



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
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The Power of Political Branding

*A Qualitative Study of Swedish Voters' Perceptions of Political Branding
and its Consequences*

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Swedish voters' perceptions of political branding and its consequences in a nation characterized by high institutional trust and low corruption. Political branding, a tool for shaping voter opinions, perceptions, and behavior, has gained significant traction in recent years. While traditionally viewed as beneficial for democracy, emerging critiques suggest it may hinder conscious voter decision-making. Employing in-depth interviews with ten Swedish voters, the study delves into their lived experiences and underlying cognitive processes.

The results show that voters perceive political branding as an important short-term, market-oriented tool to win votes and gain power. While they long for more honest and long-term brand-oriented political branding characterized by promise-keeping, consistency, and a shared worldview between them and the political brands, voters currently perceive political brands as untrustworthy. Furthermore, while expressing an understanding of potential democratic threats, they neglect the possibility of their own manipulation, which underscores the power of political branding in Sweden today. Additionally, low perceived trust leads to apathy about the political system as a whole and possibly not voting at all, a phenomenon we term *political atheism*.

The findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of voters' perceptions of political branding in a high-trust democracy. The findings reveal both potential advantages, such as clear communication of political stances, and potential drawbacks, such as anxieties surrounding manipulation and a lack of transparency. The study also emphasizes the importance of considering the specific Swedish context, including its multi-party system and established trust in institutions. By offering a qualitative analysis of voter perceptions, this thesis fills a gap in the current body of research, which has primarily relied on quantitative methods and focused on countries with lower levels of institutional trust. It provides valuable insights for future research and contributes to a more informed discussion regarding the role of political branding in a democratic society.

Keywords: *Political branding, Political marketing, Persuasion, Literacy, Brand Heritage, Democracy, Voters' Perceptions*

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1. Introduction

This introductory chapter provides a background of previous research on how branding works, with a focus on political branding. It examines the spread and increasing importance of political branding, and discusses how it can have both positive and negative effects on voters. The problematization highlights the need for research on voters' perspectives from a qualitative perspective, and the lack of research on political branding in Sweden. Finally, the chapter presents the aim and contributions of the study and the research question. The chapter concludes with delimitations, an outline of the thesis and lastly definitions of terms.

1.1. Background

Branding is not only a promise of consistent quality (Melin, 2002) and a commitment to building long-term trust (Urde et al, 2013), but also a tactic to position a set of ideas in people's minds to influence their behavior and increase the number of purchases (Jones, 2017, p.17). In the context of politics, so-called political branding, it is a common tactic to influence voter behavior (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016). Besides being a part of political marketing, it is increasingly leveraged to appeal to voters and differentiate from political rivals (Nielsen & Larsen, 2014). Common political branding strategies include crafting entertaining messages, personalizing the rhetoric and using emotional language, with the ultimate goal to create favorable images and desired voting behavior (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016). Further, important branding elements that affect voters preferences include brand awareness, party campaign, brand trust, leaders' image, party brand image and brand association (Ferreira & Eyk, 2023).

Political branding has been present in western democracies for the past twenty to thirty years (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017), and one of the most recent distinct examples of political branding is within the case of the former US president, Donald Trump. Trump claims he actually won the 2020 election and that Biden's victory was fraudulent, referred to as "the big lie" (Jacobson, 2023, p. 133). Jacobson (2023) describes how Trump's attacks on mainstream journalists as "enemies of the people" (Jacobson, 2023, p. 140) and "fake news" (Jacobson, 2023, p. 140) have grown Republicans' distrust of the news media. According to the study,

the majority of his supporters agree with him and deny Biden's legitimacy despite evidence against him and the "big lie" (Jacobson, 2023, p. 133).

Political branding has during the last few years spread to other parts of the world such as India as it has been acknowledged as a powerful rhetorical tool (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017). Several socio-cultural trends, including the rise of social media and the increasing importance of branding in society overall, have cultivated the importance of political branding (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016). Additionally, images have a great power to influence political movement, and social media platforms such as Instagram are common tools to present political statements (Scott A-L, 2023). By influencing voters' perceptions of political brands' policies, but also influencing perceived competence, trust and liking, political brands work as an important source of information for voters who are unfamiliar with politics overall (Nielsen & Larsen, 2014). Given that technology plays an important role in political branding, it enables voters to stay consistently connected to their preferred party, underscoring the significance of political branding today (Kumar et al. 2016).

A concern with political branding is that many voters have a hard time deciding who to vote for (SVT Nyheter, 2022), which may imply that they don't know what party that benefits them the most. Another concern is that many politicians use alternative truths to seduce the voter (SVT Nyheter 2018; Svenska Dagbladet 2018; Sveriges Radio 2018; Jacobson 2023). Voters' overall perception is that honesty is very important for political support compared to commercial markets (Smith, 2009), making political branding a terrain that voters struggle to navigate.

1.2. Problematization and Research question

Marsh and Fawcett (2011) argue that branding is less about improving the quality of a product and more about marketing it to consumers. In political branding, this could mean that it is not about political ideas and how to solve issues, but rather about receiving political support. Therefore, the authors argue that by treating voters as consumers, political brands will be more responsive to their desires. This in turn will, according to them, lead to a better representation of voters, which they believe is positive for democracy (Lees-Marshment [27] in Marsh & Fawcett, 2011).

However, we have a critical view against this perspective. Nielsen and Larsen's (2014) argue that voters are increasingly influenced by political brands, and that the traditional model of voters' decision making based on political identification and cleavages, no longer works as the primary explanation. The authors describe how political brands use various branding techniques to influence voting behavior and explain that voters are more likely to vote for parties with a strong brand. Therefore, we argue, in contrast to Marsh and Fawcett (2011), that political branding could instead lead to worse representations of voters if their desires are shaped by clever branding techniques, as this could possibly undermine voters' ability to make independent and objective political decisions. Thus, it could be questioned whether it is democratic for voters to believe they are making conscious voting decisions when, in reality, these could be the outcome of clever branding techniques.

Political campaigns are a way to persuade voters (Kulachai, 2023). Additionally, political brands pursue their own political agendas when answering questions of public concern, thereby utilizing branding techniques by strategically focusing on their preferred political issues (Bramlett, 2021). As a result, voters tend to more positively evaluate the performance of their preferred politician and typically interpret information based on their preexisting beliefs (Mullinix, 2015; Warner et al, 2020). Research on "the big lie" that delves into how Trump's rhetoric convinced his supporters that the 2020 election was fraudulent despite contradicting evidence (Jacobson, 2023), especially raises our curiosity in the paradox of how the use of alternative truths for political branding purposes don't always diminish perceived trust and support. It is especially interesting since honesty is perceived as a paramount element for political support (Smith, 2009; Warner & Banwart, 2016). With this background, it could be assumed that political branding is a form of persuasion that sometimes twists the truth to shape desired voting behavior.

Further, democracy is facing a global challenge. In just two decades, the number of democratic countries has shrunk dramatically. A recent study by Nord et al. (2024) found that only 29 % of the world's nations can be classified as democracies today, compared to 50 % in 2003. This translates to a rise in autocracies, which now govern 71 % of the world's population. The report also reveals a concerning increase in the number of people living under autocratic regimes, jumping from 7 % to 35 % in the same timeframe. Even Western Europe, which has fared better than other regions, is not immune to this decline. While the

situation there may not be as bad, democratic principles are demonstrably weakening (Nord et al., 2024).

These alarming trends necessitate a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the erosion of democracy. One potential cause that warrants investigation is political branding. Traditionally, political branding has been viewed as a positive force for democracy (Downs, 1957 in Smith & French, 2009), promoting engagement and informing voters. However, this perspective deserves critical examination. Recent scholarship, exemplified by Smith and French (2009), presents a contrasting story. This critical view argues that political branding can have a harmful impact on democracy. The rise of political branding over the past two decades coincides with the documented decline in democracies worldwide. This temporal correlation suggests a potential link: political branding could be a contributing factor to the decline of democratic values. As the critical scholars have already suggested a negative relationship between political branding and democracy, this paper takes a different angle. We strive to explore voters' perspectives on political branding and its consequences. It's particularly important to study voters' perceptions of political branding and its consequences, since the majority of previous research on political branding has been conducted quantitatively (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016; Nielsen & Larsen, 2014; Bramlett, 2021; Lindemann & Stoetzer, 2021). Therefore, there is a need to properly understand voters' perspectives, which is crucial given the divided view on how political branding impacts our democracy.

Moreover, previous studies within the field of political branding have mostly focused on countries that have low to average trust in institutions, such as the United States (GLOBE, 2020a) and the United Kingdom (GLOBE, 2020b). The Swedish society stands out in this point of view since they score high in trust to institutions (GLOBE, 2020c). As Sweden has more trust in institutions, it is interesting to investigate how Swedish voters perceive political branding. Not only does Sweden boast a significantly higher level of trust in institutions (GLOBE, 2020c), but it also demonstrates a remarkably low likelihood of corruption, ranking 82nd out of 100 on a corruption perception index (Transparency International, 2024).

This unique combination of high trust and low corruption raises intriguing questions about the role of political branding in Sweden. Sweden's multi-party system, with eight parties in the parliament, allows citizens a wider range of options to express their voices. It can also

lead to some ambiguity regarding what each party stands for (Nicholson et al., 2018). This potential lack of clarity might contribute to the perceived importance of political branding in Sweden. Swedish voters are exposed to a significant amount of political branding, making it challenging to assess the credibility of these messages. This challenge is further amplified by the tendency of certain issues to become associated with specific parties in Sweden, potentially limiting open debate and critical evaluation (Van der Brug & Berkhout, 2024).

To highlight the study's relevance to Sweden, a recent documentary on political marketing and branding examines its impact on democracy (Malmberg, 2024). The documentary examines how a Swedish political party uses different marketing tactics to alter the truth in their favor, to ultimately gain votes. This reinforces the importance of political branding and the active efforts of parties to shape voters' perceptions and behavior through branding.

To fully understand the unique Swedish context, we must explore how these factors influence their perceptions of political branding. By critically analyzing their perceptions of political branding within the Swedish context, we can contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon. We can explore how a country with high trust and low corruption grapples with the challenges and potential benefits of political branding in a multi-party system. This point of view can add a relevant perspective and increase the literature streams on political branding. Hence, the increasing utilization of political branding in societies demands broader knowledge on the topic, so that the relationship between political branding and the society is critically explored.

To conclude, given the unique Swedish context, coupled with the overrepresentation of quantitative research on political branding (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016; Nielsen & Larsen, 2014; Bramlett, 2021; Lindemann & Stoetzer, 2021), and the absence of a voter perspective lens, this thesis aims to examine the following research question:

How do Swedish voters view political branding, and how do they perceive its consequences?

1.3. Aims and Contributions

The purpose of this study revolves around delving beyond surface-level opinions and into the lived experience that shape them. By engaging with participants in open and in-depth conversations through interviews, the research strives to uncover cognitive and affective dimensions including the underlying perceptions and personal narratives. Ultimately filling the epistemological and methodological gap in the literature stream, the study's purpose is to investigate voters' perceptions of political branding and explore how voters perceive the consequences of this phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, persuasion could be related to political branding. Previous studies in political persuasion are relatively outdated (Holbert, 2005; Schrott & Lanoue, 2013; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984; Vancil & Pendell, 1984), which indicates a demand for updated research on political branding. This is especially important due to the evolving digital landscape, with politicians increasingly turning to digital means to promote political agendas (Scott, A.L, 2023). Lastly, the overrepresentation of quantitative studies on political branding, demands research with a qualitative lens.

1.4 Delimitations

Our study employs an in-depth approach, limiting the number of respondents to only ten. This allows for a more nuanced and detailed examination of individual perceptions, enabling us to delve into the intricacies of voter perspectives. While this approach precludes generalizations to the broader Swedish electorate, it provides a rich understanding of the complexities of voter perceptions.

Our focus lies in understanding voter perceptions, rather than actual voting behavior. This distinction is crucial, as perceptions and behaviors are not always aligned. By delving into perceptions, we gain insights into the factors that influence voter decision-making, even if those factors do not always translate into actual votes cast. Our study maintains a neutral stance on political matters, steering clear of endorsements or criticisms of specific political parties. Instead, we examine the political branding as a whole, analyzing the messages and images they project to the public. This approach allows us to assess how these branding strategies influence voter perceptions.

While our study may not provide sweeping generalizations about the Swedish electorate, it offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of voter perceptions. By exploring these perceptions in depth, we gain insights into the underlying factors that shape voter decision-making, providing a foundation for further research and informed political discourse.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

The following section will begin with a literature review, presenting relevant previous research on political branding. After this, the key theories chapter will present three different theoretical streams: Brand Heritage, Literacy, and Persuasion. Following key theories, we will present the methodological part, where we will provide arguments for the chosen method, including aspects such as research design, data collection, and sampling strategy. Afterwards, a thorough analysis of the main findings in relation to the key theories will be presented, where four themes will be emphasized. Finally, a discussion of the main findings in relation to previous research on political branding will be outlined, including theoretical contributions. Lastly, a conclusion will be presented, summarizing the main findings, practical implications, and suggestions for future research.

1.6 Definitions of terms

Political brand/s: We use this as a collective term for a political party and/or politician because political brands have traditionally been defined as a trinity of leadership, party, and policies. (Khan et al., 2024)

Political branding: Our definition of political branding is that it is a long-term brand promise aimed at building trust with voters. As the majority of the literature on political branding is built on branding in general, we base our definitions on Melin's (2002) definition of it as a guarantee of consistent quality, and on Urde et al.'s (2013) definition as a long-term perspective where staying true to the core brand identity is imperative.

Political marketing: Our definition of political marketing is that it is about "identifying and meeting voters' and social needs in a way that harmonizes with the goals of the organization" (Kotler et al., 2022, p. 29) with a short-term perspective (Urde et al., 2013),

2. Literature Review

The second chapter of this study presents a literature review of previous research on political branding, by beginning to discuss the ancestor to political branding: political marketing. This transition to the beginning of political branding, which will be described afterwards. Thereafter, the chapter continues by describing a normative and a critical view on political branding in relation to democracy. Finally, critique of prior research is presented.

2.1. From Political Marketing to Political Branding

“Marketing is about identifying and meeting human and social needs in a way that harmonizes with the goals of the organization” (Kotler et al., 2022, p. 29). Urde et al (2013) describe market orientation as satisfying customers’ needs and wants and argue that it is a short-term view. This could indicate that political marketing is about adapting to societal changes and voters' evolving needs, which could be viewed as prioritizing short-term goals.

Modern political marketing is heavily influenced by the exploratory marketing views of Kotler and Levy (1969). Hughes & Dann describe it as “a set of activities, processes, or institutions used by political organizations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange promises of value with voter consumers, political party stakeholders, and society at large” (Hughes & Dann, 2009, p. 244). Therefore, political marketing differs from general marketing in its focus to achieve political objectives, and is achieved by diverse marketing activities, such as branding or advertising. Further, political marketing needs to choose an approach; selling, transactional, relational, or experiential (Abid et al. 2023).

With the growth of social media, political marketing has adapted. The earliest example of effectively using social media within political marketing is Howard Dean’s nomination bid (Abid et al. 2023). The difference from traditional media is that social media makes it possible for co-creation and co-branding, as politicians can interact with voters instantly. Additionally social media makes it easier for the parties to connect with voters as social media reduces the psychological distance (Abid et al. 2023).

Political marketing on social media needs a distinct approach compared to traditional media channels. Notably, effective social media engagement requires an interactive and relational communication style. Additionally, research suggests that social media platforms necessitate a personal and social approach from politicians. This approach is most effective when grounded in shared values between the politician and their constituents. (Abid et al. 2023)

Branding on the other hand is a term that can be described as a promise, which means that it needs to have a clear positioning. By keeping its brand promises, the brand builds trust with its customers, which can help the organization achieve its goals and stay true to its brand promise. Additionally, a brand is a guarantee, meaning that it guarantees products of consistent quality. It is always important not to promise more than the brand can deliver, as this could erode the value of the brand (Melin, 2002). Urde et al. (2013) describe a brand-oriented approach as a long-term process of satisfying customers' needs and wants without compromising the brand's core identity. With this background, political branding is more of a long-term perspective compared to political marketing, as building trust and loyalty by staying true to the brand promise is paramount in branding.

The research by Smith (2009) showed that when it comes to brand personality, leadership and honesty were among the most important components, with honesty being especially important due to the frequent questioning of politicians' truthfulness. Additionally, the personality of a political party is more associated with the leader than the party itself. Another study found that politicians are more likely to generate positive associations and activate their supporters than generating negative associations with their non-supporters. Consequently, their brand identity will be strengthened among their political supporters, an outcome linked to our tendency to remember things that align with our prior attitudes. On the contrary, non-supporters are more likely to generate negative associations, which leads to bias towards voters' preferred political candidate (Bramlett, 2021).

Lindemann & Stoetzer (2021) research on political branding showed that parties whose candidates are perceived as more competent, empathetic and possessing integrity, are more likely to gain political support. The result also demonstrates that changes in candidate perceptions, rather than alterations in policies, mediate the voting intention for the party, suggesting that policy stances matter less than image-building does. Political communication, debates and brand images have shown to greatly influence electoral success. Consequently,

voters support a candidate when they trust the candidate will represent them and their values. Therefore, when considering a candidate's image, what really matters is representation and asking the questions "Which candidate understands me?" and "Who will be a voice for me in government?" (Warner & Banwart, 2016).

Using traditional marketing concepts in the political sphere requires more flexibility given its differences from commercial brands and politicians' images have shown to be more important than political policies (Smith, 2009). Smith (2009) emphasizes the impact of brand image in politics, illustrating that when two groups of people were asked about their opinions of the policies of the Conservative party of the UK, with only one group informed about the party's identity, the results suggested that the party's overall negative image influenced the liking of policies. Individuals in the group informed about the party's identity suddenly disliked the policies once they learned they belonged to the Conservative party, highlighting the impact of brand image in political branding.

Additionally, Chandler and Owen (2002, in Kumar et al. 2016) argue that political branding is significant because of voters' cultural, emotional and personal connections with the brand. Especially the cultural aspect is crucial as voters tend to associate with parties that represent them culturally (Kumar et al. 2016).

2.2 Two streams on Political Branding and Democracy: Normative view & Critical view

Two different streams on political branding in relation to democracy have been identified, a normative view and a critical view. We are now going to outline the two streams according to prior research on political branding.

2.2.1 Political Branding and Democracy: Normative view

The normative view of political branding is something positive for democracy. This is usually explained by the economic theory of expected utility maximization (Downs, 1957 in Smith & French, 2009) or rational choice theory (Scott, 2014) in general. This theory equals voters with consumers and assumes that, like in macroeconomics, the voter will make an informed decision and vote for the party that benefits them the most. In addition, some authors argue that the voters benefit from political branding as the parties have to take the voters' needs into account to get votes (Lees-Marshment, 2001 in Smith & French 2009).

The personal connections with a political brand is important because of personalization. This means that the brand itself can become so important that it becomes part of oneself (Fetscherin et al. 2014 in Kumar et al. 2016). This phenomena can be explained as the extended self (Belk, 1988). If a brand becomes part of the extended self it becomes very important for the consumer. For example if someone proves your party wrong, and thereby acknowledging that you have less knowledge on the subject, this can seem like a personal attack. The same thing can happen with creation or mastery of the possession (party). This emotional reaction with using a party as part of the extended self goes hand in hand with the emotional aspect (Gobé, 2002 in Kumar et al. 2016) as they describe the voters to have an “exalted position in the minds of customers” (Kumar et al. 2016 p. 49). The author argues that the emotional connection goes beyond just liking a political party, it becomes a personal and exclusive experience.

2.2.2 Political Branding and Democracy: Critical view

The critical view of political branding in the light of democracy is often explained as the political market is different from the commercial (Henneberg, 2006 in Smith and French, 2009). Smith and French describe the consequences of political marketing (2009 p. 210) as:

when branding has been applied in the political marketplace, it can produce unwanted effects such as narrowing the political agenda, increasing confrontation, demanding conformity of behaviour/message and even increasing political disengagement at the local level...

The authors highlight the importance of keeping political branding completely separate from commercial branding as it could negatively affect democracy (Smith and French, 2009).

If parties have branded themselves mindfully (Chandler and Owen, 2002, in Kumar et al. 2016), voting for something else could be difficult considering perceived risks (Hsu & Ken, 2021). The physiological risk could be great if the voter considers another party that is better matching their interest since it could go against their culture and cause concerns. Further, it may lead to a social risk as it could be perceived as a betrayal by a peer group.

Political branding as a terminology and voting behavior are not explicitly linked in previous literature, despite several studies connecting cleavage structure, party identification and issue ownership to voters' decision making (Nielsen & Larsen 2014). However, Nielsen & Larsen (2014) were able to show that political branding does affect voting behavior, explaining that political brands with higher political brand value are more likely to gain votes than brands with low political brand value.

Voting decisions are the foundation for democratic societies, and the study by Kulachai et al. (2023) illustrates how various individual and contextual factors shape voting decisions. Contextual factors, including socio-cultural and political factors, involve media influence and social networks, which influences voters' political knowledge, preferences, attitudes and perceptions. This in turn impacts the evaluation of political candidates, their policies, and it can lead to voters adopting a similar political perspective as political brands promoting it. Voters assess candidates based on their experience, leadership abilities, integrity and alignment with voters values, which directly influences voting decisions. Moreover, political candidates' communication techniques, coupled with their tone and messaging, influences voters' perceptions and behavior. (Kulachai et al, 2023)

2.3 Critique of Prior Research

The existing research on political branding offers many valuable insights, highlighting the growing significance of branding in politics to build a brand image and influence voter behavior. However, previous research has not dug deep enough into how voters perceive political branding and its consequences. The overrepresentation of quantitative studies on political branding, including honesty, brand image, and factors that influence political support, suggests a lack of a comprehensive and in-depth voter perspective on the topic.

Secondly, most research focuses on countries with low institutional trust. Exploring how political branding is perceived in high-trusted societies such as Sweden can offer valuable comparisons. Finally, the existing literature on political branding often overlooks the ethical implications for voters, focusing primarily on quantitative methods and studies in countries with lower institutional trust. Previous research presents a divided view on the impact of political branding on democracy, highlighting the need to investigate how political branding in a high-trust society could influence voters' perceptions and perceived consequences, potentially contributing to the understanding of political branding in relation to democracy. This research, which aims to use qualitative methods to explore these gaps in Sweden, has the potential to significantly contribute to the field.

3. Key theories

The third chapter presents relevant theories to answer the research question. The chapter begins by presenting Brand heritage, followed by theory on Literacy and Persuasion. Finally, the chapter critiques the theories and presents a summary of how the theoretical frames can be integrated to help us better understand voters' perceptions of political branding.

3.1 Brand Heritage

Consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that show authenticity, heritage and stability and research indicates that brands that have such elements are well equipped to establish symbolic and emotional attachments with their consumers (Ballantyne et.al, 2006). As a result of today's many choices, heritage brands struggle in marketing their brand's historical reliability without simultaneously appearing outdated (Hakala et.,al, 2011).

Urde et.al (2007) claim that heritage can exist in many different organizations, which per definition could involve political brands. The authors define heritage brands as “a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in an organizational belief that its history is important” (Urde et.al, 2007, p.5). The stronger the five elements of heritage are, the more important is heritage for the brand and for how they are perceived and valued by their customers (voters) and other stakeholders (non-voters). Additionally, heritage can provide a brand with both authenticity and credibility, for instance by helping the brand get support in difficult times (Urde et.al., 2007). Hakala et., al (2011) shares a similar perspective, asserting that consistency in core values and operations enhances the brand heritage, which in turn fosters brand trust and loyalty.

Track record means that the organization has lived up to its promise and values over time (Urde et.al., 2007). In the political sphere, this means that a political party or leader has successfully fulfilled their promises to voters, thus remaining truthful to their political statements. *Longevity* reflects a consistency when demonstrating other heritage elements under many leaders, so that it could be believed that it is integrated in the culture (Urde et.al.,

2007). This means that political brands, regardless of political leader, stay true to their core promises and prove a consistency in previous claims, values, and what they stand for.

When an organization shows consistency of its *core values*, they become an integral part of the brand's heritage (Urde et.al., 2007). This means that political brands need to continuously prove to their voters that their core values underpin every political statement or resolutions to political issues. The *use of symbols* is another important element of heritage, and could include everything from logos, symbols, and slogans (Urde et.al., 2007). This means that political brands need to utilize their well-known brand symbols to nurture their heritage, thus stay recognized. Lastly, organizations need to consider *their history* to maintain their heritage, meaning to show who and what they are. Brands' history determines both how they operate and guide future decisions (Urde et.al., 2007). In political branding, this means that parties and other political leaders need to strategically align their history with present and future standpoints to maintain truthfulness to their heritage.

To protect a brand's heritage, organizations need to incorporate a brand stewardship which encompasses a sense of responsibility, long-term continuity, safeguarding trust in the brand, and adaptability. While protecting the heritage is fundamental, stewardship must still allow adaptations to evolving needs of the present, but without compromising on the brand's core values and heritage. Additionally, trust and credibility is fundamental to a brand's heritage, making trust a crucial aspect for stewardship, especially considering the possibility of losing trust in the brand. (Urde et.al., 2007)

Based on these assumptions about brand heritage, we argue that political brands could be understood as heritage brands. For instance, the Socialdemokraterna party emphasize that they have always been the party for the "working class" (Socialdemokraterna.se, 2024), whereas Miljöpartiet claim they are the only "green" party (Miljöpartiet, 2023). This shows their attempt to highlight their brands core values, longevity and history. Additionally all political parties have their own colors and logos, which manifest the use of symbols. However, track record, meaning if they live up to their brand promises and values over time, is a claim made by most political brands. They may actively seek to cultivate the belief among their supporters that they consistently deliver on their commitments, deriving satisfaction from accomplishing this aim. In this way, political branding could be understood

through brand heritage, and thereby provide a branding perspective from a new angle on the topic.

3.2 Literacy

Literacy today is found in multiple social contexts, such as computing, film and politics and literacy is needed in many aspects of life due to the daily exposure of branded goods through advertising, social interactions and media (Bengtsson, 2006). Literacy does not only involve the ability to write and read, but also to interpret complex meanings in sociocultural contexts (Bernardo, 2000).

3.2.1 Brand Literacy

Brand literacy is “the ability of the consumer to decode the strategies used in marketing practices in introducing, maintaining and reformulating brands and brand images, which then further enables the consumer to engage with these processes within their cultural settings” (Bengtsson, 2006, p. 375). In simpler terms, it means the understanding of marketing strategies and how brands are introduced, maintained, and changed, which in turn helps consumers engage with these processes in their cultural context (Bengtsson, 2006).

Besides involving the competence of making sense of and interpreting a brand culture, it incorporates the understanding of the meanings of words and symbols associated with the brand on a deeper level. Further, consumers are aware that signs involve complex cultural meanings, and that these are co-produced over time together with consumers.

To be a part of a brand culture, it is imperative that consumers understand what others think and feel about the brand. Everyone has an image of a brand that they know about, but the image might not consider the brand’s cultural meanings in a specific context given that consumers tend to personalize the meaning of a brand through their own habits, resulting in that the brand image can vary heavily. As a result, there are different levels of brand literacy, low, medium and high. Low means that people consume brands without knowing much about the cultural meanings those brands hold. Medium means that consumers can read and understand cultural meanings and strategies underlying brands, whereas high involves reformulating cultural meanings besides also following them. (Bengtsson, 2006)

Consumers with high levels of brand literacy skills are better equipped to understand marketing tactics that may obscure the true qualities of a product. Consequently, brand literacy influences consumers' relationships with brands, and consumption behaviors and preferences. By understanding consumers' different levels of brand literacy skills, which is directly linked to different consumer relations with brands, a better understanding of consumer-brand relationships and engagement within brand cultures is possible. (Bengtsson, 2006).

3.2.2 Advertising literacy

The exposure to advertising messages, a result of the growth of media culture, is bigger than ever before. This means that consumers are increasingly forced to interpret advertising messages, which means the ability to recognize, evaluate and understand advertisements and other messages, referred to as advertising literacy skills (Malmelin, 2016). The author defines advertisement as “advertising can be defined as planned and target-oriented, paid-for media publicity” (Malmelin, 2016, p. 132). Continuing, Malmelin (2016) describes two dimensions in advertising literacy based on consumers' ability to understand and recognize various marketing communications in the media, which are *informational literacy* and *rhetorical literacy*.

Compared to before, when the focus of advertising was on product information, there is now a shift where the goal instead is on capturing attention and creating positive associations. Consequently, while it is easier nowadays to stay informed about corporations due to the internet, simultaneously, it is more difficult to evaluate the reliability and credibility of information. The first dimension, *informational literacy*, is exactly this, meaning the ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from the media. Judging the accuracy of information is difficult, especially online, given the blur between advertising and objective content which demands high literacy skills (Malmelin, 2016).

Rhetorical literacy is about understanding the means of persuasion utilized in advertising and understanding who is being targeted by the specific advertisement. Thus, it concerns the ability to understand persuasion attempts in marketing communication and involves critically evaluating the kind of tones and visual expressions aimed to target different target groups. The idea behind this dimension is that the rhetoric is adapted depending on the recipients, and

the continuous changes in the rhetoric demands high literacy skills among consumers (Malmelin, 2016), or voters. Additionally, traditional marketing communication is about persuasion, and the rhetorical part of it is increasingly leveraged in public administrations (Malmelin, 2016), which could also include political brands.

Consumers today are more literate than before as a result of the growth of media where they have been forced to adapt to new advertising circumstances. According to Malmelin (2016), this means that advertisers struggle to get value for money for their ad investments, as consumers tend to bypass messages as a result of the high amount of ads in society.

Consumer's literacy skills continuously change, resulting in advertisers having to adapt and tailor messages accordingly. Advertising skills depend on consumers' individual perceptions and interpretations of a brand. Therefore, companies advertise in a way to influence consumers' perceptions as these are linked to advertising literacy skills (Malmelin, 2016).

3.3 Persuasion

Consumers need to navigate between a large amount of advertising today, resulting in the development of personal knowledge about marketing techniques. By understanding persuasion purposes behind advertising, consumers can respond to it accordingly.

3.3.1 Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM)

Persuasion knowledge, which refers to people's ability to understand the persuasion tactics behind messaging, develops over our lifespan and is influenced by various factors such as personal interactions, observations of marketers, and the media. As people learn about persuasion techniques over time, their attitudes and behaviors change, which occurs because persuasion knowledge affects how they respond to persuasion attempts. (Friestad & Wright, 1994)

Friestad and Wright (1994) have developed a theory on persuasion knowledge, referred to as the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). In the model, *Target* means to whom the persuasion is intended (voters) and *Agent* means who the target believes is responsible for the persuasion (political brand). *Persuasion attempt* describes the target's perception of the

agent's strategic tactic to influence their beliefs, attitudes, decisions and actions, and includes the perception of why and how the persuasive message was designed.

In PKM, there are three knowledge structures; *Persuasion Knowledge* (depends on people's cognitive skills that develop with age, and on various social encounters with persuasion), *Agent Knowledge* (beliefs about the competencies and goals of the agent, and could in political branding be political party or politician), and *Topic Knowledge* (beliefs about the message's topic, and could in political branding be ideology or politics overall). Consumers (voters) have various levels of knowledge about the three structures, meaning that when they lack knowledge about one, they will compensate with the knowledge they have about the other two. The three knowledge structures influence the outcome of persuasion, meaning that consumers use their knowledge about the three structures to shape their attitudes and response to advertising (political messages) (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

The *Persuasion Coping Knowledge* means what the target does in direct response to a persuasion attempt, and includes how they analyze, remember, and interpret persuasion attempts and select coping tactics accordingly. According to PKM, consumers (voters) can refine their attitude goals (reaction to persuasion) over time, meaning that using past memories from persuasion attempts will impact how they cope or *react* to advertising.

People's (voters) persuasion knowledge will direct them towards certain parts of the ad, helping them make assumptions about the reasons behind the message, how it was created, and how it could influence other consumers (voters). However, accessing persuasion knowledge is not a way to resist advertising, rather a way to control the outcome of it. Thus, persuasion knowledge is an important tool for consumers in understanding and managing interactions with persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Consumers (voters) access their persuasion knowledge both out of curiosity of understanding the topic (ideology) and the intention behind it, but also to evaluate the message itself. In PKM, it is also assumed that persuasion knowledge is more extensive and accessible to consumers than agent and topic knowledge, meaning that it somewhat is more frequently utilized when reacting to persuasion attempts. However, when consumers are well-informed about the topic or agent, they will be less inclined to utilize their persuasion knowledge. Further, in persuasion knowledge there are a couple of components which are: *beliefs about*

marketers' tactics, and *beliefs about their own coping tactics*. These shape consumers' perceptions and response to persuasion attempts. (Friestad & Wright, 1994)

Within the *beliefs about marketers' tactics*, we find how consumers perceive various strategies used by persuasion agents, their effectiveness and appropriateness in achieving persuasive goals, and the relationship between actions taken by persuasion agents and the psychological response they result in. To exemplify the latter, it could be that if consumers believe that emotions are the mediators of persuasion, they might see that emotional language in the tactic is intended to influence their feelings about the marketed product or service. (Friestad & Wright, 1994)

In the dimension of *beliefs about their own coping tactics*, consumers are motivated to form accurate judgements about persuasion agents, which stems from a desire to evaluate their credibility, trustworthiness, or effectiveness. This motivation is more likely to be pursued when consumers are exposed to unfamiliar marketers or when familiar marketers use a different persuasion tactic. Conversely, this also means that when consumers are exposed to ads and persuasion attempts from well-known companies (political brands) promoting familiar products with traditional marketing tactics, the motivation will be less strong (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In political branding, this could indicate that when voters are exposed to political persuasion attempts from parties that represent an ideology that the voters support, they will be less likely to form accurate judgements, meaning they are more likely to perceive the persuasion as credible, trustworthy and effective. Conversely, this should mean that when voters are exposed to persuasion attempts from parties that promote a different ideology, they will be more hesitant to the message, and more motivated to access its credibility, trustworthiness, and effectiveness.

3.3.2 Source Credibility Theory (SCT)

Source Credibility Theory (SCT) is defined by perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Sternthal et al., 1978). Within previous empirical studies these two variables result in either a high or low perceived credibility of an influence. The results of these studies say that higher perceived trust and expertise leads to more positive attitudes. People might even be more receptive to the information and less likely to generate counterarguments.

In a political branding setting, this means that when political brands appear as trustworthy, voters will like them more and question them less. On the contrary, when political brands are perceived as less trustworthy, voters will like them less and be more skeptical towards them. The reason for this is that when the source (political brand) has low credibility, it triggers negative or skeptical thoughts. This is a result of people questioning the message's validity and searching for reasons to disbelieve it. This means that when a political party speaks about a topic they have been proven wrong about before, it evokes voters thoughts and feelings, cognitive responses, which ultimately influences their attitudes to the messages. Positive cognitive responses make positive attitude changes more likely to happen, while negative cognitive responses make resistance more likely. In a political setting this means that if a voter reacts positively to a new idea from a party this could lead to a more positive attitude of the political party overall. Consequently, if the party presents a suggestion that evokes a negative cognitive response among voters, this could instead lead to skepticism towards their brand.

3.3.3 Cognitive Response Model (CRM)

The Cognitive Response model (CRM) helps us understand internal evaluations (Greenwald, 1968). The cognitive response analysis of persuasion takes a unique approach to understand how people's minds change. Persuasive messages can influence our attitudes by modifying the way we think about the topic. This modification happens through the collection of thoughts we already have about the subject, and the message can either strengthen these existing thoughts or introduce entirely new ones. For example, imagine a political advertisement highlighting the party's stance on education. If you already value strong public schools (existing cognition), the ad might reinforce that by showcasing their education plan (strengthening), thus becoming more credible for the consumer. But it could also introduce a new thought, like their focus on affordable childcare (new cognition). By targeting these relevant political opinions, the ad aims to ultimately shift your overall perception of the party (attitude change). When consumers perceive a brand as credible, they're more likely to have positive cognitive responses to their messages.

Research also suggests two things influence attitude-relevant learning; Information utility (how useful people perceive the information), and novelty (how new and surprising the information is). These two factors increase attention to persuasion messages. A limitation to

this is that the factors simply grab attention to the persuasive message, which in turn does not have to lead to long-term learning (Greenwald, 1968). In the context of political branding, this could mean that if a party presents a unique idea about how to solve a relevant societal problem, it will get more attention from the audience.

In order for persuasion to work cognitive learning needs to be considered. This occurs because consumers compare the persuasive message to their previous knowledge, which will affect how they react to the information. However, simply receiving the message isn't enough for a long-term attitude change. *Cognitive Consistency Theory* plays a crucial part for persuasion to work. Messages that contradict current beliefs will probably be rejected as we trust our present beliefs more than the new persuasive message.

A similar relevant perspective is the *Assimilation-Contrast Approach*, as it argues that people are more willing to accept messages that align with their current beliefs. For example; 'This politician seems trustworthy, so their ideas must be worth considering.' They will simultaneously reject statements that strongly oppose their beliefs, for example; 'This politician seems untrustworthy, so their message is probably biased.' Another important aspect to acknowledge is the *Reject theory*. It is vital since persuasive messages are rejected or resisted if the target feels pressured or controlled. In a political setting this could mean that a party is demonizing other parties and trying to appear as the only option, thereby forcing voters to vote for them. (Greenwald, 1968)

3.4 Critique of Theories

Political branding thrives on a complex interplay between voters and the political brands vying for their support. This section examines three key theories to understand how this relationship is built: Brand Heritage, Literacy, and Persuasion.

Brand Heritage emphasizes the importance of a political brand's past. A strong track record, core values that resonate with voters over time, and a sense of longevity all contribute to building trust and loyalty. Symbols and historical narratives also play a crucial role in shaping how voters perceive a political brand. However, this theory can be limiting. It assumes voters prioritize consistency over change.

Literacy focuses on the flip side of the coin, the voters themselves. This theory acknowledges that voters aren't passive recipients of political messages. They possess varying levels of sophistication in decoding political communication.

Some voters are highly critical, able to see through marketing tactics and evaluate the underlying values. Others are less discerning and accept messages without question. Literacy is a valuable concept, but it has not yet been widely applied in political branding, emphasizing a need to better explore how literacy can be applied when studying voters' perceptions of political branding.

Persuasion dives deeper into the process of influencing voters. Theories like PKM, SCT, and CRM provide frameworks for understanding how political brands use persuasive messages to shape voter attitudes, perceptions and behaviors. These frameworks acknowledge the role of various knowledge structures (PKM), knowledge about the political brand (SCT), and knowledge about the issue at hand (SCT, CRM). Additionally, SCT highlights the importance of source credibility, emphasizing that voters are more receptive to messages from brands they perceive as trustworthy and knowledgeable. However, these theories can be overly simplistic. They may neglect the emotional manipulation and social influence that often play a significant role in persuasion. Furthermore, they don't fully address the growing distrust in traditional media and political institutions, which can complicate how voters evaluate messages. Finally, these frameworks lack a nuanced perspective on how political branding leverages negativity and fear to influence voters.

In conclusion, while Brand Heritage, Literacy, and Persuasion offer valuable insights into political branding, a comprehensive understanding requires us to consider their limitations and incorporate other factors. The rise of social media, and the growing sophistication of emotional manipulation in political communication are all crucial aspects to consider when examining the ever-evolving landscape of political branding. Despite the critiques of these theories, combining all three theory streams provides a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing our results.

4. Method

This chapter describes the research methodology and the choices made to achieve the purpose of the study. The methodology begins with a summary of the research approach, followed by the research setting, data collection, sampling strategy, and data analysis.

Finally, the ethical aspects and quality criteria are discussed.

4.1. Overview of Research Design

Guided by some pre-existing theories, this inductive approach (Bell et. al, 2019) allows the data itself to form new insights, revealing emergent themes and patterns. Acknowledging the diverse perspectives on reality, influenced by individual viewpoints and societal environments, the research embraces a relativist standpoint (Easterby-Smith, 2021), valuing varied viewpoints. Consistent with this perspective, the study recognizes the role of human interactions and interpretations in shaping reality, particularly within the political perspective, adopting a social constructionist ontological view (Easterby-Smith, 2021).

The primary objective of this research is to make meaningful advancements in the domain of political branding. Substantively, it endeavors to unveil fresh perspectives on the perceptions held by Swedish voters. Methodologically, the study adds value by demonstrating the effectiveness of semi-structured interviews by going deep into these perceptions. The selection of data collection methods prioritizes fostering participants' genuine expression, thus increasing the papers authenticity and credibility. Rigorous and systematic analysis is employed to ensure that interpretations are not only plausible but also substantiated by evidence.

4.2. Research setting

To truly understand how Swedish voters view political branding and its effects, we need to focus on their opinions in a way that captures the full spectrum of perspectives. Qualitative interviews are the right tool for this task. Unlike other methods, interviews provide a depth of detail that reveals the nuances of voters' feelings and beliefs towards political branding. By asking open-ended questions, we can reach a broader range of voices, including those who

may not be active participants in online discussions. This ensures a more comprehensive understanding of Swedish public opinion on this topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews also allow us to explore the thought processes behind voters' views. We can talk to people who might not have strong pre-existing opinions on political branding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This is valuable because it helps us understand how voters form their perspectives in the first place. The interview setting offers a crucial advantage: the ability to clarify any ambiguities on the spot. If something is unclear, we can ask follow-up questions to ensure a clear understanding, avoiding misinterpretations that might arise in solely text-based methods (Brinkmann, 2022). Perhaps the most significant strength of interviews in this context is their ability to uncover the "why" behind voters' opinions. By going beyond surface-level responses, interviews allow us to delve into the reasons that shape voters' views on political branding and its consequences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

While other methods have their merits, they fall short in capturing the full picture for this research question. Netnography, for example, is limited to the viewpoints expressed online, potentially missing the perspectives of voters who are not active participants in those spaces. Interviews help us move beyond this by providing a platform for a wider range of Swedish voters to share their perspectives on political branding.

Additionally, since political topics are considered sensitive, it could lead to social desirability bias if we would for example conduct focus groups instead. Therefore, the choice of interviews is better to understand voters' perceptions of political branding and its consequences. Additionally, since the interviews will involve presenting several political branding campaigns for the respondents to view and analyze potential consequences, it would likely be hindered in focus groups because of social desirability bias. Therefore, the interviews will be conducted in the respondents homes so that they feel safe to share their honest perceptions. Recognizing the inherent sensitivity of political discussions, particularly within home environments, this approach aims to minimize social pressures and social desirability bias. To minimize the impact of major political events on participants' responses, all interviews are scheduled to take place within a two-week span.

However, participants that have agreed to be interviewed could lead to better responses, suggesting that we have to be self-assured (Bryman et.al, 2019, s. 215). Another limitation is that followup questions will depend on the respondents answers, possibly resulting in a

variety of angles on the topic. Additionally, we cannot underestimate the possibility of the respondents lying or altering the truth to approach the questions. Also, open-ended questions are more prone to interpretation errors than closed questions (Bryman et. al, 2019, p. 216).

Interviews allow follow-up discussions, which leads to clarifications and a deeper understanding of individual perceptions. Additionally, each interview is audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription, with the consent of all respondents. To facilitate data collection and analysis, the study utilizes a well-equipped technological infrastructure. Phones with high-quality recording capabilities will ensure clear and reliable capture of interview audio. Computers equipped with Microsoft Office software will aid in interview transcription and ensure the secure writing of the paper, emphasizing accuracy and ethical data handling. We want to assure respondents that their answers are transcribed securely and will only be used for the purposes of this research. Additionally, this practice aligns with the principle of purpose limitation, guaranteeing that data is used solely for the intended research objectives. Finally, secure data storage solutions safeguard interview recordings and transcripts, guaranteeing participant privacy and data integrity. To underscore the participants safety further, they are assigned pseudonyms during transcription and analysis consisting of made up names, to ensure their privacy.

We used a standardized interview guide so that all respondents are asked the same questions, which enhances the study's trustworthiness at the same time as it reduces potential bias by us. The introduction to the interview is also standardized, so that all respondents receive the same information about the study's objectives, data collection methods, potential risks and benefits, and their rights. The idea is that this can ensure informed decision-making and voluntary participation to increase ethical practices. By emphasizing data security, ethical considerations, and good data collection methods, our goal is that diverse perspectives can be expressed.

4.3. Data collection

The semi-structured interviews begin with an open-ended question designed to get the interviewees' initial thoughts on political branding. Following this, the interviewer presents examples of political branding campaigns from across the Swedish political spectrum. The political party campaigns that were shown in the interviews were from Miljöpartiet de gröna

(2022), Kristdemokraterna (2022), and Sverigedemokraterna (2010). They were chosen as their political campaigns were very clear and messages were easy to understand. These were important attributes as their purpose is to make the interviewees think about the different components of branding, such as trustworthiness, credibility and other related branding criterias. Another purpose of presenting political branding campaigns is that the respondents can get examples of what political branding is and thereby better understand the questions. This is important for the following interview questions as it hopefully makes the participants give more thorough thought. To ensure respondents provide unbiased opinions on political branding, we included examples from both left-wing and right-wing parties. This approach helps mitigate potential bias based on political beliefs. After each campaign video followed five questions to make the interviewee think about the campaign in different ways. Following the campaigns, additional 13 open questions were asked that were continuously intertwined with supplementary questions to completely grasp their perceptions, in line with the ladder technique (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). This is important since we aim to understand the interviewees' underlying thoughts. The interviews lasted between 35 to 55 minutes.

4.4. Sampling strategy

The target population encompasses Swedish citizens aged 18 and above with prior voting experience. This ensures familiarity with the electoral process and provides opportunities for exploring variations in their perceptions on the topic. To capture a multifaceted representation, a purposive sampling strategy will be employed. Participants from diverse backgrounds, in this case both males and females (Ahlbom & Karlsson, 2023), educated and uneducated individuals (Valforskningsprogrammet, 2021), and different ages (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004) are included to ensure a diversity of views across demographics commonly observed to have varied voting inclinations. While we strive for a diverse range of participants, our study employed a convenience sampling approach. This means we recruited participants easily available to us. This approach ensured we met our timeframe and participant quota. Thus, ten participants are selected based on gender, age, and educational background acknowledging the influence of these factors on political leanings.

Deciding on the right number of participants for our study was a balancing act. While some scholars advocate for smaller interview groups, citing the benefits of in-depth analysis with a tight timeframe (Morse, 2015), like our own. Despite crafting thoughtful questions based on

our research question to encourage rich responses from each participant, we recognized, as master's students conducting this research, that a limited sample size could potentially restrict the range of viewpoints captured. After all, fewer interviews could create "blind spots" in our research due to our limited interview experience. To navigate this, we considered established research practices. Leading researchers in the field (Creswell, 1998) recommend a range of 5 to 25 participants for similar studies. Our chosen number of 10 falls neatly within this range, even though their specific recommendations vary slightly. Ultimately, we believe 10 participants struck the right balance. It allowed us to gather rich data within our time constraints, while acknowledging the potential drawbacks of a smaller sample size for researchers like ourselves, who are still gaining experience.

The male and female participants are equally divided. This is an important aspect to take into account when discussing politics as men and women differ more and more for every election, as women tend to vote more left, and men tend to vote more right (Ahlbom & Karlsson, 2023). The difference between educated and uneducated is noticeable within the Swedish voters as well. In this report we are focusing on the difference between post-secondary education graduates and high school graduates. The educated is represented within 7 interviews, and the uneducated is represented in 3 interviews. This is important in the Swedish context in many ways. One of them is that smaller parties are preferred by post-secondary education graduates (Valforskningsprogrammet, 2021). In terms of age, there are many differences between different age groups. Our respondents are divided between younger, 19 to 25 year olds, and older, 53 to 68 year olds. The younger is represented in 6 interviews and the older is represented in 4 interviews. Age is seen as an important variable in the Swedish setting as younger people have in general a poorer knowledge within politics. The knowledge factor is in turn directly affected to which party they prefer (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004).

4.5. Data analysis

This research adopts an inductive approach, themes are not imposed upon the data; they are revealed by the data itself. Themes are allowed to organically surface from the data itself. By carefully attending to both the explicit and implicit meanings, key themes that capture the essence of the respondents view on political branding began to take shape. This necessitates a willingness to be surprised, to challenge preconceived notions, and to allow the participants'

voices to guide the direction of the analysis. The researcher assumes the role of a detective, piecing together fragments of stories, and observations to construct a coherent understanding of the larger picture. By seeking deeper explanations for the perceptions expressed by the participants, the analysis contributes to a richer and more nuanced understanding of voters' perceptions.

By using a reflexive approach, the researcher critically examines their own biases, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the data and influence by personal opinions is minimized. The data analysis is not a one-time event, it is a dynamic process of immersion, interrogation, and interpretation.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method for analyzing the data. In order to identify themes, we searched for repetitions, categories, metaphors, transitions, similarities and differences and linguistic connectors. Repetitions, however, are among the most common criteria when establishing that a pattern in the data can be a theme (Bryman et.al, 2019), resulting in us paying close attention to this.

The transcripts from the interviews are gradually analyzed to identify patterns and categories. In the next step, the transcripts were carefully read multiple times and all relevant sentences or phrases related to the research interest were coded as soon as possible. After this, we reviewed our codes in relation to the transcripts and tried to consider more general theoretical ideas in relation to the data. Following these steps are important to enable accurate coding according to Bryman et.al (2019, p. 531).

In the next step, the codes are analyzed using axial coding, where the sentences and phrases are coded in more detail to identify relationships and categories. A code tree structure is created to organize the codes and identify overarching themes. In the final step, the most relevant and significant codes are selected to create a coherent analysis of the text. In this final step, we translated the codes into English to ensure the highest level of accuracy throughout the coding process. By coding the text in this way, it is possible to identify the most important themes and categories in the text. This provided a basis for analyzing the respondents' perspectives and drawing conclusions about their perceptions of political branding.

The analysis is well-suited for exploring new research areas as it does not require a predefined set of themes. This allows themes to emerge organically from the data itself, which is crucial in a study like this one. This flexibility is advantageous in the initial stages of research when the aim is to gain initial insights and refine the research question for further investigation. Thematic analysis allows for in-depth analysis of the participants' detailed perceptions. This enables the researchers to discover nuances of the respondents' perceptions regarding political branding. This rich understanding is essential as it helps identify key areas for exploration in subsequent research phases. Even with a small sample size, this approach can give valuable insights into the perspectives and potential areas of concern, informing the direction of future research.

4.6. Ethical considerations

Central to ethical research lies informed consent. It is imperative that participants grasp the study's objectives, methodologies for data collection, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any point (Easterby-Smith, 2021). Providing clear and succinct information sheets in simple language is pivotal for facilitating informed decision-making. Furthermore, utilizing pseudonyms rather than participants' actual names throughout the research journey ensures anonymity and preserves privacy.

The research design should prioritize minimizing potential risks to participants. This involves ensuring that the interview environment is comfortable and secure, staying away of topics that may cause distress, such as their personal political orientation, and providing access to support resources if necessary. Upholding respect for diverse opinions and refraining from judgmental language are essential for fostering an environment where participants feel heard and respected. To accurately understand interviewees and limit interviewer bias, the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the native language of both respondents and interviewers. While we acknowledge that translating the coding into English poses a potential limitation, conducting interviews in Swedish is deemed advantageous as it allows participants to fully express themselves in their native tongue. Thus, this approach is considered ethically correct.

An additional concern is about the topic of our research, political branding. This is because political beliefs are sensitive and can be a basis for bias. Therefore, we acknowledge that this can be a limitation of our research if the interviewee believes that they have to answer in a certain way. To reduce the bias and to make the interviewees more comfortable are we not asking for their political beliefs in the interview nor in the screening process of choosing the participants. In addition to ensuring interviewee safety, we inform them about the use of an AI tool from the Microsoft Office to transcribe their answers. We also explain that we will monitor the transcription process to maintain accuracy. Finally, we assure them that their responses will be presented in a way they consider fair, by letting them read our results before publishing. The choice of the AI tool aligns with our ethical considerations because it's the same software used for writing the thesis.

4.7. Quality criteria and limitations

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trustworthiness, the overall worth of a research study, depends on establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Several features elevate this research within this framework. Thanks to using a purposeful sampling strategy, where we can explore diverse individuals, we can analyze many different perspectives on political branding. Moreover, by using semi-structured interviews guided by standardized protocols but allowing flexibility for follow-up questions, we gain a deeper understanding of voters' perceptions, enhancing the credibility of our findings. This strengthens the authenticity of our study. Listening manually to the transcription makes sure it's accurate and helps us study subtle details like pauses and changes in tone, which adds reliability to our analysis (dependability). Furthermore, our integration of past research on political branding with contemporary digital contexts, coupled with a focus on voters' perceptions, gives our study high plausibility. By adopting a fresh outlook on methodology and epistemology, we invite readers to engage critically with our findings (credibility). The presence of these attributes contribute to a higher level of validity in qualitative research (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993 in Easterby-Smith, 2021).

Despite the valuable insights provided by our qualitative study, it's imperative to recognize its limitations. The relatively modest sample size, tailored for in-depth analysis, necessitates caution in generalizing findings to the broader Swedish populace. The diversity among the respondents aimed to minimize the influence of any individual's specific political views on

the overall report findings. Additionally, the subjective nature of semi-structured interviews introduces the potential for interviewer bias, mitigated here by standardization and reflexivity. Furthermore, participants' self-reported perceptions might not always reflect their true beliefs or behaviors, introducing potential biases related to social desirability or memory limitations. Moreover, respondents sharing the same political beliefs as a party shown in the interviews may increase bias, potentially resulting in varying judgments of political branding campaigns. Even though we try to reduce this possibility by using different genders, education levels and ages, as all of these variables usually vote differently, it is crucial to keep the potential bias in mind. An additional bias is considered when the interviews are conducted and transcribed in Swedish but the analysis is conducted in English.

Acknowledging these constraints promotes transparency and modesty in conveying the results. The research report openly recognizes the sample size and its impact on the extent to which findings cannot be generalized. Furthermore, we address potential interviewer biases by delving into researcher reflexivity and making efforts to diminish subjectivity. Lastly, we acknowledge the limitations of self-reported data, emphasizing the necessity for triangulation with alternative research methodologies in future studies.

5. Analysis

In this chapter the empirical findings of the study will be presented and analyzed through the three theoretical lenses; Heritage, Literacy, and Persuasion. Four main themes have been identified in the material, creating the foundation of the analysis, which will be strengthened by various quotes of the respondents.

5.1 Theme 1: Stealing Votes and Hearts

In the first theme, the analysis will explain the perceived purpose of political branding which is power and trust, and elaborate on the elements that are perceived as paramount for trusting a political brand, which are consistency, keeping promises and a shared worldview. Changes in political stances, broken promises, and a misalignment with the fundamental values or “worldview” of voters all diminish the perceived credibility of political brands.

5.1.1 The Purpose of Political Branding: *Power* and *Votes*

The respondents perceive that the goals of political branding is to win votes, gain power and continue governing. They also believe that political parties and leaders’ existence depend on the quantity of votes. Additionally, the perception that the objectives are to get votes and gain power could be viewed as a form of short-term goal, suggesting that the perceived aims of political branding are perhaps more market-oriented.

"The aim is to gain renewed trust, to continue governing or to come to power, so to speak."

- - *Lennart*

"I believe the purpose, as I said with the other campaigns, is also to vote for the party, of course. They want to attract more voters..."

- *Melissa*

"...The thing is that they exist to be voted for. If they don't get votes, they aren't relevant, and then they won't... Then eventually they will... Disappear."

- *Adam*

As we can see, all three respondents perceive that getting votes, continuing governing and coming to power is the ultimate goal of political branding. Adam even explains how political brands exist to be voted for, and if they don't get votes, they become irrelevant and eventually stop existing. Thus, it could be argued that the perception that political branding is solely about getting power and winning votes, is a typical short-term marketing goal. Solely getting votes and power does not guarantee long-term success, and therefore, political branding might be perceived as political marketing, regardless whether the respondents believe it is political marketing or political branding.

Additionally, the fact that the respondents are aware of these underlying political motives, could indicate that they possess both brand and advertising literacy skills (Bengtsson, 2006; Malmelin, 2016). However, considering that the respondents were placed in a situation where they actively could reflect on politics in relation to branding, could perhaps explain why they made this connection. Hence, we cannot explicitly claim that literacy skills can fully explain this, especially since the respondents knew the topic of the interviews beforehand. When deciding whether someone is literate or not, it's necessary to know how they evaluate, understand and decode marketing strategies behind persuasive messages (Bengtsson, 2006; Malmelin, 2016). In this case, they only expressed their perceptions of the goals of political branding, which shows that they possess a basic understanding of its purpose. This could indicate that they are somewhat literate.

5.1.2 Consistency, Shared worldview, and Promise-keeping Paramount for *trust*

The respondents explained that trust in political parties and politicians depends on if they keep their promises, pursue consistent politics, and share the same fundamental values and opinions as them. They acknowledge that political brands sometimes are forced to alter their political stances, but the overall perception is that it can compromise on trust.

"What makes me trust a politician? I would say that it delivers on what they promised to do.

That the politicians have similar opinions as I may, and like implement them."

- Melissa

"It's mostly about them keeping their promises. And maybe not changing their opinion too much. Then there's the logic that you can shift if the world situation demands it, I'm thinking, for example, with the NATO issue, where many parties changed their position after Russia

invaded Ukraine. But that can also be seen as a logical thing to do because the world situation has changed a lot. But I think on a smaller scale or in general, it's still good if politicians stick to what they believe."

- Samuel

From what we can notice from these quotes is that the respondents believe that keeping promises, sharing the same “worldview”, and pursuing consistent politics, is paramount for trust. However, Samuel recognizes that in some situations, circumstances can force political brands to alter in their political stances, and exemplified the view by referencing the Swedish entry in NATO after Russia invaded Ukraine. Despite acknowledging how societal changes can impact politics and forcing them to adapt to new circumstances, he still emphasizes the importance of consistency. According to theory on Heritage branding (Urde et.al, 2007), while protecting the heritage is fundamental, adaptations to evolving needs of the present must be possible, given it does not compromise on the brand’s core values and heritage. Thus, the shift in how political parties in Sweden changed their view about Sweden entering NATO could, according to theory on Brand heritage, be explained by the evolving context of the Russian/Ukrainian conflict. Samuel's statement that it is still important for political brands to maintain consistent political opinions, is also in line with the theory where it explains that adaptations should only occur if they don’t undermine the brand’s core values.

Just as the theory on Heritage branding indicates, heritage brands (political brands) need to live up to their promises over time (track record), show consistency in political stances (longevity), prove that their core values base their stances (core values), and show who and what they are (history) to be perceived as credible and truthful. This in turn is paramount to maintain their heritage, indicating that the elements mentioned by the respondents, *keeping promises* and *being consistent* is fundamental to trust a political brand, which is supported by the theory. In this way, theory on brand heritage can explain why the respondents perceive that consistency (longevity, core values, history) and keeping promises (track record) are critical elements to perceive political brands as trustworthy.

Moving on to explaining why “shared worldview” is paramount for trust, which could be explained by Assimilation-Contrast Approach (Greenwald, 1968). The theory states that people are more willing to accept messages that align with their current beliefs. Therefore, if a political brand has rhetoric and opinions that support voters’ ideologies, they are more

likely to accept their messages, thereby possibly explaining why they think that a “shared worldview” is also a paramount element to perceive a political brand as trustworthy.

To summarize so far, both Heritage branding and Assimilation-Contrast Approach are theories that explain that consistency, keeping promises, and a shared worldview, are imperative factors to trust heritage brands, which could explain why the respondents believe that these three elements are most important to perceive political brands as credible. Further, despite the respondents being literate enough to perceive that the ultimate goal of political branding is to gain votes and power, winning people’s hearts (trust) is viewed as the final outcome that political brands should strive for.

5.2 *Theme 2: Turncoats in a Labyrinth*

This theme explores the challenges of trust in Sweden's multi-party political system. Voters express frustration with the difficulty of achieving high trust due to frequent compromises among political parties. This complexity forces political brands to abandon some promises, leaving voters unsure of who to believe. The analysis examines how this dynamic impacts voters' perception of political branding.

5.2.1 Multi-party System erode Trust

The respondents perceive that it is difficult to have high trust for political parties. The politics roadblock is described by the Swedish political system, with several parties to choose from. It is difficult for one party to get the majority of the votes, therefore, they have to cooperate with other parties, resulting in that they can’t achieve all of their promises, which decreases voters’ trust.

“Since none of these parties have a majority in the government, they always have to cooperate with other parties. And the other parties may not agree with everything the parties promise, so it may not be possible to simply get it through the government.”

- Melissa

“...Because in Sweden, we have a political system where it’s not just one party, and they can only get a certain percentage of the votes, so they can't push everything through. So you always have to compromise. So, even if you might vote for a party that wins, they have to collaborate with another party that doesn't share the same views. And then you have to

compromise and meet in the middle. And then you might not get what you initially voted for in the first place.”

- Hilda

These quotes clearly state a frustration or a negative feeling about the Swedish multi-party political system. Melissa highlights this when explaining that the different political parties never get the majority of the votes, and thereby have to collaborate with other parties. She adds that collaboration leads to compromising and breaking political promises due to working with parties that have different political viewpoints. Hilda shares a similar understanding of the Swedish political system. She agrees that Sweden's multiparty system leads to compromises and breaking promises due to collaborating with parties that have a different angle on political issues. She mentions that the consequence of this is that we might not get what we voted for in the first place, indicating that political parties might not be able to follow through on a promise that influenced a voter's decision.

The Cognitive Consistency Theory (Greenwald, 1968) can be used to describe this irritation Melissa and Hilda express as the Swedish political system has many parties, which leads to voters being exposed to multiple ideas. Trust in political brands is generally low, as they have to collaborate with other parties to gain power in the government, which forces them to abandon some proposals. This makes it more difficult for voters to know who to vote for, as nobody knows which proposals the political brands will follow through on. Following the overall lower trustworthiness in politics, STC (Sternthal et al., 1978) can be used. The theory posits that higher perceived trust and expertise leads to more positive attitudes. In a political branding setting, this means that when political brands appear as trustworthy, voters will like them more and question them less. On the contrary, when political brands are perceived as less trustworthy, voters will like them less and be more skeptical towards them. Hence, the theory explains that the reason for the respondents mentioning the implication with a multi-party system, is that they have low trust in politics in general, which leads to skepticism towards political messages and political branding. This idea has some nuances, as voters' personal views can lead them to perceive some political brands as having more expertise and trustworthiness than others, thereby questioning their branding less and believing in their brands more. Overall, the respondents' answers strongly indicate that a multi-party system causes their overall trust in political branding to decline.

5.2.2 Political Turncoats fuels voters frustration

This section explores how voters react to political parties that frequently change their stances. Voters express frustration with this inconsistency, as it makes it difficult for them to know who to trust. Despite medium literacy skills, they dislike this inconsistent behavior and long for parties that are more consistent with their core values. As it looks now, political parties underestimate voters' ability to see through inconsistencies to political brands as heritage brands.

“But at the same time, it’s not good to always be swayed by the wind, so to speak, and sometimes you still have to stand by your opinion. Otherwise, you can face consequences like mistrust and people simply not trusting politicians if they constantly change their stance and don’t stick to their opinions.”

- *Melissa*

“Are you just a “turncoater” you know?... And then it becomes difficult to know what they stand for. Because you want to vote for the party you agree with. But if you're not sure what the party stands for, then it becomes even harder to vote.”

- *Oscar*

To extend on the overall negative feeling of the Swedish political system, the quotes above describe an additional fear. Melissa criticizes parties that shift their positions. She argues that this erodes voters' trust in those parties. Oscar builds on Melissa's point, noting that when parties constantly shift positions, “turncoat”, it becomes difficult to discern their true beliefs. This, in turn, makes it harder for voters to decide which party aligns with their own values. All quotes in this theme point to a pre-existing issue of low trust in politicians. Melissa and Oscar highlight this by mentioning that compromise and collaborations with other parties are commonly occurring in Swedish politics.

However, the quotes collectively express frustration with parties that constantly change their stances, further eroding trust. This leads to it being very difficult for the voters to know who to vote for as we can see in Oscar's quote. The respondents request consistency, which goes hand in hand with brand heritage (Urde et.al., 2007). Here, track record, longevity, and core values are three of the five components of brand heritage, which all can all be connected to consistency with political values, stances and opinions over time. As the respondents express

a dislike for inconsistency, characterized by alterations of opinions and political stances, it indicates that Swedish political parties do not align with their brand heritage today. According to brand heritage (Urde et al., 2007), consistency would benefit heritage brands, such as political brands. If they would instead prioritize long-term continuity and building trust, both characterized as strategies to protect the brand's heritage (brand stewardship), it could lead to more loyalty among voters, instead of the perceived lack of trust as the quotes currently indicate. According to brand heritage, some alterations of political stances are allowed, as long as they don't compromise the brand identity (Urde et al., 2007). However, based on the respondents' frustration with turncoating, it could be assumed that political brands in Sweden today may in fact compromise their brand, thereby diminishing the value of their heritage (political brand).

As the respondents express an understanding of Sweden's multi-party system as a factor that forces parties to compromise with other political brands, it is possible to suggest that they have medium literacy skills. Medium literacy skills means the ability to understand cultural meanings and strategies underlying brands (Bengtsson, 2006), which we think the respondents can as they describe a possible reason for alterations in political stances. Despite understanding this, it does not mean they necessarily like it. It is important to mention that political brands need to better understand voters' literacy skills as voters prefer consistent parties that commit to their core values and brand. Hence, they aspire for proper heritage brands. It is possible that political brands underestimate voters' literacy skills, as they might not understand that voters are literate enough to "see through" that the political brands don't always stay "true" to their heritage brand.

5.3 *Theme 3: Navigating Mind Games*

This theme explores how voters perceive and respond to political branding, highlighting varying levels of consciousness in political decision-making. It is highly individual how persuasive messages are received and how they shape political decision-making, and could be understood by voters' literacy skills, persuasion knowledge, and perceived trustworthiness of a political brand. Despite recognizing the risk of manipulation and threats to democracy, the respondents are convinced that their political ideologies are valid, and believe they make conscious political decisions.

5.3.1 Consciousness shapes the outcome of Political Branding

As previously outlined, the perceived goal of political branding is to gain votes and power. However, it depends on each individual voter how persuasive messages are received, indicating that some voters might act in line with the intended way of the agent responsible for the message, while others will not. We claim that this results in voters either making conscious or unconscious political decisions.

"It's difficult too. What you really should do before every election is to read through everything like this. So you have an understanding of all the parties. And I actually think I'm a bit bad at doing research. So I've seen one party that I just like and then I've joined it. Even though something else might actually be best for me. But I lack research."

- Oscar

"Then I also think that many people are so damn ignorant. Or naive. You can also listen to someone talking nonsense and think that's it. Or watch a commercial and think that everyone else is crap."

- Hilda

Oscar explains that doing your own research before an election is important to understand what the different parties stand for. He continues by explaining that he merely relies on his liking of a political brand, and that this can determine who he supports politically. He explains that by not doing his own research, he might dismiss a party that is actually better for him. Hilda expresses a concern that people in general are very ignorant and naive, and explains that some might listen to nonsense and believe it's true. She indirectly claims that people can easily become victims to political persuasion, a perspective that Oscar also shared.

The respondents overall view is that voters, but also themselves, are not always well informed about what the different political parties stand for due to lack of knowledge or research. Hence, they believe that voters can, without being critical, accept what they hear and see through political branding tactics. By acknowledging this, it could be explained that our respondents have some degree of literacy skills. Literacy skills means people's ability to interpret complex meanings in sociocultural contexts (Bernardo, 2000). Despite recognizing

their own and many other voters' lack of knowledge or own research to make conscious political choices, they still can become victims to persuasion and have their political decisions shaped.

One possible explanation could be elucidated by the theory on Brand literacy (Bengtsson, 2006). The theory claims that people tend to personalize the meaning of a brand through their habits, ultimately leading to various levels of brand literacy (Bengtsson, 2006). The fact that people might have an ideological preference, or even preference for a political party or leader, might lead to different understandings of the political brand's cultural meanings, thus leading to either low, medium or high levels of brand literacy as Bengtsson (2006) outlines. Drawing upon the respondents' acknowledgment that they and others can be persuaded, and that they in turn can base political choices on simple factors such as liking of the political brand, could indicate low brand literacy skills. This means that they consume brands without knowing much of the cultural meaning of it. However, the fact that they showed awareness of the possibility of persuasion, could instead indicate that they can understand *some* cultural meanings and strategies underlying brands. As a result, medium literacy could perhaps be a more accurate explanation of their perspective.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model, (Friestad & Wright, 1994), would instead explain that the reason for the respondents' acknowledgement of the potential risk for persuasion is attributed to their relatively low persuasion knowledge. Persuasion knowledge means the ability to see-through persuasion tactics behind messages. In line with that the respondents claim that many voters, including themselves, can be persuaded to act in a certain way and thereby make unconscious political decisions, could indicate low persuasion knowledge abilities. According to the theory, it is something that they will develop with age and with exposure to persuasive scenarios. This means that the more exposed they will be to political branding scenarios, the better they will become at detecting persuasion attempts, understanding complex social meanings, and making conscious political decisions. When the respondents have relatively low persuasion knowledge, they will compensate with topic and agent knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This means they will use their existing knowledge about politics, and the competencies and goals of political brands, as a basis for their political choices. Both Oscar and Hilda explained that voters tend to rely on political campaigns and their liking of a political party. Therefore, it could be questioned whether their agent and

topic knowledge are influenced by clever branding tactics or are their own conscious decisions.

Source credibility theory could also be applied to explain why the respondents believe that there is a possibility for them and other voters to be persuaded. Since the theory posits that perceived trust shapes attitudes (Sternthal et al., 1978), it means that when political brands appear as trustworthy, voters will like them more and question them less. Therefore, when voters are exposed to persuasion of a political brand that they already trust, which according to the respondents depends on whether the political brand keeps promises, pursues consistent politics and shares the same “worldview”, they are more likely to accept their messages. Thus, it could be argued that voters are more likely to make unconscious political decisions when exposed to political brands that they already like and trust. Conversely, they will make more conscious political decisions when exposed to political brands that they perceive as untrustworthy and don’t like. The reason for this is that they are more likely to question messages from political brands they don’t trust, making them less susceptible to persuasion, political influence, and unconscious decision-making.

The Cognitive Response model (CRM) claims that persuasive messages can influence our attitudes by modifying the way we think about the topic. It posits that this modification happens through the collection of thoughts we already have about the subject, and the message can either strengthen these existing thoughts or introduce entirely new ones (Greenwald, 1968). Therefore, this theory explains that a possible reason for the respondents’ perception that people are ignorant, naive and easily “buy” what some political brands present, is based on what thoughts they already have of the subject (political brand). Therefore, if voters are exposed to political messages from a political brand they already view positively, their existing thoughts will be strengthened or new thoughts will be introduced. This means that if a political brand already holds a positive position in voters' minds, presenting new ideas will make voters more likely to agree with them. Hence, this could explain why the respondents believe that people are ignorant, naive and easily become victims to political manipulation. Their attitudes are simply modified by political messages.

To add to the discussion about making conscious political decisions, some respondents explained that they are well aware of of political persuasion and branding techniques in political branding;

“I am very critical. I don't believe much in what they say. They are trained to say things, to make it sound good. They invest a lot of money in being able to phrase things correctly, to communicate messages that they get away with”

- Lennart

Lennart explains that he is very critical of political messaging and does not believe much of what they say. The reason for this is that he is well aware they are trained to formulate words to sound good, and that political brands invest resources into communicating messages they can get away with. This shows that he understands persuasion tactics utilized in political branding to shape desired voting behavior, possibly indicating high brand literacy skills (Bengtsson, 2006). It could also be explained by high levels of rhetorical literacy (Malmelin, 2016). In rhetorical literacy, the ability to evaluate tones and visual expressions are paramount, possibly explaining why the respondent perceives that politicians put many resources and training into saying things that sound good. High levels of informational literacy could perhaps also explain Lennart's ability to detect underlying political motives and understand complex social meanings. Informational literacy is the ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from the media, which demands high information literacy skills due to the blurring of lines between advertising and objective content in the media (Malmelin, 2016). Lennart's explanation that he is hesitant to trust information in political messages could indicate a high level of informational literacy.

To conclude so far, the three respondents; Oscar, Hilda and Lennart have expressed a general view that political branding can influence voter behavior. The PKM is applicable to explain this overall perception. According to the model, persuasion attempts are the target's (voters) perceptions of the agent's (political brand) strategic ways to influence their beliefs, attitudes, decisions and actions (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Since the respondents acknowledge that political campaigns and messaging influence voters, including themselves, it can be assumed that they all possess some level of persuasion knowledge. Hence, whether voters make conscious or unconscious political choices could be explained by their persuasion knowledge by Friestad and Wright, (1994).

As previously outlined, it could also be explained by how they understand the cultural meanings and marketing tactics behind branding (Literacy skills) (Bengtsson, 2006) (Malmelin, 2016), and how trustworthy they perceive a political brand to be (SCT) (Sternthal

et al., 1978). Therefore, we believe that voters are more inclined to make unconscious political decisions when they have low literacy skills, possess low persuasion knowledge, and when they perceive political brands as trustworthy. Conversely, when the respondents have higher literacy skills, higher persuasion knowledge, and perceive political brands are less trustworthy, they are more likely to make conscious political decisions.

However, another interesting insight is that despite the respondents acknowledging the possibility of political manipulation, they are convinced that they will not vote for the “wrong” party because they are confident in their fundamental values and ideology. This makes us question their ability to understand branding techniques behind political branding, thereby question their level of literacy skills and persuasion knowledge.

“Interviewer: Do you think there's a risk that you might vote for the wrong party for you?

Why? Why not?

Lennart: There's no risk.”

- Lennart

“Interviewer: Do you think there's a chance that you might vote for the wrong party for you?

Lisa: No, because if I were unsure, I would play it safe. I would choose a party that I know is good for me and Sweden. I wouldn't choose a party that I just get a bit starstruck by at the moment. It has to have more substance. I don't change my mind that easily.”

- Lisa

“Interviewer: Do you think there's a chance that you might vote for the wrong party for you?

Peter: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Why not?

Peter: No, because I have my convictions and my fundamental values. My basic perspective on politics.”

- Peter

As we can see, Lennart, Lisa and Peter claim that there is no risk that they vote for the “wrong” party. Lisa expresses that if she would feel unsure about a political brand, she would play it safe instead, indicating that she would decide for a party that she believes is good for her and the country. She continues by describing that she does not change her mind easily and

that she would not choose a political party based solely on being starstruck. This could indicate that she believes she is not easily persuaded by political brands that she either dislikes, does not share values or opinions with, or does not support. Peter states that there is no risk of him voting for the “wrong” party or being persuaded, as he is convinced of his fundamental values and general political views. This could also indicate that he believes he is not easily persuaded by political brands that he dislikes, does not share the same values or opinions with, or does not support.

Altogether, it is evident that the respondents are convinced that their ideological identification and political orientation is the best both for them and for society, thereby asserting that they are not susceptible to political persuasion. Whether this is true or not, is impossible to determine since ideas about political ideology and orientation are subjective. However, it can be questioned whether their political beliefs are conscious decisions or outcomes of clever branding tactics.

A possible explanation for why they believe they would not vote for the “wrong” party, and thus believe they make conscious political decisions, is that they have relatively high topic and/or agent knowledge, which they rely on instead of persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This means that when respondents have extensive knowledge about an ideology or political orientation (topic knowledge) that an agent (political party or leader) presents, they are less motivated to complement with persuasion knowledge. When they utilize their topic and agent knowledge, they should be less receptive to manipulation. However, whether their perceived topic knowledge and agent knowledge are outcomes of political branding practices, or actually conscious decisions, is another question.

Additionally, in the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), there is a dimension called; *beliefs about own coping tactics*. In this dimension, consumers aspire to form accurate judgements about agents’ persuasion attempts. The motivation to do so is less when consumers are exposed to familiar marketers, and more when they are exposed to unfamiliar such (Friestad & Wright, 2006). This indicates that when an agent (political brand) promotes ideas that are in line with voters ideology and political beliefs, they are less motivated to question the accuracy and credibility of the message. As a result, voters who are exposed to political messaging that are in line with their ideology and political beliefs, will more likely be convinced that the ideas are correct. Consequently, they will be influenced, or

persuaded, to act and believe in a certain way, this leading them to making unconscious political decisions. What's interesting is that they actually believe that their political decisions are conscious. This could possibly explain why the respondents believe that they would not vote for the "wrong" party, as they are less likely to question the accuracy of information from a political brand they are familiar with.

On the contrary, when they are exposed to agents that promote ideas that are contradicting their ideology (topic knowledge) they are more motivated to question the accuracy and credibility of the information according to the dimension *beliefs about their own coping tactics*, (Friestad & Wright, 2006). Consequently, they will be more hesitant to the message, and more motivated to assess its credibility, trustworthiness, and effectiveness. This could also explain why they are convinced that they would not vote for the "wrong party". They are so convinced that parties promoting unfamiliar ideologies and ideas present inaccurate and untrustworthy information.

SCT (Sterthal et al., 1978), posits a similar explanation, asserting that when voters perceive political brands as more trustworthy, they are more likely to "buy" their arguments. Conversely, when political brands are perceived as less trustworthy, there will be more skepticism towards them. This means that when voters are exposed to political persuasion from political brands that they perceive as trustworthy, they are more likely to believe what they say. This could also explain why the respondents believe that there is no way they would vote for the "wrong party", as they are convinced that their political ideology is "right". However, how conscious these decisions are in reality, can be questioned.

5.3.2 Awareness of potential consequences despite political convictions

The overall perception of the consequences of political branding is that people can be manipulated to act in a certain way, which is believed to harm democracy.

"No, but it's that the people are being manipulated and democracy is being undermined. You don't know what you're voting for, and then you're in the hands of various opinion makers and those pulling the strings behind the scenes, making you think you have a say. But you really don't. You think you're voting for one thing, and then it turns out 'that's not at all what I wanted.' There are examples, if you take a foreign example. The British people got the idea

that the best thing for the UK was to leave the EU, and many were persuaded to vote for that. Then it happened, and it turned out there were a lot of negative consequences that followed. People didn't know they were voting for it to turn out that way. It only became apparent afterward.”

- Lennart

Lennart describes that people can be manipulated to vote in a certain way. He claims that people can become “marionette dolls”, where they believe they make conscious decisions, but actually they are not. He explains that people can believe they are voting for one thing, but it later turns out differently than promised. He indicates that this harms democracy, as people believe they make conscious political decisions, but in reality, their decisions are shaped by various opinion makers. He exemplifies his view by bringing up Brexit, and describes how British people were, according to him, manipulated to vote for the UK leaving the EU without actually understanding the consequences. What is interesting about this perspective is that despite showing concern about the possible negative impacts on democracy when people are “marionette dolls”, the respondent was convinced that he would not vote for the “wrong” party, as we explained above. Hence, he is convinced that his ideology and political orientation are the best for him and society. This is particularly interesting, given that the respondent acknowledges the possibility of manipulation and harm to democracy.

Since political ideology is subjective, and because people tend to avoid questioning messages of trusted sources (STC) and of agents that are in line with their own ideology (PKM) (Sternthal et al., 1978; Friestad & Wright, 2006), there is a risk that the conviction of what is the “right” party and what is “good for society” is solely their own subjective belief. Therefore, the respondent, along with other voters, can avoid questioning messages of political parties that represent their political ideology. This can possibly explain why the respondent believes he makes conscious political decisions, despite being aware of potential consequences, such as harm to democracy.

The dimension *beliefs about marketers' tactics* in PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which involves voters' perceptions of agents' strategies, their effectiveness, and appropriateness, could also explain why the respondent makes the connection between political branding and threats to democracy. Lennart describes the possible implications of political branding, where

voters can be manipulated into making unconscious political decisions. Hence, we can see that the respondent perceives political branding as an effective tool that can influence voters perceptions and behavior, despite questioning its appropriateness.

However, the paradox where Lennart, along with Lisa and Peter, perceive themselves as making conscious political decisions (not vote for the “wrong” party), while also recognizing the implications of manipulation and threats to democracy, is intriguing. It shows that despite acknowledging the problematic nature of political branding in relation to mass manipulation and democracy, voters in general still believe in their ability to make conscious political decisions. This could indicate that despite perceived negative consequences on society, political branding may indeed be a clever tool for political brands to gain power and votes. However, whether it is ethical or not, is another question.

5.4 *Theme 4: Unreliable Politics: The Domino Effect*

This theme dives into how voters react when they perceive political brands as lacking credibility. The argument is that this distrust makes voters feel lost and unsure about who to trust and vote for. This can lead to a number of consequences, including party-switching, ranging from extreme parties to single-issue concerns, and, as we'll later describe, support for “protest parties”, if these parties are perceived to be keeping their promises and maintaining consistency. It can also lead to people not voting at all, due to apathy caused by low trust. In the worst-case scenario, voters become apathetic about the entire political system, feeling their vote doesn't make a difference, and thereby perceive the political system as less credible.

5.4.1 Low perceived credibility and its consequences

The respondents described their overall experience as voters as having low trust in political brands and politics in general. They describe that low trust can lead to party-switching, which could be either a more extreme party or a party that is perceived to stay consistent and keep promises. They even prioritize voting for parties that keep promises and are consistent, despite not aligning with them politically. Another consequence mentioned is lower voter turnout in general.

“Much like I said before. If there's no credibility, you become lost. And then you don't really know what to do. So maybe you latch onto something that you don't fundamentally agree

with. But it's the best option. And that's dangerous. And then people become disengaged.

Because the danger lies in not exercising our right to vote.”

- Lisa

The voters, presented in Lisa quote, seem very unsure about which party to choose from, as a result of low trust in the political system. This disoriented feeling could be based in SCT as it is defined by perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Sternthal et al., 1978). As Lisa's statement indicates low trust and a perception of politicians being experts in persuasion rather than in politics, the theory can explain why it is reasonable for the respondents to react the way they do. The same theory can explain the negative attitude towards the political system, as low perceived trust and low expertise leads to a negative attitude. The theory posits that when brands are perceived as less trustworthy, people will be more skeptical towards them. The reason for this is that when the source (political brand) has low perceived credibility, it triggers negative or skeptical thoughts. This can explain Lisa's quote, as she questions the intent of political messages. This is not good in the context of political branding.

Further, showing an ability to question political messages validity, could also indicate medium literacy skills (Bengtsson, 2006). Being skeptical could be explained by political brands compromising on their heritage brand (Urde et.al., 2007). Sufficient brand stewardship where protecting the brand heritage through consistency, should be prioritized to maintain trust and build loyalty. Since Lisa's statement indicates low trust, it could be assumed that political brands compromise on their heritage brands. One of the components in heritage brands is track record, which means whether the brand has lived up to its brand promises and values over time. This could be connected to expertise in SCT (Sternthal et al., 1978), because if a political brand consistently demonstrates honesty, it is reasonable for voters to perceive them as experts. Thus, because of the respondents' medium literacy skills, where they possess the ability to understand cultural meanings and strategies underlying brands, political brands need to prioritize brand heritage and incorporate a better brand stewardship.

Distrust in political brands can lead to party-switching, with respondents mentioning potential shifts towards extreme or single-issue parties. Further, the respondents believe that voters might also turn to "protest parties" as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with the current

political environment. Such trends could increase the polarization within the political landscape.

"If politicians lack credibility, people won't vote, creating space for various discontent parties with one-sided issues, which isn't good and can even be dangerous because it leads to extreme variations, which can arise from both the right and the left. It's not about that; it's about a society being torn apart, which can be dangerous. History also demonstrates this."

- Lennart

"No, but then I think people trust politicians less in what they say, simply."

No, but I guess people lose faith in politics. It can lead, for instance, to people not voting at all or perhaps voting for parties that are further to the right or left."

- Samuel

Lennart explains that if a political brand lacks credibility, it leads to people voting for more extreme parties to show their dissatisfaction. He goes further when explaining that this can make the society more polarized, which he thinks is dangerous. Samuel takes another perspective, saying that a consequence of voters not trusting political brands can be that they don't vote at all or, along the same lines as Lennart, vote for parties that are more far to the right or left. The perception that low perceived trust can lead to such consequences, could be explained by brand heritage. As the respondents perceive some political brands to be inconsistent with crucial elements of heritage brands, such as track record, longevity, core values, and history (Urde et.al, 2007), it could possibly explain why they think voters switch parties. Fulfilling these elements are paramount to maintain trust in a heritage brand, thus potentially being key elements to maintain loyalty to a political brand.

"Protest parties" could be voters' way of showing their dissatisfaction to other parties not sufficiently protecting the elements of brand heritage, which is fundamental to increase the political brands' perceived credibility. Further, that single-issue parties are perceived as more credible, could be explained by the fact that they have clear political stances and show a consistency in their core values, track record, and longevity. Consequently, they could be using the components of heritage branding better than the other parties, which could indicate that they stay true to their brand promises, thereby possibly explaining why they attract political support.

Attitude-relevant learning could also explain why people chose more extreme-, single issue-, and protest parties (Greenwald, 1968). The theory explains that voter information utility (how useful voters perceive the information to be) and novelty (how new and surprising the information is) increases attention to persuasive messages (political branding). As extreme-, single issue-, and protest parties can have a more extreme "worldview" this could mean that their branding has higher novelty. This could therefore result in these parties receiving more attention and support.

Further emphasizing that keeping promises is paramount, some respondents believe that it is more important that political brands keep promises than voters aligning with their ideologies.

"...It stems from people not trusting politicians. Then you'll start looking for others who are more honest. Whom you personally like. Yeah, and then it's like you might vote wrong. That is, you vote because of that instead of the political issue. And you don't care because you think it doesn't matter."

- Adam

"The ones I really trust. Because it doesn't matter if I vote for a party and they say "this is what we'll do." And I'm like, "I agree with that." Then they don't do it anyway. Then it's just like another party has won."

- Oscar

The respondents display such apathy that they do not even consider the political brands' worldview. They just want a party they can trust, which is perceived as the most important feature. Both Adam and Oscar indicate that they do not trust political brands. Adam explains that he votes for the party he perceives as most honest and not necessarily depending on what political stances. This suggests that a shared worldview matters less than trust. Oscar doesn't explicitly say that trust is more important than a shared worldview, but his position is clear. If the party he votes for doesn't keep its promises, he feels it might as well have been another party that won, as the outcome is the same. When interpreting what he means, he indicates that honesty is crucial for political support. This could mean that political brands presenting themselves as reliable and trustworthy will attract votes even from people who do not align with them ideologically. According to brand heritage theory (Urde et al., 2007), brands that

pursue consistent policies and prioritize good brand stewardship to protect their heritage will build trust. Consequently, this could attract political support, as honesty is perceived as the most important feature.

Depending on voters' literacy skills, they may be able to understand the underlying branding techniques and complex social meanings (Bengtsson, 2006) and recognize, evaluate, and understand advertisements and other messages (Malmelin, 2016). If high, this would make them less likely to be deceived by political brands attempting to persuade them by appearing trustworthy. Adam and Oscar explain their distrust of political brands, suggesting they possess high levels of informational and rhetorical literacy (Bengtsson, 2006). High informational literacy involves the ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from the media, while high rhetorical literacy entails a deeper understanding of the persuasive techniques used in marketing. Their general distrust of political brands likely stems from having decoded many marketing campaigns before. In addition, Persuasion Coping Knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) can further explain the respondents' apathetic standpoint, as it explains that past memories from persuasion attempts impact how the voters react to advertising. Adam and Oscar perceive all of the political brands as being similar as all of the political brands try to persuade them, their reaction to the brands' persuasion attempts therefore becomes very passive.

5.4.2 No consequences for political parties leads to *Political atheism*

Following the previous chapters explaining how voters perceive political branding and its consequences, many express an overall feeling of apathy. This is partly explained by low trust and the perception that political brands face no consequences for breaking promises and being inconsistent. However, because all political parties are perceived to break their promises, this negative effect doesn't significantly impact any particular party. The respondents have expressed that they are tired of politics and that they have lost faith in politics overall. They express that this results in less interest in politics which they believe decreases the voting percentage and have consequently labeled themselves as political atheists. Essentially, voters' perceptions of broken promises are widespread across all parties, diluting the negative impact on any single party, so no single party is affected much by the negative impact.

The consequences of why Peter does not trust politicians

“You become like me, a political atheist... where you become indifferent. It doesn't matter what you vote for. It becomes mainstream. It never turns out as stated from the beginning. Or very rarely, at least.”

- Peter

“Yes, mistrust, I would say. That you don't really trust them. I also think that sometimes some people might feel they don't want to use their right to vote because it doesn't make any difference anyway, and they might not bother to go to the polling stations and such.”

- Melissa

Being a *political atheist*, like Peter mentioned, sums it up very neatly. The respondents believe it doesn't matter who they vote for because they will always get the same politics anyway. Melissa shares the same thought as Peter. She goes one step further, explaining that low trust discourages people from voting, as some might believe their vote doesn't matter. These perceptions of the Swedish political system lead to a feeling of apathy to the political system as a whole. This negative view of the political system could be explained by SCT (Sternthal et al., 1978), which describes that low trust leads to skepticism. Therefore, when exposed to persuasive messages from sources in which voters have low trust, they may feel skeptical, lose faith in the political system, and become apathetic. Reject theory (Greenwald, 1968) could also describe this dilemma, as it posits that people will reject persuasive messages if they feel pressured or controlled. Hence, when voters feel that political messages are trying to persuade, control, or pressure them, they might reject the messages altogether, possibly reevaluate if they want to vote, and become political atheists.

Additionally, the respondents believe that low trust stems from the perception that political brands do not face any consequences for their actions. The respondents explain that political brands can campaign on any issue and promise voters anything they like, but they are not legally obligated to follow through. The perceived consequence is that voters stop supporting these political entities, leading to increased apathy. Since most political brands are perceived as untrustworthy due to not properly protecting the elements of brand heritage (longevity, history, core values, use of symbols, track record) by consistency and promise-keeping, (Urde et.al., 2007), can explain why the overall perceived trust towards political brands decreases even more.

“They have no personal responsibility for the things they say, the things they do, or what they implement or don't implement. So there are no consequences for anything; instead, it's just like, well, unfortunately, it didn't work out.”

- Peter

“It's not always easy to check, and many people also forget. You can promise anything, and then try to check it five or ten years later, and so many other issues have come up. And the person in question is no longer responsible. There's no one to hold accountable if it didn't go as planned.”

- Lennart

Peter explains that political brands have no personal responsibility for their statements, actions, or implementations. This is why they can break promises or are inconsistent in their political stances. Lennart adds an important perspective, highlighting the challenge of being an informed voter due to the difficulty of following up on statements and remembering all of them. This could indicate significant advantages for political brands, providing them with the opportunity to be inconsistent or break promises, benefiting from the difficulty to fact-check and people's tendency to forget. Both Peter and Lennart express concerns about politicians not having any responsibilities for their actions except for building up a bad reputation. When the respondents explain that this phenomena is present in multiple parties it is possible that this “bad marketing” solely correlates to skepticism towards the political landscape. This can be explained by skepticism found in SCT (Sternthal et al., 1978). When the parties are not staying true to their brand, this can create skepticism towards political brands overall and not only to the persuasive messages. As the skepticism is a negative cognitive response this leads to more resistance, which is seen in the statements above. As discussed earlier, political brands have not adequately integrated elements of brand heritage (Urde et al., 2007). This might explain why respondents feel insecure when parties change their opinions and fail to keep promises. Consequently, voters may feel uncertain about politics in general, experiencing pressure to vote despite not knowing which statements to trust. This sense of pressure aligns with reject theory, which further explains why voters distrust persuasive messages (Greenwald, 1968). Further, SCT (Sternthal et al., 1978) describes that trusting a source depends on perceived trustworthiness and expertise. Peter and Lennarts quote make it reasonable to believe that they likely do not see political brands as trustworthy and they are

not mentioning the brands expertise. The analysis consistently underscores the low perceived trustworthiness of political brands, particularly highlighted in this section. Respondents note that political brands frequently change their positions without facing any consequences, allowing them to persist in this behavior.

Peter and Lennart also appear to have a clear understanding of the persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994) by political brands. Persuasion attempts refer to the target's perception of the agent's strategic efforts to influence voters' beliefs, attitudes, decisions, and actions. Given the respondents certainty that political brands do not stay true to their promises, it is reasonable to believe that they view these statements as marketing tactics to attract more voters rather than genuine commitments. This in turn promotes the voters idea of the political brands not being trustworthy.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, we will discuss our findings in relation to previous literature. We will start by describing our main discoveries. The four identified themes that were elaborated on in the analysis through the three theoretical lenses; Brand Heritage, Literacy, and Persuasion, will base the foundation of the discussion. Further, we will elaborate on our theoretical contributions to the field.

6.1 Summary of Findings

The analysis found that the respondents perceive that the purpose of political branding is to gain power and votes. They also perceive that pursuing consistent politics, keeping promises and having a shared worldview as the political brands, is paramount for trust.

Additionally, the respondents express that Sweden's multiparty system decreases their trust in political brands as this forces parties to compromise with other political parties. They perceive that this leads them to breaking promises and not being consistent in their politics, which makes them feel confused, and thereby lose trust. Further, political brands that regularly shift, or “turncoat”, their political stances to meet voters' evolving demands, is perceived as untrustworthy. The respondents aspire for consistent political brands that stay true to their core values and brand promises.

Further, the more literate the respondents are, meaning the better they are at detecting marketing techniques and understanding complex social meanings behind political branding, the better they will be at making conscious political decisions. Conversely, the less literate voters are, meaning the worse they are at spotting marketing techniques behind political branding and interpreting complex social meanings, the worse they will be at making conscious political decisions. Literacy partly depends on voters' cognitive skills, but primarily by how closely aligned the political brand attempting to persuade them is to their ideological beliefs. The analysis indicates that respondents possess enough literacy to perceive societal consequences of political branding, such as mass manipulation and erosion of democracy, despite conviction that they make conscious political decisions. Furthermore,

the respondents exhibit low trust in political brands and politics in general. This is perceived to lead to voting for “protest parties” to show their dissatisfaction, voting for extreme parties or for single issue parties. The reason for this is that these political brands are perceived to pursue consistent politics and keeping promises, thereby staying true to their core brand values and brand promises. The respondents believe that by voting for these, they are more likely to receive what they voted for.

Additionally, the low perceived trust towards political brands leads respondents to become apathetic, believing their votes don't matter because they won't receive what they voted for anyway. The respondents perceive that political brands face no real consequences for breaking brand promises and being inconsistent. In fact, the only perceived penalty seems to be "bad marketing" for their brand. This results in voters believing that it does not matter what they vote for, because it never turns out the way as promised. This, in turn, leads to political atheism, where voters lose faith in the political system entirely, potentially resulting in them choosing not to vote.

6.2 Elaboration of Findings

Based on our findings, we have noticed that our respondents perceive that the ultimate goal of political branding is to gain power and votes. They perceive that political branding, which is about pursuing long-term goals such as building customer loyalty, is actually more about short-term electoral success. Voters believe that political brands prioritizing adaptations to the present and dynamic needs of evolving customer demands, make them untrustworthy. This shows how political branding in Sweden today actually could be political marketing. This perception among voters could indicate that political branding in Sweden, in reality, is perceived as political marketing, as winning votes and getting power is perceived as more prioritized than pursuing long-term brand strategies such as building trust. This could potentially show that political branding in Sweden has a market-oriented approach, rather than a brand-oriented such (Urde et al., 2013).

However, Swedish voters desire political brands to adopt a long-term, trust-based approach characterized by consistent politics, kept promises, and shared worldviews. Therefore, we argue that Swedish voters perceive political branding as political marketing, which is defined by a market-oriented approach. Hence, about fulfilling customers' needs without considering

the brand identity (Urde et al., 2013). This despite the respondents highly requesting political brands to pursue long-term and honest, thereby brand-oriented, political branding strategies.

The research by Smith (2009) shows similar results to ours, where the author identified that honesty and staying true to political statements are most important in political branding. Therefore, we agree with Smith (2009) that honesty, or *trust* as we call it, and staying true to promises, *consistency* and *keeping promises* in our study, are among the most important elements in political branding. Our research also supports the study by Warner and Banwart (2016), where they claim that people will support politicians that they trust will represent their values. According to our study, representing voters' values could be seen as the element of shared *worldview*. Similar approach is presented by Abid et al (2023), when the authors explain that shared values between politicians and voters lead to more effective campaigns. Despite the authors specifically focusing on political campaigns on social media, the key take-away between our research and theirs, is that shared worldview is imperative. Hence, Abid et al. (2023) and Warner and Banwart (2016) studies about a shared worldview, complement the research by Smith (2009) who claims that honesty and staying true to promises is paramount for trust. However, in our study, we were able to connect all three components in the same research (consistency, keeping promises and shared worldview) as paramount elements for trust in political branding in Sweden.

Downs (1957, cited in Smith and French, 2009) argues that voters will make informed (conscious) decisions and vote for parties that benefit them the most, thereby expressing a positive view of political branding. However, from our research we see that this is not the case, as none of our respondents were confident about what every political brand stands for. This leads to confusion and frustration about Sweden's multiparty system, because parties cannot implement everything they promise due to the fact that they need to compromise with other parties. The respondents do not perceive the current Swedish political brands as trustworthy, thereby it is difficult for them to make conscious decisions on who to vote for. This leads to that Downs (1957, in Smith and French, 2009) argument about the positive aspect of political branding is not applicable in the Swedish context, as the Swedish voters express low credibility towards political brands and their branding strategies.

Lees-Marshment (2001 in Smith and French, 2009) claim that voters benefit from political branding as the parties need to take their needs into account. Since our respondents have

indirectly said that they want more political branding through brand heritage, such as keeping promises and consistency, we agree that political branding could be beneficial for voters.

However, as the respondents lose trust in political brands due to “turncoating”, this approach by political brands in the Swedish context might not be beneficial for voters after all. Being able to stay relevant through small changes can be beneficial to keep up with novelties, and is still in line with brand heritage. The problem with this strategy is that voters can perceive such behavior as “turncoating”, which is in line with the majority of our respondents' opinions. This in turn, as mentioned in the analysis, increases voters' frustration when political brands do not keep their brand promises and stay consistent with their brand identity. While Lees-Marshment (2001 in Smith and French, 2009) argues that politicians changing their positions to align with voters is a good strategy, commonly used in the private sector, our findings show that it may not be favorable in the Swedish context. The reason is that this approach could further damage the already low perceived credibility of political brands in Sweden.

Through our analysis, we were able to see that the more literate the respondents are (the better they are at detecting marketing tactics and understanding complex social meanings behind political branding), the better they are at making conscious political decisions. Conversely, the less literate they are, the worse they will be at making conscious political decisions. This means that they are easier to persuade. Based on our research, respondents' literacy may be influenced by the extent to which they perceive a political brand as credible. Through our research, we have noticed that this in turn depends on the brand-oriented elements; consistency, keeping promises and a shared worldview.

However, we have also noticed that our respondents in general lack knowledge to fully understand and do their own research about what the different political brands stand for. As a result, they admit to relying on political branding, for instance through campaigns, thereby admitting to possibly becoming victims to persuasion. According to research by Warner and Banwart (2016) this could be explained by the fact that understanding political issues is cognitively demanding, underscoring the significance of political branding. Thus, their research strengthens our finding that political branding does play a pivotal role in influencing voters' perceptions.

We can clearly see the significant role that political branding has on voters' perceptions, where perceived trust is key. Hence, political branding could be seen as a contextual factor that influences voters' perceptions and political decision-making. The Research by Kulachai et al (2023) supports the idea that contextual factors, which includes political factors, influences political knowledge, preference, attitudes, and perceptions. This in turn shapes voting decisions. Their findings indicate that political branding affects how voters evaluate different political candidates and policies, which can lead to voters adopting a similar view that the political brand is promoting. In line with what the authors explain, our findings show similar results. Our respondents claim that they are convinced that their political ideology is correct. However, this could also be an outcome of them adopting a similar view as the political brand they support is promoting. Additionally, supporting a political brand in the first place could be as simple as the brand promoting ideas that are in line with the voters' political beliefs.

As previously mentioned, the respondents can either make conscious or unconscious political decisions depending on their understanding of marketing tactics behind political branding (literate). An example of this is when the respondents are certain that they would not vote for the wrong party, despite acknowledging potential implications of manipulation and democratic erosion. Kulachai et al (2023) describes it as an issue that contextual factors, such as political branding, shape voting behavior as voting decisions are the foundation of democratic societies. They explain that if voters are manipulated to vote in a certain way, it can affect democracy in a negative way. Drawing on the indication that our respondents are convinced that they are voting for the right party and making conscious decisions, there is, according to Kulachi et al. (2023) and our findings, a possibility that this is merely an outcome of political persuasion. Hence, their "unconscious", but as they perceive "conscious", political decisions, could in fact be harmful for democracy.

To add to the discussion, Downs (1957) in Smith and French (2009) claim that voters will make informed (conscious) decisions and vote for parties that benefit them the most. However, from our research we see that this does not necessarily mean it is always the case, as the respondents' conviction about what is right to vote for, could be an outcome of political branding.

Our respondents generally report low trust in traditional political brands. This lack of trust leads them to believe that other voters are turning to protest-, extreme- or single issue parties,

as a way to express their dissatisfaction. All three are perceived as consistently pursuing consistent politics and keeping their brand promises.

Abid et al. (2023) argue that shared values between politicians and voters lead to more effective social media campaigns. This is because voters find messages from those who share their worldview to be more personal and relatable. Bramlett (2021) suggests that debate candidate branding creates positive associations for supporters and negative associations for non-supporters. Our findings align with both of the articles, as trust is very important to our respondents. They are more likely to trust parties perceived as consistent, as keeping promises, and potentially as sharing their worldview.

The perceived rise of extreme parties, single-issue parties, and "protest parties" in the Swedish context could potentially lead to a more polarized political landscape. Social media persuasion and debate candidate branding might play a key role. When voters are exposed to messages from individuals or groups that share their worldview, even if it's extreme, they may be more receptive to them. Conversely, messages from those with opposing views might be rejected, leading to further division. This polarization can have negative consequences for democracy, as voters become less tolerant of differing political viewpoints.

Additionally, the low perceived credibility towards political brands leads voters to become apathetic. The reason for this is that they believe that it does not matter what they vote for, because they don't get what they vote for anyway. The reason for this is that voters perceive that political parties constantly break brand promises. This additional consequence for Swedish society could also potentially damage democracy, as a consequence of being apathetic towards the political parties is to not vote.

Our results align with previous literature from Smith (2009) and Lindemann & Stoetzer (2021), suggesting that image-building may be more important than political stances or policies. According to Lindemann & Stoetzer (2021), image-building includes being perceived as competent, empathetic, and possessing integrity. These aspects can all increase trust in a party. A party that is perceived as competent and consistent in its views (demonstrating integrity) is likely to be seen as more trustworthy. Our respondents indicated a greater likelihood to vote for a party they trust, even if the party's platform doesn't perfectly align with their own worldview.

This trend, where voters struggle to trust political brands due to perceived broken brand promises, highlights the critical role of political branding in regaining voter trust. However, if political branding becomes as crucial as our respondents and previous literature suggest, it could have detrimental effects on democracy. Voters might prioritize a party with superior branding over one whose ideology aligns more closely with their own. This could potentially shift the focus of democratic systems from representing the majority's ideology to favoring the most effectively branded party.

Previous literature has not discussed one of our findings, that the voters are frustrated that the politicians do not have any personal consequences for breaking promises. Since political brands are perceived by voters to face no real consequences for breaking brand promises and being inconsistent, with the only consequence being seen as “bad marketing” for their brand. The respondents highlight that all parties break brand promises and therefore is not one party alienated by the consequences. This results in voters believing that it does not matter what they vote for, because it never turns out the way promised. This in turn leads to *political atheism*, meaning that voters don't believe in the political system at all. This in turn leads to negative democratic consequences, for example not following politics, not knowing what to vote for or even choosing not to vote.

The consequences of political branding suggest negative effects on democracy. One consequence is the perceived polarization between different opinions. This occurs because some voters have been convinced by one party that their way is the only way, leading them to reject other parties' ideas. Other voters, unconvinced by any party, see them as mere marketers seeking votes and not following through on brand promises. This disillusionment leads to voters calling themselves *political atheists*, which could include not voting at all. From the voters' perspective, the solution to these problems, and thus the path to a more democratic society, lies in increasing politicians' trustworthiness and improving political branding. However, this solution has a potential drawback, as discussed earlier. Parties with the most effective political branding, rather than the party with the best ideas, could win elections.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

Our multiparty qualitative perspective offered a unique standpoint in research on political branding, as both of our multi-party and voter viewpoints were rarely studied before in the context of political branding. By incorporating a voter perspective based on a qualitative study, we could discover new insights into how Swedish voters perceive political branding and its consequences.

Since our aim and purpose of the study was to delve beyond surface-level opinions and into the lived experiences that shape them, the research could uncover cognitive and affective dimensions including underlying perceptions and personal narratives of political branding. Thus, we were able to fill the epistemological and methodological gap in the literature through a qualitative study of voters' perceptions of political branding and its consequences. Additionally, we were able to provide an updated study on political branding compared to previous research, that is better adapted to a society characterized by rapid technological developments, and politicians increasingly leveraging social media to promote their political agenda.

Based on our research, we support previous findings that keeping promises, being consistent and having a shared worldview, are important elements for trust in a political brand (Smith, 2009; Warner & Banwart, 2016; Abid et al. 2023; Kulachai et al, 2023; Hakala et., al 2011; Urde et.al., 2007). However, as far as we know, we are the first to integrate all three elements in the same study. Thus, while we agree that political brands build trust by keeping promises, maintaining consistent politics, and aligning with voters' fundamental values, we have unified all three aspects as crucial elements for trust.

Through our research we have also developed a new definition; *political atheism*. This is important in the Swedish context as our respondents have an overall low trust in political brands, which leads to apathy towards the political system. This, in turn, is a result of respondents believing that political parties constantly break promises without facing consequences, leading to disillusionment and a lack of faith in the political system. The concept of political *atheism* is one of our main theoretical contributions as it explains the apathetic attitude of Swedish voters graphically.

Previous studies have also engaged in a constant debate about whether political branding benefits democracy. Our research in the Swedish context suggests that political branding can be harmful, even though voters seem to desire it. The reason for this is that our respondents have expressed a willingness to vote for a party they trust, even if it doesn't perfectly align with their political views. Consequently, parties with the strongest political branding may win elections, even if their platforms don't perfectly reflect the beliefs of the majority. As this can lead to manipulation of voters and outcomes that don't reflect the population's will, we argue that political branding is detrimental to Swedish democracy. While voters appreciate political branding and seek a trustworthy party due to a general distrust in political brands, they may be unaware of its potential to manipulate them.

Additionally, our study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of political branding by highlighting the gap between voters' desires for long-term trust and the reality of short-term political marketing tactics. It emphasizes the importance of promise-keeping, consistency, and shared worldviews in building trust, while also noting the critical role of voters' understanding of marketing tactics and ability to interpret complex social meanings to make conscious political decisions. These findings extend existing research, suggesting a need for political brands to align more closely with voters' desires for a long-term brand strategy built on trust.

7. Conclusions

In this final chapter, we are going to present the main findings, ultimately answering the research question. We will also elaborate on theoretical contributions, practical implications and provide ideas for future research.

7.1 Main Findings

This study reveals a nuanced perspective on political branding among Swedish voters. While they recognize it as a strategic tool utilized by political brands to gain votes and power, their primary concern lies with trust. Voters perceive that a shared worldview, consistency, and keeping promises are paramount for trust in a political brand, yet consistency and keeping promises are key to rebuilding trust in the political system overall, potentially strengthening democracy.

The research highlights trust as a more critical element in political branding than previously assumed. Ideological alignment seems to take a backseat when trust is broken by parties perceived to be shifting stances. This does not only lead to voter apathy and party switching, but also potentially to a phenomenon of *political atheism*, a disillusionment with the entire political system which could lead to not voting at all.

The study also exposes a paradox. Voters recognize the risk of mass manipulation and democratic threats as potential consequences of political branding, yet believe they make conscious voting choices, which was explained by various levels of literacy and ability to decode complex social meanings and marketing tactics. This indicates a potential vulnerability to manipulation, despite the fact that they already associate it with threats to democracy. It also suggests a correlation between voters' ability to detect political persuasion, understanding complex social meanings, and trust, which in turn is influenced by consistency, keeping promises, and alignment with shared worldview.

Overall, these findings call for a shift in focus for Swedish political brands from a short-term marketing perspective to a long-term brand perspective. This should be done by building trust through a consistent brand, keeping promises as much as possible, and having a clear

connection to core brand values. By fostering trust through transparency and authenticity, which could be achieved by pursuing honest politics that voters can understand, political branding could possibly strengthen Swedish democracy.

The identified negative consequences, such as perceived polarization or *political atheism*, highlight the need for more honest political branding, potentially leading to a more democratic society. Prioritizing branding over ideology could undermine democracy by favoring well-branded parties over those with better ideas.

This study investigated how Swedish voters view political branding and its consequences. To repeat our research question; How do Swedish voters view political branding, and how do they perceive its consequences?

In conclusion, voters view political branding as an important tool to win votes and get power. Since these are more short-term goals, political branding might instead be viewed as political marketing, whether voters are aware of it or not. However, voters long for more honest politics with a more long-term brand perspective that is characterized by consistency, keeping promises, and a shared worldview between them and the political brands. This suggests that voters desire political branding, although their current perception leans more towards political marketing. Further, the perceived lack of a long-term perspective makes voters perceive political brands, and their branding, as untrustworthy. With reference back to the problematization where we described that Sweden is characterized by a high trust towards institutions, our results indicate that this does not necessarily include political brands.

When it comes to perceived consequences of political branding, Swedish voters express an understanding of potential democratic threats. This despite neglecting the possibility of own manipulation, which could be a result of clever political branding tactics. The potential negative effect on democracy may therefore be explained by voters' various levels of understanding of marketing tactics and ability to interpret complex social meanings. This could indicate that political branding is highly effective in shaping voter perceptions, possibly because it has the power to obscure voters' full understanding of its impacts.

7.2 Practical Implications

Our research exposes a critical issue, political branding, a powerful tool for engagement, can be misused to manipulate voters, hence eroding public trust and weakening democracy. To address this, we suggest a multi-pronged approach through policy regulations.

Policymakers should consider regulations that promote transparency in political branding. This could involve mandating clear guidelines for political advertising and branding, restricting misleading language, demonstrably false claims, and emotionally manipulative tactics. Additionally, enhancing accountability for political actors is crucial. Requiring political parties to disclose funding sources and branding strategies, alongside potential consequences for violations by politicians, would strengthen this.

Specific regulatory examples could include a ban on demonstrably false statements by politicians during campaigns, ensuring voters base decisions on accurate information. Additionally, regulations limiting deceptive imagery, manipulative emotional appeals, and other tactics that mislead voters within political party branding could be enacted.

The benefits of such regulations are clear. Holding politicians and parties accountable can rebuild public trust in the democratic process. Ethical branding practices fostered by these regulations contribute to a more transparent political landscape where voters are empowered to make informed choices, ultimately strengthening democracy. By implementing these proposed regulations, policymakers can effectively address the potential for manipulation in political branding, fostering a more ethical and transparent political system.

As managerial implications we suggest that political brands should prioritize building trust over adapting stances to chase what they perceive voters want. This focus on authenticity, even in the face of evolving societal contexts, can benefit them in the long run. Voters are increasingly literate, as they are better at seeing through marketing tactics and interpret complex social contexts. This can lead to manipulation attempts further eroding trust in the brand. However, voters' literate abilities worsen when they are exposed to a political brand that they relate to. Regardless, we strongly discourage manipulative political branding strategies as it is unethical and harms our democracy. Political brands should therefore focus on building genuine trust through long-term brand strategies. This will not only strengthen

individual parties but also contribute to a healthier overall political landscape where trust is the norm, not the exception.

7.3 Future Research

Possible limitations of this study include the use of convenience sampling and the small sample size of only ten respondents. To enhance the study's robustness, future research on political branding should therefore interview a larger number of participants and use other sampling strategies to provide an even better representation of Swedish voters. Additional methodologies could also be considered depending on the studies purposes and research question, such as focus groups or netnography.

Since our research has found new insights in political branding, especially within Swedish multi-party context, there are many different routes for future research. In order to generalize our findings we suggest a quantitative study.

Based on our findings, future research could build on our results and compare them to actual voter behavior. In the private sector, it is well-known that there is often a discrepancy between what consumers say they will do and what they actually do. From a political branding perspective, it would therefore be interesting to extend our findings to explore the behavioral aspect of Swedish voters. Another interesting perspective would be to study how human relationships impact our political perceptions, preferences, and voting behavior.

It would also be worthwhile to delve deeper into our findings about voters' dissatisfaction with the Swedish multi-party system. Specifically, investigating if voters would prefer a different type of political system could provide valuable insights. This line of inquiry is particularly intriguing given our results indicating a general dissatisfaction with the current multi-party structure among Swedish voters.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate the lack of political branding among Swedish political brands. Voters perceive political brands as untrustworthy and dislike their current “branding” strategies in general. Could it be that Swedish political brands are unaware of the fact that they are performing poorly in political branding from voters’ perspectives? Or could it be that they perceive long-term political branding strategies as less

important than short-term marketing success? Alternatively, have neglected political branding because they persist in their marketing efforts as a routine, rather than proactively cultivating relationships with the voters?

By posing these questions, future researchers in the field can generate new research within the subject. This is important for several reasons: it helps political brands understand voters in the context of political branding to maximize their vote count, it enables voters to comprehend political branding and its consequences, and it ultimately benefits society. By ensuring that political branding is a positive force for democracy, it goes beyond merely attracting votes to fostering a more informed and engaged voting public.

8. References

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Hej och välkommen till intervjun. Som du vet kommer vi använda oss av pseudonymisering vilket i praktiken kommer göra att du kallas för ett annat namn än ditt eget. Det finns inga rätt eller fel svar. Svara bara på frågorna baserat på dina egna erfarenheter. Kommer du på något du vill säga som är lite utanför frågan får du gärna göra det också. Detta gör vi för att du ska kunna känna dig säker, både nu när du ska svara på frågorna och senare så du vet att dina svar hanteras konfidentiellt. Känns detta fortfarande okej?

- Vad är din övergripande bild av Sverigedemokraterna och vad de står för?
- Vad är din övergripande bild av Miljöpartiet och vad de står för?
- Vad är din övergripande bild av kristdemokraterna och vad de står för?

Nu ska vi visa tre kampanjer från tre olika politiska partier samt ställa några frågor efter varje klipp.

(Sverigedemokraternas reklamfilm) [Sverigedemokraternas officiella reklamfilm, tv4](#)

- Berätta vad du känner när du såg kampanjen och vilka som var dina första tankar när du såg valfilmen?
- Hur tolkar du budskapet som de sänder ut via sin varumärkeskommunikation och den underliggande betydelsen?
- Vad tror du är syftet med kampanjen?
- Vad är det för tankar/känslor som filmen appellerar till?
- Hur kan du se att kampanjen relaterar till partiets varumärke?

(Miljöpartiets reklamfilm) [Miljöpartiets valfilm 2022](#)

- Berätta vad du känner när du såg kampanjen och vilka som var dina första tankar när du såg valfilmen?
- Hur tolkar du budskapet som de sänder ut via sin varumärkeskommunikation och den underliggande betydelsen?
- Vad tror du är syftet med kampanjen?
- Vad är det för tankar/känslor som filmerna appellerar till?
- Hur kan du se att kampanjen relaterar till partiets varumärke?

(Kristdemokraternas reklamfilm) [KD: Vi är många som kämpar](#)

- Berätta vad du känner när du såg kampanjen och vilka som var dina första tankar när du såg valfilmen?
- Hur tolkar du budskapet som de sänder ut via sin varumärkeskommunikation och den underliggande betydelsen?
- Vad tror du är syftet med kampanjen?
- Vad är det för tankar/känslor som filmerna appellerar till?
- Hur kan du se att kampanjen relaterar till partiets varumärke?

Ytterligare frågor:

- Hur bedömer du trovärdigheten i vad politikern säger?
- Vad tror du konsekvenserna blir av att politiker inte håller vad de lovar?
- Vad tror du konsekvenserna blir av att politiker/politiska partier regelbundet byter åsikt/ställningstagande i olika frågor?
- Upplever du att de politiska partiernas lovade budskap är rimliga och möjliga att uppnå?
- Hur påverkas din tillit till politiska partier av huruvida de håller vad de lovar eller inte?
- Hur påverkar politiska budskap och kampanjer ditt förtroende för politiska ledare och partier?
 - Vad tror du att politikers trovärdighet kan ha för konsekvenser?
- Vad påverkar hur du uppfattar politiker och politiska kampanjer generellt?
 - Vad kan det ha för konsekvenser?
 - Vad är det som gör att du litar på politiker?
- Tror du att det finns en chans att du röstar på fel parti för dig? Varför/varför inte?
 - Vad kan det ha för konsekvenser för samhället om folk röstar på fel parti för dem?
- Hur tror du att politiska budskap och kampanjer påverkar samhället?

Tack så mycket för din medverkan. Så du vet kan du alltid ta tillbaka din medverkan. Du har min mail om du har frågor eller funderingar. Tack ännu en gång.

Appendix B: Interview guide, translated

Hello and welcome to the interview. As you know, we will be using pseudonymization, which means you will be referred to by a different name than your own. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer the questions based on your own experiences. If you think of something you want to say that is a bit outside the question, you are welcome to do so as well. We are doing this so you can feel secure, both now when you are answering the questions and later knowing that your responses are handled confidentially. Does this still feel okay?

- What is your overall impression of the Sweden Democrats and what they stand for?
- What is your overall impression of the Green Party and what they stand for?
- What is your overall impression of the Christian Democrats and what they stand for?

Now we will show three campaigns from three different political parties and ask a few questions after each clip.

(Sverigedemokraternas commercial)  Sverigedemokraternas officiella reklamfilm, tv4

- Describe what you feel when you saw the campaign and what your initial thoughts were when you saw the election film?
- How do you interpret the message they are sending through their brand communication and the underlying meaning?
- What do you think is the purpose of the campaign?
- What thoughts/feelings does the film appeal to?
- How can you see that the campaign relates to the party's brand?

(Miljöpartiets commercial)  Miljöpartiets valfilm 2022

- Describe what you feel when you saw the campaign and what your initial thoughts were when you saw the election film?
- How do you interpret the message they are sending through their brand communication and the underlying meaning?
- What do you think is the purpose of the campaign?
- What thoughts/feelings does the film appeal to?
- How can you see that the campaign relates to the party's brand?

(Kristdemokraternas commercial)  KD: Vi är många som kämpar

- Describe what you feel when you saw the campaign and what your initial thoughts were when you saw the election film?
- How do you interpret the message they are sending through their brand communication and the underlying meaning?
- What do you think is the purpose of the campaign?
- What thoughts/feelings does the film appeal to?
- How can you see that the campaign relates to the party's brand?

Additional questions:

- How do you assess the credibility of what the politician says?
- What do you think the consequences are when politicians do not keep their promises?
- What do you think the consequences are when politicians/political parties regularly change their stance on various issues?
- Do you find that the promised messages of the political parties are reasonable and achievable?
- How is your trust in political parties affected by whether they keep their promises or not?
- How do political messages and campaigns affect your confidence in political leaders and parties?
 - What do you think the credibility of politicians can have as consequences?
- What affects how you perceive politicians and political campaigns in general?
 - What could the consequences be?
 - What makes you trust politicians?
- Do you think there is a chance you might vote for the wrong party for you? Why/why not?
 - What could be the consequences for society if people vote for the wrong party for them?
- How do you think political messages and campaigns affect society?

Thank you very much for your participation. Just so you know, you can always withdraw your participation. You have my email if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you once again.