

7. Long-Term Effects of Media on Process Perceptions and Political Support

This chapter presents the investigation of long-term effects of media information on citizens' process perceptions and political support. In this study, routine use of mass media is assumed to reflect the influence of characteristic patterns of the media coverage. Media use patterns are considered to be relatively stable and distinctive ways of interacting with the media (McLeod & McDonald, 1985). These stable patterns are recently referred to as logic of an institutional news media (Marcinkowski, 2005). In addition, the role of citizens' individual process preferences as moderator of the media's impact is examined. The research questions and hypotheses are presented in Section 7.1. Section 7.2 describes the methodological design. The findings are presented in Section 7.3., followed by a summary and discussion (Section 7.4).

7.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Routine media use in this study is measured with respect to the use of political information. The routine use of newspapers and the routine use of television are distinguished. Not only is television generally assumed to contain more negative political information than newspapers, it also includes visual information, which results in dual information-processing strategies. Thus the likelihood of a possible impact of television on social reality perceptions might increase. Moreover, the results from the media content analysis that are presented in Chapter 4 indicate that television newscasts, in general, are more evaluative than press articles. Television news about political decision-making processes was found to be shaped by a strong focus on political accusations, particularly when informing about parliamentary processes, although television news at the same time focuses on aspects of consensus. In addition, television news referred to the inability of political actors to solve political processes, particularly when informing about political processes in the parliament.

Following the tradition of videomalaise and cultivation research, possible effects of routine television use are assumed to capture long-term changes of political attitudes. As regards the impact on process perceptions, I assume that routine television use shapes the perception of certain qualities of political processes. Based on the finding that the television presents political processes with references to political discord and procedural inefficiency (Chapter 4), I hypothesize that television use decreases both the perception of political processes as consensus-oriented and the perception of political processes as efficient.

- H1: The more intensive a person's television use is, the less are political processes perceived as consensus-oriented by that person.
- H2: The more intensive a person's television use is, the less are political processes perceived as efficient by that person.

Based on the preferences-perceptions model of media effects, the perception of political processes is hypothesized to explain levels of political support. Both a decrease in the perception of political processes as consensus-oriented and a decrease in the perception of political processes as efficient are assumed to be associated with lower levels of political support.

- H3: The less consensus-oriented political processes are perceived by a person, the lower is this person's level of political support.
- H4: The less efficient political processes are perceived by a person, the lower is this person's level of political support.

The concept of political support in this study encompasses attitudes towards different objects of evaluation, namely government, parliament, political actors, and democracy. In order to test whether the assumed effect mechanisms vary with respect to these different objects of evaluation, I formulate the following research question.

- RQ1: Does the model explain citizens' support for the government, support for the parliament, support for political actors, and support for democracy equally well?

Little is known about the media's link to individual process preferences of the citizens. Whether routine television use affects citizens' process preferences will be a question open to empiricism. Similarly, it is an open question whether the media might affect political support by shaping citizens' process preferences. Hence, I formulate a research question in order to test whether process preferences mediate the relationship between television use.

- RQ2: Do citizens' process preferences mediate the effect of routine television use and/or exposure to news articles on political support?

Whereas the mediating variable is influenced by the independent variable and then, in turn, influences the dependent variable, a moderating variable specifies the conditions under which a given effect occurs, as well as conditions under which the strength or direction of an effect vary (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). The core assumption here is that process preferences moderate the impact of process perceptions on political support. Drawing on discrepancy theory, I expect that the effects of process perceptions on political support are smaller if the perceived quality of political processes is in line with individual process preferences. In contrast, I expect that the effects of process perceptions on political support are stronger if the perceived quality of political processes is contrary to what a person does prefer. More precisely, I assume that if a subject holds strong preferences regarding the

consensus-orientation of political processes, the consensus perception has a stronger influence on political support than it would be the case for subjects with low consensus preferences. Likewise, if a subject holds strong preferences regarding the efficiency of political processes, the efficiency perception has a stronger influence on political support than it would be the case for subjects with low efficiency preferences.

- H3a: The impact of consensus perceptions on political support is stronger for subjects with high levels of consensus preferences than it is for subjects with low levels of consensus preferences.
- H4a: The impact of efficiency perceptions on political support is stronger for subjects with high levels of efficiency preferences than it is for subjects with low levels of efficiency preferences.

The media is assumed to affect political support via its influence on the perception of political processes. Process preferences, hence, might moderate the media’s impact on political support in the end. Thus, if H1 and H3a are considered together, and if H2 and H4a are considered together, assumptions of moderated mediation follow (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). The assumption of moderated mediation is that process preferences moderate the indirect effect of media information on political support via the perception of political processes. More precisely, I assume the following hypotheses. These hypotheses are illustrated in Figure 7.1.

- H5: The impact of television use on political support via consensus perception is stronger for subjects with high levels of consensus preferences than it is for subjects with low levels of consensus preferences.
- H6: The impact of television use on political support via efficiency perception is stronger for subjects with high levels of efficiency preferences than it is for subjects with low levels of efficiency preferences.

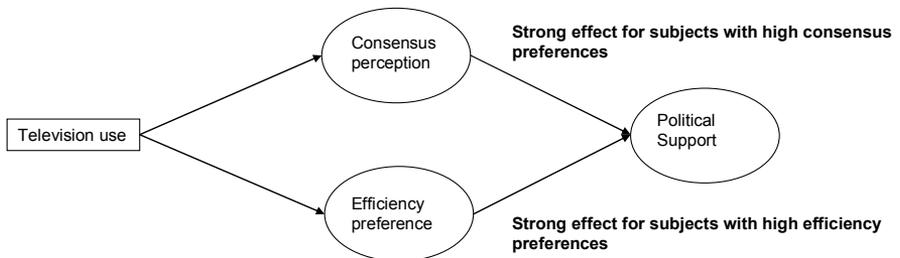


Figure 7.1. Process Preferences as Moderator of Television Use-Support Relationship

The chronic accessibility of the preference-perception relationships is argued to be high for people with high levels of political awareness and to be low for people with low levels of political awareness. Because a chronically accessible preferences-perceptions relationship might increase the likelihood of effects of the preferences-perceptions relationship on political attitudes, I assume that the impact of the preferences-perceptions relationship might be stronger for people with high levels of political awareness compared to people with low levels of political awareness. More precisely, I assume that the relationship between process perceptions and preferences has a stronger impact on political support for individuals with high levels of political awareness compared to subjects with low levels of political awareness.

- H7: For subjects high in the magnitude of the discrepancies between process preferences and process perceptions, the relationship between preferences and perceptions has a stronger impact on political support of individuals with high levels of political awareness compared to subjects with low levels of political awareness.

7.2. Method

The experimental study presented in Chapter 6 was embedded in a series of surveys, an initial survey that was conducted at Time 1 in the forerun of the experimental study (see Chapter 6), and a final survey that was conducted at Time 2 after the experimental treatment. Data from those two surveys are the basis for the analyses presented in this chapter. Hence, the data analyses in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 are partly based on the same data set. Section 7.2.1 describes the variables and operationalization. The data collection procedure is outlined in Section 7.2.2. The methods of data analysis are discussed in Section 7.2.3.

7.2.1. Variables and Operationalization

In the following, the operationalization of the variables is described (see Appendix 10.2 for precise item wordings; the survey questionnaires (in German language) can be requested from the author). The measurement of concepts is based on multi-operational measures if possible, so that latent variables can be modeled in SEM. The use of political information in newspapers and television was assessed at Time 1, together with socio-demographic variables. Process perceptions and preferences, political support and the impression raised by the stimulus articles were measured two weeks later at Time 2. All means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 7.1.