

is known about the impact of strategy frames outside the election context, for instance (De Vreese, 2004, p. 191). Second, research interested in the direct relationship between media negativity and political attitudes focuses on outcomes and neglects the investigation of *effect mechanisms and processes*. For instance, there is a need for future studies to gain an “improved theoretical understanding of why strategy-oriented media coverage is associated with negative civic outcomes” (Besley & McComas, 2005, p. 429f.). In order to inform the conceptualization of effect mechanisms in this study, research that considers effect mechanisms is presented in Section 2.2. Third, research neglects to consider the *conditions* under which political attitudes are particularly susceptible to media effects. In order to inform the choice of possible conditions, an overview of studies exploring the conditionality of media effects is given in Section 2.3.

## 2.2. Mechanisms by which Media Information has an Impact on Political Attitudes

This section provides an overview of studies that examine the effect mechanisms in order to explain how media information alters political attitudes. The investigation of process mechanisms is an important aim in research:

“Establishing relationships between variables is important, because correlation is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for claiming that two variables are causally related. Of even greater scientific interest is explaining how or by what means a causal effect occurs” (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 879).

In order to investigate how the media affect political attitudes, research considers variables that mediate the relationship between media information and political attitudes. “Questions about cause–effect relations invoke the idea of mediation, the process by which some variables exert influences on others through intervening or mediator variables” (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 879). Despite potential non-significant direct associations between media and political support, there might be a significant indirect effect. Such a significant indirect effect, then, would describe the effect of media information on political support via the influence on a third variable. The overview of variables that mediate the relationship between media information and political attitudes in this section will inform the choice of possible mediators in the present study. More precisely, plausible explanations for the way in which media depictions of political decision-making processes may evoke a decrease in political support will be developed. Because only a few studies on the media’s impact on political support consider mediating variables, the present section expands the focus on studies that investigate the media’s impact on attitudes of political support and also includes studies on the relationship between media and attitudes towards policy issues, in order to provide a rather broad overview of possible mediators.

Research, for instance, suggests that the mass media may decrease political support by shaping the perception of political realities (Section 2.2.1). Other studies propose that simple media attention to certain political issues may shape presidential evaluations, because these issues then serve as a benchmark for the evaluation (Sec-

tion 2.2.2). Further studies indicate that media information may foster fear and anger which might in turn lead to an increase in political distrust (Section 2.2.3). The media may not only serve as an obstacle to political support but also contribute to it by enhancing citizens' political knowledge (Section 2.2.4). Section 2.2.5 summarizes the findings and discusses suggestions for the present study.

### 2.2.1. Trough Effects on Social Reality Perceptions

Some research suggests that social reality perceptions might mediate the media's impact on political attitudes. Although the mass media's influence on social reality perceptions is at the core of cultivation research (see Section 3.2.1), this section is not about cultivation research, because cultivation research perceives reality perceptions as an independent variable. Instead, this section focuses on the role of reality perceptions as a variable that mediates the relationship between media information and political attitudes.

For instance, a study by Hetherington (1996) investigates the relationship between media use, the audiences' perception of the economy and vote choice in the framework of the 1992 U.S. national election. The author found a highly significant and negative effect of both media consumption in general and attention to the presidential campaign in particular on voters' perceptions of the national economy. In addition, there was a highly significant effect of economic evaluation on vote choice. Hence, the author concluded that mass media had an "indirect impact on vote choice through contribution of negative retrospective economic evaluations" (Hetherington, 1996, p. 383). The study does not provide a test of mediation in the strict sense, because the effect of economic evaluations on vote choice is not controlled for media consumption (cf. Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Other studies showed that attributions of responsibility function as a mediator of media effects. Those responsibility attributions can be described as a distinct aspect of social reality perceptions. In a series of experimental studies, Iyengar (1987) explored the effect of media framing of political issues. Two versions of media framing are distinguished: Framing issues in terms of societal outcomes (issue framing) and framing issues in terms of particular victims and individual fates (episodic framing). These media frames were found to alter the attribution of responsibility. Results indicate that issue frames foster the attribution of responsibility for political problems to the political system and episodic frames foster the attribution of responsibility to individual persons. The attribution of responsibility to the political system, in turn, was linked with the assessment of presidential performance. "The more individuals attribute problems to structural or systemic causes, the more critical they are of President Reagan's performance" (Iyengar, 1987, p. 828). The assumption of indirect framing effects was not tested empirically in a strict sense, because the effects of responsibility attributions on presidential evaluation were not controlled for the impact of media frames. Iyengar & Simon (1993) replicated the experimental findings reported above with survey data.

## 2.2.2. Trough Effects on Issue Accessibility or Perceived Issue Importance

Another explanation for the mechanisms by which media information affects political attitudes is suggested by priming theory.<sup>21</sup> Some scholars argue that priming effects provide an explanation for the mechanisms by which negative media information affects political attitudes, because most of the stimuli used in priming experiments have been bad news, not good news (Kosicki, 2002, p. 76). Building on the idea of agenda-setting, researchers formulated the hypothesis that media coverage influences citizens' assessment of the presidential performance by altering the importance that citizens describe to national policy issues (Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Kosicki, 1993; M. E. McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The priming hypothesis assumes that "by focusing on some issues and not others, the news may determine the standards by which a president's performance is evaluated and may, as a result, provoke surges and declines in presidential popularity" (J. M. Miller & Krosnick, 1996, p. 80). Iyengar & Simon (1993) examined the priming hypothesis in the context of the Gulf crisis based on a combination of content analysis and survey data. The content analysis of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) news coverage between August 1990 and May 1991 showed that the Gulf war received an increasing amount of media attention. As a parallel trend, citizens were found to perceive that the crisis was the most important problem facing the country. As a consequence, they assigned greater weight to their beliefs and opinions concerning foreign policy when forming attitudes towards George Bush. These attitudes were shown to override the role of economic assessments, and, in turn, made the perception of George Bush more positive. Similarly, Krosnick & Brannon (1993), based on survey data from the National Election Panel Study (NES), found support for their assumption that the media's focus on the Gulf crisis increased the impact of George Bush's handling of the crisis on his overall job performance. In a study on the Iran-contra disclosure, Krosnick & Kinder (1990) found the same effect pattern. The authors assumed that for citizens who had been interviewed after the disclosure, the issue of the U.S. intervening in Central America had a greater impact on their presidential evaluations than for citizens who had been interviewed before the story broke. Other studies showed that although priming effects may explain presidential evaluations, they are less applicable to predict evaluations of political groups (McGraw & Ling, 2003). In all these studies, the assumed indirect priming effects were not the subject of strict empirical tests, however.

21 Discussions on how priming and framing effects differ go beyond the scope of this paper. For further information see, for instance, Price & Tewksbury (1997).