

4. Media Presentations of Political Decision-Making Processes

In order to test the assumptions of the preferences-perceptions model of media effects, the present study, first, analyzes the media presentation of political decision-making processes in Switzerland. The aim of this study is to investigate whether the assumption of an adversarial style of presenting decision-making procedures also holds for news coverage in Switzerland. This study's research question is presented in Section 4.1. The methodological details are considered in Section 4.2. Section 4.3 describes the results, followed by a summary and discussion in Section 4.4.

4.1. Research Question

Following their own rules of news production, the media do not mirror political processes but might present a distinct picture of the way political decisions are reached. Although there is empirical research on the mass media's presentation of political campaigns or certain policy issues (for instance De Vreese, 2005; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2009; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001), there is less research dealing with media presentations of political processes (Arnold, 2004). In general, research shows an increasing tendency on the part of the media to present information about Congress in terms of conflicts, winners and losers, strategies, and political discord. For instance, media coverage of processes within the parliament was found to focus on conflicts and to be shaped by a negative tone (Lichter & Amundson, 1994; Morris & Clawson, 2005, 2007). This emphasis on adversarial aspects might also be characteristic of media information about day-to-day political decision-making processes in general. Because the conclusion that the news media adopt an adversarial style when depicting political processes is based on empirical evidence that stems mainly from the U.S., comparatively less is known about media presentations of political processes in Europe, Switzerland in particular. In fact, the literature provides theoretical arguments that would, rather, speak for an emphasis on aspects of consensus and compromises in the case of Swiss media, since Switzerland is a consensus-democracy (Marcinkowski, 2006). Hence, the following research question will guide the data analysis:

- RQ1: Which aspects characterize the presentation of day-to-day political decision-making processes in the news coverage of Swiss media?

This study is interested in differences in the presentation of political processes within the legislative and the executive branch. In order to derive patterns that are specific for contemporary news coverage in Swiss media, the analysis follows a comparative perspective over time. Moreover, a national comparison between Switzerland and Germany is intended to shed light on the question whether political

decision-making procedures are presented differently in consensus-democracies compared with more competitive systems like Germany.

4.2. Method

Section 4.2.1 describes the sample that was used to investigate the media coverage of political decision-making processes in Switzerland and Germany. The operationalization of variables is presented in Section 4.2.2. Section 4.2.3 contains information on how the content analysis was conducted.

4.2.1. Content Analysis Sample

In order to include media with different qualities, a broadsheet, a regional paper, and a tabloid from each nation were included in the sample. The selection criterion was circulation, so the sampling unit consists of papers with the highest circulation. For Switzerland, these are “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” (“NZZ”, WEMF³⁸ 2005: 150.945), “Tages-Anzeiger” (236.569), and “Blick” (262.262). For Germany, “Süddeutsche Zeitung” (“SZ”, IVW Q1/2008³⁹: 450.201), “Freie Presse” (IVW Q3/2006: 336.968) and “Bild” (paid circulation IVW Q2/2006: 3.599.652) were chosen. Television newscasts were also investigated. The main evening news on German public television, “Tagesschau” (average of 9.73 million viewers per day), and the main evening news on Swiss public television, “Tagesschau” (average of 1 million viewers per day), were selected for the analysis. Since this study focuses on the media presentation of political decision-making processes, the analysis of media content is based on the newspapers’ front pages and the pages on national politics. Letters to the editor were not analyzed in the study.

The newspapers were investigated in a longitudinal perspective, because this study is interested in possible differences in media coverage patterns at different points in time. In order to exclude “special times” in the context of elections, articles from the second years of the legislative term were chosen as a time of regular political decision-making. Newspaper editions from 1964/65, 1984/85 and 2003/2004, 2004/2005 were examined.⁴⁰ The time comparison allows us to observe any potential specific patterns in contemporary news coverage. The patterns observed in contemporary media presentations will serve as a guideline for the development of the

38 WEMF (“AG für Werbemedienforschung”) is an advertising media research institute in Switzerland.

39 IVW (“Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V.”) is advertising media research institute in Germany.

40 As a time of regular political decision-making, a one-year period beginning with the second year after the election of the German Chancellor and the election of the Swiss Federal Council (after the elections for the National Council), was chosen.