

8. Conclusions

Mass media's impact on political support has been the subject of extensive research in recent years. The present study aimed to contribute to this research by asking the following research question: *How and under which conditions do mass media's presentations of political decision-making processes affect citizens' political support?* The objective of this study was to expand on previous research in three respects. First, this work investigated the impact of mass media's presentations of political decision-making processes on citizens' political support, because little is known about the impact of media presentations of routine political processes (Arnold, 2004; Morris & Clawson, 2007). Previous research has concentrated on the effects of media information in the context of election campaigns, "but there have been no attempts to tie media coverage of legislative process to citizen approval" (Morris & Clawson, 2007, p. 3). The second objective of the present study was to probe the mechanisms by which media information about political processes affects citizens' political support, since previous studies focused on outcomes and tended to neglect the investigation of effect mechanisms. Moreover, the empirical findings on mass media's impact on political malaise are ambiguous. Hence research is needed that probes the precise conditions under which the mass media may contribute to a decline of political support. Studies in political science indicate that the relationship between the perception of political realities and related preferences is a relevant predictor of political support. Research on media effects has so far neglected to investigate whether media's impact on political support is contingent upon individual preferences.¹⁰¹ Thus, the third objective of this study is the analysis of the media's impact on political support as a function of individual preferences as regards political processes. Because research lacks a standardized measurement of process preferences and perceptions, a further aim of this study was the development and validation of standardized scales to measure both.

In order to provide answers to the research question, a preferences-perceptions model of media effects on political support was developed. This model describes both the mechanisms by which media information on political decision-making processes affects political support and the conditions under which the media's impact is particularly likely. It takes central account of the relationship between media information, individual perceptions of political processes, individual preferences regarding political processes, and political support. As regards the effect mechanisms, the model draws on cultivation theory (W. P. Eveland, Jr., 2002) and argues that the way media cover political decision-making processes shapes the perception

101 Previous research addressed media effects as a function of preferences in the sense of ideological orientations, for instance (e.g. Zaller, 1992). This study, however, looks at the role of individual preferences in the sense of importance attached to certain process aspects.

of political processes by the recipients. The perception of political processes, in turn, is assumed to predict levels of political support. With respect to the conditions that make those effects particularly likely, the model builds on discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987; Kimball & Patterson, 1997; S. C. Patterson, et al., 1969). Discrepancy theory assumes that “evaluations of individual, social or political objects are partly grounded in disparities between expectations and perceptions” (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 703). Thus, the model proposes that the impact of the perception of specific process aspects on political support is particularly strong if a person holds strong preferences towards these aspects of political processes. Based on the distinction between consensus democracy and majoritarian democracy, this study distinguishes between preferences with respect to the efficiency of political processes and preferences concerning the role of compromise-seeking endeavors. In addition, the model assumes that media information might shape the temporary accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship through priming. As a result, the impact of the relationship on political support is assumed to be stronger. Likewise, chronic accessibility may foster the impact of the preferences-perceptions relationship on political support.

In order to test the theoretical assumptions and to provide answers to the research question, this study investigated the impact of both routine use of political information in the mass media and exposure to specific news articles on political support. A series of standardized online surveys with 523 citizens from the German-speaking part of Switzerland was therefore conducted. The surveys embedded an experimental study. In the experimental setting, the participants were randomly assigned to two treatment groups and a control group. One treatment group received news articles that contained critical information about the consensus-orientation of political processes. The other treatment group received news articles that included critical information about the efficiency of political processes. In addition, data from a comprehensive content analysis of media presentations of political decision-making processes in Switzerland provided the background for the interpretations of findings.

Regarding the mechanisms by which media information affects political support, the results indicate, overall, that media may decrease political support by shaping the perception of certain aspects of political processes. Findings from the content analyses that were presented in this study suggested that television news referred to political discord and power struggles as well as the inefficiency of political decision-making processes, the latter especially when reporting on political processes within the parliament. These media coverage patterns appeared to be not without consequences for citizens' political support. The survey results indicated that television use enhanced the perception of political processes as inefficient. This finding corresponds to studies which show that media information shapes recipients' perception of political institutions (Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001). The perception of political processes as inefficient, in turn, led to a decrease in political support. Hence television use was found to decrease political support indirectly via the perception of political processes as inefficient. The use of television for political information was not directly related to the respondents' levels of political support. This result is in

line with previous research, which shows that there is no direct association between television use for political information and support for the government or parliament (Bennett, et al., 1999; Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Moy, et al., 1999; O'Keefe, 1980).

The results indicate that the media particularly affect the perception of those aspects of political processes which are not closely related to central values and beliefs of a citizen's political culture. Although television newscasts were found to focus on political discord, power struggles, and accusations, this study's results indicated that there is no significant relationship between television use and the perception of political processes as consensus-oriented. Building on the assumption expressed in the literature, that attitudes which are rooted in beliefs and ideologies are less prone to media effects (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 191), the lack of significant media effects on the perception of political processes in terms of consensus-orientation appears to be reasonable. Considering the context of political culture in Switzerland, the following explanation might account for the findings: The political culture in Switzerland is characterized by values of consensus and compromises (Linder & Steffen, 2006). This warrants the assumption that the perception of political processes in terms of consensus-orientation is deeply rooted in citizens' beliefs and is based on information from a variety of sources other than news media. Thus, the mass media's impact on perceptions of aspects of political processes that are related to these central values might be limited. Further comparative studies would be needed in order to investigate whether in competitive democracies like the U.S. – where endeavours for compromises and consensus are not important for the citizens (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) – television use is significantly related to consensus perceptions.

Concerning the impact of exposure to specific newspaper articles, this study found that exposure to distinct media articles did not contribute to direct changes in the perception of political processes. Both exposure to newspaper articles that contained critical information about the consensus-orientation of political processes and exposure to newspaper articles that contained critical information about the efficiency of political processes did not change the perception of political processes by the recipients. Thus, it seems warranted to suggest that mass media's impact on reality perceptions may be subject to long-term changes rather than short-term changes. This assumption is in line with cultivation research that conceptualizes attitude changes as long-term processes (W. P. Eveland, Jr., 2002).

With regard to the conditions under which the impact of media's presentations of political processes on political support is particularly likely, the findings support the assumption that individual preferences concerning political processes matter. The media's impact on political support via the perception of political processes appeared to be particularly strong for those citizens for whom according aspects of political processes are very important. More precisely, this study found that television use had an indirect impact on political support via the perception of political processes as inefficient, particularly for those respondents for whom efficient decision-making procedures are important. In contrast, for those respondents for whom efficient decision-making procedures are unimportant, the impact of television use

on political support via the perception of political processes as inefficient was not significant. This finding is consistent with other research using the discrepancy concept (Moretti & Higgins, 1990). Moreover, the results are in line with findings from previous studies that showed that the impact of satisfaction with results of government policy on trust in the government is stronger for people who perceive that this policy issue is an important issue (Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2009). Hence the assumption that political preferences in the sense of importance rankings are a significant moderator of media effects appears to be applicable to media effects research in general. For instance, the impact of strategy frames on political cynicism might be contingent upon individual preferences as regards the role of motives and strategies of political actors.

Regarding role of accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship, the preferences-perceptions model of media effects assumes that situational exposure to information may increase the temporary accessibility of already available discrepancies between process preferences and perceptions through priming. The findings presented in this study did not support this assumption, however. Because methodological reasons might be responsible for this null finding, future research is needed with respect to priming effects on the temporary accessibility of preferences-perceptions relationships. Moreover, the model assumes that a chronically accessible preferences-perceptions relationship does increase the impact of the preferences-perceptions relationship on political support. Because the findings reported here are less compelling, further studies that test alternative indicators of chronic accessibility are needed in order to gain more evidence as regards the moderating role of chronic accessibility.

In general, the empirical evidence presented here support the preferences-perceptions model of media effects in some parts. With regards to other parts, however, further research is needed. The assumption that media information shape citizens' perceptions of political processes in the long-term receives empirical support. Moreover, process perceptions were found to impact attitudes of political support (Proposition 1). In addition, the impact of process perceptions on support was found to vary as a function of process preferences (Proposition 2). Whereas the assumption that the process-preferences relationship predicts political support receives support, further research is needed with respect to the moderating role of the accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship (Proposition 3). Furthermore, future studies shall investigate in more detail the media's impact on process preferences in order to test the stability of such political preferences and to specify the conditions under which media information might alter preferences. Looking at the diagram of the model in Figure 3.1, it appears that the middle part of the model is backed up by empirical evidence presented in this study. Future research, hence, could focus on the investigation of assumptions that are illustrated in the left part of the model.

This study provides several methodological contributions. The scales measuring process perceptions and process preferences were found to encompass three dimensions each, namely consensus-orientation, competition, and efficiency. The developed scales are a first step towards a standardized measurement of process prefer-

ences and perceptions. Further research, however, shall investigate the role of additional process dimensions, such as transparency, responsiveness or inclusiveness. The use of confirmatory factor analysis with structural equation modeling appeared to be valuable for the development and validation of the scales measuring the perception of political processes and according preferences. In further analyses, the cultural equivalence of the process preference scale was confirmed. In addition, the study provided empirical evidence which support the assumption that the scale is invariant as regards different objects of assessment. The invariance as regards the object of evaluation was investigated with a multi-method-multi-treat approach. This appeared to be an applicable procedure which could be used in future studies that are interested in the issue of scale invariance in terms of different objects of evaluation.

Furthermore, the use of structural equation modeling appeared to be useful to investigate media effects on complex political attitudes. In order to account for the factorial structure of attitudes such as political support (Wolling, 1999, pp. 33-36), these variables can be modeled as latent factors that are reflected by several indicators that measure different dimensions of a concept. Moreover, structural equation modeling facilitates the investigation of mediation (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002, 2003). Investigating indirect effects with mediation analysis is considered to be important for the further development of theories (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Preacher, et al., 2007). Structural equation modeling might also contribute to future studies that apply a cross-cultural comparative research design in ascertaining measurement equivalence as a pre-condition for comparisons of effects over samples from different cultures. This study applied latent interactions to test moderating assumptions in structural equation models. Based on the experiences, I may suggest using latent interactions in future studies as an applicable alternative to group comparisons in cases when moderator variables are measured continuously.

Several limitations of this study deserve special consideration. First, this study's reliance on media use measures as surrogate for media content data limits the validity of its findings. Studies that are based on media use measures cannot provide answers to the question which aspects of media coverage contribute to the explanation of political attitudes. In order to be able to trace back the media's impact on citizens' process perceptions to precise aspects of how political processes were presented in the news coverage, a study that is based on a data set which links content measures and attitude measures would be needed. Such a data set should match measures of presentations of political decision-making processes in those media outlets that an individual was exposed to with measurements of this individual's political attitudes. Only such a design can provide evidence for the assumption that media presentations of political processes account for the variance in process perceptions and rule out the possibility that other aspects, such as a general negativity in media content, are responsible for the effects. A content analysis of the news coverage that was used by the survey participants was beyond the scope of this study, however.

Second, the investigation of media effects in this exploratory study is based on a

non-representative sample of highly educated and politically interested citizens. Although using specific samples is considered to be appropriate for exploratory research, the generalizability of the findings reported here is limited. Thus, it is not possible to determine from these data whether the effects of television use on the perceptions of political processes and political support also hold for people with low levels of political interest and/or lower levels of formal education. Studies that test the preferences-perceptions model of media effects based on a representative sample would be needed to enhance the generalizability of the findings presented here. Moreover, the findings of this study are restricted to Switzerland as a typical consensus democracy. Hence it remains an open question whether the findings presented here would also hold with regard to the relationship between media information and political attitudes in other cultural settings, such as competitive democracies. Future research that investigates the media's impact on political attitudes as a function of political preferences in different political cultures could contribute to the understanding of the moderating role of process preferences.

Third, the findings on the impact of television use on the perception of political processes and political support are based on cross-sectional survey data. Thus, the results of this study cannot be taken as evidence for the assumed causality of effects. Although this study's consideration of effect mechanisms may contribute to the investigating of causality, it is not a test in a strict sense. The results of this study indicate that there is an indirect effect of television use on political support via the perception of political processes as being inefficient. It seems more plausible to argue that television use shapes the perception of political processes than to assume that subjects with certain process perceptions use television for their political information more often than individuals which do not share these process perceptions. However, future research based on experimental designs or panel surveys is needed in order to put the assumed causal mechanisms to a strict test.

Despite its preliminary character, the findings do suggest that media may affect citizens' political support by shaping the perception of certain aspects of political realities. The less these perceptions are related to established ideologies or beliefs, the stronger might the relationship between mass media and political perceptions be. Hence the findings of this study do suggest that it may be useful to include social reality perceptions as a mediating variable in the prediction of political attitudes from media use measures. Future research interested in explaining the mechanisms by which media effects occur could, hence, consider reality perceptions. The preferences-perceptions model of media effects, for instance, might be used to explain dynamic changes in opinion levels as a response to shifts in perceived political realities due to changes in the media information that a person is exposed to.

However exploratory, this study may offer some insight into the role of preferences as a moderator of media effects. The study thus contributes to the specification of conditions under which media coverage might negatively influence citizens' political support by showing that long-term effects of routine television use on political support in some circumstances are contingent upon political preferences. Similar arguments were already made in other contexts. For instance, Kleinnijenhuis & van

Hoof (2009) argue that ambiguous media information on policy plans of the government decrease recipients' support because the news content is not in line with citizens' preferences of decisive governmental plans. Mutz & Reeves (2005, p. 3) found that incivility in political debates significantly decreased trust in politicians and argued that what it is about those conflicts in the media that makes people angry is that political actors then "violate the norms for everyday, face-to-face discourse." These studies do not provide empirical evidence for their assumptions that recipients' preferences matter, however. The present study, then, presents the first empirical evidence for the role of individual preferences – in the sense of importance rankings – in moderating the effects of media information on political attitudes.

However, this study's findings on the role of preferences are restricted to process preferences. It is not possible to conclude from this study that preferences with respect to policy issues or characteristics of political actors are an important moderator of media effects. Despite its preliminary character, the research reported here would seem to indicate that the preferences concept is fruitful and could be incorporated into future research, not only with respect to process preferences, but also with respect to preferences regarding other aspects of political life. The preferences-perceptions model of media effects specifies in greater detail than previous research how media information interacts with existing political preferences in forming individual attitudes of political support. In that sense, the model might be used in future studies to explain the relationship between perceptions of political realities and political support as a function of related preferences of the citizens. Based on the proposed model, then, the general statement that negative or critical media coverage tends to contribute to a decline in political support might be further differentiated. The model proposes that negative media content does not, *per se*, decrease political support. Rather, the model assumes that media information threatens political support if it opposes citizens' preferences. Moreover, the model allows defining circumstances under which media information might contribute to an increase in political support: In situations when media information is in line with the audience's individual preferences, media information might enhance political support.

In general, then, the research reported here would seem to indicate that the way mass media presents political decision-making processes is not without consequences for the political support that the audience holds for political actors, institutions, and democracy. The information in the mass media is shaped by journalists' selection and interpretation processes (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Marcinkowski, 2000; Maurer, 2003a, 2003b; Sarcinelli, 1998). As results from the content analysis of media presentations of political decision-making processes showed, the news coverage focuses on political discord and power struggles and refers to the inefficiency of political decision-making procedures. This distinct presentation of political processes by the mass media may shape the perception of political realities and challenge citizens' political support.

Although the media's presentations of political processes are not without consequences for political support, the findings indicate that media information does not unfold its effects on all citizens in a similar way. The findings presented here rather

suggest that mass media's impact on political support is contingent upon citizens' individual preferences. More precisely, media content was found to challenge citizens' political support if it contradicts their individual preferences. The findings shed new light on the democratic performance of citizens in suggesting that they are less vulnerable to media effects than, for instance, assumed by videomalaise theory (Robinson, 1976). To get back to the definition of political distrust by Barber (1983) that was quoted at the outset, this study suggests that political distrust is a critique of political processes as perceived based on media information in the light of individual preferences. It seems warranted to suggest that citizens' political support is not affected by media information *per se* but, rather, that it is shaped by rational reasoning of the citizens as to whether aspects that are important to them apply to political reality. The media information may contribute to this reasoning, but individual preferences of the citizens might matter also.

Based on the preferences-perceptions model of media effects, then, two different strategies of how the media could in fact contribute to citizens' political approval can be discussed. This study agrees with Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (2002, p. 161ff.), who argued that in order to enhance citizens' political support, people should not necessarily be given the processes they want. One possible measure to enhance political support, then, would be to suit citizens' process preferences to political processes (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 245). Clearly, agents of socialization such as family or schools would be asked to teach people to tolerate conflict, for instance. But mass media might also have a role to play. This study's findings indicated that the media may not only shape the perception of political processes, but also citizens' process preferences. More precisely, news coverage in television was found to strengthen the audience's preferences as regards the efficiency of decision-making processes. The preferences as regards efficiency were found to be associated with a decrease in political support. Instead, journalists could contribute to a consolidation of political support by being less impatient and by accepting that political decision-making processes may take their time. The other strategy could be to suit political processes to citizens' process preferences (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 245). In the light of this study's findings, this would mean that the media's information could be suited to citizens' process preferences, because the media are an important source of information about political processes. Just as the media might contribute to the political malaise if they focus on those aspects of political processes which are particularly unfavorable in the eye of the citizens, media could also contribute to an increase in political approval by strengthening those aspects of political processes that are considered favorable by the majority of citizens. Such aspects are shaped partly by the political culture of a nation. Hence it seems to be important that journalists consider dominant political values when informing about political processes. Routines of news production that are closely linked to the political culture of a nation might foster a style of news reporting that facilitates the citizens' political support.

