on private donations to political parties or politicians, as long as these donations come from domestic givers (these donations can be anonymous up to a certain level, currently 24,150 SEK). All foreign financing is prohibited. Swedish campaign finance laws stipulate no limits on spending. Parties can use all their money as they see fit, including in messages against a candidate or party, but they cannot buy votes (Government of Sweden, 1962, Chapter 17, Section 8).

Transparency is ensured by the obligation of parties to report their finances via a revenue statement given to the Kammarkollegiet (the Legal Financial and Administrative Services Agency). The financial reports cover the full income (but not expenditure) of parties, not only those related to campaigning. These reports from political parties, MPs, and party-affiliated organizations are made public on the Kammarkollegiet website (with the names of the non-anonymous donors available upon request).

3.1. Swedish Political Parties: Ideology, Resources, Structure, and Attitudes

Below we introduce how resources, party structure, ideology, and attitudes toward data feature in Sweden, operationalizing the party-level explanatory variables highlighted above. All Swedish parties have well-defined organizational structures, with elected leadership, party congresses, and regional and local branches (Aylott & Bolin, 2019). Traditionally, the class cleavage has been the predominant one in Swedish politics, with two major parties being distinguished along a left–right scale, where to the left we have the Social Democrats (the largest party in Sweden since the interwar period), and, to the right, the Conservatives (Moderaterna). Several smaller parties are also present, two close to the middle of the political spectrum (the Center Party and the Liberals), one to the left of the Social Democrats (the Left Party), and one slightly to the left of the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats. The Sweden Democrats are more difficult to place on the left–right spectrum as they combine anti-immigration and socially conservative stances with an interventionist, "big state" approach. To account for their position, we can refer to the GAL–TAN axis (green/alternative/libertarian to traditional/authoritarian/nationalist; Hooghe et al., 2002), where the Sweden Democrats are clearly close to the TAN end of the spectrum, followed by the Christian Democrats and the Conservatives. At the GAL pole we find the Greens and the Left Party, and, in the middle, closer to GAL than TAN we have the Social Democrats and the Center and Liberal parties.

Resources are described in financial terms, as there is no available data about the staffing of each party. As shown in Figure 1, the Social Democrats are the most affluent, followed by the Center Party; the Liberals are the least wealthy. The source of the income varies by party. The Social Democrats gather money through their party lottery, the A Lotteriet. The Center Party has a large budget because it manages an investment fund. The Sweden Democrats report receiving 21% of their income from donations, the highest percentage among the Swedish parties. The Liberals' budget comes almost exclusively in the form of public financing

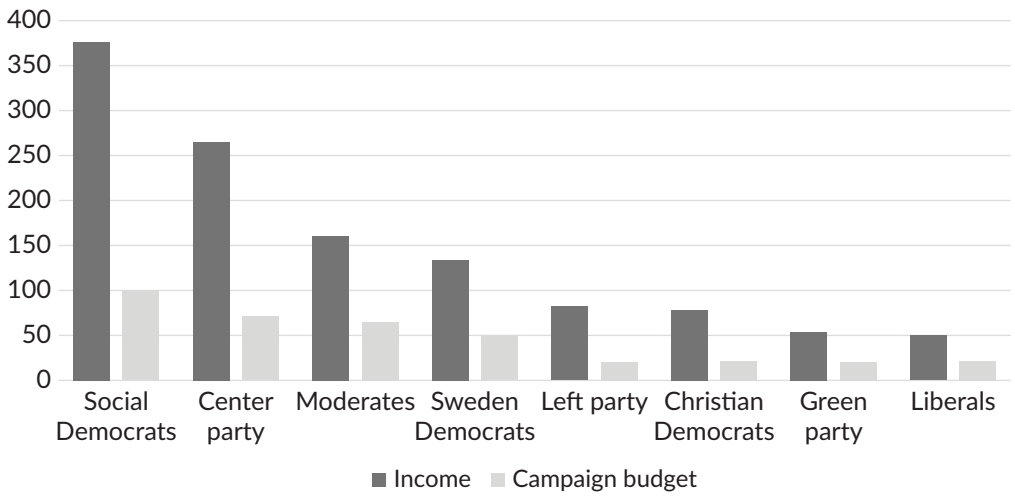

Figure 1. Financial resources: Reported income from political actors and size of their campaign budget in million SEK, 2022. Source: Kammarkollegiet (n.d.).

(87% of the reported income), whereas only a quarter of the total income of the Center Party comes from the state (Kammarkollegiet, n.d.). As financial resources vary greatly between the Swedish parties, the range between top and bottom parties is high in comparison to other European countries such as the UK or the Netherlands (Webb & Keith, 2017, p. 53).

Party structure and leadership's attitudes toward data are two variables that we found less straightforward to operationalize. For party structure, we approximated it by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey variable *membership vs leadership*, where a score of 0 means that members/activists have complete control over policy choices and a score of 10 means that it is the party leadership that has full control. To capture the attitudes toward data in the party elite, we relied on an index for the digitalization of campaigns (Grusell & Nord, 2020). Even though this measure is based on older data, we use it because it captures well the theoretically derived elements of data privacy, technology, and innovation. The index includes items such as the use of internal and external digital tools, an overall internet evaluation, and the perceived relevance of digital communication channels.

Figure 2 summarizes the hierarchy and digitalization scores of Swedish parties. The Chapel Hill Expert Survey data on hierarchy shows that most parties that cluster in the center on that scale tend to balance the top-down and bottom-up governance models, leaning overall towards empowering the grassroots. This is particularly the case for the two historically largest parties, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives. The Sweden Democrats, the most hierarchical party, are very top-steered for historical reasons, as the party leader, Jimmy Åkesson, has centralized the party to limit the expression of extremist voices within the party, similar to other radical right parties (Art, 2018). The least hierarchical party is the Greens, an inheritance from their origins as a recent grassroots movement, also fitting a general trend (Rihoux, 2016).

Despite differences in size, hierarchy, and ideology, all political parties' campaign managers in Sweden claim that they have highly digitalized campaigns and internal communications (Grusell & Nord, 2020). The differences between parties are small, and in the period since Grusell and Nord's publication, the gaps may have grown even smaller. Thus, we can conclude that Swedish party elites have a positive attitude toward data and digital channels.

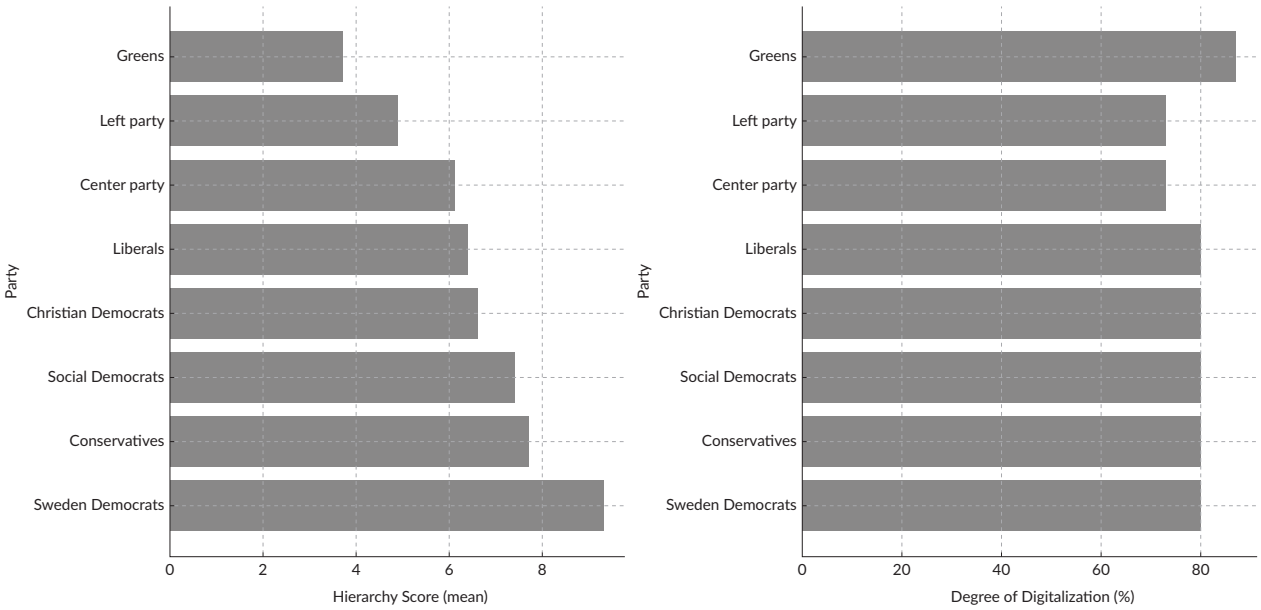

Figure 2. Party hierarchy score with 0 the least and 10 the most hierarchical. Sources: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019 (Jolly et al., 2022); Digitalization Index from Grusell and Nord (2020).

4. Research Design and Method

To evaluate the influence of party-level variables on DDC, we interviewed 15 campaign managers at national and regional (Scanian/Skåne) levels representing all eight parties in the Swedish parliament. The Sweden Democrats could not be reached at the regional level and the Conservatives could not be reached at the national level. For the Social Democrats, we interviewed two persons at the national HQ due to their campaign structure; otherwise, we had one person per party and level. The participation of all interviewees in the study was voluntary. The interviews were performed online in the period immediately before and immediately after the national parliamentary elections of September 11, 2022. There was a maximum of six weeks between the interviews before the elections and those after election day, which allows us to maintain that this time difference did not affect the responses.

Each interview followed the same questionnaire as the one in Dommett et al. (2024), with questions divided into several blocks: attitudes towards data analysis, use areas, obstacles and opportunities, and future directions. The questionnaire was translated into Swedish, to be found in the Supplementary File, and contained altogether 25 questions. All interviewees received the questions beforehand and had the option of answering them in writing or in a live conversation, an option preferred by all minus one party campaign responsible. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and a half and were conducted in Swedish.

The interviewees were granted anonymity, which is the reason why we are not very precise in describing the exact position the respondents held in the campaign hierarchy of staff. We offered the interviewees the option to speak without being recorded and all of them chose this alternative. This is why the conversations were never taped; instead, one author took notes while another was asking questions.

We performed a manual qualitative thematic analysis of the interview materials, facilitated by the direct connection between the structure of the questionnaire and our theoretical focus on the four party-level variables: attitudes, resources, use areas, and structure of the campaign. We annotated each interview identifying each of the four variables per party, and then grouped the resulting labeled texts by topic (e.g., motivations, use areas, etc.).

5. Results

5.1. Extent of DDC Use

All parties use some form of DDC in their campaign. We asked party officials whether their party uses DDC as well as about their perceptions of the other parties' sophistication in terms of data use. According to both self- and others' perceptions, the Center Party and the Social Democrats are seen as the most advanced in this process. Even if they are not equally far ahead, the other parties also clearly identify themselves and their political competitors as adopters of data analytics. The one exception is the Sweden Democrats.

The Sweden Democrats state that they do not embrace data analytics and that they do not believe in a data-driven approach. They appear to be critical of microtargeting and of using data as a strategical ground for decisions within the campaign, instead claiming: "We think what we think and then it is up to the people to vote for us." The Sweden Democrats accuse other parties (and the Social Democrats in particular) of being too eager to follow public opinion and adapt their politics to the voters' wishes. While the Sweden Democrats state that they do not systematically analyze data, they nevertheless admit that they collect and evaluate data from their digital channels and call social media "extremely important" for their outreach.

Seen from the other parties' perspective, the Sweden Democrats appear even more adept at crafting a digital presence than they themselves would let on. However, there seems to be an agreement that, while they are active digitally, this does not transfer into being active in the DDC sphere. The Center Party perceives the Sweden Democrats as a clear example of a party that profits greatly from its digital presence without having to put in as much effort (compared to the rest).

The Social Democrats explain this by saying "[Sweden Democrats] is a popular movement born in the digital world." In contrast:

> [Social Democrats] was founded as a popular movement over 100 years ago. Our credibility lies in that people expect us to be the Social Democrats [a more traditional, state-bearing, party]. We need to adapt to how people consume information and understand the world around them while not adopting populist ways; we cannot adjust to their [Sweden Democrats'] tone.

5.2. Motivations for Using Data-Driven Approaches

When discussing the reasons to introduce a data analytics approach, our interviewees contrast it with the old ways of decision-making within the party. They emphasize the positive aspects of DDC as compared to previous practices in that it can be juxtaposed against intuition, guesswork, or heuristics. For example, the head of communication for the Left Party says:

> In a party with many divergent views on many things, you can take support in data. There will always be people who say that if we had pursued that issue, it would have gone better. Then it is helpful to have measures to look at.

Data is viewed as a way to reach decisions acceptable to a majority in the party leadership and membership, in a context of competing views and ideas about what can be done. This echoes Munroe and Munroe (2018), who describe how "a data-driven campaign is one in which decisions are guided by the use of data rather than by instinct, guesswork, intuition, tradition or rules of thumb" (p. 139). Moreover, this testifies to the desire of Swedish parties to adopt a modern and "scientific" approach (Römmele & Gibson, 2020).

Another motivation is related to the need to obtain more information about the wants and needs of the electorate in an age where party membership is low. Even well-maintained member registers are insufficient to paint a broad picture of the potential voter, because of the small number of party actives. One party (Liberals) says:

> In 1979, 10% were party members. Now that number is down to 2%. A fifth of the Swedish population joined the popular movements that built the Swedish political assemblies. It is important to maintain contact with the grassroots, for trust and legitimacy. Parties need to figure out what this contact should look like nowadays. From that perspective, parties have an obligation to gather data by other means.

The same idea of needing to be in touch with the public and to reach them by hitting the right note is echoed by the Center Party: "When the competition over attention in the media is great, it is crucial to get the message out in the right channels. Thus, data about different media's audiences get extra interesting for us."

We can conclude from our interviews that all parties collect data and analyze it, even if some parties are more advanced and some more reluctant to do so, corroborating Grusell and Nord (2020) and Bolin et al. (2022, pp. 74–83). Experience with digital communication channels does not automatically imply a preference for DDC. The primary motivations for working with data analytics are to measure campaign performance, provide legitimacy to campaign decisions, and remain in touch with the electorate.

While DDC adoption and motivations are generally similar, it is interesting to further probe the existence of differences among the eight parties, following the four variables of resources, structure, attitudes towards data, and ideology.

5.3. Resources

There are substantial differences in the resources parties have dedicated to data analytics in their campaigning. Because of campaign finance rules, the larger parties tend to get more support from the state than smaller parties, perpetuating an imbalance. However, parties that can recruit individual donations or that have external sources of financial support will supplement public sources with private funding.

The Social Democrats and the Center Party use the most sophisticated forms of DDC in Sweden, both according to themselves and the other parties, with the Conservatives in third place. Our interviewee from the Center Party says that they can afford to measure and analyze more than other parties. The Social

Democrats believe that they are most similar to the Center Party in terms of campaign spending ("we probably spend as much or more, in particular on social media") but that they probably are the most resource-strong party in terms of staff. They can invest staff time in data analytics and testing and can train internal people to respond to the data needs of the campaign. Richer parties can thus afford deeper mining of the data, in contrast to less affluent parties who are limited to more short-term temperature measures.

The resource imbalance is reflected not only in the degree of data analysis but also in the type of data sources parties can afford. All parties use freely available data from the official statistical bureau and from opinion polls whose results are published in the media. They monitor their own social media and other digital channels using the analytical tools provided by the platforms. For example, all parties use Facebook tools such as "core," "lookalike," or "custom" audiences to identify specific types of voters or those who have certain attributes in common, such as location, age, language, or gender. All engage in social listening to measure impact and pick up on discussions online.

The difference comes in the form of supplementary data. Richer parties can commission their own opinion polls and obtain more fine-grained and customary data that allow them to tailor messages regionally or by other segmentation (profession, age). Richer parties can periodically organize focus groups that give them more context from which they can interpret the data obtained from social media or from opinion polls.

5.4. Structure

The structure of a party (how strong is the central leadership versus regular members/local branches) is reflected in the organization of the party's electoral campaign and thus may affect how data analytics is included in the campaign activities.

The organization of the campaign and communication strategies are on paper rather similar (Bolin et al., 2022, p. 43) but are implemented quite differently across parties. In some cases, the teams are organized centrally to deal with all data and campaign materials. In some other cases, the campaign is structured in siloes, each dealing with a separate aspect of the campaign. The collaboration between the teams in charge of implementing the campaign and the strategic division of the parties is also more or less tight. We will illustrate with some examples below.

Smaller parties (Liberals, Greens, Center, Left) tend to be less hierarchical and their campaign structure is more compact and closer to the party leadership. The people working with data/digital campaigning are typically the same people who have the overall responsibility for the party's information and campaign activities, and for developing the party's brand. This enables efficiency and less coordination effort. There are, however, nuances in this small party category. For example, the Green Party has a flatter organization of the campaign—as a result "many get a say about many things all the time." This makes it extra important to clearly anchor strategies within the organization, an activity that is described as a central part of the campaign manager's efforts.

The Left Party aims to be a "united party, with everyone pulling in the same direction." The central level gives the general campaign direction and allows other levels to adapt it and express their own ideas, accommodating a diversity of members' views. However, "there is a desire from the leadership for a more cohesive and coordinated campaign than they were able to achieve." Thus, despite having access to a

well-structured member register and a digital application for internal communication with party members of their own design (the Zetkin app), the Left Party was unable to mobilize its data resources in a coherent way because of organizational problems in the party before the 2022 elections.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Social Democrats, Sweden's largest party and a decentralized one, operate with a campaign team divided into two segments: one dedicated solely to managing organic social media and web presence, the other dealing with digital ads. Moreover, the campaign also includes a team in charge of opinion polls and focus groups, but, rather surprisingly, there is no one responsible for coordination. The choice of not having a digital campaign manager is rooted in being a less hierarchically managed organization. Instead, coordination occurs through regular meetings between the three teams. While this structure fosters autonomy, it also risks fostering silo mentalities, according to our interviewee. This organizational approach raised internal concerns regarding internal competition for resource allocation and the challenge of reconciling diverse communication objectives within a unified framework. However, separating the team affords them autonomy, as they can "run at their own pace, without compromising with each other." Potential drawbacks are reduced synergy and heightened coordination demands. The interviewees suggest a future shift towards task division based on target groups, advocating for a more holistic approach to digital engagement. They also acknowledge a need for a centralized coordination function, bridging current organizational gaps.

The Christian Democrats, a small but less hierarchical party, mention that the campaign is partly centralized, partly flexible. The central organization provides templates for infographics and video posts, as well as materials involving the party leader. Regional organizations have autonomy in deciding how to use the templates and how to implement the strategies. For example, even if the central campaign is not data-oriented, regional campaigns can apply data-based methods to their own constituencies, and regional campaign managers are allowed to experiment.

5.5. Attitudes Toward Data and Use Areas of DDC

Our interviews show that, while Swedish parties see data analytics as beneficial, all of them believe that data must be an integrated part of the overall campaign strategy and not something that can be conceived of on its own. When there is a difference between party culture or tradition and the data-based suggestion for a course of action, tension is likely to occur.

The Center Party says that they invest considerably in data and digital campaigning in relation to other parties but that they do not get that much in return. One reason for this is the discrepancy between the way things have been done traditionally in the party and the new, data-oriented, ways. The Center Party interviewee said that digital campaigning is not really built into their party's culture, since they are a "typical door-knocking party."

Even the Left Party mentions the tension between the actions suggested by the data and the ones coming out of experience. The Left considers that DDC has a potential drawback in that data analysis may distort perceptions of what works well or not because of a focus on immediacy and measurable outcomes. Data can be deceiving:

> When you have access to a lot of continuously updated data, you can become short-sighted. And if you become short-sighted, it is difficult to be consistent. It is better to have a bad plan that is consistent than to have a good plan that changes all the time.

Therefore, it is important to balance "gut feeling and getting a hint [from the data] about what works, to learn about target groups and how to run processes."

The tension exists not only between intuition and data-based approaches, but more widely between traditional forms of data analysis (such as surveys and focus groups) versus digital data (such as social media ad performance). Many parties emphasize that salient issues online are very different from the issues voters rank as most important in surveys. In the words of the Christian Democrats, surveys identified healthcare as one of their top prioritized issues followed by heartland/countryside, and, finally, safety. Our interviewee said that if the Christian Democrats had relied only on digital data, they would have concluded that healthcare does not qualify as a top issue, based on social media engagement. Safety, on the other hand, appeared high as a priority on social media, but not in the survey of the broader population.

All parties seem to agree that the introduction of new data forms and new data-based processes is not unilaterally positive but contains ambiguities and tensions. Negotiating their way through these tensions will challenge the established ways of doing this and may reshape the party campaign organization.

5.6. Ideology

Data-driven techniques may change the election campaign structure, but parties are very reluctant to let them change the primacy of ideology for policy development. All parties agreed, in no uncertain terms, that they see data as a tool to get their ideological message out to the public and not as a tool to change the foundational ideas they build their agenda on. This consensus view is reflected in the absence of ideological differences in DDC adoption. Parties varying on the left–right and GAL–TAN scales say that they are equally inclined to use data-based approaches both strategically and evaluatively.

The exception here is the Sweden Democrats, the Swedish party that has grown the most in the past decade. Located at the TAN end of the political spectrum, the Sweden Democrats' campaign leadership acknowledges the digital data collection and a strong digital presence, but no data-based policy suggestions. The emphatic rejection of DDC in favor of both more experiential strategy design and of ideological agenda-setting is meant to present the party as authentically motivated by fundamental values and principles and not interested in opportunistically "chasing votes."

While the Sweden Democrats' statement is the most clear-cut, the other parties also propose a version of DDC that plays a role in strategy building, communication, and internal use—but not in policy development.

The Center Party interviewee declares: "Our 2022 campaign is absolutely data-driven, but data do not determine policy. Rather it is about using data to be able to communicate politics more efficiently." The Christian Democrats have a similar take:

> Being too ideological about policy is often described as a trap, with the risk that you develop policies around things that people do not think solve their problems. Against that background, data can play

> a role: It helps us learn what people are worried about, identify societal problems, and then, from an ideological foundation, to seek an answer to those concerns.

For other parties, data may help them not only identify the priorities and problems of the voters but also to adjust their policy agenda. The Left Party interviewees mentioned one instance where they noticed that a new issue became important in their social media data analysis. This led them to look over their policies to make sure that they were sufficient to address the respective issue or if the campaign needed further adjustments or even adopt new policies.

Data analytics as a confirmation or adjustment of the policy agenda is a role also identified by the Social Democrats. According to them, a policy has so many components to it that even if ideology comes first, data can improve decisions related to policy development: "If we see some issues becoming salient, we might need to prioritize differently." For the Social Democrats, the campaign strategy with prioritized issue areas was set about half a year before the 2022 election and built on the priorities set by the party leader (a new phenomenon started with Magdalena Andersson, the prime minister at the time). Then, the war in Ukraine, NATO, and the war's effects on the economy made the PM's leadership qualities come into focus. Data analytics allowed the Social Democrats' campaign to be agile and adapt faster to the changing political environment: "It is difficult with election pledges because we need to constantly adjust, and the result is only visible after the election. Election manifestos are no longer relevant or at least not as they previously functioned." For most parties, it is important to leave room for longer-term, ideological perspectives, as data analytics is useful primarily in the short term.

6. Discussion

One takeaway of our study is that, in Sweden, data analytics is an established practice for all eight parliamentary parties, though to a lesser extent for the Sweden Democrats. Moreover, parties have similar information sources for extracting patterns of behavior and attitudes among the Swedish electorate, making good use of the high volume, quality, and availability of public data. Thus, all parties exploit the systemic structures in which they operate. Party structure does not affect the implementation of data analysis, as more or less hierarchical parties are at the same level of DDC inclusion. The structure of the electoral campaign, however, matters, with more professionalized and therefore centralized campaigns being more adept at leveraging insights from the data to inform strategies.

This said, parties can still be divided into a top tier that is more active in the implementation of DDC (Social Democrats, Center, and Conservatives) and a second tier, with less sophisticated data use (Sweden Democrats, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Left Party).

The three top DDC adopters are the richest of the eight Swedish parties. They can afford to hire expert services and to commission customized opinion polls and focus groups at different points in the campaign. Thus, they have better data and better analysts to make sense of it. However, even here there are exceptions. The Sweden Democrats benefit from a lot of resources but choose to invest them elsewhere; they resolved the tension between a more experience-based and a more data-based approach by favoring experience.

Party ideology does not seem to matter in the adoption of DDC, as parties from across the political spectrum are interested in data collection and analysis. The Center Party is located in the middle, ideologically, and has participated in both center-left and center-right coalitions. The Social Democrats and the Conservatives constitute the two traditional poles of Swedish politics, the first on the center-left, the latter to the center-right. Since the three parties cover all centrist standpoints and appeal to moderate voters (cf. the spatial voting model in Downs, 1957; and the catch-all party thesis in Kirchheimer, 1966), we can propose that, instead of ideology, other party features may be more relevant to DDC adoption.

We argue that *party type* is more relevant than ideology: Catch-all parties are more interested in DDC because their policy portfolio is broad and the potential voters more numerous than for niche parties. We have seen that DDC can help split the electorate but only in large segments to not contradict privacy rules and norms. We have also seen that parties use data to keep their flexibility when the context is volatile. But one-issue parties with a narrower base do not gain traction by segmenting even further their electorate. Instead, they would rely on their core issue to gain votes. Moreover, they likely do not have a broad policy appeal. Thus, it is catch-all parties with a diverse policy offering that would benefit the most from DDC—and the top DDC adopters among the Swedish parties fits that trend.

Swedish campaigns clearly separate between policy and communication. Communication is where data analytics makes its primary contribution. In contrast, policy formulation remains an ideological matter. This is a long-term trend, as already in 2013 party elites ranked ideology above campaign strategies and tactics (such as door-to-door canvassing or messaging through the party's digital channels; Strömbäck et al., 2013, p. 47). However, data insights are used as a corrective to the pre-established and ideologically derived policy agenda. Data insights help parties to remain agile and adapt to new contexts that appear during the campaign period. This is explained by their competition for a large group of middle voters. Voter mobility is high in Sweden, with party membership lower and party allegiance weaker. Plus, tactical voting is common, where citizens vote not for a preferred party but for the governmental coalition where that party would be present (Fredén, 2014).

The biggest practical challenge for DDC deployment in Sweden is the size of the domestic population. In contrast with larger electorates elsewhere, it is not possible to perform a fine-grained segmentation by issue crossed with location and/or occupation, say, because the results would be too narrow, risking breaking privacy laws. This inherent limitation, recognized by all parties, combined with voter volatility and the high cost of integrating data analysis into the party structure and practices, makes heavy investment in DDC less attractive. Instead of going all-in on the data front, Swedish parties walk a middle ground, where ideology provides the main message priorities, and data analytics, in tandem with experience and intuition, gives shape to this message.

6.1. Limitations

This study presents the perspective of the campaign managers themselves, who communicated their subjective perceptions, perhaps conveying partial or misleading information. They offered details about internal party procedures, roles, and decisions that could not be verified by cross-checking with other sources, since there were no other party officials available for interview. We mitigated this risk by comparing with existing literature on Swedish campaigns (e.g., Bolin et al., 2022; Grusell & Nord, 2020).

Of the eight parties, the Conservative national campaign HQ was the only one to not respond to our interview requests. Consequently, the DDC practices of the Conservatives might have been inaccurately represented here. We addressed this shortcoming by referring to other interviews that the campaign manager for the party gave to media outlets and podcasts and by consulting in depth with the responsible for the Scania regional campaign.

7. Conclusion

Despite the above limitations, according to interviews with campaign officials, political parties in Sweden tend to be rather similar in their approach to DDC. Thus, systemic and regulatory factors are important in understanding the choices made by Swedish parties. Party-level variables are only somewhat useful to explain the small-scale differences between the eight parties here. Access to economic resources mattered, with more affluent parties implementing DDC on a wider scale, but size, structure, and ideology do not affect DDC adoption. We found ideology to be an unconvincing factor in explaining the diversity of attitudes towards data analytics. Instead, we propose party type, distinguishing between catch-all and niche parties, as a more useful party-level variable, and invite DDC researchers to test it in their future work.

Sweden is a case of a small but data-dense country governed by rather generous campaign finance laws and by high data transparency (albeit still under EU privacy law restrictions). In addition, Swedes are used to coalition governments and often vote tactically to support not one party but one future governing alliance. The overall party similarity in DDC adoption emphasizes the limited role of party-level factors and, instead, the relevance of regulatory and systemic factors, which would indicate that DDC adoption patterns in other countries fitting Sweden's profile might be similar (e.g., in other Nordic countries, or smaller and richer EU member states such as Austria). Here an avenue opens for comparative research.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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