

Of Foreign or Domestic Origin?

Swedish media reporting on election interference in connection with the 2022 Swedish general election

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Election interference poses a threat to nations around the world. Potential negative effects include depressed public participation in the political process and elections, artificially exaggerated polarization among different groups in society and a decrease in trust among voters for the election system and in the long run, democracy itself. While different forms of interference in the election process is not a new phenomenon, the advent of the Internet has facilitated interference via digital means, originating either outside the nation's borders or from within. Sweden is no exception to being a subject of attempts of election interference, even though its election system is generally regarded as trustworthy and of a high standard. This study focuses on the 2022 Swedish election and the perceived threats of electoral interference via digital means, as well as claims of interference having taken place, as discussed in Swedish media. The results show that while Swedish media reported on both threats ahead

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of the election, as well as claims of different forms of interference having taken place, the integrity of Sweden's election system seems to have remained intact. Of primary concern are issues that can be connected with attempts of interference that have a domestic angle, pertaining primarily to the spread of disinformation online about alleged election fraud.

Key Words: election interference, election fraud, cyberattacks, disinformation, Sweden

1. Introduction

On October 10, 2022, Annika Strandhäll of the Social Democratic Party, tweeted a quote from an op-ed in Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*. The tweet stated: “We are left with the conclusion: bought propaganda, illicit manipulation and a push towards hatred likely decided the election campaign ...” (Strandhäll, 2022, my translation). The tweet generated criticism, for example from those who wondered if Annika Strandhäll, former Minister for Climate and the Environment and Minister for Social Security, was insinuating that the results of the newly held 2022 Swedish National Election could be questioned. The former Minister denied that this was the intent of her tweet. Yet her tweet and its subsequent replies illustrate part of a wider discussion held in the context of the 2022 election regarding possible election interference, particularly via platforms online, either from within the country or originating in foreign countries.

Such discussions in Sweden on possible interference or manipulation of a national election via digital methods are in turn illustrative of a development seen in different parts of the world in recent years. In fact, there are a number of examples in the last decade of not just fears of possible interference but

proven attempts by both domestic and foreign actors in countries such as Brazil, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Ghana, Iran, Singapore, Taiwan, United Kingdom, United States and Zimbabwe (e.g. Chang et al., 2021; Freedom House, 2019; Quirk, 2021; Rheault & Musulan, 2021; Shahbaz et al., 2018; Yuheng et al., 2021).

While by no means an exhaustive list, the range of countries above shows how the phenomenon has proliferated throughout the world. Whether attempts to interfere via online measures were successful or not in terms of having an effect on election results, committed by foreign or domestic actors, in consolidated democracies or countries aspiring to become consolidated democracies, citizens whose wish is for their national elections to be conducted fairly and without any kind of unlawful influence are ultimately affected. In a long-term perspective, the consequences ultimately have a negative effect on democracy itself. Among voters around the globe, Swedish voters however live in a country where manipulation of votes has not been a significant issue. Swedish voters, in contrast with many other citizens around the world, live in an economically stable liberal democracy well-known for its high quality of life as indicated by Sweden's persistently high ranking on a range of international indices, e.g. democratic development, human rights and development, rule of law and freedom of the press (Strömbäck, 2022). While such international status does not provide a guarantee against the forms of online election interference prevalent today, it can nevertheless be argued that Swedish voters do not appear as the most vulnerable. Why then, would discussions on the validity of the election results be questioned by a former Minister, one month after the elections had taken place?

The objective of this article is to provide an account of the concerns expressed regarding online election interference that were raised before the 2022 Swedish national election, as well as reports or claims of actual interference following the election. While the paper does not aim to either

confirm or rebuke claims on illicit activities affecting the election made before or after the election up until the point of writing, the idea is to make a preliminary assessment of the vulnerability of Sweden when it comes to election interference via digital means by weeding out fears and concerns from actual reports of violations. The research questions in focus in this article are the following:

- RQ1. What is Sweden's experience of election interference via digital means in recent elections?
- RQ2. What concerns were raised concerning online election interference in Swedish media leading up to the 2022 national election?
- RQ3. What, if any, reports of actual election interference were made in Swedish media in the months following the election?

The paper will start with a review of how the form of election interference in focus here can be categorized and applied by previous research. A brief background on Sweden's experiences of election interference then follows, after which the study's methodological approach is presented. The results will then be presented and discussed.

2. How elections can be manipulated online

Attempts to affect election results have a long history. For instance, traces of election fraud are visible in historical records going as far back as the 1700s in Sweden (Teorell, 2017). Manipulation of elections at that time however mainly concerned local election officials, and such practices were long eradicated as modern, democratic Swedish started to take shape. In a study situated in more modern times, comprising more than three hundred elections in over one hundred countries primarily held during the 1900s, Bubeck and Marinov (2019) document the phenomenon of foreign intervention,

which predates the advent of online means of interference by many decades. Methods may have changed quite drastically over time, and involve multiple possible actors both foreign and domestic, yet the main objective of affecting an election result to benefit a particular interest remains.

When it comes to the forms of election interference in focus in this paper, and that have been documented in multiple countries as mentioned in the introduction, four main strategies have been identified: *cyberattacks*, *misinformation campaigns*, *micro-targeted manipulation* and *trolling* (Tenove et al., 2018). These methods are distinct yet may overlap in practice, as the below review will indicate.

The strategy *cyberattacks* refers to digital systems, services and/or databases being targeted via electronic means, usually by a so called “hacker” that manages to gain access or control of data. In the context of elections, hackers can for example pose a threat to the integrity of the voting process by gaining access to voting systems, making modern systems that rely heavily on electronic voting machines and other databases particularly vulnerable. Different types of leaks of information obtained via unlawful means is another example that can affect the election (Tenove et al., 2018). Recent examples of this type of strategy include accusations against Russia interfering in the 2017 German elections via data breaches of the German parliament and other government agencies (Stelzenmüller, 2017) and in the same year, documents that allegedly belonged to the election campaign team of French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron were leaked (Downing & Ahmed, 2019).

The second strategy, *misinformation campaigns*, is broad and can take on many different forms depending on the context. Typical techniques include using memes, fake social media accounts and automated programs that can “perform simple, repetitive, robotic tasks” (i.e. bots) (Woolley & Howard, p. 6) in order to spread misinformation and disinformation, meaning information that is either unintentionally misleading, and that which is (Allcott &

Gentzkow 2017). In an election scenario, the effects of potential voters taking in such information are numerous, even though discerning and measuring the effects is methodologically challenging (Schünemann, 2022). Voters may for example gain a very skewed idea of election candidates or parties, get an impression that certain opinions are far more popular than they are in reality as messages have been amplified online, and ultimately begin to doubt the legitimacy of elections, elected officials and government overall (Henschke, Sussex & O'Connor, 2020; Tenove et al., 2018). Numerous countries have experience of misinformation campaigns of various sorts, originating from within the country or outside, in the context of a national election. The United States experience is perhaps one of the most well-known and well-documented after the most recent presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 (Ferrara et al., 2020; Tenove et al., 2018), but evidence of the use of this strategy is prevalent at a global scale (Woolley & Howard, 2019).

The third strategy, *manipulation via micro-targeting*, consists of identifying specific groups or individuals, both via data accessible via legitimate means and illegitimate (for example via hacking), and disseminating information to them meant to influence their opinion. The targeted information may have a better effect compared to that which is widely spread across for example an entire platform, as it can be customized for the particular audience and may exploit for instance an identified information deficit in the targeted group (Tenove et al., 2018). Russian-affiliated actors are claimed to have targeted Americans via Facebook ads in order to influence them during the 2016 election (Isaac & Shane, 2017). Another example is the scandal surrounding United States-based company Cambridge Analytica, having been accused of participating in micro-targeting campaigns in both the 2016 United States election and the Brexit referendum in the UK during the same year (Anstead, 2018).

The fourth and last strategy identified is “*trolling*”. Trolling is a behavior

that can be traced back to the early years of the Internet, yet has despite its relatively long existence in the online context not been given a definition scholars entirely agree upon (Ortiz, 2020). It is often associated with a form of generally disruptive, antagonistic and uncivil behavior seen online across platforms and contexts, sometimes in significant scale and with the ability to trigger or exacerbate societal conflict (Tenove et al., 2018). In the context of election interference, the following definition of trolling is fruitful: “[A] specific kind of political activity that is marked by a refusal to participate in the kind of productive exchange of ideas that marks democratic politics. Instead of engaging in activity marked by democratic principles of reciprocity, accommodation, and inclusion, trolls actively work to dominate and control the conversations on any given site (Forestal, 2017, p. 150). Politically-motivated trolling as a strategy involves for example different form of intimidation or triggering of antagonistic views of different groups or individuals, revealing and disseminating personal information and in other ways seeking to affect opinions online, or causing targeted voices to withdraw from a platform (Tenove et al., 2018). Russian use of trolling activities has been thoroughly addressed in previous research (e.g. Aro, 2016; Linvill & Warren, 2020), and researchers have studied the prevalence of trolling in recent elections in e.g. Canada (Louden & Frank, 2021), the United States (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016) and the 2016 Brexit referendum (Llewellyn et al., 2019).

The above strategies apply directly to the threats posed towards the Swedish election process identified by the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) in a recent report (Bay et al., 2022b) and in the section below, recent experiences of documented election interference will be presented as a backdrop to the 2022 national election. From a democratic theory standpoint, the above methods of in different ways interfering with an election pose a serious threat. For example, all four strategies reviewed above have potential to negatively affect the five standards for the democratic process presented by Dahl (1989),

i.e. effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusiveness.

3. Recent experiences of election interference in Sweden

Swedish elections are generally regarded as maintaining a very high standard. From an international perspective, Sweden ranks among the top countries in the world when it comes to election integrity (Frank & Coma, 2017). Furthermore, the Swedish Election Authority (Valmyndigheten), the single and centralized government body that manages all elections in Sweden, has in recent research received very high scores for its performance (Garnett, 2019). In Freedom House's scores of political- and civil rights, Sweden receives top scores year after year; scores that include the election process and public participation (Freedom House, 2022).

That is however not to say that all Swedish elections are flawless. To begin with, administrative mistakes are not uncommon in what constitutes a manual vote counting procedure, as opposed to a more automated/digital process. However, considering how the counting of votes is a much decentralized process, the occurrence of errors is not entirely unexpected, and the entire process has an in-built function meant to detect errors as well (Lundmark et al., 2020). A notable and recent example of significant errors made in the handling of votes is the 2010 election in the Swedish region Västra Götaland. Eight months after the 2010 election, over one million voters were asked to submit their vote again in the regional election, as the Swedish Parliament's oversight committee, the Election Review Board (Valprövningsnämnden), had concluded that the results of the original regional election was void due to a number of mistakes in the handling of ballots (Lundmark et al., 2020). Not since 1946 had there been an election rerun in the region, and the overall

number of complaints to the Election Review Board that year was the highest in over 200 years (Teorell, 2012).

Administrative mistakes and errors made without any intent to change an election result are however very different from attempts of intentional election interference, which is in focus in this paper. Neither in this regard is the Swedish election process without its vulnerabilities. During the 2010s, both the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen, SÄPO) and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB) made the assessment that the risk of different types of threat against the election was increasing (Koskelainen, 2018; Säkerhetspolisen, 2018).

In this context, a dramatic increase in complaints submitted to the Election Review Board can be noted. In connection with the 2018 election, the Board received 767 complaints, compared to 120 in 2010 (Valmyndigheten, 2018). In a recent report by the Swedish Defence Research Agency, all incidents reported in connection with the election 2018 were analyzed, and show that missing ballots at the voting venue was the most common complaint, along with a number of other errors and perceived mistakes made in handling ballots. A significant number of the complaints however dealt with accusations of election fraud (Bay et al., 2022a). After investigations had been concluded, the Election Review Board were nevertheless able to dismiss the majority of all complaints, even though some administrative mistakes had indeed been made, and stated that many the complaints could be characterized as more general and pertaining to the outcome of the election, rather than actual events in connection with the election. Importantly however, some complaints were submitted referencing information obtained via social media or reports in the media (Valmyndigheten, 2018), which is also where rumors and conspiracy theories regarding election fraud circulated for weeks before the election, and also after election day (Bay et al., 2022a). The Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) was also able to conclude that the 2018 election was not marked by

significant and coordinated efforts to influence the election process, nor its results, but it did note that some attempts to undermine trust for the process and its results had been carried out (Gummesson, 2018).

While the integrity of the Swedish election in 2018, despite the discovery of errors that required correction and an unusually large number of complaints, was thus not at serious risk, there was also a significant incident that happened during the election night. The website of the Swedish Election Authority, val.se, was subjected to a cyberattack, i.e. a distributed denial-of-service attack (DDoS attack) that made it impossible to see the preliminary count of votes via what should arguable be the most reliable source for such information. This incident rendered a lot of attention in the media and on social media it was rumored that the attack was indication of an on-going attempt at election fraud (Bay et al., 2022a). This event very clearly falls into the category of election interference via cyberattack, even though no data seems to have been obtained by the perpetrators, and the process of counting votes was not disturbed.

Relatedly, research also shows that the election in 2018 featured politically oriented bot activity on Twitter. During the election night, use of the term “valfusk” (meaning election fraud in Swedish) spiked on Twitter. While the vast majority of accounts that discussed the Swedish election on Twitter were genuine, approximately 6-12% were not, and considering the pattern of increased bot activity as election day came closer, it is reasonable to assume that the individuals behind the use of bots had an interest in influencing the discussion regarding the election (Fernquist et al., 2020). The impact of such activity on Twitter in connection with an election is difficult to determine, not least due to the fact that it is not a platform frequented by all voters. It is however clear that Twitter is a social media platform where discussions on Swedish politics frequently occur, particularly among journalists (Grusell, 2017). It is also evident that among Swedish journalists on Twitter there is

increasing polarization, for example when it comes to journalists that work along more traditional journalistic lines, and those whose focus is on alternative media, which includes social media (Hedman, 2022). Bots able to make certain topics seem far more polarized, or popular, than they actually are among voters, may have been a strategy used by individuals wanting to influence conversations on the 2018 election on Twitter.

Based upon the above account of recent analyses of Swedish general elections, it can be concluded that Sweden does not have extensive experience of seriously disruptive activity that constitutes election interference via online means. Nevertheless, in 2022, the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) produced a report regarding threats against the Swedish election, due to a perceived increase of threats during recent years (Bay et al., 2022b). The agency identified five different categories of possible attacks: against individuals, polling stations, the election result, as well as cyberattacks and information influence/disinformation. Some of the attacks thus affect the execution of the election in a physical sense, while others have an overarching aim to undermine trust in the election process. The two latter categories largely overlap with the strategies identified in previous research as reviewed above. Despite the perception of increasing threats being posed towards the Swedish electoral system, the Swedish Defence Research Agency concluded that the system is overall robust. Because of the level of difficulty in influencing the execution of the election, it is however not unreasonable to assume that an antagonistic actor may choose another way of influencing the election, meaning attempts to undermine the public's trust, whereby various proactive measures directed towards the public are recommended (Bay et al., 2022b).

4. Election interference fears and claims before and after the 2022 election

Against the backdrop of Sweden's prior experience of election interference, focus now turns to the 2022 election, held on September 11. While Sweden has limited experience of serious attacks, and generally displays a very stable electoral system, it is evident that main government agencies responsible for ensuring that Swedish elections continue to uphold very high standards are concerned with growing levels of threat towards the system. This paper does not aim to determine the relevance and accuracy of such concerns, nor provide documentation of election interference. Considering that at the point of writing, the 2022 Swedish general election occurred a mere nine weeks ago, it is also important to note that post-election analyses are still on-going. Swedish media's accounts of pre-election and immediate post-election expressed fears and claims of election interference can however be seen as concluded. These accounts are indicative of the general state of Sweden in the context of election interference, in this case with particular focus on interference carried out via digital means. Such accounts might differ greatly from discussions held on social media itself regarding election interference and various other issues relating to the election. However, since disinformation campaigns concerning the election may, based upon previous elections in Sweden and in a number of other countries as reviewed in section 2 above, be prevalent on social media, using such data is an entirely other study.

4.1 Methods overview

In order to examine Swedish media's account of possible election interference via digital means, a search for news articles was conducted in the largest media database in the Nordic countries, Mediearkivet (also known as

Retriever). The database features all major daily newspapers, a significant number of local newspapers, online newspapers and magazines, specialist press, as well as web sources that include press releases from government agencies and other organizations. Transcriptions of news broadcasts (television and radio) are also searchable via the database (Linnéuniversitetet, n.d.).

A broad search was carried out in the database concentrated upon a time frame that included the entirety of the most intense part of Swedish election campaigns (i.e. the summer preceding an election), as well as two months immediately following the election. Specifically, the search covered May 1 to November 20, 2022. No limitation was made regarding the sources searched, meaning all possible sources were included (in total 1,180). This approach was applied in an effort to create a general baseline for the analysis of fears and claims of election interference in the country as expressed by media, regardless of the type of media. However, letters to the editor (insändare) were not included in the data, as such are expressions of readers and are difficult to equate to general news reporting. The following search terms were used: “valpåverkan” and “påverka valet”, intended to catch news on election interference/influence, as well as “valfusk”, intended to cover claims of election fraud, which may or may not involve different interference tactics carried out online. The idea was not to equate mentions of election interference with election fraud, however, the term “election fraud” (valfusk) implicates cheating of some sort, theoretically comprising both attempts to cheat to affect the election result at the physical ballot station, for example by removing ballots for a specific party, and attempts to in some way influence voters, which may be discussed in terms of cheating.

Upon obtaining the data, the results were qualitatively assessed based upon their content. A content analysis can be applied in order to put a numerical value to qualities of a phenomenon, as well as when a more qualitative assessment is made of for instance, how an issue is framed (Neuendorf, 2017).

An initial stage of determining relevance of each news item was first of all conducted, i.e. a determination on whether the articles/texts pertained to Sweden and the 2022 election specifically. Secondly, the articles obtained were categorized based upon main category. The Swedish media landscape, much like in other countries, has changed in recent decades primarily as a consequence of the digital media infrastructure established with the introduction of the Internet, and later social media (Nord & Van Krogh, 2021). An important addition to the landscape is the alternative media scene. When applying a very broad stroke, this new addition can be categorized as generally critical towards legacy/mainstream media, and situated primarily among right-wing opinions (Nord & Van Krogh, 2021), even though variation within this rather imprecise category certainly exists (Holt, 2018). Despite a fragmented media consumption pattern among Swedes today, compared to a more cohesive mass media era (Nord & Van Krogh, 2021), the media sources part of this analysis fit into the following categories: daily newspapers (with national reach), local newspapers (more limited reach), public TV and radio, alternative media, specialized press, online magazines/news websites, and lastly press releases from universities and government agencies). Categorization of the alternative media category is based upon previous research (e.g. Holt, 2018; Sandberg & Ihlebaek, 2019).

Lastly, content of the articles were categorized based upon explicit references to threats of, as well as actual claims of, election interference and election fraud, respectively. This determination was based upon mentions in the text of expressions of “high risk” (or “low/no risk”), accounts of different types of warnings and fears concerning the upcoming election, and post-election, all and any claims and reports of actual election interference concluded in connection with the election. A fourth category of items mentioning the issue in more neutral terms and/or more generally and not specifically concerning the 2022 election was also added.

The above examination is unlikely to cover *all* Swedish media coverage relating to possibilities of election interference of different kinds, as additional variants of the search terms might generate more hits. The examination does also not include discussions held on Internet forums and on social media regarding potential threats and claims of interference or fraud. However, the search terms do represent words that are typical for the discussions the study aims to document. Another possible limitation is also the time frame, considering how researching something as complicated and possible comprehensive as disinformation campaigns is a time-consuming endeavor, whereby reports of such findings would not have been made by November of 2022.

4.2 Results

Quantitatively speaking, the results indicate that the topic of election interference (via the search terms “valpåverkan” and closely related “påverka valet”) was significantly less frequently mentioned in Swedish media during the chosen time period compared to the term election fraud (“valfusk”). The latter was mentioned in 1,804 items, found primarily in web sources (869 items), printed press (797 items), and TV/radio (138 items), peaking in the month of June with 334 items and again in November with 497 items. In contrast, election interference (via the two search terms) was mentioned in 365 items, of which 187 were from printed sources, 126 from web sources and 52 from TV/radio, peaking in frequency in the month of September.

However, when assessing relevance of the items, it became clear that election fraud, while indeed a frequently mentioned topic throughout the broad array of Swedish-speaking sources, concerned a large number of other countries than Sweden and the upcoming election. News reports regarding events in the United States dominated the content, which is not surprising

considering that the summer featured Congressional hearings concerning the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, as well as the 2022 mid-term election. However, election fraud was mentioned in connection a number of other countries, including Brazil, Colombia, France, Kenya, Myanmar, Russia, Turkey and Venezuela. In the end, only 133 items pertained to the 2022 Swedish election, of which only 12 were *not* published during August and September.

Similarly, news items that mentioned election interference specifically pertaining to Sweden were less frequent compared to the overall result, however, 76 items did contain either one of the terms “valpåverkan” or “påverka valet”, of which a little above half (44) were published in either August or September.

The second stage of analysis of the 77 plus 133 articles focused upon the type of sources these news items were published in. While not indicative of the actual levels of threat posed against the system, the sources where the topics were mentioned are of relevance to the last part of the analysis, i.e. the content of the news items.

<Table 1> Mentions of election interference and election fraud by media source

	Election interference	Election fraud
<i>Media source category</i>		
Daily newspapers	16	15
Local newspapers	26	62
Public TV/radio	8	14
Alternative media	9	19
Specialized press	8	2
Online magazines/news websites	7	20
Universities/Government agencies etc.	3	1
Total	77	133

Comment: Search terms used in media database Mediearkivet/Retriever were “valpåverkan”/“påverka valet” and “valfusk” and covered the time period May 1 to November 20, 2022.

The categorization in Table 1 indicates that the mentions of election interference and election fraud in the context of Sweden were primarily found in local newspapers, followed by daily newspapers, alternative media and online magazines/news websites. In that sense, the topics were thus spread across the Swedish media landscape, with emphasis on newspapers with local or national reach.

The last and most important stage of the analysis involved determining *how* the terms election interference and election fraud were mentioned in the context of the 2022 Swedish election. Four categories aimed at capturing the sense of perceived threats or accusations of actual interference expressed in the media were applied in a content analysis. The first determines whether the news items mentioned a *heightened* or *high risk* of election interference and the second mentions of the opposite, i.e. a *low* or *no risk* of election interference. Expressions used by journalists in articles in these two categories are explicit, meaning the articles contains some mention of risk and whether the perceived risk is at a heightened or high level (“förhöjd risk”, “hög risk” etc.), or that the risk is at a low level/non-existent (“låg risk”, “ingen risk” etc.). The third category captures texts in which specific threats ahead of the election were mentioned, and in the post-election period, accusations and claims of election interference having taken place. The fourth and last category captures news items in which election interference is mentioned, but where different levels of risk of election interference are not discussed, nor specific threats or claims of election interference having taken place.

<Table 2> Mentions of risk levels and specific election interference attempts

	Heightened risk/ High risk	Low risk/ No risk	Specific threat/ accusation	Neutral/ general mention
<i>Month</i>				
May	2	-	14	1
June	3	1	-	1
July	2	3	-	1
August	6	3	5	3
September (1 st -11 th)	1	-	10	8
September (12 th -30 th)	-	-	6	2
October	-	-	1	-
November (1 st -20 th)	-	-	4	-
Total (76)	14	7	40	16

Comment: Search terms used in media database Mediearkivet/Retriever were “valpåverkan”/ “påverka valet” and covered the time period May 1 to November 20, 2022. The month of September is split into two parts, pre- and post-election day (i.e. September 11).

Table 2 shows the results of the categorization of news items, and indicates that the category of specific threats is the most common among the 76 articles dealing with election interference, followed by more neutral articles that mention election interference but without commenting on the general level of threat, nor describing a specific threat. The figure of 14 news items from May is however not entirely indicative of there being significant amounts of specific threats being discussed in the media as the same text is published in multiple sources, primarily in local newspapers. The text, originally written by Swedish news agency *Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå* (TT), “Ny kampanj ska hjälpa skydda svenska valet”, was for example published in local newspapers *Borås Tidning* and *Blekinge Läns Tidning*, but also in daily tabloid *Aftonbladet*, representative of Sweden’s leading national media outlets (Nord & Van Krogh, 2021). The article deals with a report by newly established government agency

Swedish Psychological Defence Agency (Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar), in which it is stated that there is an increase in disinformation targeting Sweden, and that Russia might attempt to make efforts to distort the Swedish public debate (Aftonbladet, 2022).

The news items in August (5) and just before the election in September (10) in this category of specific threats are more unique and include very different specified threats. There are two articles that mention specific threats being posed by Russia, and four that mention entirely local (and not digital) matters of election interference. Six mention threats posed by the Sweden Democrats and/or a member of the Moderates and pertain to the issues raised by for example *Aftonbladet* during the election campaign and referenced in the tweet by Annika Strandhäll as mentioned in the introduction above. The remaining three specify the perceived threat as being legacy media/and or social media tech giants, for suppressing free speech and distorting the flow of information online, published in alternative media.

Beyond this most common category of threats perceived primarily pre-election, Table 2 also indicates that there were news items mentioning there existing a heightened or high risk of election interference in connection with the 2022 election, yet there were also a few articles that spoke of the risk actually being lower. For example, during August, news consumers would potentially encounter both a headline on the website of public broadcaster *Swedish Radio* stating that there is a risk of election interference and that Sweden is specifically targeted (Sveriges Radio, 2022), and a little over two weeks later read an article in daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* in which the Director General of the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency speaks about how attempts of foreign election interference are seen as less of a threat than previously perceived (Sallinen, 2022).

Regarding accusations or claims of election interference after the election had taken place, beyond the claims presented for example in *Aftonbladet*

regarding in particular, attempts of influence by the Sweden Democrats, the majority of these pertain to local matters and deal with errors etc. perceived to have been committed during the election process, for example at a local ballot station. A notable claim published two days after the election was nevertheless made by major daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* concerning the newly formed political party Partiet Nyans which ran in an election for the first time in 2022. The party focuses upon gaining votes primarily among voters living in areas where crime rates are high and there are problems with social exclusion, and *Dagens Nyheter* claimed that journalists investigating the matter had found that foreign actors had attempted to influence the Swedish election. The method of attempted influence had been noticed on Arabic-speaking social media and seemed to aim towards discrediting Swedish society and government, in effect fueling polarization and distrust and encouraging votes for Partiet Nyans (Sadikovic et al., 2022).

When it comes to the second main term in focus in this study, election fraud, the results of the content analysis determining the sense of perceived levels of threat indicate that accounts of specific threats are most common, followed by accounts of there being no or very low risk of election fraud. The remaining categories aiming to capture news items mentioning a heightened or high risk of election fraud, and more neutral mentions of election fraud, are both by far less common.

Beginning with the news items that mention specific threats of election fraud, a number of things can be noted regarding the pattern depicted in Table 3. First of all, out of the 70 news items collected in this category, a significant amount pertain to local matters of perceived election fraud, both before and after the election (37 in total), and do not pertain to any kind of either foreign or domestic attempts of election fraud via digital means. Out of the remaining news items, there is a lot of variation in the perceived threats when it comes to election fraud. A few news items mention foreign powers without

identifying which, the prospect of cyberattacks and exploitation of voters with visual impairment, but among the remaining news items two themes appear: claims of election fraud after the election by the newly started political party Partiet Nyans (12) and claims directed towards domestic conditions in the Swedish system (10). The former was reported in a variety of newspapers and other media sources, and stem from claims of election fraud expressed by Partiet Nyans due to missing ballots in a number of municipalities (Hansson, 2022). The latter involve a variety of claims regarding flaws in the Swedish electoral system, accusations against the Social Democrats committing intentional election fraud at ballot stations and different kinds of sabotage at ballot stations affecting the Sweden Democrats (e.g. Ekeröth, 2022; Fria Tider, 2022; Holm, 2022;) originating in alternative media where anti-systemic criticism is common (Holt, 2018).

<Table 3> Mentions of risk levels and specific election fraud attempts

	Heightened risk/ High risk	Low risk/ No risk	Specific threat/ accusation	Neutral/ general mention
<i>Month</i>				
May	-	2	5	1
June	1	-	2	-
July	-	1	-	-
August	-	23	11	1
September (1 st -11 th)	3	20	26	1
September (12 th -30 th)	-	9	26	1
October	-	-	-	-
November (1 st -20 th)	-	-	-	-
Total (133)	4	55	70	4

Comment: Search term used in media database Mediearkivet/Retriever was “valfusk” and covered the time period May 1 to November 20, 2022. The month of September is split into two parts, pre- and post-election day (i.e. September 11).

Continuing with the second major category among the news items mentioning election fraud, 55 of them, published in a variety of media sources, describe the threat of election fraud being committed in Sweden as being low or non-existent. In fact, the vast majority of the articles in this category do not primarily focus on why the issue of election fraud is so low in Sweden due for example to its well-functioning electoral system, but instead consist of criticism against those who raise the idea of election fraud being an issue in Sweden in the first place. When criticism is more general in these news items, it is directed towards a broader category of right-wing politicians or movements in Sweden, but in almost every one of them, the Swedish Democrats are mentioned as being the main problem. The articles are thus not about election fraud being committed or risks thereof, but that some actors raise doubts regarding the election process by speaking of the potential of election fraud being committed in various ways. Many of these publications come in response to the articles above which express threats of election fraud (e.g. Frick, 2022; Helmersson, 2022; Lindberg, 2022; Sjöstedt, 2022), and specifically those published in alternative media or based upon statements by the Swedish Democrats.

It can be argued that this category comprised primarily of criticism against actors who make, as the critics see them, unsubstantiated claims about election fraud, should be included in the category covering specific threats. The spread of claims of imminent risks of election fraud, questioning for example the entire electoral system, can raise doubt and confusion among some voters and in a worst case scenario undermine the election process as such voters no longer want to participate. Such a development can from the perspective of the strategies of election interference described in section 2 above resemble that of misinformation campaigns, even if the spread of claims of election fraud are not necessarily coordinated, nor originating from foreign actors.

Overall, the analysis shows that when it comes to fears of election

interference, the primary theme in Swedish media during the months leading up to the election was the threat Russia and/or Russian-affiliated actors posed. After the election, no dominating theme appeared in terms of specific accusations beyond those that pertained to local circumstances, which did not involve any forms of digital attempts of interference. The most serious claim post-election was that presented by *Dagens Nyheter* pertaining to Partiet Nyans and possible foreign attempts of influencing voters. Importantly however, there were no media reports of digital election interference having been committed when it comes to its arguably most dramatic form, i.e. cyberattacks that can harm the integrity of the election in an immediate sense. The analysis of the related issue of election fraud being discussed in the media indicates that relatively many claims of specific threats and accusations were presented, yet that many of them pertained to local matters of a non-digital nature. Beyond those, the main themes were accusations of fraud presented by Partiet Nyans, and those presented in alternative media directed primarily towards domestic aspects, neither of which involved accusations of tactics committed online.

The running theme across the results presented in both Table 2 and 3 consists of concerns regarding different forms of election interference having a primarily domestic angle. The most evident theme is that which pertains to right-wing actors and in particular, the Sweden Democrats, and to a lesser extent involving the newly formed party Partiet Nyans. Both are accused of spreading disinformation and sowing doubt in the democratic process by presenting unsubstantiated claims.

5. Conclusions and discussion

This study was carried out only a few months after the 2022 Swedish election was held, and should therefore be seen as preliminary. Nevertheless, it

aimed to make an assessment of Sweden's robustness when it comes to election interference via digital means based upon Swedish media reporting regarding the fears and concerns for election interference expressed before the election took place, as well as reports of violations taking place upon the completion of the election. Sweden has faced threats, and actual attacks, during the 2010s in connection with elections, but based upon the experiences of the 2022 election, an alarming trend does not seem to be on the rise. Based upon the reporting analyzed in this study, Sweden does not seem like a country that is particularly vulnerable to election interference via digital means, at least not when analyzed based upon main interference strategies as reviewed in this paper, and the empirical examples from other countries.

Nevertheless, concerns regarding possible attempts of online interference in the election as reported in Swedish media during 2022 were raised, and will likely continue to be raised for an unforeseen number of elections to come. For example, the threats of foreign interference discussed during 2022 stemming from a war raging in Sweden's immediate geographical area might not be a concern that pertains to Sweden's security and independence isolated only to one single election, as geopolitical tensions and conflict continue or reappear. Such interference may involve a variety of strategies possible via digital means, from more immediate cyberattacks to less explicitly noticeable manipulation via social media, for instance. Heightened alertness concerning the possibility of such attempts should therefore always remain, and the issue should continue to be discussed.

Furthermore, the theme found in this study regarding concerns over disinformation campaign with a primarily domestic connection, instead of exclusively foreign, is similarly also going to continue to feature in reporting on Swedish elections. The tweet presented in the introduction of this paper is illustrative of the criticism directed mainly towards right-wing politicians and their claims of election fraud being an issue in Sweden. As is shown in this

study, there was a relatively high level of frequency of news items featuring such criticism in connection with the 2022 election; a discussion that can be expected to continue in connection with the next election. The main argument among critics is that in themselves, unsubstantiated claims of interference and fraud can cause confusion and doubt among the public, with serious effects for democracy.

As this is a preliminary study, there are multiple ways for research to move forward. Future studies of the narratives surrounding election interference should for example include discussions held on social media, and contrasted with the views expressed in Swedish media, including both legacy media as well as newer, alternative media. Such analyses should also feature more in-depth content analysis of news items.

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<국문 요약>

해외 출처인가 국내 출처인가? 2022년 스웨덴 총선과 연계된 선거개입 관련 스웨덴 미디어의 보도

Emma Ricknell

선거개입은 전 세계의 많은 나라들에 하나의 위협을 제기한다. 잠재적으로 부정적인 효과들에는 정치과정과 선거에 대한 시민 참여의 억압, 인위적으로 증폭된 사회집단 간 극화(polarization), 그리고 선거제도 및 장기적 차원에서 민주주의 그 자체에 대한 유권자 신뢰 감소가 포함된다. 선거과정에 대한 다양한 형태의 개입은 새로운 현상이 아니지만 인터넷 시대의 도래는 디지털 도구를 활용한 선거개입을 촉진하였고, 그 출처는 국경 바깥일 수도 있고 내부일 수도 있다. 스웨덴의 선거 시스템은 전반적으로 신뢰할 만하고 높은 수준이지만 스웨덴 또한 선거개입 시도로부터 예외가 아니다. 이 연구는 스웨덴 미디어들의 논의를 바탕으로 하여 2022년 스웨덴 총선과 디지털 도구를 통한 선거개입의 인지된 위협, 그리고 선거과정에서 제기된 선거개입 주장들에 초점을 맞춘다. 연구결과는 스웨덴 미디어들이 선거 목전의 (개입) 위협과 다양한 형태의 개입 발생 주장에 관해 보도했지만 스웨덴의 선거 시스템은 별 영향을 받지 않았음을 보인다. 가장 중요하게 우려되는 문제는 국내 출처로부터 비롯된 선거 개입 시도와 연계된 것으로 특히 선거 부정을 주장하는 온라인 허위정보의 확산과 관련된다.

주제어: 선거 개입, 선거 부정, 사이버 공격, 허위정보, 스웨덴

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