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THE EFFECT OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ON STOCK REPURCHASES: EVIDENCE FROM SWEDEN

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► **To cite this version:**

Andreas Jansson, Ulf Larsson-Olaison. THE EFFECT OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ON STOCK REPURCHASES: EVIDENCE FROM SWEDEN. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 2010, 18 (5), pp.457. 10.1111/j.1467-8683.2010.00803.x . hal-00613804

HAL Id: hal-00613804

<https://hal.science/hal-00613804>

Submitted on 6 Aug 2011

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**THE EFFECT OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ON STOCK
REPURCHASES: EVIDENCE FROM SWEDEN**

Journal:	<i>Corporate Governance: An International Review</i>
Manuscript ID:	CGIR-2009-0248.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	Internal CG: Ownership Issues, Dividend Policy < Board Policy issues, Scandinavia < Governance Environments, Board Policy issues



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4 **THE EFFECT OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ON STOCK REPURCHASES:**
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6 **EVIDENCE FROM SWEDEN**
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10 **ABSTRACT**
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14 **Manuscript type:** Empirical

15 **Research Question/Issue:** The paper examines whether corporate governance differences
16 affect firms' stock repurchasing behaviour. Previous hypotheses on stock repurchases, well-
17 supported by US data, are based on assumptions of managerial autonomy that might not be
18 descriptive in corporate governance systems characterised by influential controlling
19 shareholders such as the Swedish. Firm-level corporate governance arrangements may also
20 affect firms' incentives to repurchase stock.
21

22 **Research Findings/Insights:** Stock-repurchasing patterns among Swedish firms differ from
23 those previously observed among US firms. The findings indicate that Swedish firms do not
24 repurchase stock to distribute excess cash, signal undervaluation or fend off takeovers. Stock
25 repurchases are made in addition to dividends and thus do not substitute for them. Firm-level
26 corporate governance arrangements directly affect stock repurchasing behaviour. Firms
27 without a dominant controlling owner seem to use stock repurchases to increase leverage. The
28 existence of a dominant controlling shareholder diminishes the propensity for stock
29 repurchases, while cross listing on a US or UK stock market increases that propensity.
30

31 **Theoretical/Academic Implications:** The findings suggest that corporate governance
32 differences affect stock repurchasing behaviour. The agency-theoretical view of the firm, on
33 which the leading hypotheses on stock repurchases are based, accurately predicts stock
34 repurchases only in certain institutional and governance settings.
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36 **Practitioner/Policy Implications:** The study suggests that differences in national and firm-
37 level corporate governance must be taken into account in order to accurately assess outcomes
38 of regulatory reforms and/or harmonisation attempts.
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53 **KEYWORDS**
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58 Corporate Governance; Stock Repurchases; Sweden; Dividends.
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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the issue of whether corporate governance differences affect firms' stock repurchasing behaviour. The paper tests whether five well-established hypotheses can explain stock repurchases among Swedish firms. These hypotheses are grounded in agency-theoretical reasoning and have often been found to explain stock repurchases in the US context. The issue at stake here is whether they can be generalised to a context with substantially different corporate governance arrangements: the Swedish. The paper also explores the impact of a set of firm-level corporate governance variables on stock repurchases. The results suggest that the hypotheses grounded in agency theory are unfit for explaining stock repurchases among Swedish firms, which is likely to be an effect of differences in corporate governance arrangements between Swedish and US firms. The paper identifies controlling shareholder salience and heightened exposure to Anglo-Saxon capital markets as important factors shaping stock-repurchasing behaviour among Swedish firms.

Previous research has hypothesised that stock repurchases constitute a way of distributing temporary excess cash (Fenn & Liang, 2001; Guay & Harford 2000; Jagannathan, Stephens, & Weisbach, 2000). It has also been suggested that stock repurchases are a substitute for dividends (Dittmar, 2000; Grullon & Michaely, 2002; Skinner, 2008). Moreover, various forms of the signalling hypothesis suggest that the motivation behind stock repurchases may be that management wishes to signal perceived unfair low valuation of the firm's stock (Chang & Sullivan, 2007; Dittmar, 2000; Ikenberry, Lakonishok, & Vermaelen, 1995; Jun, Jung, & Walkling, 2009; Lakonishok & Vermaelen, 1990; Louis & White, 2007; Sanders & Carpenter, 2003; Vermaelen, 1981). Furthermore, it has been hypothesised that the underlying motive behind stock repurchases may sometimes lie in an attempt by management to fend off take-overs (Billett & Xue, 2007; Chang & Sullivan, 2007; Denis, 1990; Dittmar, 2000; Vermaelen, 1984). Yet another hypothesis on the motives behind stock repurchases is

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2
3 that firms may repurchase stock to increase leverage (by decreasing outstanding equity)
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5 towards an optimal level that minimises agency and financing costs (Dittmar, 2000; Opher &
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7 Thakor, 1987; Wansley, Lane, & Sarkar, 1989).
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11 These hypotheses are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and have all gained
12
13 substantial empirical support when tested with US data. They have, however, been developed
14
15 to explain the behaviour of US firms, operating in a corporate governance system
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17 characterised by a comparatively high degree of ownership dispersion, managerial autonomy,
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19 and fraction of compensation that is performance-based (Gedajlovic & Shapiro, 1998;
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21 Weimer & Pape, 1999). These assumptions of managerial autonomy and motivations can be
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23 associated more generally with an agency-theoretical view of the firm. This view has received
24
25 criticism for being US-centric, failing to take into account the effects that embeddedness of
26
27 corporations in varying institutional contexts have on corporate actions (Aguilera & Jackson,
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29 2003; Fligstein & Freeland, 1995; Gospel & Pendleton, 2005; Lubatkin, Lane, Collin, &
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31 Very, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2002). The pertinent agency problem in a corporate governance
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33 system, for example, is likely to vary with the relative strength of internal and external
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35 governance mechanisms (Dharwadkar, George, & Brandes, 2000).
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41 Swedish corporate governance, like most corporate governance systems
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43 throughout the world (La Porta, Lopez-De-Silanes, & Shleifer, 1999), is characterised by
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45 powerful controlling shareholders who are actively involved in firms' governance (Agnblad,
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47 Berglöf, Högfeltd, & Svencar, 2001; Stafsudd, 2009). Swedish controlling shareholders are,
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49 for example, typically involved in board work (Dzialo, Jonnergård, Kärreman, Svensson, &
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51 Urbanek, 1998; Jonnergård & Kärreman, 2004; Jonnergård & Larsson, 2007). Moreover,
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53 managerial compensation in Sweden is, compared to US conditions, to a lesser degree
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55 performance-based (Oxelheim, Wihlborg, & Zhang, 2008; Weimer & Pape, 1999). All this
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57 suggests that Swedish firms in general are characterised by substantially greater influence of
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3 powerful and active owners on board-level decisions such as stock repurchases, and less
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5 capital-market pressures on top managers, than US firms, although there may of course be
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7 firm-level variation on these dimensions in the Swedish context. To the extent that large
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9 owners and managers less incentivised by financial performance face different incentives
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11 from the more autonomous US managers regarding stock repurchases, these institutional
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13 differences may cause hypotheses on stock repurchases developed with US firms in mind to
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15 hold less explanatory power in the Swedish context.
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20 This paper tests whether the hypotheses derived from an agency-theoretical
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22 view of the firm, which have received previous empirical support when tested on US data, can
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24 explain stock repurchases among Swedish firms, to explore whether the institutional
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26 differences in corporate governance between these two countries may produce dissimilar
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28 patterns of stock repurchases. We furthermore test whether variation in firm-level corporate
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30 governance arrangements affects stock repurchases, to explore whether Swedish firms
31
32 governed more or less similarly to US firms exhibit dissimilar repurchasing patterns.
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34 Understanding how variation in corporate governance affect stock repurchases will arguably
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36 constitute one contribution towards a better understanding how institutional embeddedness of
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38 corporations impacts the behaviour of these corporations.
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44 We find evidence that partially supports the leverage hypothesis, but not the
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46 other hypotheses. A sub-sample analysis reveals that the leverage hypothesis predicts stock
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48 repurchases for firms without a large shareholder (>25% of the votes), but not for other firms.
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50 Dividends are, contrary to expectations, positively related to stock repurchases, suggesting
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52 that stock repurchases are generally made in addition to dividends rather than as a substitute
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54 for them. Firms cross-listed in the US or UK are more prone to stock repurchases, whereas the
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56 presence of a large shareholder is negatively related to stock repurchases. Overall, this
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58 indicates that since board-level decisions such stock repurchases are likely to be under the
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3 control of large shareholders, and large shareholders are likely to have interests that are
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5 different from those of an autonomous management, hypotheses formulated within the
6
7 agency-theoretical framework are generally unfit for explaining stock repurchases among
8
9 Swedish firms.
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12 The next section describes the historical development and characteristics of
13
14 Swedish corporate governance. The section that follows reviews the literature on stock
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16 repurchases and develops the hypotheses to be tested, followed by a section detailing the
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18 sample and variables used. The paper continues by presenting the test results, followed by a
19
20 discussion and conclusion.
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23 24 **THE SWEDISH CORPORATE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM** 25

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27 As described by Agnblad *et al.* (2001), corporate governance in Sweden is
28
29 characterised by highly concentrated ownership of listed firms. In fact, Swedish listed firms
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31 exhibit among the highest ownership concentrations in the world when measured as
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33 concentration of votes, which is facilitated by legal provisions that can be used
34
35 simultaneously, such as dual-class shares and pyramid and cross ownership. These allow
36
37 concentration of votes without corresponding ownership of cash flow rights. Sweden is also
38
39 often argued to have only moderate formal minority protection in international comparisons
40
41 (La Porta *et al.*, 1999; Nenova, 2003), leading to a situation in which minority expropriation
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43 and a small and inactive stock market might be expected. Yet Sweden has liquid financial
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45 markets (Agnblad *et al.*, 2001; Stafsudd, 2009) and very little minority shareholder
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47 expropriation from an international perspective (Gilson, 2006; Nenova, 2003).
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53 These rather paradoxical facts are often said to be the effect of controlling
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55 owners that monitor management while refraining from exploiting minority shareholders for
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57 reasons of social prestige and reputational considerations (Agnblad *et al.*, 2001; Jansson,
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59 2007; Stafsudd, 2009). The large controlling shareholders are typically represented on the
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3 board of directors, where they are considered hierarchically superior by other board members
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5 (Kärreman, 1999), and can control the annual general meetings and thus hire and fire
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7 management at will (Collin, 1998; Jonnergård & Kärreman, 2004). At the same time, Swedish
8
9 controlling owners are themselves monitored. The Swedish corporate governance system
10
11 exhibits tightly knit personal networks among owners of firms (Sinani, Stafsudd, Thomsen,
12
13 Edling, & Randøy, 2008; Stafsudd, 2009). This creates a situation in which owners operate in
14
15 small worlds where information travels quickly and reputations for honesty are likely to
16
17 become valuable, thus creating an environment in which minority expropriation is curbed
18
19 (Stafsudd, 2009).
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25 Assuming that the Swedish corporate governance situation is path-dependent
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27 (Bebchuck & Roe, 1999), clues to these features of the Swedish corporate governance system
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29 could be found in its history. According to Högfeldt (2005) the Swedish corporate governance
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31 situation should be viewed in light of historical compromises reached by the large business
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33 owners, the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party. When the Social Democrats came
34
35 into power in the 1930s, Swedish economic policy was geared towards supporting very large
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37 firms in which discernible capitalists, available for negotiations, were in control. As Aguilera
38
39 and Jackson (2003) predicts, the result was firms in the hands of the highly committed large
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41 owners, partly pursuing strategic goals such as prestige and social esteem (Agnblad *et al.*,
42
43 2001; Stafsudd, 2009). This also facilitated a corporatist model of negotiations and
44
45 compromises, in which private ownership by large owners was respected as long as they
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47 participated in achieving full employment and social reforms (Högfeldt, 2005).
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54 As a consequence of the corporatist model employed, a number of very
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56 powerful business groups, often centred on families, could control multiple firms on the
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58 Stockholm Stock Exchange (SSE) (Collin, 1998). However, the concentration of power by
59
60 controlling owners is also a general feature in firms independent from these business groups,

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3 which could also take advantage of the legal provisions used by large business groups to
4 concentrate voting power. Moreover, economic success for Swedish firms is often said to be
5 the effect of directing the business society's resources to a few export-oriented industries,
6 often with government support (e.g., Glete, 1994; Högfeltdt, 2005). This resulted in a highly
7 internationalised business society.
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15 However, just as the present situation in Swedish corporate governance system
16 is rooted in the past, recent changes have certainly sprung from globalisation; at least from a
17 perceived pressure for change due to globalisation among business leaders and the
18 government. The 1980s saw the start of massive deregulation of what had been a highly
19 regulated capital market, making the Swedish markets *de jure* more akin to US and UK
20 markets. This resulted, among other things, in a massive influx of foreign ownership to go
21 with what were already very internationalised firms; foreign ownership on the SSE is now
22 about 30 -35% (Statistics Sweden). Another reform that emerged from this was that stock
23 repurchases were allowed in 2000; this met hardly any resistance from the business
24 community, suggesting that the reform was perceived as beneficial, or at least not harmful.
25
26 After this reform the Swedish Companies Act stipulated that a decision to repurchase stock or
27 to pay a dividend is a decision to be taken by the shareholders at a general assembly, which in
28 practice almost invariably mandates the board of directors to take this decision.¹
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46 Firms also changed in response to globalisation. For example, the use of option
47 schemes to reward top managers in Swedish firms became popular in the late 1990s.
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49 However, variable pay, though by now common, still constitutes a much smaller part of total
50 remuneration for Swedish managers than for managers in most other countries. Around a third
51 of a Swedish CEO's remuneration comes from variable pay systems (Oxelheim *et al.*, 2008);
52 the comparable number for US managers is over 80% (Murphy, 1999). This may be an effect
53 of more active owner monitoring, making performance-based pay less necessary for aligning
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3 managers' and owners' incentives (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989). Despite globalisation, the Swedish
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5 model of powerful controlling shareholders still prevails and has proved itself very flexible
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7 throughout the course of history, adapting to, for example, the internationalisation of
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9 corporate ownership and the regulations that followed this development (Jonnergård &
10
11 Larsson, 2010).
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15 We thus have good reason to suspect that, in general, controlling owners
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17 constrained by a willingness to uphold a reputation for honesty, play a dominant role in
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19 board-level decision making in Swedish firms, such as in the decision to repurchase stock.
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21 The use of owner monitoring rather than performance-based pay to align managerial
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23 incentives with that of the (large) owners may also create a situation in which managers are
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25 shielded from capital market pressures to a higher extent than, for example, managers in the
26
27 United States or the UK. Finally, although there may be a typical Swedish model of corporate
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29 governance, many Swedish firms are highly internationalised, both in terms of ownership (in
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31 some cases due to cross listings) and product market orientation, although foreign owners as
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33 minority shareholders will tend to have little direct influence compared to the dominant
34
35 controlling shareholders (cf. Agnblad *et al.*, 2001).
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41 **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

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43 In recent times, the dominant theoretical perspective in the analysis of corporate
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45 governance issues has been agency theory (Turnbull, 1997), a theory that has been accused of
46
47 'made-in-the-US' bias and of a failure to account for how embeddedness of corporations in
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49 varying institutional contexts affects, for instance, corporate organisation and decision making
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51 (Aguilera & Jackson, 2003; Fligstein & Freeland, 1995; Gospel & Pendleton, 2005; Lubatkin
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53 *et al.*, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2002). Specifically, agency theoretical understandings of corporate
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55 governance issues typically presume absent owners and autonomous managers whose utility
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57 is highly dependent on stock performance (Aguilera & Jackson, 2003), which are features that
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3 may not necessary be descriptive of the Swedish corporate governance system, or many other
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5 corporate governance systems around the world. Agency theory and the accompanying
6
7 assumptions of autonomous managers who are sensitive to capital market pressures can also
8
9 be seen as the overarching framework for the dominant hypotheses on stock repurchases.
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13 In this study we explore the impact of differences in corporate governance on
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15 stock repurchases. This is done, first, by empirically testing the extent to which leading
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17 hypotheses on stock repurchases, which have received widespread support when tested on US
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19 data, can explain stock repurchases among Swedish firms. Second, we do this by testing
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21 whether firm-level corporate governance arrangements that cause firms to be governed more
22
23 or less as their US counterparts, impact firms' stock-repurchasing behaviour. In this section,
24
25 we outline the five leading hypotheses on stock repurchases under test, and consider how the
26
27 characteristics of Swedish corporate governance might impact their applicability to stock
28
29 repurchases among Swedish firms, and then formulate a sixth hypothesis suggesting how
30
31 firm-level corporate governance arrangements may affect stock repurchases. We begin,
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33 however, by outlining the basic agency-theoretical understanding of stock repurchases that
34
35 frame the leading hypotheses.
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40 41 **Stock repurchases in agency theory** 42

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44 In agency theory, the firm is a nexus of contracts among various principals and
45
46 agents (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Fama, 1980; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). As stated in the
47
48 seminal work of Jensen and Meckling (1976), the agency theoretical model rests on a number
49
50 of assumptions, for example, choices by economic agents are motivated by their self-interest
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52 and information asymmetry between management (agents) and shareholders (principals). It is
53
54 typically presumed that management are separate from owners and that there is a conflict of
55
56 interest between shareholders and managers (Fama, 1980; Fama & Jensen, 1983; Jensen
57
58 1986) and between shareholders and debt holders (Jensen & Meckling 1976). These conflicts
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3 of interest lead to agency costs (e.g. costs for monitoring, *ex ante* bonding and residual
4 losses).
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8 Stock repurchasing is a method of cash distribution from the firm to
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10 shareholders that, over the years, has grown in popularity in the United States, especially open
11 market share repurchasing (e.g., Dittmar, 2000; Fenn & Liang, 2001; Jagannathan *et al.*,
12 2000). It is often seen as an alternative to cash dividends, but differs from it in some
13
14 significant aspects. A share repurchase, in contrast to a cash dividend, is not an irrevocable
15
16 distribution of cash from the firm to shareholders. If not annulled, the repurchased shares may
17
18 be sold back to investors, or be used as payment in acquisitions. However, the shares, in
19
20 accordance with the logic that a firm cannot own itself, have no real value when owned by the
21
22 firm. Hence, share repurchases do have a real effect on the firm's capital structure by
23
24 increasing leverage.
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32 According to Jensen (1986), optimal capital structure occurs when the sum of
33
34 the agency costs of equity and the agency costs of debt is minimised, and thus the market
35
36 value of the firm is maximised. However, as pointed out by Stulz (1990), a management
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38 separate from owners is unwilling to achieve optimal capital structure. Management are likely
39
40 to prefer a lower leverage, since this leaves them in control of more cash flow that can be
41
42 used to pursue their own ends, untouched by contractually specified, scheduled interest
43
44 payments and repayment of debt. Cash flow over and above what can be profitably invested is
45
46 referred to as free cash flow (Jensen, 1986) and is thus an effect of lower than optimal
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48 leverage, which may lead to agency costs as management has incentives to invest the cash
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50 flow rather than distribute it to shareholders. Presuming an autonomous management that has
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52 incentives to achieve a lower leverage than optimal, a transaction that intentionally increases
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54 leverage (as a stock repurchase) should, according to agency theory, be interpreted by a
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3 rational investor as a transaction that will decrease future agency costs, as it implies less free
4 cash flow under management's control (cf. Harris & Raviv, 1991).
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8 If an autonomous management were given total freedom to pursue its own
9 interests, the firm's leverage would thus presumably be lower than optimal. Nevertheless,
10 several control mechanisms constrain managerial discretion. As suggested by Walsh and
11 Seward (1990), these constraints may be classified as external and internal. External
12 constraints are market-based mechanisms such as the market for corporate control and hostile
13 take-overs (Gedajlovic & Shapiro, 1998; Jensen, 1986), the managerial labour market (Fama,
14 1980), and not least, pay made contingent on stock performance, which can exert considerable
15 influence on managerial decision making (Lazonick, 2007). Internal constraints are
16 organisationally based mechanisms, such as monitoring by the board of directors (Fama &
17 Jensen, 1983) or the internal market for promotions (Fama, 1980). It is often assumed that the
18 US and UK corporate governance systems depend on external constraints, whereas
19 continental European systems depend more on internal constraints (Gedajlovic & Shapiro,
20 1998).
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38 The Swedish corporate governance system relies mainly on internal control
39 mechanisms for controlling management; in particular active owners who exert control
40 through representation on boards of directors. The agency-theoretical understanding of stock
41 repurchases presumes that management controls firms' decision to repurchase stock, but, as
42 argued above, we doubt that this may be true in the Swedish context, where controlling
43 shareholders are likely to exert considerable influence over this decision. Controlling
44 shareholders, however, may, similar to management, have reasons to prefer a lower-than-
45 optimal leverage, since they typically have invested a large part of their portfolio in one firm
46 and therefore may have an interest in decreasing the default risk of that firm.
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Hypotheses on stock repurchases based on agency theory

What motivates firms to repurchase stock? In this section, we will describe the five hypotheses that are tested in this study and link them to the agency-theoretical framework outlined above. These are a selection of what has been discussed in the literature and were appraised as the most persistent explanations of the rationale behind stock repurchases. We have, to some degree, synthesised ideas expressed by other researchers about stock repurchases in order to form the five hypotheses. The rationale for repurchasing stock typically presupposes an autonomous management whose wealth is highly linked to stock price performance. After stating each hypothesis, we consider how the specifics of Swedish corporate governance, especially the likely dominance of controlling owners over the decision to repurchase stock and managers less sensitised to capital market pressures, might affect their ability to predict stock repurchases among Swedish firms.

Management-controlled firms may be motivated to repurchase stock to alter their capital structure towards optimum, which according to agency theory is likely to increase the value of the firm. This assertion gained empirical support when tested with US data by, for example, Wansley *et al.* (1989) and Dittmar (2000), although the results of Chan, Ikenberry, and Lee (2004) seem to contradict this finding. For an autonomous manager subject to the discipline of the stock market, increasing the value of the firm is attractive, especially if the manager's remuneration is tied to the performance of the firm's stock. Moreover, according to agency theory, a higher value of the firm generally increases the management team's market value on the managerial labour market (Fama, 1980), and makes the firm less attractive as a take-over target (Jensen, 1986) or a target for shareholder activism (Strickland, Wiles, & Zenner, 1996). Hence, the more a firm's leverage negatively differs from the optimal level (i.e. the more free cash flow the firm generates), the greater the volume

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3 of stock repurchases that may be expected according to this rationale, *ceteris paribus*. Thus,
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5 the following hypothesis, referred to as the leverage hypothesis, may be formulated:
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10 *H1: There is a negative relationship between firm leverage and extent of stock*
11 *repurchases.*
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17 It is straightforward to see why a manager whose wealth is tied to the market
18 value of the firm may want to repurchase stock to leverage the managed firm if this increases
19 its value. If this hypothesis can predict stock repurchases in the Swedish context with
20 managers less exposed to the discipline of the market and large shareholders likely to largely
21 be in control of stock repurchasing decisions is, however, less obvious. On the one hand, a
22 major shareholder, whose wealth often is largely synonymous with the value of the firm, may
23 have an interest in increasing firm value. However, some differences between the situation
24 faced by an autonomous manager and a large owner may be raised. Many controlling
25 shareholders may be reluctant to sell the firm, making them care less about its immediate
26 market value and more about default risk, while managers' rewards may depend more
27 immediately on firm value (cf. Fama, 1980). Moreover, controlling shareholders are less
28 likely to be disciplined by mechanisms such as hostile takeovers. To the extent that
29 controlling shareholders influence Swedish firms' stock repurchases, leverage is thus likely to
30 be a less important driver than for firms in contexts where ownership is more dispersed.
31 Bohman's (2006) study of what affects the probability that a firm adopt a stock repurchasing
32 program based on Swedish data consistently indicates that leverage has no effect.
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54 While the leverage hypothesis focuses on recurring streams of free cash flow,
55 liquid assets over and above profitable investment opportunities do not always have to come
56 in a steady stream. It has been suggested, and empirically supported by, for example, Dittmar
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3 (2000), Fenn and Liang (2001), Guay and Harford (2000), and Jagannathan *et al.* (2000), that
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5 stock repurchases may be used to distribute temporary shocks of liquidity. Management-
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7 controlled firms may have an incentive to distribute cash over and above profitable
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9 investment opportunities to the shareholders to maximise firm value. If management decides
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11 to distribute temporary excess cash, it may prefer a stock repurchase as the method of
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13 distribution, in favour of a dividend. Jensen (1986) and Jagannathan *et al.* (2000) argue that
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15 stock repurchases are perceived as a weaker promise of future pay-outs; a decreased rate of
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17 dividends is typically punished by the capital market with large stock price reductions and
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19 may also be harmful to the reputation of managers (Gwilym, Morgan, & Thomas, 2000). The
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21 more excess cash a firm possesses that cannot be invested in profitable investment
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23 opportunities, the greater the volume of stock repurchases that may be expected according to
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25 this rationale, *ceteris paribus*. Thus, the following hypothesis, referred to as the excess cash
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27 hypothesis, may be formulated:
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36 *H2: There is a positive relationship between firm excess cash holdings and*
37 *extent of stock repurchases.*
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43 If board-level decisions, such as that of repurchasing stock, is controlled by
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45 large shareholders, as it is likely to typically be in the Swedish context, and if managers are to
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47 a less extent sensitised to stock market reactions, it is however less obvious why a stock
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49 repurchase would be preferred to a dividend. On the one hand, if the controlling shareholder
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51 has no intention to sell the firm, market reactions to temporary dividends may not play such a
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53 big role. On the other hand, using stock repurchases to distribute excess cash is a lower-risk
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55 transaction than an extraordinary dividend, as there is the possibility of selling the stock
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57 should the cash be needed after all. Moreover, if controlling shareholders, and Swedish
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3 managers alike, are less sensitive to negative market reactions to firms possessing excess
4 cash, there may be weak incentives to distribute the cash in the first place. It is, thus, difficult
5 to predict the extent to which contextual factors may affect the applicability of the excess cash
6 hypothesis.
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12 Stock repurchases may also be used as a substitute for dividends. This
13 hypothesis has received empirical support in Grullon and Michaely (2002) and Skinner
14 (2008), but is contradicted by Dittmar's (2000) and Jiraporn's (2006) results. Because of the
15 weaker commitment to future payouts (Jagannathan *et al.*, 2000; Jensen, 1986), a
16 management-controlled firm may prefer a cash distribution policy, implying that a larger
17 fraction of the corporate cash distribution is carried out by stock repurchases at the expense of
18 dividends. Managers are more risk-averse than stockholders in widely held firms (Harris &
19 Raviv, 1991) and such a policy will allow for sudden cuts in corporate cash distribution
20 without depressing the stock price, thus inducing less risk for a future depreciation of the
21 management team's value on the managerial labour market (Fama, 1980) and slumps in
22 performance-related pay. Grullon and Michaely (2002) also show that market reaction to
23 decreasing dividends is not negative if the firm simultaneously engages in repurchasing stock.
24 This suggests that when stock repurchases become an available alternative, a propensity for
25 paying dividends might gradually decrease in favour of stock repurchases, *ceteris paribus*.
26 Thus, the following hypothesis, referred to as the substitution hypothesis, may be formulated:
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50 *H3: There is a negative relationship between firm dividends and extent of stock*
51 *repurchases.*
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57 Controlling shareholders may, like management, be more risk-averse than
58 dispersed shareholders with diversified portfolios, but are also likely to be less driven by
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3 immediate market reactions. Therefore, they face less strong incentives to substitute stock
4 repurchases for dividends, as the negative market reactions from lowering dividends as a
5 response to poor performance is not as costly as for an autonomous manager. This suggests
6 that the incentives for letting stock repurchases replace dividends in the Swedish context, in
7 which controlling shareholders are likely to largely control the decision to repurchase stock,
8 are weaker than in the US context.
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17 These hypotheses are premised on the notion that managers have an incentive to
18 ensure that the firm's market value increases, or at least does not decrease. Moreover, they
19 assume that the firm is being valued fairly by the market. However, the point of departure for
20 one of the most widely discussed explanations for stock repurchases is that the firm is not
21 being valued fairly, or, more specifically, that managers of management-controlled firms
22 perceive the firm to be undervalued. Management is assumed to have superior information
23 than investors do about the firm. Asquith and Mullins (1986), Chang and Sullivan (2007),
24 Dittmar, (2000), Ikenberry *et al.* (1995), Jun *et al.* (2009), Louis and White (2007), Netter and
25 Mitchell (1989), Opher and Thakor, (1987), Sanders and Carpenters (2003) and Vermaelen
26 (1981), among others, have argued that stock repurchases are under most circumstances
27 interpreted by investors as a signal that management perceives the firm to be undervalued. In
28 fact, firms need not even necessarily repurchase share for the signal to work, which has given
29 rise to what is, among US firms, the common practice of announcing a stock repurchase
30 program without necessarily repurchasing many shares. Stephens and Weisbach (1998) show,
31 however, that given three years, firms tend to repurchase around 80% of what they promised.
32 This hypothesis has been widely discussed and elaborated on and has also been empirically
33 supported. Lakonishok and Vermaelen (1990), moreover, argue that the signalling effect
34 increases with the volume of stock repurchased. Management-controlled firms are therefore
35 likely to repurchase stock to signal perceived undervaluation of the firm if such exist. The
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3 greater the perceived under-valuation, the greater the probability and volume of stock
4 repurchases that may be expected according to this rationale, *ceteris paribus*. Thus, the
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6 following hypothesis, referred to as the signalling hypothesis, may be formulated:
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12 *H4: There is a negative relationship between firm valuation and extent of stock*
13 *repurchases.*
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20 It is easy to see why a manager whose rewards and career prospects are tied to
21 the market value of the firm would want to signal that the firm is undervalued if that is the
22 case. It is, however, less obvious why a controlling shareholder would extend resources for
23 such signalling to fix a problem that in the longer run is likely to fix itself anyway. Unless a
24 controlling shareholder plans to exit the firm, a more or less temporary undervaluation should
25 be of less concern. Signalling under those circumstances could be interpreted more as a
26 favour to the minority shareholders, which nonetheless may be a plausible outcome of
27 pressures among Swedish controlling owners to improve their reputations (Stafsudd, 2009).
28 Another caveat regarding signalling in the Swedish context is that the market may not
29 necessarily understand what the signal means. Zajac and Westphal (2004) show that it took a
30 long time for the US stock market to begin interpreting stock repurchases as a signal that the
31 repurchasing firm is undervalued. Altogether, this suggests that the incentives to repurchase
32 stock to signal undervaluation may be weaker in the Swedish than in the US context.
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50 In the hypotheses outlined thus far, the market for corporate control, especially
51 the threat of hostile take-overs, is a disciplining mechanism for managements in management-
52 controlled firms. Management is motivated to keep the value of the firm high, so that it will
53 not be an attractive target for take-over attempts. However, it has been suggested by, for
54 instance, Chang and Sullivan (2007) Denis (1990), Dittmar (2000), Ikenberry *et al.* (1995)
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3 and Vermaelen (1984) that stock repurchases are used in order to fend off take-over attempts
4 already in progress, or very closely imminent (Billett & Xue, 2007) in some cases (i.e. as an
5 instrument in ongoing corporate power struggles). A stock repurchase fills, at the very least,
6 two desirable purposes for a management team whose jobs are potentially endangered by a
7 take-over. (i) A stock repurchase is likely to increase firm value due to decreased future
8 agency costs from increased leverage or signalling effects and thus decrease the potential
9 gains from an acquisition. (ii) The owners who are willing to sell their shares at the lowest
10 price will sell them to the firm; thus these shareholders will be removed (Bagwell, 1991).
11 According to this rationale, the more obvious and severe the threat of a hostile take-over, the
12 more likely a firm would be to repurchase stock, *ceteris paribus*. We may therefore formulate
13 the following hypothesis, referred to as the control hypothesis:
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H5: There is a positive relationship between take-over threats and stock repurchases.

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57 Obviously, firms with a controlling owner who holds a large fraction of the
58 shares are less attractive takeover targets unless large shareholders are willing to sell. For that
59 reason, hostile takeovers have been very rare in Sweden (Agnblad *et al.*, 2001), and
60 accordingly we do not expect the control hypothesis to be as important for explaining stock
repurchases in the Swedish as in the US context. However, for those few firms that have
dispersed ownership, take-over threats can still induce stock repurchases, which is why we
test this hypothesis empirically on a Swedish data set.

The impact of firm-level corporate governance differences on stock repurchases

We have considered how the general characteristics of the Swedish corporate governance system might limit the applicability of leading hypotheses on stock repurchases

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3 developed with US firms in mind. Overall, this discussion suggests that corporate governance
4 factors may be important for firms' stock repurchasing behaviour. The literature can also give
5 further clues as to what type of corporate governance factors may impact stock repurchases.
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7 Of particular interest is the literature focusing on stock repurchases outside an Anglo-Saxon
8 context, which however is small, perhaps because stock repurchases have not been allowed
9 for very long.

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17 On a system-wide scale, the legal environment seems to matter. Gonzáles and
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Gonzáles (2004) show that a Spanish cap on the number of shares that companies can
repurchase (similar caps exist in Sweden and other EU countries) induces firms to repurchase
shares on the open market. In addition, the degree to which minority shareholders are
protected may be of consequence. Jiraporn's (2006) study, conducted in the US, shows that
stronger shareholder rights expressed in, for example, state law and corporate charters,
assumed to force managers to act more in the interests of shareholders, prompt more
repurchases of stock. Bohman (2006) uses survival analysis to show that the probability that a
Swedish firm will engage in a stock repurchase program increases with board interlocks with
other firms that repurchase stock, although the small worlds character of Swedish ownership
and board networks (Sinani *et al.*, 2008; Stafssudd, 2009) suggest that most boards are not
many steps away from each other.

Ownership structure appears also to be linked to stock repurchases. Liljeblom
and Pasternack (2006) show that foreign ownership increases stock repurchases among
Finnish firms, and Ginglinger and l'Her (2006) show that the market reaction to
announcements of stock repurchase programs vary with ownership structure in France, such
that the market reacts more positively when the firm has large foreign ownership and when no
single shareholder can dominate decision making and thus use repurchases for minority
expropriation purposes. The latter is consistent with Jiraporn's (2006) findings on the positive

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3 link between shareholder protection and repurchases; however, Swedish firms, though
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5 certainly often dominated by controlling owners, exhibit very limited minority expropriation
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7 (Nenova, 2003; Stafsudd, 2009), so this effect may not be as strong in the Swedish context.
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10 Nevertheless, these studies indicate that beyond system-wide effects, ownership concentration
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12 and heightened exposure to the pressures of international investors might be linked to stock
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14 repurchases. International investors are predominantly situated in Anglo-Saxon contexts and
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16 might both expect and be more positive to stock repurchases (cf. Zajac & Westphal, 2004)
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19 than other investors.
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22 With the specifics and historical development of the Swedish corporate
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24 governance system in mind, this suggests that firms governed in more traditional Swedish
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26 ways (i.e. firms that are characterised by controlling shareholder dominance and limited
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28 influence of foreign investors), may be less induced to repurchase stock, *ceteris paribus*. This
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30 also appears consistent with our discussion about the applicability of hypotheses derived from
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32 agency theory in a context of controlling owner dominance. We may therefore formulate the
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34 following hypothesis, referred to as the governance hypothesis.
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41 *H6: There is a negative relationship between traditional Swedish corporate*
42 *governance arrangements and stock repurchases.*
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51 **SAMPLE AND VARIABLES**

52 Swedish firms were allowed to repurchases stock for the first time in 2000. The
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54 sample consists of yearly observations of all firms listed on the SSE 2000-2004 on which full
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56 information could be obtained. This includes all Swedish firms that were allowed to
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58 repurchase stock, with the exception of a few smaller ones listed on alternative market places.
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60 The sample excludes firms quoted on SSE that were not incorporated in Sweden, as they

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3 operate in different legal regimes regarding stock repurchases. In total, the sample consists of
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5 1304 observations of which 233 were from 2000, 263 from 2001, 279 from 2002, 275 from
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7 2003, and 259 from 2004.
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10 The dependent variable, 'Stock repurchases', is defined as actually incurred
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12 stock repurchases in terms of millions of Swedish crowns (MSEK) over a year. The
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14 independent variables of the study are summarised in Table 1.
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24 Firms' degree of leverage is captured by the variable 'Leverage', which is,
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26 similar to Sanders and Carpenter (2003) and others, defined as firms' debt-to-equity ratio.
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28 Consistent with, e.g., Dittmar (2000) two measures are used to capture excess cash, one
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30 capturing the stock and the other the flow of overliquidity: 'Current assets-to-total assets' and
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32 'Cash flow-to-total assets', measured as the ratios of current assets and yearly cash flow to
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34 total assets, respectively. For banks and closed-end investment funds that do not account for
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36 current assets, total cash possessions were used instead.
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41 The valuation of firms is captured by two variables: 'Market-to-book' and
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43 'Earnings-to-price'. Market-to-book is defined as firms' market-to-book ratio, an established
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45 measure of potential undervaluation of firms (e.g., Bohman, 2006; Dittmar, 2000), and
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47 Earnings-to-price is measured as the ratio of earnings before tax to stock market
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49 capitalisation. The more traditional P/E ratio could not be used as many firms had negative
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51 earnings during the period. Dividends are, as in Sanders and Carpenter (2003), measured as
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53 cash dividend payouts in terms of MSEK, captured by the variable 'Dividends'. Rumours of
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55 potential takeovers of firms are measured by a dummy variable, 'Rumour', that equals 1 if
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3 rumours of a potential takeover of the firm existed in the business press during year; if not it
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5 equals 0, similar to Dittmar (2000).
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8 As in Dittmar (2000), all measures of independent variables are from the
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10 financial year preceding the year of stock repurchases (the end of this year for balance sheet
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12 and market value measures). This approach was chosen because of the hypothesised causal
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14 relationship that the nature of these fundamentals precede a stock repurchase. Moreover, in
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16 Sweden a stock-repurchasing scheme has to be authorised by the general assembly where the
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18 main source of information for the shareholders is the annual financial statement. Two
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20 exceptions exist, however: Dividends and Rumour. Dividends are measured at the year of
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22 stock repurchases to see whether stock repurchases substituted dividends. Dividends, too,
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24 have to be authorised by the general assembly. When measuring Rumours, take-over rumours
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26 for both the year of stock repurchases and the preceding year were recorded, as both imminent
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28 and ongoing take-over attempts may motivate stock repurchases (Billett & Xue, 2007; Chang
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30 & Sullivan, 2007).
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36 We use three variables to capture the in-sample variation of firms' corporate
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38 governance arrangements, indicating whether firms are governed in ways more representative
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40 of traditional Swedish corporate governance or in ways more similar to US firms. One of the
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42 most prominent features of Swedish listed firms, as opposed to US ones, is the prevalence of
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44 major block holders that actively control corporations, often by means of dual-class shares
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46 (Agnblad *et al.*, 2001). We therefore include dummy variables indicating whether a firm has
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48 dual-class shares and whether any one owner holds more than 25% of the votes at the
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50 beginning of the year.² Firms with these characteristics may be regarded as more
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52 representative of traditional Swedish corporate governance, whereas other firms thus have
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54 governance characteristics more similar to US firms, even though they still exhibit high
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56 ownership concentration from a US perspective (cf. La Porta *et al.*, 1999). We also include a
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3 dummy variable, 'Crosslisting', which indicates whether a firm is listed on the London Stock
4 Exchange (LSE), NASDAQ and/or the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE); this variable
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6 proxy for heightened exposure to the pressures of international investors, which traditionally
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8 has been low for most Swedish firms.
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12 We furthermore control for size, industry and year. The natural logarithm of
13 total assets measured in MSEK, 'Log total assets', and dummy variables indicating year and
14 which industrial sector firms belong to according to GICS, the classificatory standard used by
15 SSE, are used for this purpose.
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19 All accounting data were collected from the EcoWin and Datastream databases
20 or directly from the firms' annual reports. Data on ownership structure, the presence of dual-
21 class shares and market values were collected from the annual 'Owners and power' series,
22 comprising highly reliable data on the ownership structures of listed Swedish firms. Data on
23 stock repurchases and cross listing were collected from SSE's records. Data on take-over
24 rumours were collected from Affärsdata's database that contains an archive of articles from
25 the most important Swedish business press. A query with the search string containing the
26 Swedish equivalent of 'take-over' was performed, and those firms mentioned as potential
27 take-over targets were coded 1 and all others were coded 0. The data collected on takeover
28 rumours are, in contrast to all other data, obviously not as reliable. In order to test for this, we
29 attempted to recode rumours of the year 2001, and the results differed very little from our first
30 attempt, indicating that the reliability problem is not particularly serious. All multivariate tests
31 have also been performed with the variable excluded, and the results presented in the
32 remainder of this paper are robust to the inclusion of the Rumour.
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54 RESULTS

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56 Table 2 present descriptive statistics, VIF values and bivariate correlations
57 (Pearson) among the variables and Table 3 compares the means for firms that did or did not
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3 repurchase stock, respectively (industry and year dummies are not reported). Table 3 also
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5 reports results from independent samples t-tests (t statistic) and Wilcoxon/Mann-Whitney U-
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7 tests (z statistic) to test for equality between the two groups.
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25 The average firm of our sample repurchased stock worth MSEK 66.07, although
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27 the standard deviation is very large. The average dividend of MSEK 218.20, also with a high
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29 standard deviation, is about triple the size of the average stock repurchase. Considering that
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31 our sample encompasses the first five years in which stock repurchases were allowed for
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33 Swedish publicly traded firms, thus making dividends the only way for firms to distribute
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35 cash to investors prior to the sample period, the reform was at least not coldly received. The
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37 governance variables show that 56% of the firms in the sample had shares with differential
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39 voting rights, and that 59% of the firms had a shareholder controlling 25% of the votes or
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41 more. Cross-listing, in contrast, is much less common: 5% of the firms in the sample were
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43 cross-listed on LSE, NASDAQ and/or NYSE.
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49 As indicated by the VIF values accounted for in Table 2, the inclusion of the
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51 variable Log total assets in multivariate analysis creates hazards of multicollinearity. We
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53 have, however, performed all multivariate tests with this variable excluded to determine
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55 whether this is a problem. The results remained the same with this variable excluded, which
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57 indicates that it is not.
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3 The sample contains 164 observations of stock repurchases, which means that in
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5 an average year, around 13% of our sampled firms repurchased stock. This is slightly less
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7 than US firms; in Dittmar's (2000) sample of listed non-financial US firms, for example, 16%
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9 of firms repurchased shares in 1995 and 20% of firms repurchased stock in 1996. The tests for
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11 equality (Table 3) show that stock-repurchasing Swedish firms tend to be larger than those
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13 that are not repurchasing shares ($t = -11.75$; $p < .01$). Surprisingly, they also appear to be
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15 significantly higher leveraged ($t = -2.68$; $p < .01$), have less current assets relative to total assets
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17 ($t = 5.11$; $p < .01$), and pay larger dividends ($t = -8.03$; $p < .01$). The Wilcoxon/Mann-Whitney test,
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19 but not the t-test, also indicates that repurchasing firms have significantly higher earnings-to-
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21 price ratio ($z = -12.39$; $p < .01$) and lower market-to-book ratio ($z = -3.65$; $p < .01$). Repurchasing
22
23 firms are also more often the subjects of take-over rumours ($t = -4.7$; $p < .01$). Thus far, the data
24
25 appear to be outright contradictory to the leverage hypothesis, the excess cash hypothesis, and
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27 the substitution hypothesis, while being ambiguous regarding the signalling hypothesis and
28
29 supportive of the control hypothesis. Yet the important qualification that the tests for equality
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31 do not take the volume of stock repurchases into account should be stressed. The tests for
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33 equality also show that repurchasing firms tend to be cross-listed more often than non-
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35 repurchasing firms ($t = -2.62$; $p < .01$), thus suggesting that they are more exposed to pressures
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37 stemming from US and UK investors.
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46 Table 4 reports results from OLS regressions³ with Stock repurchases as a
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48 dependent variable, hence taking into account the variability in the volume of stock
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50 repurchases the tests for equality fail to acknowledge. Information technology and 2002 are
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52 consistently used as reference categories in the estimated models. Since the sample to a large
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54 extent consists of data from the same firms over consecutive years, there is a risk of serial
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56 correlation. We control for year to preserve the independence of the observations, but also
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3 report Durbin-Watson statistics, all of which suggest that serial correlation is not at hand in
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5 the estimated models.
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10 Insert Table 4 here
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15 Models 1-2 are estimates based on the full sample. Entering the experimental
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17 variables (Model 2) greatly increases the explanatory power compared to Model 1 consisting
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19 only of control variables ($\text{Adj-R}^2 = .083$ and $.223$ respectively). The regression analysis
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21 indicates that stock repurchases are positively related to dividends ($t=12.93$; $p<.01$). This
22
23 contradicts the substitution hypothesis, suggesting instead that stock repurchases are made on
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25 top of dividends; firms that pay large dividends are more likely to repurchase large volumes
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27 of stock. Beyond that, all hypotheses based on agency theory fail this test, suggesting that
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29 patterns of stock repurchases among Swedish firms differ substantially from that among US
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31 firms.
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36 Two governance variables are significant at the 1% level, indicating that
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38 corporate governance indeed affects stock-repurchasing behaviour. Our results suggest that
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40 firms with a shareholder in control of more than 25% of the votes tend to repurchase less
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42 stock ($t=-3.72$; $p<.01$). Being cross-listed on LSE, NASDAQ and/or NYSE is positively
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44 related to stock repurchases ($t=3.36$; $p<.01$). We thus find evidence to support the governance
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46 hypothesis, that firms with more traditional Swedish governance arrangements repurchase
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48 less stock. The presence of dual-class shares does, however, not predict stock repurchases in
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50 our sample, so the support is not unambiguous. Ownership concentration and heightened
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52 exposure to pressures of US or UK investors seem, however, to be of significance for
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54 Swedish firms' stock repurchasing behaviour.
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3 The presence of a shareholder in control of more than 25% of the votes appears
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5 to be of major importance for stock repurchases among Swedish firms. We therefore
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7 estimated two additional models: one based on the subset of firms with a large owner (Model
8
9 3) and one based on the subset of firms without a large owner (Model 4). A number of
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11 industries were only represented in one subset and the respective dummy variables were thus
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13 excluded from the estimation based on the subset in which they were not represented.
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17 The significant positive relationship between dividends and stock repurchases
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19 ($t=3.18$; $p<.01$; and $t=12.93$; $p<.01$, for Model 3 and 4, respectively), and cross listing and
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21 stock repurchases ($t=-2.64$; $p<.01$; and $t=2.56$; $p<.05$, for Model 3 and 4, respectively) is
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23 consistent across specifications. However, there is a significant negative relationship between
24
25 leverage and stock repurchases for the subset of firms without a large owner ($t=-3.46$; $p<.01$),
26
27 suggesting that the leverage hypothesis can predict the behaviour of this group. Interestingly,
28
29 the R^2 differs substantially between the two models. The estimated model based on the subset
30
31 of firms with a large owner have an Adjusted R^2 of only 0.075, whereas the model based on
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33 the subset of firms without a large owner have an Adjusted R^2 of 0.367. This suggests that the
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35 model is a substantially better fit for firms with an ownership structure more similar to US
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37 firms, which indicates that the independent variables, largely selected based on agency
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39 theoretical explanations of stock repurchases, does a far better job at predicting stock
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41 repurchases among firms with corporate governance arrangements more similar to US firms
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43 than those with more traditional Swedish arrangements, supporting the governance
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45 hypothesis.
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53 Overall, the only hypothesis derived from agency theory to which our results are
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55 partly supportive is the leverage hypothesis, but it only appears to predict stock repurchases
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57 among the subset of firms that do not have a large controlling shareholder. Another caveat is
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59 that the bivariate tests show that the group of stock-repurchasing firms on average is more
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3 highly leveraged than the non-repurchasing group, but this effect thus disappears when
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5 volume of stock repurchases are taken into account. Variables derived from the other leading
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7 hypotheses fail to predict stock repurchases, or are related to stock repurchases in the opposite
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9 direction than expected. The results differ somewhat from Bohman's (2006) study of stock
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11 repurchases in Sweden that indicates that a high return on assets and a low market-to-book
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13 may increase the probability for a firm to engage in a stock repurchase program, whereas
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15 leverage appears to be indifferent. These differences are likely attributable to the fact that
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17 Bohman studies the probability to engage in a stock repurchase program, whereas this study
18
19 uses the volume of stock repurchases as dependent variable.
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25 Some of the governance variables, in contrast, are interestingly enough
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27 significantly related to stock repurchases, indicating that stock repurchasing behaviour is
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29 affected by corporate governance arrangements. More specifically, firms with concentrated
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31 ownership seem to behave differently from those with less concentrated ownership in the
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33 sense that they repurchase less stock. Firms with less concentrated ownership seem also to
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35 behave more similarly to what has been observed among US firms. Those firms that are more
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37 exposed to the pressures of US or UK stock markets, seem also to behave differently from
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39 other firms in the sense that they repurchase more stock; this supports the governance
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41 hypothesis.
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45 46 **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

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48 Table 5 summarises our empirical results on stock repurchases among Swedish
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50 firms with regards to the five leading hypotheses on share repurchases, which are compared
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52 with earlier US research, and the governance hypothesis. We find evidence to support the
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54 governance hypothesis, that firms with more traditional Swedish corporate governance
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56 arrangements are less prone to stock repurchases. We also find evidence that partially
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58 supports the leverage hypothesis, that firms with repurchase stock alter their leverage closer to
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3 an optimal level – although only firms with relatively dispersed ownership do this. However,
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5 we find little evidence to support the other hypotheses based on an agency theory view of the
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7 firm, (i.e. that share repurchases are used as a mean to distribute excess cash, signal
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9 undervaluation, or fend off takeover attempts). Neither are repurchases a substitute for
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11 dividends. In fact, dividends are positively related to stock repurchases in our sample,
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13 indicating that they are made in addition to cash dividends, rather than substituting for them.
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24 Overall, the results support the view that variation in corporate governance
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26 arrangements impacts stock repurchasing behaviour. We find direct evidence to suggest that
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28 firm-level governance affects stock repurchases. The pattern of stock repurchases among
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30 Swedish firms also appears to differ substantially from that of US firms. Although this is not
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32 conclusive evidence that differences in corporate governance institutions drive these
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34 differences, our results on how firm-level corporate governance arrangements affect the
35
36 volume of stock repurchases in such a way that firms whose corporate governance
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38 arrangements are more similar to those of US firms (relatively less ownership concentration)
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40 and with heightened exposure to US or UK stock markets (through cross listing) repurchase
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42 more stock, support this interpretation. This is in line with Liljeblom and Pasternack (2006),
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44 who show that foreign ownership increases stock repurchases among Finnish firms, and with
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46 Ginglinger and l'Her (2006), who show that stock-price reactions to share buybacks by
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48 French firms are more positive if foreign ownership is high and there is no dominating
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50 controlling shareholder. Another finding that is consistent with the view that national
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52 corporate governance institutions partially drive these changes is that the model, consisting
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54 mostly of variables linked to hypotheses that had received previous support by US data, fits
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3 firms with more dispersed ownership a lot better (in terms of R^2) than firms with a dominant
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5 controlling owner, which are common in the Swedish (Agnblad *et al.*, 2001), but not in the
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7 US (Weimer & Pape, 1999) context.
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10 Hence, our results are consistent with the institutional literature arguing that
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12 agency theory suffers from US-centricity and fails to account for the effects of important
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14 institutional differences (Aguilera & Jackson, 2003; Fligstein & Freeland, 1995; Gospel &
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16 Pendleton, 2005; Lubatkin *et al.*, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2002); differences which seem to matter
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18 also for stock repurchases. The study contributes to this literature by identifying institutional
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20 factors that may be important drivers of cross-national differences in stock repurchases:
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22 controlling shareholder salience and exposure to Anglo-Saxon capital markets. Controlling
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24 shareholders are likely to have interests regarding stock repurchases that differ from
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26 autonomous managers. While approximately a third of the stock traded on SSE is owned by
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28 foreigners and Swedish firms generally have highly international sales, the existence of
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30 dominant controlling owners is also likely to shield many firms from pressures stemming
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32 from foreign investors that often seem to have a preference for stock repurchases (Ginglinger
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34 & l'Her, 2006; Liljeblom & Pasternack, 2006). Cross listing may, however, indicate
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36 heightened exposure to such pressures that firms, whether they have a dominant controlling
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38 owner or not, cannot resist.
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45 What our study largely fails to do, however, is to provide a convincing
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47 explanation as to why Swedish firms repurchase stock in general. It is obvious that the leading
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49 hypotheses on stock repurchases have limited explanatory power in the Swedish context.
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51 Even though the leading hypotheses have better explanatory power for Swedish firms with
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53 relatively dispersed ownership (in terms of R^2), they still do not have strong explanatory
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55 power even for those firms; only the leverage hypothesis seems to significantly explain stock
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57 repurchases among this subset of firms. What does seem clear, however, is that any
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3 explanation of stock repurchases among Swedish firms should consider that stock repurchases
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5 are likely to largely reflect the interests of controlling shareholders, rather than those of an
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7 autonomous management sensitive to capital-market pressures.
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10 Our findings have clear implications for the literature on stock repurchases. The
11
12 leading hypotheses seem to accurately predict stock repurchases only in certain (Anglo-
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14 American) institutional and governance settings that, from a global perspective, are special
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16 cases. We also show that firm-level corporate governance can have a significant influence on
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18 incentives for stock repurchases. This highlights the need to integrate the impact of corporate
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20 governance in theorising on stock repurchases and our study contributes by indicating some
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22 factors that may influence the decision to repurchase stock.
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27 The findings also have implications for policy makers. Specifically, the finding
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29 that differences in national and firm-specific corporate governance institutions seem to affect
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31 stock repurchases has implications for reform work. This finding essentially suggests that
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33 attempts to harmonise legislation on stock repurchases around the world (as has been done in
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35 the EU) is likely to yield stock-repurchasing behaviour that differ between countries in ways
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37 that reflect these countries' unique institutional settings. While this study certainly cannot
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39 fully substantiate such a claim, it does suggest that *de jure* harmonisation will not
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41 automatically lead to *de facto* harmonisation when it comes to stock repurchases. Policy
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43 makers need to consider the impact of their respective institutional context on the incentives
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45 to repurchase stock in order to more accurately assess the effects of reforms in this area.
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50 The study has a number of limitations. Since we only have data from Sweden,
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52 we were unable to make direct comparisons between stock repurchases among Swedish firms
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54 and among firms in other countries. The results of this study suggests that such direct
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56 comparisons may be a promising avenue for future research, which by such comparisons
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58 should be able to, with more precision, identify those differences in national institutional
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3 arrangements that affect stock repurchases. One such difference between Swedish and US
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5 firms that potentially could be an important driver behind our results, is the differences in
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7 CEO compensation between the two countries (cf. Oxelheim *et al.*, 2008; Murphy, 1999).
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10 Another potentially important factor that has not been regarded in this study is cross-national
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12 variation in board composition. Swedish firms have, for example, labour representatives on
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14 the board, who may be more interested in reinvesting excess cash than distributing them to
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16 shareholders by stock repurchases.
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20 Another interesting avenue for future research is to develop and test hypotheses
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22 on stock repurchases in corporate governance systems characterised by concentrated
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24 ownership. One potential reason for why controlling shareholders may want to repurchase
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26 stock is to consolidate their ownership stake (cf. Ginglinger & l'Her, 2006). By letting the
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28 firm repurchase stock and not selling privately held stock, the relative stake of the controlling
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30 owner increases. Controlling shareholders are often argued to derive private benefits from
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32 being in control (Dyck & Zingales, 2004; Nenova, 2003; Rydqvist, 1996), so such company-
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34 financed consolidation of the ownership stake should be especially valuable to controlling
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36 shareholders that plausibly could face a control contest. In our sample, the absence of an
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38 owner holding more than 25% of the votes increases the volume of repurchased stock. At the
39
40 same time, over 90% of all firms in the sample have a block holder controlling over 10% of
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42 the votes. Hence, most firms that repurchase stock are likely to have a controlling shareholder
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44 that could conceivably lose control over the firm. Also consistent with this conjecture is the
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46 fact that our sample contains only 11 observations of repurchases of shares with higher voting
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48 power, typically held by controlling owners, even though 60% of the repurchasing firms had
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50 dual-class shares in operation. Though these observations are in line, we do not have the data
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52 to directly capture whether this motivation drives stock repurchases in Sweden, but future
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54 research might wish to examine this hypothesis more closely.
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3 We thus conclude that differences in corporate governance seem to impact stock
4 repurchases. More specifically, we conclude that controlling shareholder salience seems to be
5 negatively related to stock repurchases and exposure to Anglo-Saxon capital markets appears
6 to be positively related to stock repurchases. As Swedish firms typically have a much higher
7 ownership concentration than US firms, hypotheses developed to explain stock repurchases
8 among US firm fail to predict the behaviour of Swedish firms. Among five hypotheses, all of
9 which are well-supported when tested with US data, only the leverage hypothesis partially
10 predicts stock repurchasing behaviour among Swedish firms, although only among those
11 firms that do not have a dominant controlling owner (>25% of votes). The excess cash
12 hypothesis, the signalling hypothesis, the substitution hypothesis and the control hypothesis
13 seem not to describe the stock-repurchasing behaviour among Swedish firms.
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30 NOTES

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34 ¹ It could be argued that in Sweden, well-known for its high tax environment, tax
35 considerations and repurchases should be related. Although we do not focus specifically on
36 tax-related explanations in this study, this warrants a few comments. Capital gains are taxed at
37 an equal rate as dividends (30%) for physical persons, which is similar to the situation in the
38 United States (cf. Dittmar, 2000). It could be argued that stock repurchases are beneficial for
39 physical persons on the grounds that they are able to choose whether to realise capital gains or
40 not, which is not possible with a dividend. However, many of the business groups use closed-
41 end investment funds in pyramid-holding structures, and for these, dividends are, if they
42 consist of dividends from portfolio companies passed on, tax-deductible. Controlling
43 shareholder families also often exert control by foundations (due, among other things, to past
44 inheritance-tax laws), which are taxed in other ways. Moreover, a third of the ownership on
45 SSE is foreign, which faces the tax situations in their home contexts. Swedish institutions are
46 taxed in yet other ways. Altogether, it is difficult to say whether shareholders as a group
47 would prefer stock repurchases to dividends, even if only focusing on controlling
48 shareholders. To the extent that taxes affect preferences, we capture some of that when we
49 test the substitution hypothesis, and whether the presence of controlling shareholders or cross
50 listing (implying more foreign ownership) affect stock repurchases.
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53 ² We also collected data on whether firms had an owner in control of more than 10 % of the
54 votes. However, since over 91% of the firms in the sample did, the variable was not very
55 useful for analysis due to limited variation.
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58 ³ The TOBIT model is another commonly used estimation technique for predicting stock
59 repurchases (e.g., Dittmar, 2000; Sanders & Carpenter, 2003), as it is often argued that this
60 dependent variable is censored at zero, i.e., that information on its value is not available for
some observations (cf. Gujarati, 1995). However, information on the amount of stock

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5 repurchases is available for all observations, those displaying zero stock repurchases have not
6 repurchased any stock. Thus the variable is not censored, even though it is highly skewed,
7 which is why we choose not to use the TOBIT model for our estimations.
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TABLE 1
Independent Variables

Variable	Definition	Expected relation to stock repurchases
<i>The leverage hypothesis</i>		
Leverage	Debt / Equity	Negative
<i>The excess cash hypothesis</i>		
Current assets-to-total assets	Cash and equivalents / Total assets	Positive
Cash flow-to- total assets	Cash flow / Total assets	Positive
<i>The substitution hypothesis</i>		
Dividends	Dividends paid	Negative
<i>The signalling hypothesis</i>		
Market-to-book	Market value of equity + book value of debt / Book value of equity and debt	Negative
Earnings-to-price	Earnings before tax / market value of equity	Negative
<i>The control hypothesis</i>		
Rumour	1 if a takeover rumour is identified in press searches	Positive
<i>The governance hypothesis</i>		
Differential voting rights	1 if the firm uses dual-class shares	Negative
Crosslisting	1 if the firm is cross-listed on NYSE, NASDAQ and/or LSE	Positive
Owner > 25%	1 if any one owner holds > 25% of votes	Negative

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	S.D.	VIF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Stock repurchases, MSEK	66.07	519.23		1.00							
Log total assets	7.08	2.15	2.62	0.29	1.00						
Leverage	1.81	7.46	1.09	0.10	0.23	1.00					
Current assets-to-total assets	0.51	0.28	1.58	-0.08	-0.44	-0.12	1.00				
Cash flow-to-total assets	-0.01	0.25	1.08	0.01	0.15	0.00	0.04	1.00			
Market-to-book	4.07	21.87	1.05	-0.01	-0.07	0.04	0.08	0.02	1.00		
Earnings-to-price	-0.32	5.08	1.03	0.01	0.05	0.03	-0.01	0.07	0.01	1.00	
Dividends, MSEK	218.20	710.28	1.70	0.44	0.62	0.21	-0.22	0.03	-0.02	0.03	1.00
Rumour	0.20	0.40	1.11	0.07	0.18	0.06	-0.06	0.00	-0.04	-0.01	0.08
Differential voting rights	0.56	0.50	1.28	0.04	0.09	-0.05	0.00	-0.01	-0.07	-0.01	0.06
Cross-listing	0.05	0.23	1.26	0.21	0.37	0.05	-0.05	0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.27
Owner > 25%	0.59	0.49	1.25	-0.09	0.07	-0.03	-0.07	0.01	-0.07	0.06	-0.01

Note: VIF values from estimation of Model 2 (Table 4)

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-0.14	1.00		
0.07	0.07	1.00	
-0.11	0.36	-0.02	1.00

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TABLE 3
Tests for Equality

	Non- Repurchasers (n=1145)	Repurchasers (n=164)	t	z
Log total assets	6.83	8.84	-11.75**	-11.06**
Leverage	1.60	3.26	-2.68**	-4.09**
Current assets-to-total assets	0.53	0.41	5.11**	-4.70**
Cash flow-to-total assets	-0.02	0.01	-1.33	-0.21
Market-to-book	4.37	1.96	1.32	-3.65**
Earnings-to-price	-0.39	0.13	-1.22	-12.39**
Dividends, MSEK	159.94	624.94	-8.03**	-12.75**
Rumor	0.18	0.34	-4.70**	-4.66**
Differential voting rights	0.55	0.60	-1.14	-1.14
Cross-listing	0.05	0.10	-2.62**	-2.62**
Owner > 25%	0.60	0.57	0.59	-0.59

Note: † p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01

TABLE 4

Results of OLS Regressions with Stock Repurchases as Dependent Variable

	Model 1 (all firms)		Model 2 (all firms)		Model 3 (firms with owner >25%)		Model 4 (firms with no owner >25%)	
	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error
(Constant)	-480.96**	56.58	-42.77	83.77	-179.51**	51.91	-75.27	166.63
Log total assets	77.17**	7.45	-1.07	9.65	21.20**	5.50	-4.35	20.85
Leverage			0.45	1.80	1.10	0.86	-17.66*	7.30
Current assets-to-total assets			47.63	58.38	50.16	36.55	45.90	110.01
Cash flow-to-total assets			-26.45	53.21	-16.00	33.26	-47.93	102.82
Market-to-book			-0.41	0.60	-0.97	1.23	-0.37	0.83
Earnings-to-price			-0.04	2.55	-10.35	11.17	-0.32	3.45
Dividends, MSEK			0.30**	0.02	0.04**	0.01	0.64**	0.05
Rumour			37.99	33.69	1.13	20.40	84.50	65.44
Differential voting rights			36.24	29.16	12.80	17.17	7.31	59.66
Cross-listing			213.01**	63.34	-95.50**	36.18	360.17*	140.61
Owner > 25%			-108.52**	29.15				
Energy	141.46	224.30	6.03	210.40	48.15	91.41		
Materials	-91.28	60.62	-21.62	58.87	23.70	32.18	-28.69	135.99
Industrials	-41.83	40.05	36.69	38.81	-15.46	23.05	-33.62	79.62
Consumer discretionary	-39.17	50.69	44.20	48.57	-5.01	26.47	50.37	114.24
Consumer staples	-16.96	104.37	130.15	98.81	-21.69	51.12	73.15	260.16
Health care	-34.86	53.20	-7.94	49.89	-4.74	32.49	-13.29	88.85
Financials	-74.80	48.24	31.06	50.52	25.06	29.75	-101.18	110.31
Telecommunication services	-200.20*	101.21	-77.70	95.71	-40.25	48.37	27.92	259.97

Utilities	-270.83	251.37	34.08	237.41	-47.29	103,89		
2000	99.88*	44.17	98.38*	42.33	53.84*	23,68	206,92*	90,58
2001	42.17	42.74	37.76	40.30	9.81	22,71	84,56	84,43
2003	15.49	42.26	2.76	39.62	-7.70	22,17	21,05	82,36
2004	58.94	42.92	38.88	40.22	24.81	22,71	81,90	83,32
Adj-R2	0.083		0.223		0.075		0.367	
Durbin-Watson	2.051		1.980		2.002		2.013	
N	1304		1304		774		530	

Note: † p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01

TABLE 5

Results Compared with Previous Research using US Data

Hypothesis	Studies suggesting the hypothesis' explanatory power for US firms	Results of this study
The leverage hypothesis	Ofer and Thakor (1987); Wansley <i>et al.</i> (1989); and Dittmar (2000)	Supportive only for firms without owner > 25%
The excess cash hypothesis	Stephens and Weisbach (1998); Dittmar (2000); Jagannathan <i>et al.</i> (2000); Guay and Harford (2000); and Fenn and Liang (2001)	Unsupportive
The substitution hypothesis	Grullon and Michaely (2002); and Skinner (2008)	Unsupportive
The signalling hypothesis	Vermaelen (1981); Netter and Mitchell (1989); Lakonishok and Vermaelen (1990); Ikenberry <i>et al.</i> (1995); Louis and White (2007); Chang and Sullivan (2007); and Jun <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Unsupportive
The control hypothesis	Vermaelen (1984); Denis (1990); Dittmar (2000); Chang and Sullivan (2007); and Billett and Xue (2007)	Unsupportive
The governance hypothesis		Supportive