

media use on political attitudes is different for emotional reactions compared to cognitive responses. “When people make judgments based on emotions, they react from the gut, which means they often react instinctively” (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1998, p. 479). Using data from a national survey of public attitudes, the authors did not find an effect of media use on cognitive evaluations of Congress. But those who rely on television or the radio – compared to newspapers – as their main source of political information were more likely to have negative emotions toward Congress.<sup>11</sup> Hence political media use appeared to be associated with emotional but not cognitive responses.

### 2.1.2. The Impact of Certain Aspects of News Coverage

The studies presented in the previous section investigate the relationship between media use and political support. Hence they cannot provide answers to the question of which precise aspects of media content may be responsible for a decline of political support. This question is the focus of research presented in this section. This overview focuses on studies that examine the impact of media content aspects that are presumed to have negative effects on political attitudes.

For instance, research suggests that the *interpretative style of news* is associated with a decrease of political support (T. E. Patterson, 1993, 1996). The interpretative style goes along with journalistic cynicism, because journalists “constantly question politicians’ motives, methods, and effectiveness” (T. E. Patterson, 1996, p. 103). Based on a content analysis of the election coverage from 1990 to 1992, Patterson (1993) found an increase in interpretative and horse-race journalism. The author reported parallel trends of an increase of interpretative news in the media coverage and a decrease of voters’ satisfaction with political leaders, Congress and the presidency in the U.S. Because of this parallelism, the author concluded that the interpretative news style leads to citizens’ dissatisfaction with political leaders and institutions.

Other studies indicate that *media presentation of political actors* may contribute to a decrease in citizens’ political support. For Germany, Kepplinger (1998, 2000) showed that negative presentations of political actors in the media coverage increased since the late 1960s. For the same time period, the author noted a decline in support for the political elite in Germany. Based on these parallel trends, the author concluded that negative depictions of political actors in the media decrease citizens’ trust in political leaders. A study by Maurer (2003a, 2003b) provides more confidence regarding the assumed causality of the relationship between media presentations of political actors and citizens’ political attitudes. Based on a data set that combines media content data and panel survey data on the individual level, the

11 Emotional evaluations of Congress are measured with questions referring to anger, unease, fear, and disgust.

author found that negative presentations of political actors<sup>12</sup> resulted in a decline of political support.

Miller et al. (1979) investigated the impact of *media criticism* on trust in the government.<sup>13</sup> Critical newspapers are those containing a high proportion of articles that criticize aspects of the political sphere. The authors combined data from a content analysis of 94 newspapers' front pages with survey data. For each respondent, the survey data were matched with content data from those newspapers which were actually read by that respondent. The authors found that readers of highly critical papers were more distrustful of government than others. This finding is consistent with results from a study by Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema (2006). The authors investigated the impact of news coverage of the 2002 electoral campaign in the Netherlands on political attitudes of the citizens. The data analysis is based on media content and survey data that were linked on the individual level. For each respondent, only that part of the media coverage that this respondent could actually have been perceived, was included in the analysis. Based on the results, the authors concluded that critical statements in conflict-oriented and party-related news discourage trust in political leaders.<sup>14</sup> In line with this finding, Durr, Gilmour, & Wolbrecht (1997), based on a distributed-lag time series regression model, found that the negative tone of media coverage of Congress decreases public approval for Congress. A study by Wolling (1999) probed the effects of negative statements in media articles based on a combination of media content analysis and survey data. In the data set, each person was assigned media content values that describe the media outlets used by this person. The results show that negative statements in the media decrease respondents' identification with the political community. There were no significant effects of negative media information on subjects' legitimacy of the political system or their perceived efficiency of the political system, however.

Research in the field of political sciences showed that trust in government significantly decreases when political scandals arise (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000). In line with this finding, media scientists have investigated the role of *media attention*

- 12 The index describing the media's presentation of political actors was built as the arithmetical difference between negative and positive presentations of political actors in the media.
- 13 Trust in government was measured with the standard National Election Survey (NES) trust in government scale. The scale encompasses the following items: 'Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?', 'How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – just always, or only some of the time?', 'Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all people?', 'Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people, who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing?', 'Do you think that quite a few people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all?' (A. H. Miller, et al., 1979).
- 14 The dependent variable trust in political leaders was measured with two questions; the first referring to how one would rate a politician as a political leader, the second one asking how one would rate a politician's capacity to be aware of the people's problems.

to *political scandals* as a predictor of citizens' political attitudes. A study by Morris & Clawson (2007) tests the hypothesis that media attention to political scandals weakens public approval of Congress. In order to test this assumption, the authors analyzed the evening news coverage of the U.S. Congress from 1990 through 2006 in the New York Times (NYT) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). The authors coded whether the newscasts contained information on congressional scandals.<sup>15</sup> Based on time-series models, the results indicate that approval of Congress<sup>16</sup> drops, if media attention to scandals in Congress increased. The results are controlled for economic expectations and presidential approval. In contrast, a study investigating the impact of media attention to scandals on political support in Germany (Wolling, 2001) does not support the assumption that media attention to scandals decreases support. Based on the combination of media content and survey data, Wolling (2001) showed that media coverage of political scandals<sup>17</sup> is not related to the perceived legitimacy of the political system, if variables such as media use and perception of the economy are included as control variables. The ambiguous findings might be due to differences in the conceptualization of independent variables. Whereas the study by Morris & Clawson (2007) looked at the media's impact on approval of Congress, Wolling (2001) investigated media effects on system legitimacy, i.e. satisfaction with democracy.

Morris & Clawson (2007) probed the effects of media *depictions of political processes* on public approval. The authors found that media attention to legislative maneuverings<sup>18</sup> results in significant declines of public approval and supposed that this finding indicates that "the masses do not enjoy viewing the bureaucratic elements of the lawmaking processes, such as committee procedures, markups, floor proceedings, amendments, veto threats, etc." (Morris & Clawson, 2007, p. 18). In addition, the authors probed whether *references to political conflicts* or political compromises in the media affect political attitudes. Conflict-oriented news was hypothesized to decrease approval of Congress. The results, however, showed that neither media attention to political conflict nor media attention to political compromises significantly contributed to a decrease in support for Congress. In contrast, as individual, partisan, or within-party conflicts increase in the media, public approval for Congress was found to increase. Other studies, in contrast, indicate that media attention to conflict and discord enhances the political malaise. For instance, Mutz & Reeves (2005, p. 3), based on an experimental study, found

- 15 An article was coded as scandalous congressional news, if it contains illegal or unethical misdeeds in which Congress was directly or indirectly involved.
- 16 Public approval for Congress was included in the data analysis as a single item-measure based on a variety of questions such as 'Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?', or, 'Do you have a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little confidence in Congress?'
- 17 Media articles that refer to illegal, illegitimate or unethical political behavior were coded as scandal coverage.
- 18 Legislative maneuvering was coded when the articles refer to activities in the law-making process, such as filibusters, hearings, vetoes, etc.

that exposure to political debates that are shaped by incivility significantly decreases subjects' trust in politicians, trust in Congress, and trust in the government.

### 2.1.3. The Impact of Media Strategy Frames

Research on media framing constitutes a very broad and diverse field and this study cannot provide a comprehensive overview. An extensive overview of media framing research was recently provided by Matthes (2007b), for example. Nevertheless, some clarifying remarks on the media frames concept are considered to be important in order to outline the underlying assumptions of the studies presented here. Most studies in political communication research are interested in emphasis or issue framing effects (Druckman, 2001a, 2004; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Matthes, 2007b), in contrast to equivalence framing rooted in psychological research (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Whereas equivalent framing refers to logically equivalent versions of a message (for instance Version A of a message informs about 400 people that will lose their jobs and Version B of this messages informs about a 1/3 probability that nobody will lose its job and a 2/3 probability that 600 people will lose their jobs), emphasis framing refers to differences in the salience of several considerations. For instance, a hate group can be framed in terms of free speech or it can be framed in terms of public safety, each frame emphasizing different considerations (Druckman, 2004). The most relevant definition of emphasis framing stems from Entmann (1993, p. 52) and reads:

“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication test, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.”

This literature review includes studies examining framing effects on political attitudes. The framing of political news in terms of strategic considerations in particular is found to foster political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; De Vreese, 2005; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001). Media strategy frames are characterized by the following elements:

“(1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games, and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); (4) centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (5) heavy weighing of polls and the candidate's standing in them” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 33).

Several experimental studies conducted by Cappella & Jamieson (1996, 1997) provide the first empirical evidence for the impact of media strategy frames on recipients' political cynicism.<sup>19</sup> A series of experimental studies (post-test-only design

19 The authors defined political cynicism as an attitude that implies “that the self-interest of political actors is their primary goal and that the common interest is secondary at best or played out only for its political advantage” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 142). The political cynicism index was developed in order to measure attitudes addressing political events such