Section 5.3.6.[85] Two factors are distinguished. The first factor refers to support for the government. The second factor encompasses support for the parliament, support for political actors, and support for democracy. Socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, income, political ideology, and political experience) were included as covariates. The results show a significant main effect of the consensus discrepancy on support for the parliament, political actors and democracy (F = 10.075, p = .002, η^2=0.06), a significant main effect of the efficiency discrepancy on support for the government (F = 8.023, p = .005, η^2=0.04) and a significant main effect of the efficiency discrepancy on support for the parliament, political actors and democracy (F = 16.166, p = .000, η^2=0.09). The main effect of the consensus discrepancy on support for the government was not significant (F = 1.571, p = .219, η^2=0.004). These results indicate that a large discrepancy between process preferences and process perceptions (in the sense that preferences exceed perceptions) is associated with lower levels of political support. The main effects of the treatment and the two-way interaction effects on support for the government and support for the parliament, political actors and democracy were all non-significant.[86] The lack of significant interaction effects indicates that political support does not decrease as a result of exposure to the stimulus articles for subjects who are high in the magnitude of the preference-perception discrepancy. Thus, the data do not support H6.

6.4. Summary and Discussion

This chapter reported findings on the impact of the experimental stimulus articles on respondents' perceptions of political processes. The results indicate that the stimulus

---

85   The political support items were subjected to factor analysis using principal components extraction with oblique rotation which does not presume orthogonal factors. The factor loadings were used to derive factor scores for each survey respondent. Regression method was selected to construct the factor scales.

86   Main effect of the conflict treatment on support for the government: (F = 1.792, p = .182, $\eta 2$ = 0.006).
Main effect of the conflict treatment on support for the parliament, political actors and democracy: (F = .336, p = .563, $\eta 2$ = 0.004).
Main effect of the inefficiency treatment on support for the government: (F = 2.084, p = 150, $\eta 2$ = 0.006).
Main effect of the inefficiency treatment on support for the parliament, political actors and democracy: (F = .006, p = .000, $\eta 2$ = 0.000).
Interaction effect conflict treatment & discrepancy magnitude on support for the government: (F = 1.490, p = .223).
Interaction effect conflict treatment & discrepancy magnitude on support for the parliament, political actors and democracy: (F = .177, p = 674).
Interaction effect inefficiency treatment & discrepancy magnitude on support for the government: (F = .087, p = .768).
Interaction effect inefficiency treatment & discrepancy magnitude on support for the parliament, political actors and democracy: (F = .600, p = .439).

144

articles did not affect the participants' perception of political processes. More precisely, exposure to conflict-oriented articles did not decrease participants' perception of political processes as being consensus-oriented, nor did the exposure to inefficiency-oriented articles decrease the participants' perception of political processes as being efficient. A variety of factors might explain the null findings. From a methodological point of view, more precise measures of the independent variable political support which are more closely linked to the news articles' content could be applied in order to enhance the likelihood of effects. Such measurements could refer to respondents' confidence in political actors with regard to the way they handle the protection of non-smokers or the reform of the federal old-age insurance, for example. Both issues were addressed in the stimulus articles. Another methodological aspect seems worthy of consideration. Ideally, because the impact of television was assumed to be stronger than the impact of the newspapers, I would have liked to use television newscast instead of newspaper articles as stimuli in the present study. Because of the costs involved with television stimuli, this was not possible, however. Moreover, the study's sample consists of individuals with particularly high levels of political interest and political support. Thus, the sample provides a hard test for the effect assumptions. Therefore one might be able to find significant effects of stimulus articles in future studies with samples of political novices whose political attitudes are found to be less strong and stable (Fiske, Kinder & Larter, 1982; lyengar et al. 1984). However, not only methodological aspects might be relevant, the theoretical assumptions should be reconsidered also. It seems warranted to suggest that the absence of empirical evidence for the assumed effects of stimulus articles on political support in this study may indicate that the perceptions of political processes are shaped already before the participants were exposed to the stimuli. In line with the assumptions of cultivation theory, the mass media's impact on reality perceptions, then, might be subject to long-term changes rather than short-term changes. According hypotheses are tested in Chapter 7.

Looking at the indirect effects of exposure to the stimulus articles on political support via the impressions that the articles raised in the view of the participants, the findings indicate that such indirect effects took place. More precisely, the results suggest that the stimulus articles decreased both the perception of political processes as consensus-oriented and the perception of political processes as inefficient, indirectly via article impressions. However, the test of this assumption is based on a quasi-experimental design. Because quasi-experiments lack random assignment, they are more likely to suffer from threats to validity than randomized experiments. In particular, quasi-experiments provide less support for causal inferences due to inherent threats to internal validity. Most importantly, the self-selection of participants to the treatment conditions raises concern (cf. Shadish, et al., 2002, p. 13f.). In this study self-selection takes place because the participants decide for themselves which impressions the articles raise. Hence, not only the treatment, but also alternative explanations might account for the observed effect. Thus, researchers have to worry about ruling out alternative explanations in order to get a more valid estimate of the treatment effect.

In this study, it seems plausible to assume that not only stimulus articles, but also general political attitudes might shape the impressions that the articles raise. More precisely, it seems warranted to suggest that if an individual perceives a political process as being conflict-oriented, this person is also more likely to get the impression that news articles present political processes as conflict-oriented, for example.[87] The results presented here support the assumption that general process perceptions affect the impression that subjects gain from the stimulus articles. The relationship between process perceptions and article impressions, hence, might be reciprocal. Nevertheless, the significant treatment effects on the article impression variables that were found in the manipulation check suggest that the impression which the articles raise in the view of the respondents is not only affected by individual process perceptions but also by stimulus articles.

Besides the impact of news articles on the perception of political processes, this chapter also addressed the impact of exposure to the news articles on political support. The assumption here is that exposure to the articles increases the temporary accessibility of already available discrepancies between process preferences and perceptions through priming. As a result, the levels of political support of those subjects who are high in magnitude of the discrepancy are hypothesized to decrease. The results did not support this assumption, however. The conceptualization of the post-test questionnaire might account for this null finding. The items included in this questionnaire may have blurred the priming condition, because participants in the conflict group as well as participants in the inefficiency group were asked questions referring to both the consensus-orientation of political processes and the efficiency of political processes. In this exploratory study, this was done in order to be able to compare the impact of respondents' routine media use on perceptions and preferences concerning both aspects of political processes (consensus and efficiency, see Chapter 7). However, future studies that are interested in priming effects on the temporary accessibility of preferences-perceptions relationships should apply experimental designs with posttest measures which refer to the manipulated aspects only. An according study could, for instance, follow this procedure: Subjects are asked to fill out a questionnaire a few weeks before the experimental session in order to determine the magnitude of their relationship between process preferences and perceptions. Respondents are then divided into high and low consensus preferences-perceptions discrepancy groups and into high and low efficiency preferences-perceptions discrepancy groups. These divisions then can be used to create two distinct groups of subjects varying on which type of discrepancy was predominant:

---

87 This assumption is in line with the hypothesis theory of social perception, for instance. According to this theory, available considerations of people determine which aspects of reality they perceive, the conclusions that they drawn from those perceptions, and the likelihood of their retrieval at a later point in time (Bruner, 1957; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Lilli & Frey, 1993). Similarly, confirmation bias theory assumes that individuals have a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms their preconceptions (Klayman & H, 1987; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

146

A high consensus preferences-perceptions discrepancy/low efficiency preferences-perceptions discrepancy group and a high efficiency preferences-perceptions discrepancy/low consensus preferences-perceptions discrepancy group (cf. Higgins, 1987). At the experimental session, a pre-test on prior levels of political support could be conducted. Subjects then are exposed to either news articles with references to the conflict-orientation of political processes or news articles with references to the inefficiency of political processes. Following the exposure to these articles, a post-test would measure the levels of political support.

Despite its limitations, the experimental study does provide first insights into the relationship between exposure to media information about political decision-making processes and citizens' perceptions of such processes. The following chapter presents further analyses as regards the long-term impact of routine media use on process perceptions and attitudes of political support.