

preference-perception discrepancies, political support is assumed to decrease as a result of priming effects in the context of exposure to the news media articles.

- H6: For subjects high in the magnitude of the preference-perception discrepancies, exposure to the news articles decreases political support.

6.2. Method

In media effects research, experimental designs are an established method to investigate casual mechanisms (Trepte & Wirth, 2004). Likewise, Iyengar (2002) emphasized the precise causal inference that experimental designs facilitate. Moreover, experiments make it possible to investigate not only effects, but also underlying mechanisms. Experiments are “useful in helping to develop and test theories to explore whether hypothesized relationships hold and under what conditions they are operative” (McDermott, 2002a, p. 126). Hence, experiments might contribute to an increased clarity of details (McDermott, 2002b). Although political support is considered to be a rather stable attitude, empirical studies investigating the effects of media information on confidence or trust in political institutions show that experimental designs are able to identify such effects (cf. for instance De Vreese, 2004; De Vreese, Boomgarden, & Semetko, 2005; Bertram Scheufele, 2008; Schuck & De Vreese, 2006; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). An experimental study was embedded in a series of surveys (see also Section 7.2). In Section 6.2.1 the experimental design and the study’s participants are described. The procedures of data collection are depicted in Section 6.2.2. Section 6.2.3 describes the development of the stimulus material. Section 6.2.4 gives information on the operationalization of variables and Section 6.2.5 describes the methods of data analysis.

6.2.1. Experimental Design and Participants

The experimental design applied in this study is a posttest only control group design⁵⁹ with two different treatments (Alternative-Treatments Design) and a control group. One treatment (Tx₁) consists of newspaper articles⁶⁰ with negative information about the consensus-orientation of political decision-making. Articles, for in-

59 Initially, an experimental design that encompasses both a pre- and a posttest was planned. However, in order to avoid sensitization effects, subject fatigue, and attrition, this design was rejected in favour of a posttest only design with control group. More information on those aspects is provided in the following paragraphs.

60 Ideally, the experimental stimuli should consist of television newscasts, in line with the assumption of this study that television news in particular has an impact on citizens’ political support. Because the production of experimental television newscasts would have been too expensive, newspaper articles were used instead.

stance, refer to the aggressive and competitive behaviour of political actors, conflicts, and power struggles, or the lack of considering different interests. The alternative treatment (Tx₂) consists of newspaper articles with negative information about the efficiency of political decision-making. Articles, for instance, refer to delays, protracted decisions, time-consuming procedures, a lack of efficiency of decision-making processes, and the indecisiveness of political actors (see Section 6.2.2). The control group does not get any treatment. The experimental design is a between subjects-design (cf. Grabe & Westley, 2003, p. 285) .

The target population of this study consists of citizens from the German-speaking part of Switzerland who are at least 18 years old and hold voting rights. The study's participants were recruited in collaboration with the Swiss online election information tool smartvote (www.smartvote.ch). The registered users of this platform regularly receive newsletters. One of those newsletters for users of the German-speaking population contained information on the planned study as well as contact information for readers interested in participating. The sample, hence, is based on self-selection and is not representative of the Swiss population. Subjects are randomly assigned⁶¹ to the different groups in order to create a pre-treatment similarity of the groups with respect to relevant variables, such as gender, age, income, education, and political interest. Thus, possible threats to the effects due to confounding variables are randomly distributed over conditions. Subjects in the different groups tend to have the same average characteristics; the only systematic difference is the treatment (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 248ff.). Consequently, changes in the outcome variable are not caused by differences of personal characteristics between the groups (McDermott, 2002a). Thus, random assignment facilitates casual inference.

In the control group (n = 157), 71 percent were males, the age ranged from 19 to 84 (M = 42; SD = 14.5), and 69 percent had a higher education entrance qualification or a higher level of formal education. In the conflict group (n = 189), 67 percent were males, the age ranged from 19 to 76 (M = 44; SD = 15.3), and 68 percent had a higher education entrance qualification or a higher level of formal education. In the inefficiency group (n = 177), 71 percent were males, the age ranged from 18 to 80 (M = 44; SD = 16.1), and 77 percent had a higher education entrance qualification or a higher level of formal education.

6.2.2. Procedures

The study was conceptualized as an internet experiment. Internet experiments are considered to be an efficient way of doing experimental research that makes it more easy to reach diverse populations (Iyengar, 2001). Citizens who sent an e-mail to the

61 Random assignment refers to the fact that units are assigned to conditions based only on chance. Each unit has a nonzero probability of being assigned to a condition.