

formed based on memory. Hence, the accessibility of certain aspects acts as a mediator for the media-judgment relationship. “Heavy television viewing creates an accessibility bias, and that bias has an effect on real-world frequency estimates of things often seen on television” (Shrum, 1996, p. 499). Second-order cultivation effects, in contrast, are assumed to be built during the time of exposure to the information. Thus, second-order effects are proposed to be separate effects above and beyond first-order cultivation effects.

In line with cultivation research, then, this study assumes long-term effects of media on the perception of political processes. Thus, regular patterns of information may account for changes in these perceptions. The media’s influence on these perceptions is assumed to increase with a decrease in the impact of direct experiences (Pfau, et al., 1995, p. 310). Hence, in terms of political decision-making at the national level, media impact is presumed to be strong, because national decision-making processes are considered to be circumstances for which people have less opportunity to confirm or deny the media’s presentations based on firsthand experiences.

3.2.2. The Media’s Impact on Preferences Regarding Political Processes

Although media effects research provides some insights into how media affects policy preferences, little is known about the media’s impact on citizens’ preferences concerning political decision-making processes. Regarding the association between media and political preferences, there are studies which show that the media shape citizens’ policy preferences (Jordan, 1993; M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Pan & Kosicki, 1996). For instance, Pan & Kosicki (1996) found that the use of information-oriented media affects the audience’s ideological orientations. These orientations, in turn, were found to have an impact on racial policy preferences. Policy preferences were measured, for instance, as support for the government’s efforts to assist blacks or support for increasing federal spending to assist blacks. Studies carried out in the framework of agenda setting research showed that the media may have an impact on which policy issues people consider to be important (M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972; M. E. McCombs & Shaw, 1993). For instance, the perceived importance of policy issues was measured with the following question: “What are you most concerned about these days? That is, regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three main things which you think the government should concentrate on doing something about?” (M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 178). The media were found to affect what citizens think the government should do, i.e. their policy preferences.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine from these studies that investigate the link between media information and citizens’ preferences regarding *what* should be done, whether media information also has an impact on citizens’ preferences as regards *how* political decisions should be made. Based on the current state of research, it remains an empirically open question whether media information might

affect citizens' process preferences above and beyond the impact of political culture, or whether process preferences are rather independent from media information. Thus, the present study takes into consideration that media information might not only shape the perceptions of political processes but also foster certain process preferences. This might be the case, because mass media act as agent of socialization. Hence long-term effects of media use on preferences regarding decision-making processes might be plausible. This might also be the case if media information continuously contains claims that political processes should be more efficient or more efforts should be made to find a compromise between diverging interests, for example. The media's descriptions of the status quo might also shape attitudes towards how the situation should be instead. For instance, media effects on the audience's preferences as regards the efficiency of political processes might occur if the media depict political processes simply as inefficient.

3.2.3. The Media's Presentations of Political Processes

The assumption that media presentations of political processes may affect citizens' perceptions of political processes and possibly preferences as regards political processes raises the question of how the media depict political decision-making processes. In order to inform propositions concerning the media's impact on citizens' perceptions of such processes and their levels of political support, this section presents research that analyses how the mass media present political processes.

A variety of research indicates that mass media not only mirror political realities but present a picture of political life that is shaped by the rules and norms of the news production process. This could result in media depictions of political processes that might challenge the way in which political institutions actually operate (Marcinkowski, 2005). Many recent studies have focused on the media's presentation of election campaigns. The news coverage of election campaigns was found to be shaped by references to who is going to win and who is going to lose, attention to performances and perceptions of political actors, the language of wars and games, and a generally negative tone (Druckman, 2005; Rhee, 1997; Semetko & Schoenbach, 2003).

Whereas the majority of media content research investigates mass media's presentations of election campaigns, fewer studies examine the media's depictions of routine political decision-making processes. Arnold (2004, p. 16) maintained that "most of the literature focuses on how the press covers wars, presidents, election campaigns, and policy issues. Scholars have largely ignored press coverage of Congress and its members". Little is known about the characteristics of media coverage of day-to-day political processes, either within Congress, the executive branch or the administrative branch. Likewise, Morris & Clawson (2007, p. 3) argued that "given the importance of understanding how the media portray Congress, the limited scope of this field of research relative to other political institutions, events, and issues is surprising."