

In general, then, the findings indicate that the general perception of political processes influences the impression that people gain from the news articles. An alternative version of this model with paths from conflict impression on conflict perception and paths from inefficiency impression on efficiency perception, however, results in a model with equivalent fit (see also Section 6.3.2). This suggests that the relationship between article impressions and process preferences might be reciprocal. The inclusion of article impressions into the model did not enhance the amount of explained variance of political support ( $r^2 = .38$  for the model without impression factors,  $r^2 = .39$  for the model with impression factors), however. Thus, the results suggest that there is no independent effect of article impressions on political support above and beyond the impact of process perceptions.

#### *7.4. Summary and Discussion*

This section presented results from analyses of the relationship between routine media use and political support. The analyses focused on the mechanisms by which media information affects citizens' political support. In line with the assumption that media use influences political support indirectly by shaping the perception of political decision-making processes, results showed that television use has a significant effect on political support via its impact on the efficiency perception of political processes. More precisely, the findings indicate that high levels of television use are associated with the perception of political processes as inefficient. The more a person perceives political processes as inefficient, the lower are this person's levels of political support. The effect of television use on the perception of political processes as conflict-oriented was insignificant, however. As expected, there was no significant impact of newspaper use on the perception of political processes as consensus-oriented and no significant impact of newspaper use on the perception of political processes as inefficient. Hence there was also no indirect effect of newspaper use on political support. Television's impact on political attitudes may be stronger than the impact of newspapers, because television information is subject to dual information coding (audio information and visual information). In line with this assumption, other studies provide evidence for the assumption that dual-coding enhances media effects (Druckman, 2003; Van der Model & Van der Voort, 2000).

Against the background of findings from the content analysis, the lack of effects of television use on consensus perception is rather surprising. Results from the content analysis showed that television newscasts frequently contained references to political accusations and discord, particularly when presenting decision-making processes within the parliament. So why did television's strong focus on political accusations not affect the respondents' consensus perceptions? One explanation is suggested by findings reported earlier (Section 6.4.2), which show that exposure to the conflict-oriented stimulus articles may not only raise the impression that political

processes are conflict-oriented but might also foster the impression that political processes are inefficient.<sup>100</sup> These findings warrant the assumption that the conflict-oriented news coverage in television might have contributed to the audience's perception that political processes are inefficient. Another possible explanation refers to the role of the Swiss political culture. Literature suggests that strong beliefs and ideologies are less susceptible to media effects: Television is the most influential "in cultivating assumptions about which there is little opportunity to learn first-hand and which are not strongly anchored in established beliefs and ideologies" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 191). In a consensus democracy like Switzerland, where consensus-orientation of is of great value to the citizens (Linder & Steffen, 2006), the perception of political processes in terms of the role of consensus and compromises may not be prone to media effects, then. This assumption is supported by results of this study which indicate that aspects of political socialization are important predictors of both individuals' perception of political processes in terms of consensus-orientation and their preferences regarding the consensus-orientation of political processes. More precisely, consensus preferences and consensus perceptions were found to be significantly affected by socio-demographic characteristics (gender, education, and age) as well as a person's political experiences and political ideology.

The impact of television use on political support via process perceptions was tested separately for distinct objects of support, namely support for the government, support for the parliament, support for politicians and support for democracy. The explained variance was strongest for the model estimating support for politicians and least strong for the model estimating support for the government. This finding is in line with research showing that changes in political support are most dramatic for political authorities, a phenomenon called "skepticisms of elites" (Dalton, 1999, p. 74). Two differences are noteworthy: Whereas the perception of political processes in terms of their efficiency predicted support for the government, support for politicians and support for democracy were affected rather by the perception of the consensus-orientation of political processes. Consensus-orientation as a central value in consensus democracies, hence, is linked with support for democracy. This finding is in line with the studies emphasizing the relationship between cultural values and system legitimacy (Fuchs, 1999b, 2002).

Additional models were tested in order to probe whether process preferences mediate the impact of media use on political support. Both newspaper use and television use were found to affect respondents' preferences as regards the efficiency of political decision-making processes. Whereas intensive newspaper use was associated with lower preferences regarding the efficiency of political processes, intensive television use was related to strong preferences regarding the efficiency of political processes. There was an indirect effect of television use on political support via effects on preferences for efficient decision-making procedures. In general, then, television use appears to shape both the perceptions of political processes in terms of

100 Although these effects are not significant, the differences between the treatment groups are in the direction described here.

their efficiency and participants' preferences regarding the efficiency of political procedures. Hence a further model tested the media's impact on the discrepancies between process preferences and perceptions. Both newspaper use and television were found to affect respondents' preferences-perceptions discrepancies as regards the efficiency of political decision-making processes. Whereas intensive newspaper use was associated with smaller discrepancies between preferences and perceptions regarding the efficiency of political processes, intensive television use was related to larger discrepancies between preferences and perceptions regarding the efficiency of political processes. There was an indirect effect of television use on political support in the sense that television use increased the discrepancy between efficiency preferences and perceptions and, thus, decreased political support in turn. There was also an indirect effect of newspaper use on political support in the sense that newspaper use decreased the discrepancy between efficiency preferences and perceptions and, thus, increased political support in turn.

Moreover, the results presented in this chapter suggest that the relationship between preferences and perceptions shapes political support. More precisely, findings indicated that the more important consensus-orientated political processes are for an individual, the stronger a negative perception of political processes in terms of their consensus-orientation contributes to a decrease of political support. Likewise, the more important efficient political processes are for an individual, the stronger a negative perception of political processes in terms of their efficiency contributes to a decrease of political support. With regard to the role of the media, the results showed that the impact of television use on political support via its effect on the perception of political processes in terms of their efficiency is not the same for all subjects. Findings indicated a strong indirect effect of television use on support via efficiency perceptions particularly for those subjects with high efficiency preferences. The results warrant the assumption that subjects with high preferences regarding the efficiency of political decision-making processes are particularly susceptible to media effects, because television shapes the perception that political processes are inefficient. This finding is in line with an assumption by Volgy & Schwarz (1980, p. 158):

"Fear of turning off audiences with complex stories and situations has led regularly scheduled televised news programs to offer presentations that are reduced to the lowest common denominator, infused with simplistic symbols and with essentially superficial evaluations of complex problems. It is possible that this way of presenting the world leads to a state where persons depending primarily on television news become more intolerant of problems or conflicts that require complex, uneasy, and long-term solutions."

Test of differences between groups of people with high vs. low levels of political awareness did not indicate significant differences. This finding might suggest that a chronically accessible preferences-perceptions relationship does not increase the impact of the preferences-perceptions relationship on political support for subjects that are high in the magnitude of discrepancies between process preferences and process perceptions. However, methodological reasons might account for this null finding. The variance of the political awareness variable is particularly low

( $M=7.03$ ,  $SD= 0.95$ ). Furthermore, political awareness might not have been a good indicator for the individuals' chronic accessibility of the relationship between process preferences and perceptions. Political awareness might indicate the individuals' awareness of the relationship between process preferences and perceptions rather than the chronic accessibility of the relationship. Considering the political awareness variable as an indicator for the people's awareness of the relationship between process preferences and perceptions, the findings reported here are in line with the assumption that awareness is not a precondition for the relationship between preferences and perceptions to shape evaluative attitudes (Higgins, 1987). Future studies based on samples with individuals that are particularly low in their political awareness and individuals particularly high in their political awareness would be needed to shed more light on the role of political awareness. In addition, studies that test alternative indicators of chronic accessibility would be needed. The general intensity of media use might be an appropriate indicator. In general, the examination of the model's conditionality to levels of political awareness by means of group comparisons appeared to be an applicable procedure. However, in order to be able to make use of group comparisons, future studies should ensure that the group variables show the necessary variance. In addition, a sufficient number of subjects in each group is required.

Further analysis showed that there is no independent effect of situational exposure to media articles on political support above and beyond the impact of routine media use.