

6.2.4. Variables and Operationalization

In this section, 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). *Process preferences* were measured after the treatment with six items that relate to two dimensions of political processes, namely consensus-orientation and efficiency (for more information see Floß, 2008). Three items refer to preferences regarding the consensus-orientation of political processes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$), three items refer to preferences regarding the efficiency of political processes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$). All items were measured on a 7-point scale and had the stem 'In the following question we would like to know more about your political preferences. Citizens hold different preferences regarding how political decisions should be made in democratic systems. Please answer according to the following scale how important you personally consider the following preferences to be. The scale ranges from 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important).' Preferences regarding the consensus-orientation of political processes were, for instance, measured with the question 'How important is it for you that political parties sometimes concede a point to the other side?' Preferences regarding the efficiency of political processes were for example measured with the question 'How important is it for you that political decision-making processes are simple and short?'

Process perceptions were measured after the treatment with six items that relate to two dimensions of political processes, namely consensus-orientation and efficiency. Three items refer to the perceived consensus-orientation of political processes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$), and three items refer to the perceived efficiency of political processes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .67$). All items were measured on a 7-point scale and had the stem 'Now we would like to know how, in your opinion, political decisions are actually made in Switzerland. Please answer according to the following scale and indicate to what extent the following statements on political decision-making processes in Switzerland, in your opinion, apply or not apply. The scale ranges from 1 (does not apply at all) to 7 (fully applies).' Perceived consensus-orientation of political processes was for instance measured with the statement 'Political parties sometimes concede a point to the other side.' Perceived efficiency-orientation was for example measured with the statement 'Political decision-making processes are time-consuming.'

Political support was modeled as a hierarchical factor that refers to four objects of evaluation: government, parliament, politicians, and democracy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). This conceptualization is in line with other research that conceptualizes political support as hierarchical factors, i.e. as a general attitude of political support that explains the relationship between more specific attitudes towards different objects of political support (Fuchs, 1989, p. 62ff.).⁷⁸ Political support was measured after the

78 Hierarchical factor models encompass a second order factor which explains the relationship between first order factors (Kline, 2005, p. 198ff.)

treatment. The measures build on established survey items ((e.g. European Social Survey 2008; Eurobarometer 1997; cf. Muller & Jukam, 1977; cf. Westle, 1989) and were adapted to the study's context. The items were measured on a 10-point scale, because a sensitive measurement of the independent variables controls for ceiling or floor effects. More precisely, the sensitive measurement ensures that scores on the variables are less likely to approach the maximum possible scores or the minimum possible scores, respectively.⁷⁹ Support for the government was assessed by two items, for example, 'How good or bad do you consider the present general performance of the Swiss government?' Support for the parliament was measured with two items, for example, 'How good or bad do you consider the present general performance of the Swiss parliament?' Support for politicians was assessed by three items, for instance 'How much do you trust politicians in Switzerland altogether to act as they really should?' Support for democracy was measured with two items, for example 'To what extent does democracy as it exists in Switzerland correspond to your personal version of an ideal democracy?'

Article impressions variables measure the subjects' perception of the stimulus articles. The items relate to two dimensions, the conflict-orientation and the inefficiency focus of news articles. Article impressions were assessed after the treatment with two items for each dimension. On a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not apply) to 4 (applies), subjects were asked to indicate what impression the articles raised with respect to the way political decisions are made. The items measuring participants' article impressions had the stem 'To begin with, we would like to ask you some questions on the news articles that we have sent to you last week. What impression did these articles raise with respect to the way political decisions are made?' The impression of articles as conflict-focused (Cronbach's $\alpha = .62$), for example, was measured with the question 'Have the articles, all in all, raised the impression that political decision-making processes are shaped by conflicts and power struggles?' The impression of articles as inefficiency-focused (Cronbach's $\alpha = .59$), for example, was measured with the question 'And have the articles, all in all, raised the impression that political decision-making processes are time-consuming?'

The following socio-demographic control variables are included in data analysis as control variables: Age, gender, education, political ideology and political experience. Political experience is an index variable that was based on four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .64$). Two items measure political activity (party work, political mandate), and two items measure political experience in general (direct experiences through own political activity, indirect experiences through the political activity of friends or relatives). An index variable was built by counting the values indicating

79 Ceiling effects refer to the difficulty of obtaining further increases if responses already approach the maximum possible scores. Floor effects refer to the difficulty of obtaining further decreases if responses already approach the minimum possible scores (Shadish, et al., 2002, p. 50).

experiences and activity; this variable range from 0 (no experience) to 4 (much experience).

6.2.5. Data Analysis

The SEM analyses used EQS version 6.1 software (Bentler, 2006). Missing values were treated using the maximum likelihood-method (ML-imputation algorithm), also known as full information maximum likelihood (cf. Bentler, 2006, p. 285ff.; Wothke, 2000). The data were tested for univariate and multivariate normal distribution and strong outliers were excluded from data analysis. Extreme violations (moderate ones are given in parentheses) on the assumption of the univariate distribution are associated with skew values of at least 3 (2) and kurtosis of at least 20 (7) (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). These values were not reached. Strong outlier as regards multivariate normality distribution (cf. Yuan, Lambert, & Fouladi, 2004) were excluded from data analysis. Because the analysis is based on imputed data, I generally applied the distribution-free Satorra-Bentler estimation as an alternative to Maximum-Likelihood estimation. Robust methods might correct for deviations from the missing-at-random assumption. To evaluate the model fit, the following criteria were evaluated: the Chi-Square value divided by the number of degrees of freedom (< 3), the comparative fit index ($CFI > .90$), the Root Mean-Square Error of Approximation ($RMSEA < .06$) with its 90% confidence interval (CI, lower bound $< .05$, upper bound $< .10$) (Kline, 2005, p. 133ff.).

6.3. Results

One objective of this study is to examine the effects that media presentations of political processes have on citizens' perceptions of political processes and their levels of political support. In this section, the short-term impact of experimental stimulus articles on respondents' perceptions of political processes and their political support is investigated. Section 6.3.1 presents the results from the treatment and manipulation checks. Then, Section 6.3.2 describes the findings on the articles' impact on the perception of political processes. One assumption of this study is that exposure to the stimulus articles may affect political support by increasing the temporary accessibility of the process preferences-perceptions discrepancies. This assumption is tested in Section 6.3.3.

6.3.1. Treatment and Manipulation Checks

The questions for the treatment and manipulation checks were included in each of the five surveys that included the stimulus articles (conflict group: $n = 189$, ineffi-