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**Opinion polls and election predictions
in the 2018 Swedish General Election**

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Since the 1950s, the researchers associated with the Swedish National Election Studies Program at the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, conducts empirical research on the well-being and development of the Swedish democracy. The working report series is one of our main publication outlets. The aim is to publish basic facts and research results about elections and voting behavior to a broad audience of researchers, students, journalists, politicians and the public.

Party abbreviation

-  = Left Party (V)
-  = Social Democratic Party (S)
-  = Green Party (MP)
-  = Centre Party (C)
-  = Liberals (L)
-  = Moderate Party (M)
-  = Christian Democratic Party (KD)
-  = Sweden Democrats (SD)

Refer to this report

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Opinion polls and election predictions in the 2018 Swedish General Election

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Sammanfattning

Under valrörelser mäts de röstberättigades partipreferenser i opinionsundersökningar vilka sedan uttolkas av kommentatorer och väljarkåren i syfte att förutse valutgången. Många väljare reflekterar över opinionsundersökningarnas resultat när de bildar sig en översikt av valet och uppfattningar av det rådande opinionsläget kan bli direkt avgörande i röstningen. Vi kan dock förmoda att undersökningsresultaten, trots stor spridning i massmedia, når vissa väljargrupper i högre utsträckning än andra. I denna rapport undersöker vi två frågor relaterade till det svenska riksdagsvalet 2018: (1) vilka väljargrupper tar del av opinionsundersökningar under valrörelsen? och (2) hur påverkar exponeringen av resultat från opinionsundersökningar väljarnas förväntningar och beteenden vid valet? Rapporten visar att väljare som tar del av opinionsundersökningar är något bättre på att förutse om små partier klarar av att nå över 4-procentsspärren. Rapporten visar även att alla väljare, oavsett partifärg, förväntade sig att Sverigedemokraterna skulle nå ett högre valresultat än de vad de senare fick – och att de flesta väljarna trodde att opinionsundersökningarna underskattade SD:s opinionsstöd.

Abstract

Prior to elections, opinion polls are used to gauge the state of public opinion and are often used by commentators and the electorate to predict the probable electoral outcome. Prospective voters are therefore likely to use this information to update their outlook on the election and potentially even their intended vote choice. However, it is also likely that despite being widespread in the media's election coverage, this information is consumed by some groups of individuals more than others. This report investigates two primary questions with regard to the 2018 Swedish General Election: (1) who among the electorate checks the polls through the campaign and, (2) how checking the polls may influence an individual's expectations and actions regarding the election. Findings suggest that poll-checking tends to increase an individual's ability to anticipate electoral outcomes such as parties passing the electoral threshold (at least those projected by the polls), but this difference is small. Across the board, however, SD vote share for the 2018 election was overestimated by voters as to an even greater extent than many of the polls, suggesting that, on average, voters thought the polls to underestimate rather than overestimate SD.

Background

A growing literature has begun to explore the consequences of the publication of predictive polls in the run-up to elections. Estimations of electoral competition – be they from opinion polls or other means – have been demonstrated to affect the campaigning activities of political parties, for example (Enos and Hersh 2015). The findings pertaining to the effects on voting behaviour, on the other hand, remain largely mixed. While there are several countries that flatly ban the publication of pre-election polls in the days prior to the ballot, organisations such as the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network and the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) have remained resolute in their opposition to these bans. At the heart of this issue is the fundamental question of whether opinion polls do or should influence electoral behaviour.

Opinion polls were of particular relevance for the 2018 Swedish General Election, where questions of whether the Christian Democrats (KD) or Green Party (MP) would surpass the four percent threshold to sit in parliament, as well as the consequences of this for government formation, were abundant. Additionally, one of the defining features of the election was the performance of the Sweden Democrats (SD) relative to their polling projections. The 2018 election saw SD gain considerable ground on the two major parties, but their final vote share fell some way short of the majority of pollsters' projections leading many to question whether this was an overestimation on the part of the polls, an underperformance by SD, or some combination of both.

In terms of vote choice, perhaps the most prominent theoretical assertion is the suspected 'bandwagon effect', in which voters are suspected to be more likely to cast their ballot for the candidate of party that they deem most likely to win (Simon 1954; Hardemeier 2008; Moy and Rinke 2012). This may be the function of individual-level or party-level factors; an upward trend in a party's electoral prospects can help to attract new members and grass-roots campaigners and as such increase the campaigns capacity to perform (Strömbäck 2012), while individual voters may also fear the prospect of social marginalisation should they vote for the eventual loser, resembling a "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann 1984). For some, casting a vote for a winner serves as a form of validation of the action if they are unable to otherwise differentiate between candidates. The very fact that a given candidate or party is ahead in the polls suggests that a plurality of the electorate has determined this option to be the most credible.

That being said, much of this logic does not apply equally to multi-party systems such as that in Sweden, where greater party and vote fragmentation typically requires the need for several parties to form a governing coalition. In such contexts, opinion poll influence also plays a role for smaller parties, incentivising voters to consider the likelihood of such parties forming governing coalitions and acquiring sufficient votes to surpass electoral thresholds. The likely result of the election therefore has implications for the strategic choices of voters (Cox 1997; Fredén 2017).

This report will proceed to answer two questions. First, education and party preference will be assessed as possible determinants of exactly who is more likely to read the polls. Secondly, the report will turn to the possible implications of poll awareness, analysing how expectations about outcomes of the 2018 Swedish General Election differ between those who do and do not check the polls.

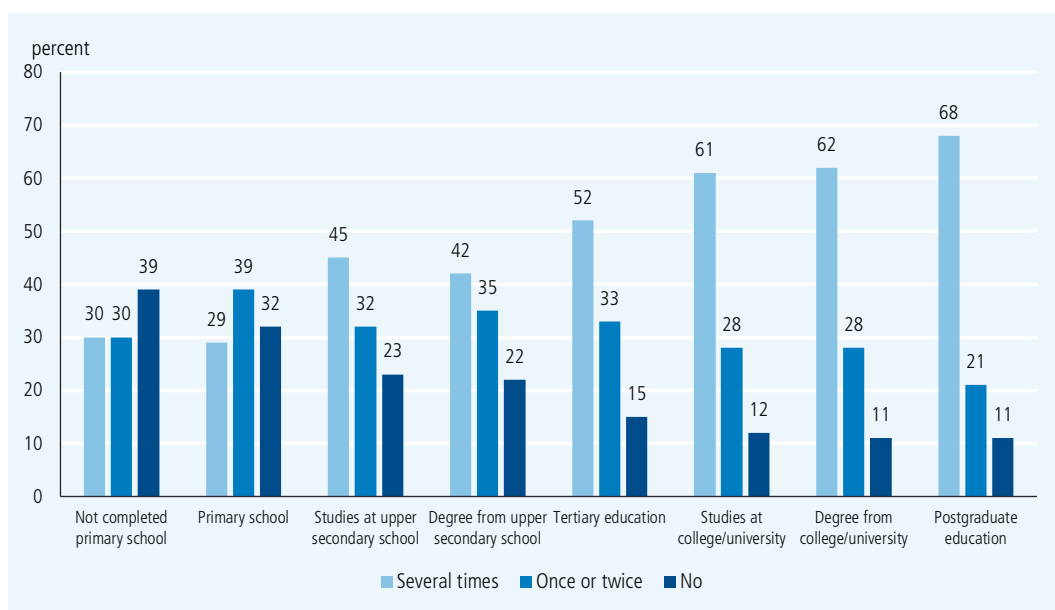
Who checks the polls?

Little is currently understood about who is more likely to be affected by polling results. Here, it is important to make the distinction between high and low order information. In making assessments of candidates, parties, and elections more generally, prospective voters consider "high order" information sources such as partisanship and issue-position (Miller et al. 1986), as well as "low order" information such as candidate gender (McDermott 1998) and ballot position (Brockington 2003), for example. Opinion polls

fall into the second of these categories (Donovan and Bowler 2016). Essentially, the presumption is that voters will prioritise high order information and only resort to low order information if they lack the ability or willingness to access high order information, or if a voter is still undecided after consuming this information. Once again, however, this perspective is largely shaped by a two-horse race conception of elections, where the meaning of victory and defeat are quite clear. There is therefore reason to believe that the prospective outcome of an election – such as whether a party would pass the electoral threshold and as such be seated in parliament – may be of a higher order in multi-party than two-party systems. The question of who takes note of opinion polls could therefore have a more nuanced meaning in the case of Sweden, for example.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the tendency of respondents to check opinion polls during the 2018 election campaign and education level. The “low order” argument outlined above would suggest that the less sophisticated voter may place a greater weight on opinion polls than voters with greater access to more information. The data on opinion poll checking here is in answer to the question of whether, before the 2018 election, an individual paid attention to opinion polls with the possible answers of “several times”, “at least once”, and “no” representing the three coloured bars in Figure 1. Education level ranges from those who did not complete secondary school (left) to those with graduate degrees (right).

Figure 1 Share of respondents who check the polls by education level (percent)



Source: Swedish National Elections Studies, University of Gothenburg: The Swedish Election Study 2018.

Comment: The question reads “Before the election this year” ... “did you read any opinion poll results?”. The response options are “yes, several times”; “yes, once or twice”; and, “no”.

The figure suggests a fairly consistent association between education levels and the frequency with which an individual takes note of the polls, suggesting a willingness of those who have graduated from secondary education to keep their finger on the pulse of the election. 85% of those who are in education following secondary school (18+) reported taking note of the polls at least once before the election, and over 50% of these did so multiple times. While this relationship appears to be strong, one must consider that 68% of the sample had attained this level of education – reflecting the generally

high level of education in Sweden. The sample is therefore not the most balanced in this regard. Additionally, just because an individual checks the polls with greater frequency does not necessarily mean that it is influencing their vote choice or (even) their perception of the election. While the former of these is very difficult to prove outside of experimental settings, this report investigates the second issue in the following section.

In Table 1 we turn to the relationship between poll-checking and party preference. As referred to earlier, voters in multi-party systems such as that of Sweden may have a stronger incentive to keep track of opinion polls, and perhaps even more so if their preferred party is close to the 4% electoral threshold needed to sit in parliament. Table 1 provides some initial support for this notion. Although this evidence is not overwhelming, especially when one considers the number of respondents who identify with smaller parties represented here, the table shows that the parties who polled closest to the four percent threshold seem to check the polls regularly than individuals who identify with other parties. Supporters of MP, KD, and L check the polls regularly more than the supporters of any other party. An exception to the trend is the Left Party, but it must be noted that their party was considered somewhat comfortable and regularly polled above their final vote share of 8%. Supporters of the Sweden Democrats reportedly checked the polls less than the supporters of any other party. Previous research on Swedish voters in this very election has suggested that there was a strong tendency to strategically vote for parties other than a voter's preference (Fredén 2019). Table 1 perhaps provides some insight into why this may occur. Along with supporters of the Moderates, it was the supporters of the parties facing uncertainty as to whether they would tally enough votes to sit in parliament who checked the polls most frequently.

Table 1 The share of respondents who check the polls by party identification (percent)

	Several times	Once or twice	No	Total	Observations
Left Party	55	28	17	100	175
Social Democrats	50	33	18	100	641
Centre Party	52	32	16	100	177
Liberals	58	30	12	100	140
Moderate Party	56	32	11	100	498
Christian Democrats	64	23	13	100	64
Green party	61	29	10	100	111
Sweden Democrats	50	29	22	100	274
Feminist Initiative	40	50	10	100	20
Other	63	31	16	100	16
Total	53	31	16	100	2 116

Source: Swedish National Elections Studies, University of Gothenburg: The Swedish Election Study 2018.

Comment: The question reads "Before the election this year" ... "did you read any opinion poll results?". The response options are "yes, several times"; "yes, once or twice"; and, "no". The direction component of party identification is derived from the question "Many feel that they are adherent of a specific party. But there are also many who do not have any such approach to any of the parties. Usually do you see yourself as an adherent of any party or do you not have such an approach to any of the parties?". The response options are 'yes', 'no', and 'don't know/hesitant'. The respondents who answered 'yes' were asked "Which party do you like best?". Respondents who answered 'no' were asked "Is there a party that you think you are closer to than other parties?".

The electorate and predictions

While the previous section addressed those individuals who may be more liable to check the polls with greater frequency, this section will investigate what the implications of

poll-checking may be, in terms of the ability to anticipate electoral outcomes. Given that opinion polls themselves are sometimes inaccurate, our running expectation should perhaps not be that those who check the polls should be more accurate per se, rather that their expectations should more closely reflect the polls. Table 2 displays the difference in electoral expectations of voters in the 2018 general election according to the frequency of poll-checking. Once again, voters are split into three groups: those who state that they do not take note of the polls, those who do so occasionally, and those who did so several times prior to the election. This table considers three questions in which respondents are asked to predict whether they thought a series of smaller parties would pass the 4% threshold (a simple yes or no prediction), which of the two major coalitions would gain the most votes, and finally the final vote share of the Sweden Democrats. Also displayed in the two right-most columns of the table are the result of a poll conducted by IPSOS around one month prior to the election in August 2018, and the final result.

Table 2 Electoral expectations of parties to enter parliament, the largest alliance, and SD vote share, by the frequency with which individuals checked the polls (percent)

		Did you check the results of the opinion polls?			Overall	Poll (Aug 18)	Result
		Several times	Once or twice	No			
Pass the 4% threshold:							
Left Party	Yes	95	88	83	91	9.5	8.0
	No	5	12	17	9		(Yes)
Christian Democrats	Yes	48	45	51	47	4.0	6.3
	No	52	55	49	52		(Yes)
Green Party	Yes	82	77	67	78	6.1	4.4
	No	18	23	33	22		(Yes)
Liberals	Yes	93	87	80	89	5.9	5.5
	No	7	13	20	11		(Yes)
Feminist Initiative	Yes	6	12	14	9	1.0	0.5
	No	94	88	86	91		(No)
Largest alliance:							
Alliansen (C, L, KD, M)		39	42	40	40	37.7	39.3
Rödgröna (V, S, MP)		33	29	24	30	40.5	40.7
Don't know		28	28	37	29		
Predicted SD vote share		22	23	23	23	19.0	17.5

Source: Swedish National Elections Studies, University of Gothenburg: The Swedish Election Study 2018.

Comment: The question on whether parties would reach the 4%-threshold is from the pre-election wave and reads "Do you think the following parties will gain at least 4% of the votes and thereby becoming represented in the parliament after the election?" The listed parties are the Left Party, the Christian Democrats, the Green party, the Liberals, and the Feminist Initiative. The response options are "yes" and "no". The question on the frequency of poll-checking, from the post-election wave, reads "Before the election this year" ... "did you read any opinion poll results?". The response options are "yes, several times"; "yes, once or twice"; and, "no".

The table reveals some interesting results with regard to how poll-checkers differ from respondents who rely on other sources of information regarding the election. First, with regard to the threshold predictions, there seems to be a linear reduction in the uncertainty with which respondents make their predictions for most parties. To take MP as an example, 66.8% of those who did not check the polls predicted that they would pass the electoral threshold, as compared to 81.6% of the group that regularly checked the polls. Similar trends can be identified in V, L, and a more affirmative 'no' answer in the case

of FI. The one exception to this trend appears to be KD, whose result was predicted with a greater success rate by individuals who did not check the polls. At first glance this result may seem a little perplexing, but it must also be noted that the predicted KD vote share in pre-election polls was rather volatile, and for the majority of the campaign (even up until late August 2018) KD had typically polled below 4% rather than above this mark. Nevertheless, it is apparent that KD were by far the most difficult party to predict, for voters and experts alike.

In a similar vein, predictions for the largest alliance were similarly inaccurate across degrees of poll-checking. Alliansen was consistently tipped by voters to become the biggest coalition, with a similar rate of affirmative predictions for those who checked the polls regularly and those who did not (39.2% and 39.7% respectively). However, the difference between Rödgröna and Alliansen predictions becomes smaller as the frequency of poll-checking increases (6-point difference compared to 16 for those who did not check the polls). There is therefore a significant reduction (around 8 percentage points) in those who answered “don’t know” when an individual checked the polls at least once.

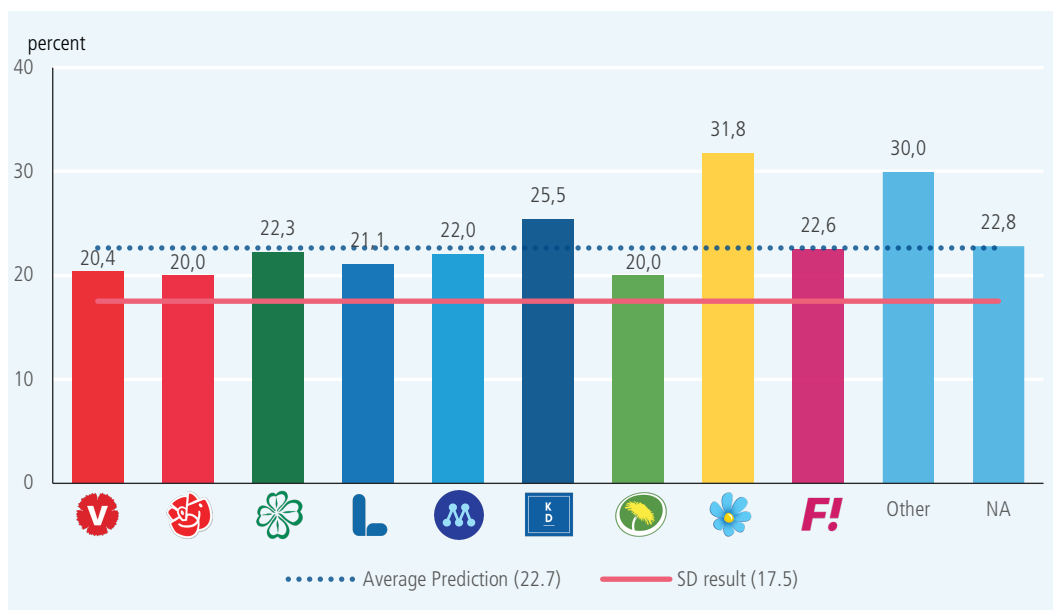
One of the defining features of the 2018 Swedish General Election was the significant gains made by the Sweden Democrats, who increased their vote share from the 2014 contest by 4.6 percentage points. That being said, the party did not make gains of the level predicted by many, and the party had polled as the prospective second largest party at many points through the campaign. While SD eventually tallied 17.5% of the popular vote, as recently as nine days prior to the election a poll conducted by YouGov reported a voting intention of 24.8% for SD, which would have made them the largest party. Various explanations have been offered for why this was the case, such as a supposed “thermostat effect” whereby the predicted success of the party made some voters consider their help unnecessary. However, prior to this and for much of 2018, the SD polling figures were volatile, frequently ranging from anywhere between 15 and 25%.

The consistency of the result in Table 2 is therefore striking when we compare those who regularly checked the polls to those who did it sparingly or not at all. Interesting, there was only a 1-point reduction in the overestimation of SD vote share between those who checked the polls frequently and otherwise. Across the board, however, it must be noted the SD vote share was overestimated by voters. This was the case for those who checked the polls regularly almost as much as those who never did. This provides substantial support to the idea that polls affect how voters view elections. Specifically, the fact that voters thought that SD’s likely outcome was higher than their polling figures suggests a belief that the polls rather underestimated than overestimate their likely performance. That being said, this relationship may not necessarily be direct, as those who reported not checking the polls overestimated SD vote share to a similar degree who those who did and, as such, may have been misled by these polls. Those who do not check the polls are likely being informed by other forms of election coverage or political speeches, for example, that are likely to refer to the position of one party (such as the SD) relative to another.

Previously, Table 1 demonstrated that there was seemingly no substantial party ‘gap’ between those who checked polls regularly, occasionally, or not at all. Table 2 also demonstrated a consistent overestimation of SD vote share across the frequency of poll-checking. We will now therefore investigate whether this overestimation is simply the same for everyone or could be driven by partisanship. In other words, is information regarding electoral competition – that we receive directly or indirectly through polls – processed by the supporters of some parties differently than the supporters of others? Figure 2 displays the predicted vote share of SD, split by a respondent’s preferred party. In this figure, the dotted line represents the average predicted vote share across parties (taken from Table 2), whereas the red line indicates the SD final vote share from the 2018 election. Beyond observing that the supporters of all parties overestimated the SD

to some extent, it is also apparent that there is significant variation between parties. Overwhelmingly, SD supporters overestimated their party’s likely performance by 14.24 percentage points – almost double their final share. This is followed by KD supporters, who predicted a SD vote share of almost 8 points higher than the result, and almost 3 points higher than the average. Notably, the three parties that overestimated the SD the least comprise the traditional bloc of Red-Green parties (S, MP, V).

Figure 2 Predicted SD vote share by party identification (percent of popular vote)



Source: Swedish National Elections Studies, University of Gothenburg: The Swedish Election Study 2018.

Comment: The question reads “How large proportion of the votes will the Sweden Democrats receive in this year’s general election?”. The direction component of party identification is derived from the question “Many feel that they are adherent of a specific party. But there are also many who do not have any such approach to any of the parties. Usually do you see yourself as an adherent of any party or do you not have such an approach to any of the parties?”. The response options are ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘don’t know/hesitant’. The respondents who answered ‘yes’ were then asked “Which party do you like best?”. Respondents who answered ‘no’ were asked “Is there a party that you think you are closer to than other parties”. The response options are the parties presented in the figure. NA refers to respondents without any party preference.

Concluding remarks

The report produces three key findings: First, the results suggest that those with higher levels of education are more likely to keep their finger on the pulse of the election, and that this finding is constant across party preference. Secondly, although those who check the polls regularly are more consistent in their electoral predictions, the difference with those who do not is relatively small, suggesting that information about the state of electoral competition is transmitted through other forms (such as media commentary, speeches, etc.). Third, although the predicted vote share for Sweden Democrats was overestimated by pollsters and voters alike, the difference between those who regularly checked the polls and those who did not was only one percentage point. The report has also found that SD vote share was overestimated – even beyond the poll overestimates – to the greatest extent by SD supporters themselves, who thought they would achieve almost double their final tally. This also suggests that, generally, voters believed the polls to underestimate rather than overestimate SD.

In sum, this report has found that the part of the electorate who check the polls tend to be well educated and spread fairly evenly across parties. This suggests tertiary support for the notion that opinion polls – or perhaps indications of the outcome of the election

more generally – are of a higher order in Sweden than in simple winner-takes-all elections. One possible avenue for future research would therefore be to address this question comparatively. That being said, a greater depth of analysis is needed to firmly conclude that this information influences how an individual actually votes as opposed to offering their predictions. With regard to electoral predictions, there is a surprising level of consistency across individuals who do and do not check the polls, albeit with regular poll-checkers possessing considerably less uncertainty in their answers. It would therefore be fruitful to further where this information is coming from, and whether this overestimation is replicated in similar parties across Europe.

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The Swedish National Election Studies Program was established in 1954 by Jörgen Westerståhl and Bo Särilvik and is today a high profile network of researchers at the Department of Political Science in Gothenburg. The Program serve as a collaborative platform for Swedish and international scholars interested in studies of electoral democracy, representative democracy, opinion formation, and voting behavior.

The aim of our research is among others to explain why people vote as they do and why an election ends in a particular way. We track and follow trends in the Swedish electoral democracy and make comparisons with other countries.

Professor Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson is the director of the Swedish Election Studies Program.

