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Informed Electoral Accountability and the Welfare State: A Conceptual Reorientation with Experimental and Real-World Findings

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Abstract:

Retrospective electoral accountability was conceived as a mechanism that makes democracy work without highly informed citizens. However, recent theory suggests accountability in modern societies can be overwhelmingly complex. Using this controversy as a backdrop, I make one conceptual and one empirical contribution. Conceptually, I promote a notion of “informed electoral accountability” that challenges assumptions made in much democratic theory and empirical research on retrospective voting. Empirically, I examine some implications concerning citizens’ policy outcome evaluations in the welfare state domain. How much do they know about outcomes? Do outcome evaluations change when exposed to comprehensive performance information? Using a panel study conducted during the 2006 Swedish election campaign I gauge knowledge levels, as well as effects of survey-embedded information experiments and real-world TV election coverage. Knowledge is found to be initially modest but citizens can learn and evaluations change as a result of comprehensive performance information. As such information is often biased or lacking altogether, however, accountability is not necessarily enlightened and conducive to good representation.

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The perhaps most basic feature of representative democracy is that voters can retrospectively hold governments to account in free and fair elections. Under this vision, citizens encounter a balanced and open information flow presenting different views on government performance. On Election Day, the dissatisfied vote the rascals out whereas the satisfied express continued support. *Informed electoral accountability*, thus conceived, is a key to making democracy work. The anticipation of enlightened sanctions forces representatives to “act in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967).

Classic scholarly work on accountability, however, always took the informational aspect lightly. Elitist models of democracy even hold that retrospective voting should be the main citizen activity in a democracy precisely because it is the easiest and only task citizens can handle. In contrast, more recent theories challenge this view head-on and suggest that in modern societies the task is overwhelmingly complex.

Using this controversy as a backdrop, I make one conceptual and one empirical contribution. Conceptually, I promote a notion of “informed electoral accountability,” challenging assumptions in classic democratic theory and empirical research. As we shall see, scholars have assumed that judging performance is less information-demanding than other democratic mechanisms, or that performance can be defined in simple objective terms, so that there is an underlying “real” performance record that citizens can learn to perceive “correctly.” Empirically, I examine two of several questions begged by the proposed conceptualization. How much do citizens know about trends and facts emphasized by leading experts on policy outcomes? Do knowledge and outcome evaluations change when exposed to the comprehensive and ambitious performance information that is often lacking in actual election campaigns?

What results has the largest appeal for those hoping that informed electoral accountability works? On the one hand, it is problematic if citizens are totally uninterested in, unaware of, and unable to react to comprehensive performance information. On the other hand, informed accountability also implies that performance views become properly informed and crystallized in time for the election. From this vantage point, we would expect performance views to become less sensitive to information as Election Day draws near. Accountability would appear flawed if—just prior to an election—even highly relevant and widely accepted facts and arguments are largely unknown but still produce sizable effects on performance perceptions if citizens do happen to be exposed to them.

For two reasons, the empirics focus on the welfare state domain. First, research on retrospective voting has been preoccupied with macroeconomics, while largely ignoring other domains. In particular, I discuss why informational problems may be larger in welfare state areas. Second, scholars identify the welfare state as a potential site for growing dissatisfaction. Although massive retrenchment has not materialized, welfare states are nevertheless challenged. Globalisation, aging populations, waning fertility rates and employment levels contribute to an environment of “permanent austerity” (Pierson 2001), in which it is difficult to maintain previous commitments to services and benefits (Korpi and Palme 2003; Allan and Scruggs 2004).

We proceed like this to reach the empirical analysis. The next three sections contrast classic against more recent scholarly work in order to flesh out the contribution. I then propose and explain a notion of “informed electoral accountability,” focusing on requirements among citizens. A subsequent section explains the design of a web-based panel study from the 2006 Swedish election campaign. It contains (1) a series of survey-embedded experiments in which randomly chosen respondents were exposed to popularized summaries of academic research

results on welfare policy outcomes, and (2) measures of which specific TV programs respondents watched during the campaign. Both are used to operationalize exposure to performance information of a more comprehensive and ambitious kind than normally encountered by most citizens. Also, both are used to study information effects on outcome evaluations of health care, schools, elder care, and inequality.

Electoral accountability: a classic model revived

It may not show at first glance, but at the heart of the accountability model lies a profound scepticism towards citizens. Theorists such as Burke (1774, 1996), Schumpeter (1942), and Riker (1982) have argued that politicians should not be constrained by voters' policy preferences, but free to solve problems by whatever means they see fit. Their job is to deliver end results that will later be evaluated by citizens. Their job is *not* to listen to citizen's prescriptions about what policies may or may not produce results.

Recently, Manin (1997) has forcefully claimed that proponents of populist models of representation forget that representative democracy was originally a squarely elitist construction. We did not opt for it only because there is no sufficiently large town square. It was also because our societies increasingly require specialisation, an insight we have applied to politics as to most other human activities. And if we were serious about the idea that parliaments should "mirror" the electorate—for instance in terms of policy preferences—we should choose representatives by random lot. This realisation, according to Manin, will become ever more central as our societies grow more complex and expertise-demanding. Thus, he speculates, "the age of voting on the candidates' platforms is probably over, but the age of voting on the incumbents' records may be beginning" (Manin 1997:221).

Scholars favouring accountability-after-the-fact have often assumed that it is less information-demanding than other democratic mechanisms (e.g, Popkin 1991). The complexities of policy-making are left to representatives. All citizens need to do, the argument goes, is to keep an eye on the overall societal results in salient areas (i.e. “what is the state of the economy?”, “is the health care system working?” “is pollution increasing”), and that they punish and reward governments accordingly after the fact. As formulated by Fiorina (1981:5) in his seminal study on retrospective voting, people “typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent’s administration. They need *not* know the precise economic or foreign policies of the incumbent administration in order to see or feel the *results* of those policies...In order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well, citizens need only calculate the changes in their own welfare. If jobs have been lost in a recession, something is wrong. If sons have died in foreign rice paddies, something is wrong. If thugs make neighbourhoods unsafe, something is wrong. If polluters foul food, water, or air, something is wrong.”

The changing view of accountability: the institutional and informational context

Recent years have seen a surging scholarly interest in accountability (Strøm et al. 2003; Papadopoulos 2003; van Kersbergen and van Waarden ; Przeworski et al. 1999; Behn 2001; Lewin 2007). Interestingly, its efficiency as a democratic instrument has been increasingly debated. In particular, doubt has been cast on the view that it can work also in the face of politically inattentive citizens (e.g. Maravall 2007; Anderson 2007). Modern outcomes and responsibility, it is argued, are harder to judge than classic democratic theory ever anticipated.

Which actor(s) at which political level(s) is the real rascal? And is the rascal really a rascal or a saint in disguise?

The usual starting point is the nature of political institutions. The accountability model seems to assume a Westminster-type political system with concentrated power (Powell 2000). But in many countries, proportional electoral systems produce fractionalised coalitions, or even minority governments that strike complex co-operation deals. Other responsibility-dispersing traits include bi-cameralism and federalism. Also of relevance is a host of trends captured by terms like “governance,” “new public management,” and “multi-level democracy” (see Pierre 2000; van Kersbergen and van Waarden 2004). As explained by Papadopoulos (2003:473, 87) “Several studies, focusing on different policy sectors, in diverse national and local environments find broad convergence toward a policy-making style dominated by cooperation among government levels, and between public and non-public actors [...] With the proliferation of governance structures, decisional processes become more opaque due to the overcrowding and the ‘problem of many hands’ that result from it.”

Other studies have concentrated on the informational context. A reoccurring finding is that political elites neglect or obfuscate accountability. A couple of studies suggest that elite messages to citizens typically concern future policies rather than retrospective performance. For instance, around 80 percent of Swedish party manifesto space is typically devoted to future political decisions and coalitions (Petersson et al. 2002). Similarly, only around 10 percent of answers and questions in party leader television interviews are devoted to accountability, whereas some 60-70 percent are about future policies and coalitions (Esaiasson and Håkasson 2002).

But even the accountability-relevant messages that citizens do receive are problematic. The mass media are widely reported to display a severe negative bias in their coverage of social and political outcomes, with specific instances of dramatically poor performance given more attention (Westerståhl and Johansson 1985; Eide and Hernes 1987; Bennett 2003). Politicians, on their part, tend to engage in “blame avoidance” and “credit claiming” (Weaver 1986; Lewin 2007; Lindbom 2007), strategies that are not inherently truth-seeking. Overall, then, institutional accountability problems are not necessarily compensated by the quality or the quantity of available information.

The changing view of accountability: empirical research on citizens

Some of these problems have been underscored in research on citizens, whereas others have been downplayed. The most prominent accumulation of evidence is the by now gargantuan *economic voting* field, which is the one policy domain where there has been much research. It initially yielded optimism as early studies suggested a consistent tendency for voters to punish their government, or president, in bad times, only to reward them when the economy gets better (for recent overviews, see Duch 2007; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Anderson 2007). However, in a later and more comparative stage it has been discovered that economic voting is in fact highly unstable. In some elections, economic performance plays a role, whereas others are marked by very weak correlations between (evaluations of) the economy and the vote. Specifically, studies report that the economy has stronger effects under “clarity of responsibility” (Powell and Whitten 1993; Taylor 2000; Bengtsson 2002; Nadeau et al. 2002; Anderson 2000) and strong “competency signals” (Duch and Stevenson 2008). Again however, the institutional and contextual conditions conducive to these values—such as single-party majority government,

long period of incumbency, clear government alternatives, centralized government etc.—are unusual.

Economic voting scholars, then, are increasingly thinking about informational problems in responsibility attribution. So far, however, they have considered mostly variation in the *extent* of electoral reward and punishment (i.e. variations in the effect of the economy). By and large, however, the informational problems assumed to explain instances of weak economic effects have been assumed rather than conceptualised and measured.

More than this, the literature still promotes a simplistic view of policy outcomes themselves. Most scholars assume there is an “objective” or “real” economy that may or may not be “correctly” perceived by citizens (Anderson 2007). The indicators used to measure the objective state of affairs vary (ironically enough), but most emphasize “the big three”: unemployment, GDP growth, and inflation (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). Moreover, most either assume or, as Sanders (2000:291), find “strong connections between objective levels of unemployment and inflation and voters’ unemployment and inflation perceptions [...] although voters may not possess much factual economic information, they nonetheless have a good sense of what is actually going on in the ‘real’ economy.”

This straightforward characterization has occasionally been questioned even inside the field of economic voting. Economic perceptions, it seems, are not only affected by the underlying “objective” economy but also by “subjective” factors like political preferences, information levels, and personal interests (Duch et al. 2000; Anderson 2007; Anderson et al. 2004; van der Eijk et al. 2007). Moreover, the individual “errors” produced by such factors do not necessarily cancel out in the aggregate. At least in the US, aggregate economic evaluations would likely be significantly transformed if everyone reached the highest political information levels (Duch et al.

2000). The direction of this “bias,” moreover, is unpredictable and time-variant so that aggregated perceptions do not necessarily reflect the real economy.

There are two possible responses to such findings. One is to question citizens’ capabilities to perceive the real economy. Indeed, Duch et al. (2000:650) take their findings as evidence that “Accountability might be compromised by the influence of subjective considerations on public evaluations of policy outcomes:” This paper, however, will take a different path and question the very notion of an “objective” performance record that can be “correctly” perceived. In particular, I argue that the objectivist notion—whatever its applicability in the macroeconomic area—is unsatisfying in many other policy domains. There, the menu of potential performance indicators is likely to be longer and more disputed. As explained by Mutz (1998:116), “In the realm of economic issues, reliable statistics are readily available on a periodic basis, regularly distributed to the media, and then often thematically presented in news coverage [...] But for most issues, reporters do not have such a systematic means of monitoring change over time; thus their impressions of whether a given issue is becoming more or less problematic and whether it is improving or worsening will be based on educated guesses at best.”

Such features characterize many types of welfare state performance. While at least pundits and politicians often agree that “the big three” are valid performance indicators, there is no parsimonious set of consensual indicators for state welfare. On the contrary, research on policy evaluation emphasises the acute need to define goals and the meaning of quality (Vedung 1998). Does a welfare state policy seek to maximise some normative principle such as equal treatment or legal security? Should indicators of product quality be the focus, such as proportion of pupils who pass tests, waiting time for surgery, or proportion of drug users returning to addiction? What role for economic goals such as productivity? Should we monitor equality of opportunity or

equality of outcome? Such questions suggest there is no “objective” or “real” welfare state performance to perceive “correctly.” Subjective considerations might instead be seen as a natural and even desirable part of the accountability process. Citizens are simply in need of—and are potentially affected by—information, debate, and deliberation on performance.

What do we know about the impact of such information? While questions of information levels and effects are now commonplace (e.g. Bartels 1996; Luskin 2002), there are few studies that focus specifically on retrospective accountability. Even fewer studies deal with the welfare state (Kumlin 2007b). Similar to economic voting research, moreover, most studies have examined responsibility attributions rather than outcome evaluations. One prominent example is experimental work on “framing,” most of which is American. For example, Iyengar (1991) found that the tendency of television to frame problems as individual responsibilities suppresses Americans’ propensity to hold politicians accountable. Other experiments suggest politicians can soften the negative electoral impact of unpopular decisions by presenting satisfactory “accounts” (for an overview, see McGraw 2001).¹ A somewhat different conclusion is reached by Achen and Bartels (2002) who study national electoral effects of local natural disasters in the US, which consistently hamper support for incumbent presidents. The authors interpret this as evidence of “blind retrospection,” with people thoughtlessly attributing responsibility even for events politicians cannot control (Achen and Bartels 2002:35).

Fewer studies have analysed evaluations of outcomes themselves. The most stable set of findings, again from the US, suggests misperceptions of outcomes among Americans are biased in the anti-welfare direction (c.f. Bartels 2005; Gilens 2001). A European study is provided by Aalberg (2003) who reports that cross-country variation in perceptions of poverty rates and inequality are correlated with actual levels. However, she also found evidence of underestimation

in some countries, but overestimation in others. Similarly mixed results come from a British study on actual public spending and perceptions thereof (Taylor-Gooby and Hastie 2002).

This paper, then, offers the following additions to the study of citizens, information, and electoral accountability. First, it concentrates on the welfare state in a West European setting, where dissatisfaction may well be on the increase, but where especially outcomes may be (even) harder to judge than in the macroeconomic realm. Second, it focuses on outcome evaluations rather than responsibility attributions. Third, whereas studies of “framing” and “account-giving” have examined subtle variation in single frames, question formulations, or news stories of up to a few minutes in length, this paper deals with longer and more comprehensive information “packages” such as those provided by longer TV debates or documentaries. This is important when gauging citizens’ capability for processing more and better performance information, and whether current views correspond to those held after considering such information. A fourth and final contribution is to propose an explicit concept of “informed electoral accountability,” which breaks with several assumptions found in much past research. This is the task to which we now turn.

Requirements for informed electoral accountability among citizens

Questions about citizens are naturally important in the study of informed electoral accountability. But any full-fledged theory on the matter places requirements on all actors and institutions in mass politics. Taking an obvious example, informed accountability reasonably requires that the government does not control the mass media, or that the media are not biased for some other reason. Spelling out the details of such requirements is beyond this paper. However, we shall return to some of them in the concluding section as the democratic evaluation

of patterns among citizens is often contingent on the situation among other actors and levels of analysis.

Moving on to citizens, how can informed electoral accountability be conceptualised?² Building on the discussion above, it can be said to have two components: (1) informed perceptions of policy outcomes, and (2) informed responsibility attributions for policy outcomes (c.f. Duch and Stevenson 2008). The first component describes an ideal situation where there are no reasons to believe that more intense exposure to a democratically generated information flow would change views on the quality of outcomes that have been delivered (“is the health care system working?,” “is unemployment insurance satisfactory?”) Expressed differently, citizens currently evaluate this aspect of performance *as they would* with more, better, or even something like “full,” information. The second component refers to an ideal situation where the same is true for attributions of responsibility; that is, there would be no further information effects on views about the extent to which political actor(s) at various political levels caused outcomes.

The word “informed” has one harder and one softer meaning. The harder version is that there are no individual-level effects of increased information. Everyone has already arrived at their informed views on these matters, and more of the same would not matter. The softer version is that there may well be individual-level effects, but these are not large and systematic enough to have politically important *aggregate* changes. For instance, the effects are not large enough to produce a change in government. It is this softer, and arguably more politically interesting, meaning that is applied here.

Again, informed should not mean “correct” in some absolute substantive sense. Rather, it refers to the evaluations and attributions people would have ended up with, had they exposed themselves to more and better information. This notion draws on Dahl’s (1989) discussion on

democracy as a procedure for forming and implementing an “enlightened understanding.”³ Dahl does not put any substantive restrictions on what people are “supposed” to think with full information, or what the “correct” enlightened views may be. Rather, what is important is that the informational context gives people the possibility to find *their own* enlightened understanding.

This non-substantive view of informed preferences may be more controversial in the study of performance evaluations than in the study of other attitudes. Indeed, while there are clearly no such things as correct party preferences and issue opinions, we have noted that economic voting scholars often explicitly ask whether citizens “correctly” perceive the “real” state of affairs. While not denying the possibility of situations where this approach makes perfect sense, the assumption here is nevertheless that the substance of informed accountability can usually not be unambiguously specified. Except for either unusual or nonsensical examples there are rarely straightforward answers to questions about “real” performance or “correct” responsibility. Rather, in the increasingly complex context of modern policy making, such judgements are open to argumentation, interpretation, and construction in democratic debate. This is true not least in the welfare state realm where there are rarely objective answers to questions about performance and responsibility.

Research design and data

Researchers have used several strategies to investigate if political preferences are informed in the sense describe above (for an overview, see Luskin 2002). Some have used “deliberative polls” (Fishkin 1995), whereas others have employed surveys to simulate whether a fully and equally informed electorate would hold different aggregate preferences (Althaus 2003;

Oscarsson 2007; Bartels 1996). A smaller category of studies have performed “survey-embedded experiments” (see Gilens 2001; Hansen 2007; Sniderman and Grob 1996). Such experiments uses the survey as an opportunity to provide a randomly selected group of respondents with information, counter-arguments or some other experience that makes them stand out from a control group taking part in the same survey. While survey experiments have long been used to investigate methodological issues (Schuman and Presser 1981), they are increasingly used to mimic substantive variation in real-world political phenomena. This paper uses both survey-embedded experiments, as well as the natural experiments occasionally offered by real-world TV election coverage. Both are used to investigate how outcome evaluations react to more information (see Appendix A for more information).

The data set is a panel study collected during the month leading up to the 2006 Swedish parliamentary election. The sample of 1,167 citizens is a self-selected experimental convenience sample that was recruited to the study via web-based party selector-tools provided by the two large national dailies Expressen and Aftonbladet (see Appendix 1). Citizens who made use of these selectors were asked if they wanted to take part in a web-based election survey conducted by academic researchers.

The central dependent variable was generated by the head question “What do you think about the political results achieved in the following areas.” Respondents evaluated outcomes in various policy areas along an 11-point scale running from -5 (very bad result) to 0 (neither good nor bad results) to +5 (very good result).

Sweden and the 2006 election

Throughout the paper I consider implications of the case and the sample. Therefore, some

brief information about Sweden and the 2006 election is in order. First, as in 1998 and 2002 several welfare state areas, such as general welfare, health care, elder care, pensions, and public education were highly salient to voters (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008). In contrast to recent elections, however, the single most salient topic in this election was employment and labor market incentives.

As a rule, welfare state issues are slightly more electorally salient in Sweden compared to other West European countries. The differences, however, are not enormous. Aardal and van Wijnen's analysis of national election study data show that at least some welfare state-related topic was among the three most salient issues in 4 of 6 Swedish elections between 1982 and 1998. Corresponding figures for available non-Scandinavian countries are 3 of 5 elections in Britain, 3 of 7 in Germany, and 3 of 6 in the Netherlands.⁴ Similarly, I have performed analyses on the election manifesto data provided by Budge, Klingemann et al. (2001). On average around 9 percent of Swedish party manifestoes are devoted to welfare state "expansion" or "limitation." The corresponding average for other EU15 countries is 7 percent.⁵

Swedish politics gives much attention to science and experts. This has been generally true for policy making as well as for the public sphere (Hermansson 2003). Specifically, research shows that welfare state media coverage often takes academic reports, public investigations and committees (which often involve academics) as a starting point (Svallfors 1996). An important example is the appointment of a *Welfare Commission* by the Swedish government to describe and make a broad assessment of the changes in social policy programmes and individual welfare during the 1990s (see Palme et al. 2002). The commission, which was chaired by professor Joakim Palme and engaged a large number of social scientists, produced more than ten volumes of research, with a main report published in 2001. (*SOU 2001:79. Välfärdsbokslut för 1990-talet*).

In the next section, the conclusions of the Welfare Commission are employed in a survey-embedded experiment.

Findings 1: Survey-embedded fact sheet experiments

The fact sheet experiments involved showing a randomly selected half of the respondents a “fact sheet” on outcomes within four areas (health care, schools, elder care, and inequality). In each new panel wave, a new fact-sheet was introduced to a newly randomized half of the respondents.⁶ Subjects in the control groups were asked questions with a future-oriented frame that were meant to stimulate thinking on the topic without touching on outcomes (see Appendix B).

Each fact sheet contained a number of bullet points on performance (see Appendix B). Most pieces of information were drawn from the main report of the *Welfare Commission*, with special weight given to conclusions the researchers themselves emphasized in their summary. Respondents were informed about the source of a given piece of information. For instance, in the health care experiment respondents were first told: “Here are a few questions about the past development of health care in Sweden.” Then came the fact sheet in the style of a schoolbook-like yellow box saying: “**BACKGROUND:** According to some observers, health care in Sweden has changed since the early 1990s. For instance, the researchers in the Welfare Commission, drew the following conclusions in 2000.” Then followed four bullet points such as “patient fees for health care and medicine doubled during the 1990s,” and “the number of private health care insurances increased fivefold during the 1990s.” Immediately after the fact sheet came a series of questions on whether conclusions fitted respondents’ own image of health care, on how health care had developed since 2000, as well as an open-ended question where respondents could write

their own text and expand on their views. Experiments in the other areas closely followed this structure (see Appendix B).⁷

The “facts” contained in the fact sheets are naturally debatable with respect to truth, relevance, and completeness. Thus, they are not attempts to nail down some sort of objective truth about performance. Exactly for this reason, however, one may wonder why they are interesting given a non-substantive definition of informed accountability. Recall here the observation that the Swedish public sphere assigns an important role to experts and academic reports (Svallfors 1996). More than this, the “Welfare Commission” in particular became a natural starting point for most elaborated debate about welfare state performance in Sweden during the first half of the 2000s. As we shall see later, this assumption is validated directly in that leading journalists and politicians made use of the Welfare Commission during the 2006 election campaign. The fact sheets, and their effects on factual knowledge and performance evaluations, are therefore interesting by virtue of capturing information citizens would very likely receive more of, were citizens exposed to more comprehensive performance-relevant public debate.

Table 1 shows performance-related knowledge in the control groups and experiment groups of the four survey-embedded manipulations. While there is no absolute yardstick to gauge levels such as these the results are arguably quite disappointing. The control column shows that in the absence of a fact sheet knowledge levels never climb significantly over the fifty-fifty pattern we would expect to emerge from blind guessing. For three of the items, knowledge levels hover around one-third. And in one—the positive development of teacher density in high schools—only ten percent give the correct answer. Thus, even self-selected, politically informed respondents in a country with above-average welfare state salience typically struggle with basic

performance trends and facts highlighted in the Welfare Commission's own summary of its most important findings. More representative samples of citizens, perhaps from other countries, would almost certainly yield even lower knowledge levels.

[TABLE 1]

Turning to the experiment groups, three of four fact sheets produced significant long-term effects on knowledge levels. The strongest effect on the proportion of correct answers was 14 percent (private health care insurances). For this item we can also compare short-term (one week) and long-term effects (four weeks). This comparison reveals that much of the one-week impact (+14) remained three weeks later (+10). So although overall knowledge levels are disappointing, at least these politically attentive respondents show some capacity for noticing and remembering performance information.

Moreover, it is interesting to note a slight trend towards weaker effects of new stimuli as the election campaign progresses. This is satisfying as the notion of informed electoral accountability implies that performance views become informed and crystallized in time for the election. Of course, our design cannot tell us once and for all whether the slight decline in effects is coincidental and due to the fact that more consequential fact sheets happened to be introduced in the early waves.⁸

All in all, these observations lend some credibility to the experiments. Respondents in the experiment groups appear to have noticed, read—and to some extent learned from—most survey-embedded fact sheets. We now move to the question of whether the information affected

evaluations of performance. To this end, Table 2 shows the impact of the survey-embedded fact sheets on evaluations of results in the specific policy areas.

[TABLE 2]

Two of the four fact sheets (schools and elder care) affected evaluations. Interestingly, the direction of the impact differs. The school fact sheet arguably stressed more outright positive or ambiguous facts and trends, which apparently made respondents evaluate government performance somewhat more positively (increasing resources to schools, increasing teacher density in high schools, growing independent school sector). The opposite may be said about the elder care experiment, where information was mostly outright negative (increasing fees, worse service, less coverage etc.)

There is no clear clear-cut tendency here for effects of new stimuli to decline as the election approaches. True, the single strongest effect arose three weeks before the election (schools), but the weakest effects are found both at the beginning and end of the election campaign (health care and inequality). Also, the elder care sheet gained significance during the last week. Again, note that these comparisons suffer from the fact that we cannot follow the impact of newly introduced fact sheets *in the same area*.

The over-time development of effects of *a particular fact sheet* is also worth noting. The effect of the school fact sheet peaked already directly after the experiment (.56) and then waned somewhat. In contrast, the effect of the elder care experiment was not instantaneously significant but instead peaked during election week. It is hard to explain these trends but one must remember that the experiments took place in the midst of a heated election race and that

experimentally conveyed information may interact with real-world events. Such interaction may serve to strengthen (as in the school case) or suppress (elder care) effects over time. Of course, both types of patterns underscore the importance of repeated measurement to grasp the strength and duration of the effects (cf. Gaines et al. 2006).

Findings 2: Effects of election TV coverage

Experimental evidence is attractive as randomisation and controlled manipulation enable causal inferences. Its standard drawback in social science, however, is external validity. It is one thing to conclude that the somewhat artificial fact sheets matter, but quite another to say the same of real-world performance information as it normally comes across to citizens. In particular, political information is often communicated to citizens by political actors through the mass media (Zaller 1992). Even expert-generated information is typically filtered through the interpretations, disputes, and comments of these actors. This step is an inherent part of the concept of informed accountability outlined above but it is arguably not captured by the fact sheet experiments.

Therefore, we turn our attention to Table 3, which shows the impact of watching particular TV programs dealing extensively with specific policy areas. All were broadcast on prime time by Swedish public service television (SVT) within two weeks of the election. And while all programs relied on expert information to describe performance (often the same information and sources as the fact sheets) they also invited party representatives, interest organizations, and experts to debate it.

The short term panel design is helpful here in several ways. First, it allows controls for pre-program initial evaluations and political preferences. This is necessary as it is possible that those

who already have a particular view of performance, or a particular predisposition, who tend to watch certain programs, rather than program-watching having a genuinely causal effect on evaluations. For this reason, we control for pre-program performance evaluations and general left-right self-identification. Second, the short-term panel design allowed asking respondents whether they watched a particular TV program only a couple of days after the program was broadcast. Such specific questions on media usage are usually difficult in large-scale standard surveys as respondents are likely to forget quickly. In this analysis, those who watched a particular program partly or entirely were assigned the value 1, others were coded 0. The dependent variable is still post-election evaluations of results in the specific areas.

Below I describe the effects of the programs (see Table 3), but also provide short qualitative analyses of their contents. The latter exercise serves several purposes. First, it is needed to understand why different programs had different effects. Second, the descriptions are meant to show that all the programs—for all their shortcomings and occasional ridiculous qualities—are nevertheless extensive and ambitious journalistic attempts to cover performance. This makes their effects interesting in a study of informed accountability. Third, it is useful to appreciate certain variations across the programs. Two programs (both on elder care) approach a deliberative/pluralist ideal in the sense that different perspectives are simultaneously examined in open debate between a multitude of actors. By contrast, a third program launched a one-sided attack on the prime minister's performance record in the area of inequality.

“Karavanen”

Karavanen was a one-hour election special devoted entirely to elder care (Monday September 4 2006, 13 days before the election). Representatives from all the seven parliament

parties were moderated by a well-known TV host.⁹ Occasionally, the studio discussion would be interrupted by various features (an interview with a professor, a comedian singing an ambiguous tribute to an elderly woman, an interview with a woman caring for her husband who had suffered a massive stroke, etc.).

What is striking about Karavanan is that everybody—the moderator, all politicians, the expert professor, interviewed citizens—basically agreed performance in the elder care area was unsatisfactory. Already the first minute of the program established some “truths” about performance that came to structure the entire debate. Interestingly, the image of elder care was essentially the same as that of the fact sheets: a smaller proportion of elderly are now living in special homes for the elderly than before; a greater proportion receives some sort of home-help than before. Later, further details would be added to the consensus picture. For instance, all actors agreed that unfortunately home-help has become a too common, but too basic, service where employees do not have time for small-talk or human compassion. In turn, actors agreed, the trend towards (more restricted) home-help means the elderly in Sweden are to an increasing extent relying on relatives (often wives and daughters), or on the private market.

For sure, politicians disagreed over future strategies. Predictably, left-leaning representatives favoured more tax-based funding for the public system, whereas right-leaning representatives wanted more market-like competition between providers, and in some cases more cooperation with voluntary organisations. However, the basic negative development of elder care was hardly ever questioned.

In the days after the program, respondents were asked if they had seen it and later what they thought of performance in the elder care domain. Not surprisingly considering its contents,

watching Karavanen had a negative effect on post-election elder care performance evaluations (-.34), even controlling for elder care evaluations and left-right placements of one week earlier.

“Agenda”

Agenda is the leading weekly studio program for political commentary in Sweden. On Sunday September 3—the day before Karavanen—Agenda devoted its first 23 minutes (out of 60) to elder care.¹⁰ Compared to Karavanen, Agenda conveyed a more complex mix of positive and negative impressions of elder care performance. Perhaps for this reason, Agenda-watchers reported more positive evaluations of elder care performance two weeks after the program. This effect (.45) survives controlling for pre-program evaluations and left-right self-placement.

The general premise was similar to that of Karavanen, namely that “a lot of people” are dissatisfied with elder care. The specific question to be discussed, however, was whether the real problem with elder care is a lack of resources or in fact too rigid regulation and too little decentralization and freedom for providers.

A first feature portrayed a Danish semi-private elder home, famous for unconventional methods and rule-bending. Contrary to regulation, the demented seniors are allowed to drink, smoke and eat unhealthy food. The staff, it was emphasized, are allowed to help themselves from the food in order to dine and socialize with the elderly. Seniors living in this home tend to live longer than those living in standard public homes (although apparently this comparison did not adjust for selection bias), in spite of a somewhat lower number of employees per senior.

Back to the studio and a debate between representatives of two elder organisations. One argued that resources are still the main problem while the other one said stiff rules and red tape

are more problematic. This, she argued, is stalling quality-enhancing development at the local level.

The next feature portrayed a Swedish semi-private home for the demented. This institution has been the target of considerable criticism from the public controlling administration¹¹ for being too small considering the number of elderly (too little space, too few bathrooms, unrelated persons sharing rooms, no kitchen etc.). Nevertheless, satisfaction is high, judging from interviews with the elderly, relatives, and employees, as well as from an abundance of touching shots of demented but happy seniors dancing and singing. The head of the home said its elderly saw “other values” than those of current regulation. This theme was later followed up by the studio moderator who asked if the public sector was in fact paying attention to the wrong outcomes.

However, the elder home was nevertheless responding to the criticism, trying to come up with a concept that adhered to regulation while preserving its popular environment. A public sector representative emphasized the importance of rules and rights, but also that the home would and could not be shut down altogether. This particular section of the program arguably conveyed a positive image of elder care decision-making and steering, where all involved actors worked together to solve problems while respecting current regulation.

At different stages, the moderator inserted facts about elder care into the discussion. She pointed out that the amount of elder care resources had remained the same in recent years. Results from a survey of Sweden’s municipalities were also mentioned. Twenty-five percent of municipality representatives are at least “somewhat unsatisfied” with elder care. One-fifth of those blamed rules and regulation, rather than resources, for poor results.

“Uppdrag granskning”

Uppdrag granskning is a long-standing program that routinely arouses controversy. It has been criticized—also by other leading journalists—for being too one-sided in the framing of problems, for being too aggressive, for being too opaque in its methods, and for relying too much on persuasive symbols, storytelling techniques, clever cutting, and selection. On the other hand, several of the program’s journalists have repeatedly won the most prestigious awards in Sweden (see Johansson 2006).

During the last days of the 2002 election campaign, Uppdrag granskning unleashed a massive political scandal by using hidden cameras to expose xenophobic remarks made by local politicians (mostly representing non-socialist parties). Remarks were provoked by a journalist pretending to be a xenophobic voter. Some 8-9 percent of the Swedish population is estimated to have seen the program. The scandal and media frenzy that followed are frequently used to explain the 2002 collapse of the Conservative party, but research remains sceptic about such massive effects (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004).

In any case, expectations were high on the eve of September 12 2006, five days before the election, when Uppdrag Granskning aired a one-hour program about Prime Minister Göran Persson. The main theme was a contrast between the fact that Persson was building a large country estate for himself—an unthinkable deed for previous, more ascetic, Social democratic PMs!—and the fact that his government had presided over the largest increase in income inequality in many decades. The question was how all this jibed with Social Democratic rhetoric about a more inclusive and cohesive society.

While a portion of the program dealt with Persson’s personal characteristics and allegedly hierarchical leadership-style, it also extensively covered both aspects of informed accountability.

A series of interviews in the middle of the program established the basic trends that lay at the heart of the story. First, a previous radio interview was rehashed, in which Persson claimed the government was now “pressing” the GINI coefficient downwards. This claim was immediately refuted by the chair of the Welfare Commission, Professor Joakim Palme. Similar to our fact sheet, he emphasized that income inequality increased during the 1990s and that these increased differences have remained largely the same during the 2000s. Short interviews with citizens living in poor areas breathed life into these abstract trends. In several cases, these were contrasted against speeches by Persson emphasizing that less inequality is the goal.

As for responsibility attribution, it was pointed out that the increase in inequality had occurred from 1995 and onwards (the Social Democrats regained power in 1994). Another, more obscure, point was made out of the fact that Uppdrag granskning’s high-profile and big-ego journalist Jan Josefsson would not be granted an interview with Persson. His failed attempts were weaved into the story and seemed to suggest that Persson was avoiding discussion and blame. Eventually, however, Josefsson was able to exchange a few apparently spontaneous words with Persson during an open-air rally. Persson lamented the increase in income inequality but forcefully argued it was the result of necessary fiscal prudence in the wake of the severe economic crisis and mass unemployment of the early 1990s. The latter of course occurred during the incumbency of the non-socialist government of 1991-94.

The epilogue of Uppdrag granskning was a spectacular helicopter shot of Persson’s estate, gloriously positioned on a cape jutting out into a lake, with the speaker voice reading from a section of Persson’s book on the importance of fighting inequality.

The day after Uppdrag granskning, respondents were asked whether they watched the program and what they thought of political results in the area of “income differences between

different groups in society.” Unfortunately, the inequality evaluation was not included in any of the pre-program waves. However, it was repeated one week later (the day after the election). What Table 3 shows, therefore, is the effect of watching Uppdrag granskning on post-election evaluations of performance, controlling for pre-program left-right ideology and for performance evaluations made the day(s) after the program. The regression coefficient shows that this impact is negative (-.30). This means that watching the program had a negative impact on *subsequent change* in evaluations. A drawback of this set-up is that it may yield a conservative estimate of the impact since any change that occurred during the first day or so after the program is not analysed. On the other hand, the set-up offers a rather strong test of causality as it is hard to argue that subsequent change in the dependent variable affects past values on the independent variable (Finkel 1995).

Conclusions

The idea of informed electoral accountability is not easily evaluated or tested. It necessarily concerns several types of actors/levels of analysis, and the evaluation of the citizen level is likely to be contingent on the state of affairs on other levels. Taking note of such complications I argue that the results deliver more bad than good news to those hoping for informed electoral accountability. First, I found disappointing knowledge levels. Clear majorities typically give the wrong answer on the most important conclusions about performance reached by experts. Second, knowledge levels and overall performance evaluations tend to change as a result of exposure to comprehensive performance information. Such effects were found for experimentally manipulated fact-sheets on expert-generated information, for a pluralist TV program open to all

parliament parties (Karavanen), for a one-sided attack on the Prime minister (Uppdrag granskning), and for a program covering the everyday reality of elder care (Agenda).

Of course, the mere presence of information effects is consistent with the idea of informed accountability. Knowledge levels may be unimpressive but there is a potential to learn. Apparently, at least politically attentive respondents can notice, remember, and react even to quite comprehensive and demanding performance information. Moreover, we did in some cases note a slight trend towards weaker information effects as the election campaign progressed. This is some evidence of the crystallisation process implied by the notion of informed electoral accountability.

This is good news as far as it goes. But several observations curb the enthusiasm. Because effects are registered late in the campaign, and because citizens start from low information levels, they become potential victims of whatever information they come across at such a late stage. Here, we know from past research that the comprehensive and ambitious performance information fed to our respondents is unusual in real-world campaigns. Not even simple journalist questions about performance appear very common (Esaiasson and Håkansson 2002). TV-programs offering extended in-depth analysis of welfare state performance must be seen as rare indeed, and the experimental fact sheets conveying popularized performance-relevant research results are of course entirely fictive. Moreover, whenever citizens are reached by such information it is likely to be systematically skewed or confusing. We have noted tendencies towards quarrels about credit and blame, as well as the well-known negative bias in media coverage of societal trends. Fine examples of this bias are provided by the pluralistic Karavanen as well as the one-sided Uppdrag Granskning. All in all, then, these remarks nurture the suspicion that while citizens can learn from comprehensive performance information, aggregated

Election Day views are nevertheless not necessarily those they would collectively hold after considering more, deeper, and less skewed information.

Caveats, qualifications, and future research

The conclusion comes with qualifications, caveats, and corresponding suggestions for future research. A qualification is that the empirics address mainly outcome evaluation, which is of course only one of the two proposed components of informed electoral accountability. The extent to which attributions of responsibility for outcomes are informed in the proposed sense is therefore an important separate question for future studies. Of course, I focused on outcome evaluation with good reason in that past research has mainly focused on responsibility. But for a fuller understanding of the welfare state domain we need to study whether also if responsibility attributions (as manifested for instance in voting) tend to change after exposure to comprehensive and fair information flows. Past studies on “clarity of responsibility”—which are relevant also in the welfare state domain—suggest that also responsibility attributions may be difficult to form in the first place, and may transform after exposure to fair democratic flows.

An obvious caveat is the self-selected convenience sample of unusually politically interested, male, and right-leaning respondents. Pending studies on representative samples, however, there are preliminary reasons to believe the uncovered patterns may actually be more pronounced in the population at large. Certainly knowledge levels can be expected to be lower. Moreover, as discussed in Appendix A, the impact of fact-sheets and TV-programs are slightly stronger overall among underrepresented groups.

Moreover, this paper has covered one electoral context in one political system. Cross-country differences in institutions and culture, and cross-election differences within countries,

are likely to matter. On the other hand, given the frequent occurrence of ambiguous responsibility and outcomes, a working hypothesis is that informed accountability cannot be taken for granted anywhere. In fact, Sweden may well be thought of as a “best case” here. That we find informational shortcomings in an unusually pervasive welfare state with above-average electoral salience and retrospective voting fuels this suspicion. At the end of the day, of course, only future empirical studies of other countries will ever tell us if our cautious generalization is ultimately sound.

A further potential objection is that effects are modest. The significant effects of watching a fact sheet or a TV-program ranged between .31 and .56 on 11-point dependent variables. While this is not overwhelming, one may also turn the objection on its head and point out that effects may be weak, but so are the stimuli. If one-shot fact sheets and TV programs make lasting differences, then what would happen if entire election campaigns focused on past performance rather than on future policies and coalitions? This question becomes especially nagging as developed welfare states enter the era of “permanent austerity.” (Pierson 2001). Governments will find it difficult to pursue the informed interests of voters if the latter punish and reward in ways incongruent with their informed views. Imagine uninformed citizens punishing a government for pension restructuring, whereas informed citizens would have rewarded it for creating a long-term viable system before it is too late. Or imagine a situation where uninformed citizens fail to think about performance *at all* because politicians and the media focus on the future. Such lack of accountability means politicians can fly in essentially unwanted outcomes under the radar. Indeed, comparative studies suggest welfare state dissatisfaction and retrenchment only rarely affect the electoral fortunes of governments in Western Europe (Kumlin

2007a; Armingeon and Giger 2008). A question for future research is if this changes with more and better information on public service performance?

A final challenge concerns citizens' ties to politics. Previous findings imply that a combination of poor (macroeconomic) performance and poor political-institutional "clarity of responsibility" hampers not only retrospective voting, but also political trust and turnout, whereas poor performance combined with clearer responsibility is less harmful (Taylor 2000). The problem here is that welfare states suffer from a deeply institutionalized diffusion of responsibility for outcomes that are themselves inherently ambiguous. Such constraints are unlikely to be relaxed. Instead, improving accountability processes will mostly be about improving informational aspects of an inherently ambiguous environment. The findings are part of a broader current in political science suggesting there is plenty to achieve in this respect.

TABLES

Table 1 Post-election knowledge (proportion of respondents giving correct answer)

	<i>Control group</i>	<i>Factsheet group</i>	<i>Diff. (*=$p < .05$)</i>
The health care experiment <i>(4 weeks before election)</i>			
The number of private health care insurances increased fivefold during the 1990s (true) (one week after experiment)	32	46	+14*
The number of private health care insurances increased fivefold during the 1990s (true)	51	61	+10*
The school experiment <i>(3 weeks before election)</i>			
The proportion of schoolteachers with an academic degree in pedagogics has increased during the last 15 years (false)	46	48	+2
Teacher density in high schools has increased during the last 15 years (true)	10	18	+8*
The elder care experiment <i>(2 weeks before election)</i>			
Since 2000, the proportion of elder-care recipients receiving home-help has increased (true)	54	63	+9*
Since 2000, the proportion of elder-care recipients living in old people's homes increased (false)	31	38	+7*
The inequality experiment <i>(1 week before election)</i>			
Ten EU member states have smaller income differences than Sweden (false)	27	30	+3

Notes: The alternatives for each item were "true," "false" and "don't know." N=about 450 in each of the control- and experiment groups respectively.

Table 2 The impact of survey-embedded fact sheets on evaluations of government performance in specific policy areas (unstandardized OLS coefficients)

	<i>4 weeks before election</i>	<i>3 weeks before election</i>	<i>2 weeks before election</i>	<i>Election week</i>	<i>Week after election</i>
The health care experiment <i>(4 weeks before election)</i>	.02	-.03	-.07	-.10	-.01
The school experiment <i>(3 weeks before election)</i>		.56***	.27*	.21	.31*
The elder care experiment <i>(2 weeks before election)</i>			-.16	-.33**	-.23
The inequality experiment <i>(1 week before election)</i>				.02	-.01

*p<.10 ** p<.05 *** p<.01

Notes: The dependent variable is an 11-point scale varying between -5 (very bad result) och +5 (very good result).

Table 3 Effects of watching policy area-specific TV programs on post-election policy area-specific performance evaluations (unstandardized OLS coefficients)

Dependent variable: Elder care evaluation

Watched "Karavanen" on September 4	-0.34**
Watched "Agenda" on September 3	.45**
Initial elder care evaluation (-5 – +5)	.78***
Initial left-right identification (0 left – 10 right)	-.22***
Adjusted R-squared (N)	.56 (726)

Dependent variable: Inequality evaluation

Watched "Uppdrag granskning" on September 12	-.30**
Initial inequality evaluation (-5 – +5)	.75***
Initial left-right identification (0 left – 10 right)	-.15***
Adjusted R-squared (N)	.49 (819)

*p<.10 ** p<.05 *** p<.01

APPENDIX A: The 2006 Swedish Webpanel

The 2006 Swedish Webpanel study was designed and carried out by Stefan Dahlberg, Staffan Kumlin, and Henrik Oscarsson, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg. Texttalk Websurvey (<https://websurvey.texttalk.se/>), provided software, server space, and technical advice (for details, see Dahlberg et al. 2006).

The sample is a self-selected convenience sample recruited via web-based party selector-tools offered by the two large national daily news-papers Expressen and Aftonbladet. Readers who made use of these selectors were asked if they wanted to take part in a web-based impartial election survey conducted by University of Gothenburg. Those agreeing submitted their e-mail address and filled in a short recruitment questionnaire with basic questions to give respondents a feel for the study and to provide the data set with background variables. Recruitment went on during late spring 2006. All in all 6,174 respondents were recruited. These were randomly distributed over four different panels. One was a two-wave panel conducted during the last week of the election campaign. The other three were five-wave panels with one-week wavelags spread out over the month leading up to the election. Questionnaires for these three different surveys were sent to respondents on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays respectively. It is the Wednesday group (1,340 recruited e-mail addresses) that is analyzed in this paper. Table 1 shows the timing of the waves for this particular section of the webpanel.

Table A1. The Wednesday section of the 2006 Swedish Webpanel

Recruitment questionnaire	Late spring and summer 2006
First wave	Wednesday August 23
Second wave	Wednesday August 30
Third wave	Wednesday September 6
Fourth wave	Wednesday September 13
Fifth wave	Day after election; Monday September 18

Questionnaires were generally sent out in the morning, with around 50 percent returning the questionnaire within 24 hours. About two-thirds generally did so within 48 hours. After that, a reminder was sent out bringing response rates up to around 75 percent for any given wave.

As illustrated by Table A2, politically interested citizens, men, and right-leaning citizens are overrepresented. Therefore, expanded versions of the regression models in Tables 2 and 3 were estimated. These let the strongest effects of fact-sheets/TV programs interact with political interest, gender, and subjective ideology. For the fact sheets, all three interactions plus main effects were included simultaneously since there are more degrees of freedom and less multicollinearity in this model (only one main independent variable and no lagged dependent variable). For the TV programs, a more cautious strategy was adopted so as to not overload the models (recall that the dependent variable is lagged on the right-hand side, and that there are two correlated independent variables in the case of elder care). Therefore, the main effects and interactions with interest, ideology, and gender were entered one at the time.

All this resulted in 15 interaction coefficients out of which only one was statistically significant and where another three approached statistical significance. Interestingly, these interactions all suggest that a more representative sample would likely yield slightly *stronger* effects of fact sheets/TV programs. Expressed differently, the estimates in Tables 2 and 3 are likely very slightly on the conservative side. Specifically, the initial impact of the school fact sheet is stronger (though not significantly so) among women ($b_{\text{fact-sheet} \times \text{gender}} = .68$; $p = .17$), and among the politically

uninterested ($b_{\text{fact-sheet} \times \text{uninterested}}=.1.13; p=.09$). Likewise, the positive effect of watching Agenda grows slightly more positive (though not significantly so) further to the left on the 11-point self-placement scale ($b_{\text{Agenda} \times \text{ideological self-placement}}=.08; p=.20$), and among women ($b_{\text{Agenda} \times \text{ideological self-placement}}=.61; p=.12$)

Table A2 Comparisons between the sample of the Webpanel and the Swedish population (percent)

	<i>Webpanel</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Politically interested (very or rather)	84	55	29
Non-voters	2	18	16
Voted for Liberals	14	8	6
Voted for Social Democrats	17	35	15
Women	44	50	6
Socialist bloc voters	34	46	12
Left-of-middle ideological self-placement	31	40	9

Note: The population information about political interest and ideological self-placement comes from the 2006 Swedish Election Study. Voting information comes from the Election Authority (www.val.se), and information about gender composition from Statistics Sweden (www.scb.se).

APPENDIX B: Outline of the fact sheet experiments

The health care experiment (wave 1)

Experiment group

“Here are a few questions about the development of health care in Sweden.”

BACKGROUND: According to some observers, health care in Sweden has changed since the early 1990s. For instance, the researchers in the Welfare Commission, drew the following conclusions in 2000:

- Patient fees for health care and medicine doubled during the 1990s.
- The number of complaints concerning accidents and errors more than doubled during the 1990s.
- The number of private health care insurances increased fivefold during the 1990s
- The share of Swedes being satisfied with health care dropped from about 70 percent in 1996 to around 50 percent in 2002, making Swedes the seventh most satisfied population among 15 EU countries.

Then followed three likert-scale type items about:

(1) how conclusions of the welfare commission fitted respondents' own views, (2) how the respondent thought health care has developed in recent years, and (3) evaluation about personally experienced health care in recent years. Also, respondents could make use of an open-ended question for additional comments about the past development of health care.

[NEW PAGE IN THE WEB QUESTIONNAIRE]

“It is sometimes discussed to what extent the Landsting (regional political level) actually can affect the development of health care. We would like to know what you think.”

BACKGROUND: Health care in Sweden is mostly financed and carried out by the Landsting. However, public health care is also affected by the state through both economic resources as well as through a large body of laws and regulation.

Then followed two items where respondents evaluated the extent to which the Landsting and the government respectively can affect health care, using a the scale from 1 (to a very small extent) to 7 (to a very large extent). Finally, another open-ended question asked for any other comments about how different actors affect health care.

Control group

“Here are a few questions about the future development of health care in Sweden. What do you think about the following suggestions”.

- Introduce more private health care.
- Prevent for-profit companies to provide health care.
- Raise Landsting taxes rather than cutting hospital resources.
- Concentrate specialist health care to large hospitals.

“If you have any further thoughts on the future development of health care, please write them here.”

The school experiment (wave 2)

Experiment group

“Here are some questions about how you think public schools in Sweden have developed.”

BACKGROUND: According to some observers, schools in Sweden have changed since the early 1990s. The researchers in the public investigation “The Welfare Commission” have noted the following tendencies.

- The teaching cost per pupil dropped by roughly 20 percent during the first half of the 1990s. During the 2000s it has increased again.
- Teacher density in compulsory schools dropped by about 10 percent during the 1990s, but has risen again after 2000.
- Teacher density in high schools increased by about 10 percent between the early 1990s and now.
- The proportion of schoolteachers with an academic degree in pedagogics dropped from about 95 percent in the early 1990s to 80 percent in 2005.
- More pupils go to independent schools. For compulsory schools, the proportion has risen from 1 percent in 1990 to 8 percent in 2005.
- Municipalities have taken on a greater responsibility for schools and today they carry the main responsibility for both financing and the actual operation. However, the state retains influence through laws and regulation, part financing, assessments and control.

Then followed four questions about (1) how conclusions of the Welfare Commission fitted respondents’ own views, (2) how the respondent thought schools have developed in recent years, (3) evaluation about personally experienced schools in recent years, (4) the extent to which various actors and levels have affected how schools function today (non-Socialist government 1991-1994, Social Democratic government 1994-2006, and municipalities). Finally, respondents could make use of an open-ended question for additional comments about the past development of schools.

Control group

“Here are a few questions about how you think schools in Sweden should develop in the future.

What do you think about the following suggestions”.

- Introduce more independent schools.
- Pay higher salaries to teachers.
- Raise municipal taxes rather than cutting school resources.
- Introduce grades at an earlier stage.

“If you have any further thoughts on the future development of schools, please write them here.”

The elder care experiment (wave 3)

Experiment group

“Here are some questions about how you think public elder care in Sweden has developed.”

BACKGROUND: According to some observers, elder care in Sweden has changed. Here is a list of a few trends and conclusions that are often discussed. Some come from the researchers behind the public investigation *The Welfare Commission,*” and some from Socialstyrelsen (*author's note: The National Board of Health and Welfare=NBHW*)

- The number of elderly is increasing. For instance, the group over 80 increased by 100,000 people between 1990 and 2005 (NBHW).
- During the 1990s there was a gradual shift from public elder care to the private market and relatives (Welfare Commission).
- The changes were probably a consequence of both stricter criteria and raised fees (Welfare Commission). Between 2003 and 2004, however, the number of households foregoing public care due to fees dropped. The reason was probably new regulation on fees (NBHW).
- Highly educated seniors tend to replace public care with market help, while others more often turn to family and relatives (Welfare Commission).
- The relatives that have taken on greater care-responsibilities are often women, mainly old wives and middle-aged daughters (Welfare Commission).
- The overall share of elderly receiving public help remained stable during the 2000s. However, fewer were granted a place in special homes, and an increasing number received home-help (NBHW).
- Elder care has become more limited and standardized, with human contact, quality, and social aspects becoming less prominent (NBHW).

Then followed questions about (1) how conclusions of the welfare commission fitted respondents' own views, (2) how the respondent thought elder care has developed in recent years, (3) evaluation about personally experienced elder care in recent years, (4) the extent to which various actors and levels have affected how elder care functions today (non-Socialist government 1991-1994, Social Democratic government 1994-2006, and municipalities). Finally, respondents could make use of an open-ended question for additional comments.

Control group

“Here are a few questions about how elder care in Sweden should develop in the future. What do you think about the following suggestions”.

- To a greater extent let private companies carry out elder care.
- Raise municipal taxes rather than cutting elder care resources.
- Pay higher salaries to elder care employees
- Introduce more home-help rather than more special homes and housing for the elderly.

“If you have any further thoughts on the future development of elder care, please write them here.”

The inequality experiment (wave 4)

Experiment group

“Here are some questions about how you think the distribution of income in Sweden has developed.”

BACKGROUND: According to some observers, incomes and their distribution have changed in Sweden during the last 30 years. Here is a list of tendencies that are often discussed. Some come from a report by Statistics Sweden (SCB) and some from the EU's statistics organization Eurostat.

- Household disposable incomes increased by 43 percent between 1975 and now (SCB).
- The increase has been larger during some periods and smaller during others. During 1980-83 there was even a small decrease. During 1995-2002 disposable incomes increased more than during any other period (SCB).
- Income inequality between different groups in society decreased until the early 1980's. Then it started to increase again (SCB).
- During the 1990's income inequality increased more than during any other period. In the early 2000s, it was as high as in the mid-1960s (SCB).
- This change is explained mainly by incomes rising faster among the richest 10 percent in the population, compared to other groups (SCB).
- Despite this change, Sweden was in 2003 one of the 2-3 EU countries with the smallest income inequality (Eurostat).

Then followed questions about (1) how facts fitted respondents' own views, (2) whether Sweden has too large or too small income inequality, (3) the extent to which the non-Socialist government 1991-1994 and Social Democratic government 1994-2006 have affected today's income distribution. Finally, respondents could make use of an open-ended question for additional comments.

Control group

“Here are a few questions about how the distribution of income in Sweden should develop in the future. What do you think about the following suggestions”.

- Reduce income differences in society
- Reduce taxes on high incomes
- Reduce taxes on average incomes

- Reduce taxes on low incomes
- Reduce replacement levels in social insurance systems.

“If you have any further thoughts on the future development of income distribution, please write them here.”

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ENDNOTES

¹ Such accounts include attempts to affect attributions of responsibility for outcomes (i.e., “the previous poor handling of the economy forced us to do it”), and attempts to enhance perceptions of the actual political outcomes (i.e., “this decision will have positive effects that you haven’t thought about”)

² An standard democratic postulate is that citizens—informed or not—are free to vote how they want. Is such sovereignty threatened by the proposed notion of informed electoral accountability? For three reasons, I think the answer is ultimately no. First, the adopted definition is actually *more* respectful to citizen sovereignty than that used in much economic voting research. After all, “informed” is conceptualized here in terms of interests defined by citizens themselves (after exposed to more intense, open and democratically fair information flows). Second, note that the conceptualization is well in line with much democratic theory in that it assigns at least a potential role to transformative political communication (for an overview, see Warren 1992). For example, Dahl stresses the importance of “enlightened understanding” (1989), whereas theorists such as Fishkin (1995) focus on “deliberative democracy.” Empirically, the implications of such concepts have been addressed in empirical studies on information effects such as Bartels (1996) and Althaus (2003). The specific contribution here is to bring such informational questions into empirical research on electoral accountability in general, and on the welfare state in particular. Third, and finally, I do not see a direct logical tension between (a) arguing that citizens are ultimately free to think and vote how they want, and (b) asking whether they currently behave as they likely would after engaging more intensely in some specific democratic activity that is presently given short

thrift. There will always be competing democratic mechanisms alongside electoral accountability such as ideological mandates, issue voting, competence voting, social representation, non-parliamentary participation, opinion polls, and so on. Thus, while electoral accountability may be found partially uninformed (as I argue the results suggest) there will always be a good chance that other powerful democratic mechanisms are in play in a free and fair society. And even in the unlikely case that they are not, democrats could (and should) make the case that even uninformed citizen sovereignty is better (normatively and empirically) than non-democratic alternatives.

³ Dahl does not necessarily have retrospective accountability in mind when discussing “enlightened understanding.” The argument is rather that this way thinking about informed preferences could be fruitfully inserted into the specific study and conceptualization of informed electoral accountability.

⁴ This comparison suffers from the fact that different issue categories were used in different countries. The following categories were defined here as related to the welfare state: Sweden: “social welfare/health”, “education”. UK: “social services/health”, “up taxes+spend more”, “equalize income”; Germany: “pension system”, “better housing”.; Netherlands: “housing”, “public health.”

⁵ The calculation begins in 1980 to create some comparability with Aardal and van Wijnen’s results. Also, in the calculation manifestoes have been weighted according to election results.

⁶ The randomization was tested by regressing fact sheet exposure on age, gender, and education. This resulted in 12 bivariate regression coefficients. Out of these, 11 turned out statistically insignificant. The twelfth coefficient revealed a slight tendency for

women to be exposed to the school fact sheet more often than men (53 percent of women, and 46 percent of men, were exposed to this fact sheet).

⁷ The experiments focused on outcome evaluation and conveyed very little on responsibility. However, two fact sheets (health and care and schools) touched on the nature of the shared responsibility across political levels in Sweden. Three of the experiments (schools, elder care, and inequality) contained follow-up questions on the extent to which various actors and levels have affected today's outcomes (the non-Socialist government 1991-1994, the Social Democratic governments 1994-2006, and municipalities). While such questions do urge respondents to ponder responsibility, they do not convey any relevant new information.

⁸ The repetition of the health insurance item gives rise to a methodological observation. Even among control group respondents (who never saw the fact sheet) knowledge levels rose over time. This could be a product of real-world learning during the election campaign. But perhaps more likely, it may reflect aroused curiosity among those being asked the question without seeing a fact sheet.

⁹ Sverker Olofsson.

¹⁰ The other main topics were a general analysis of the election and a feature on the relations between Lebanon, Iran, and Hezbollah.

¹¹ Länsstyrelsen.