1. Political Support and Mass Media: Relevance and Objectives of this Study

This study investigates the impact of the mass media on citizens' political support. More precisely, the main interest of this work lays in the effects of the way in which mass media present political processes. Political processes in this study refer to day-to-day discussions of possible solutions to political problems and decision-making within the government, the parliament, or the political administration. The term "political support" is used in this study to refer to "an attitude by which a person orients himself to an object either favorably or unfavorably, positively or negatively" (cf. Easton, 1975, p. 436). Although political support might refer not only to evaluative attitudes but also to behavior (cf. Easton, 1975, p. 436), the interest of this study is limited to the aspect of political support as empirically observable evaluative attitudes of citizens.[1] Thus the study focuses on confidence or trust[2] in political institutions, political actors, and democracy. Trust is understood as the belief that the government or any other political institution is operating according to one's normative expectations of how they should function (A. H. Miller, 1974, p. 989) and individual interests of the citizen are attended to even without scrutiny (cf. Easton, 1975, p. 447; Gamson, 1968). Consequentially, political distrust is "a realistic critique of political performance and/or of fiduciary responsibility in the light of accepted democratic values" (Barber, 1983, p. 80f.).

In order to investigate the impact of media presentations of political processes on political support, this study focuses on the example of Switzerland as a typical consensus democracy. As regards political decision-making strategies, bargaining is the dominant modus in consensus democracies (Czada, 2000; Lehmbruch, 2003; Lijphart, 1999). The endeavor to find collective compromises between diverging interests is the main purpose of bargaining procedures (Marcinkowski, 2005). Mass media, in contrast, tend to focus on discord instead of compromises and emphasize the behavior of single actors instead of collective actions (Grande, 2000; Marcinkowski, 2005). The distinct presentation of political processes by the mass media, hence, may challenge citizens' political support (Marcinkowski, 2000, p. 211; Sarcinelli, 1998, p. 553).

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1   This study's focus on evaluative attitudes is motivated by two factors. First, for economic reasons the scope of independent variables that are of interest in this study had to be restricted. Second, according to the value-attitude-behavior hierarchy, changes in behavior are a result of attitude changes (Bentler & Speckart, 1981; Homer & Kahle, 1988). In line with this, political participation was found to result from party identification and beliefs about government responsiveness (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982), for instance.
2   In literature the terms confidence and trust are often used interchangeably.

Confidence in political institutions and actors is an important resource for the stability of modern societies (Kaina, 2004). Modern societies are highly fragmented and characterized by functional differentiation. It is political confidence or trust in particular that serves the reduction of complexity and facilitates individual behavior as well as collective actions (Luhmann, 1989). Although political support is considered a relevant resource, it is generally found to have declined in a majority of western democracies over the last quarter-century (Lipset & Schneider, 1983; Pharr, Putman, & Dalton, 2000; Walz, 1996). On the whole, citizens in Switzerland are more confident in their government and their parliament than their neighbors in Germany or Austria (Linder, 2005). Nevertheless, Swiss citizens' confidence in political institutions has also declined in recent years (Freitag, 2001). In 1989, close to twice as many citizens had confidence in the parliament than in 1996, as indicated by data from representative surveys (Brunner & Siger, 1997). Similarly, the survey data showed that in 1989 eight out of ten citizens had confidence in the government, compared to five out of ten respondents in 1996. This pattern appeared to be rather stable: At the beginning of the year 2009 also about five out of ten Swiss citizens had confidence in the government, compared to four out of ten citizens that expressed their disapproval (gfs.bern, 2009a).

Among other causes, mass media appeared to be an important factor that may contribute to a decline of political support. A variety of studies attest the influence of indicators such as economic growth, unemployment, and inflation (Citrin, 1974; Gilley, 2006). Furthermore, institutional structures (Norris, 1999) and aspects of political processes (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) were found to explain levels of political support. In addition, there are studies which show that the mass media's news coverage also contributes to the political malaise. Most studies consider mass media not as the only or even primary factor influencing political attitudes (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Maurer, 2003; Nye Jr, 1997). However, media are considered to be an important factor, because media information is a relevant source of political information (Blödorn, Gerhards, & Klinger, 2005; Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). Moreover, the media coverage does not merely mirror political realities. Rather, the political information in the mass media is shaped by selection and interpretation processes of journalists (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Marcinkowski, 2000; Maurer, 2003a, 2003b; Sarcinelli, 1998). Being shaped by journalistic rules of selection and interpretation, media content is found to be increasingly negative (Ehmig, 1991; Floß & Marcinkowski, 2008; Hallin, 1992; Kepplinger, 1998; Lipset & Schneider, 1983; M. M. Miller & Denham, 1994; Nye Jr, 1997; T. E. Patterson, 1996). These findings fuel the assumption that there is a distinct impact of media information on political attitudes that goes above and beyond the impact of political reality aspects. In general, then, Wolling (1999, p. 43) maintains that the three empirical phenomena mentioned above – the increasing political dissatisfaction of citizens, the important role of media as a source of political information, and the increasing negativity of media content – warrant the assumption that media may be a significant cause for political dissatisfaction.

Thus, the mass media's impact on political support has been extensively studied

18

in recent years. Although considerable research has been devoted to the impact of election campaign coverage, rather less attention has been paid to the effects of media presentations of political decision-making processes. The majority of research on mass media's impact on political attitudes is interested in the effects of election campaign coverage (Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson, 2002; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006; Pfau, 1987; Rhee, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001), effects of media information on certain policy issues (Iyengar, 1989; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997), or the impact of media information on campaign issues (De Vreese, 2004, 2005; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). Previous research on media effect has neglected to consider the effects of media depictions of routine decision-making processes such as the discussion of possible problem solutions and the formation of binding decisions (Arnold, 2004; Morris & Clawson, 2007). However, there is research in political science that shows that not only what was decided but also how a decision was made has an impact on citizens' confidence in political actors and institutions (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

> "Our analysis also demonstrates that media coverage of the legislative process is a significant determinant of mass approval for Congress. While some recent studies have discussed the public's disdain for legislative processes (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; 2002), there have been no attempts to tie media coverage of legislative process to citizen approval" (Morris & Clawson, 2007, p. 3).

Hence the first objective of the present study is to contribute to media effects research by investigating the impact of media presentations of political decision-making processes on political support.

Previous research has shown that exposure to negative or critical media content may be associated with a decrease in political support (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kepplinger, 1998, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Maurer, 2003b; Min, 2004; T. E. Patterson, 1996; Wolling, 1999). The majority of studies focuses on outcomes and neglects the investigation of effect mechanisms and processes, however. Hence there is a need for future studies to gain an "improved theoretical understanding of why strategy-oriented media coverage is associated with negative civic outcomes" (Besley & McComas, 2005, p. 429f.), for instance. The second objective of the present study, then, is to explore the mechanisms by which media information about political processes affects citizens' political support.

Moreover, the media's impact on political attitudes was found to vary as a function of different contextual factors (cf. Maurer, 2003b; Moy & Pfau, 2000; Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999). It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to specify the conditions under which media information contributes to a decrease in political support. Whereas research in political science shows that the relationship between political perceptions and related preferences is a relevant predictor of political support (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), media effects re-

search has neglected to consider whether media's impact on political support differs as a function of individual preferences.[3] Hence the third objective of the present study is to contribute to media effects research by exploring the conditions under which media information about political processes affects political support. More precisely, this study endeavours to examine the impact of media information about political processes on political support as a function of individual preferences as regards political processes. Because, as of yet, no standardized scale to measure process preferences and perceptions exists (John R. Hibbing & Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a, p. 147), a further objective of this study is the development and validation of such measures.

In general then, the aim of the present work is to extend previous research in three respects. First, this study aims to investigate the impact of mass media's presentations of political decision-making processes on citizens' political support. Second, efforts are made to examine the processes by which the effects occur. And third, this study explores the conditions under which those effects are particularly strong by considering the role of individual process preferences. Thus, this study's research question is: *How and under which conditions do mass media's presentations of political decision-making processes affect citizens' political support?*

In order to provide theoretical answers to this question, this study draws on two strands of literature, namely discrepancy theory and cultivation theory. In order to explain how the media presentations of political decision-making processes affect support, the study builds on cultivation theory (W. P. Eveland, Jr., 2002). Regarding political decision-making procedures at the national level, the media impact on perceptions is presumed to be strong, because people have fewer opportunities to confirm or deny the medium's depictions based on firsthand experiences. Hence this study argues that regular patterns in how the media presents political decision-making processes may account for changes in the perception of political processes. Media information about political processes within the parliament, for instance, was found to focus on discord and to be characterized by a general negative tone (Lichter & Amundson, 1994; Morris & Clawson, 2005, 2007). Thus, the media may foster the audience's perception that political processes within the government are shaped by discord. The perception of political processes, in turn, is assumed to predict levels of political support. Hence the media may contribute to a decline of political support by en-hancing the perception that political processes are fraught with conflict, for example.

In order to examine the conditions under which the impact of media presentations of political processes on support is particularly strong, this study draws on findings from cognitive psychology and, specifically, discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987).

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3   The term preferences in this study refers to "a comparative evaluation of (i.e. a ranking over) a set of objects" (Druckman & Lupia, 2000, p. 2). While acknowledging that the role of preferences in the sense of ideological orientations (e.g. Zaller, 1992), for instance, has been investigated in previous research, it is that special type of preferences in the sense of individual importance attached to certain aspects that is the interest of this study.

20

This theory basically assumes that "evaluations of individual, social or political objects are partly grounded in disparities between expectations and perceptions" (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 703). Accordingly, studies from political science show that the relationship between perceptions of political realities and related preferences explains variances in support for political actors and institutions (John R. Hibbing & Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Kimball & Patterson, 1997; S. C. Patterson, Boynton, & Hedlund, 1969). Whereas congruence between perceptions and preferences may enhance confidence, incongruence was found to decrease political confidence. For instance, Patterson, Boynton, & Hedlund (1969) found high levels of support for citizens who feel that what the legislature is like comes close to what they expect of it. In contrast, low levels of support were found for citizens who perceive wide gaps between their perceptions of the legislature and the way they would prefer it to be. Building on discrepancy theory, this study assumes that the effects of process perceptions on political support vary as a function of individual preferences regarding political processes. More precisely, the study assumes that the impact of certain perceptions of political processes is particularly strong, if those aspects of political processes are considered to be important. An example might illustrate this assumption: A person perceives decision-making processes within the parliament to be inefficient. However, this person considers it important that political processes in the parliament are efficient. For this person, efficiency preferences are strong, but political processes within the parliament are perceived to be inefficient. Hence there is a discrepancy between process preferences and perceptions. As a consequence, this person presumably will have low levels of confidence in the parliament. In contrast, imagine another person who also perceives political processes to be inefficient but does not consider efficiency to be important. All else being equal, this person probably has higher levels of confidence in the parliament than the first person. With regard to the media's impact, this study, then, argues that the impact of the media via the perception of political processes on political support is particularly strong for those citizens that hold strong related preferences regarding political decision-making processes.

Empirically, this study approached the research question by investigating the impact of both routine use of political information in the mass media and exposure to specific news articles on political support. This was done based on standardized online surveys with 523 participants from the German-speaking part of Switzerland with an experimental study embedded.[4] In addition, data from a comprehensive content analysis of news coverage in Switzerland and Germany[5] were used to inform

4   The German-speaking part of Switzerland was selected because this enabled the comparison of results from the content analysis as well as findings from the pilot surveys on measuring process preferences and perceptions without having language differences. For financial reasons, the Italian- and French-speaking parts could not be included in this study.
5   The content analysis and the present work were conducted within the framework of the project "The Dynamics of Political Institutions in Mediated Democracies: Political Bargaining and the Transformation of the Public Sphere", led by Frank Marcinkowski. The project is embedded in the National Centre of Competence in Research: Challenges to Democracy in

the development of stimulus material for the experimental study and to provide background information for the interpretations of findings concerning the impact of media use on the perception of political processes and political support.

In general, the study's results lent support to the assumption that mass media may contribute to a decrease of political support by shaping the perception of political processes. In addition, in line with this study's expectations the findings indicate that the media's impact on political support was particularly strong for those respondents for whom the related aspects of decision-making processes are particularly important. However, the perception of those aspects of political processes that are deeply anchored in political beliefs and ideologies of the citizens was found to be rather resistant to media effects. In the main, this study presents first empirical results regarding the role of individual preferences – in the sense of evaluative rankings – as moderator of media effects. The findings may contribute to a differentiation of the rather general claim that negative or critical media information results in a decline of political support.

The outline of this work is as follows. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the literature on mass media's impact on political support. In Chapter 3 a theoretical model is developed which is designed to capture individual-level differences in political support and takes central account of the relationship between media information, individual perceptions of political processes and individual preferences regarding political processes. Chapter 4 presents the investigation of characteristic patterns in media presentations of political decision-making processes. The development of a scale to measure citizens' process preferences and perceptions is described in Chapter 5. The short-term effects of news articles on process perceptions and political support were investigated in an experimental study that is presented in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 refers to the long-term impact of media use on process perceptions and political support and takes central account of the role of individual process preferences in shaping the relationship between media use and political support. Finally, Chapter 8 offers a general discussion of this study's findings and suggests implications for future research.

the 21st century (NCCR Democracy). Germany was selected as reference case in the content analysis in order to be able to compare patterns of news coverage in Switzerland as a consensus democracy with data from a rather competitive democracy.