

3. A Preferences-Perceptions Model of Media Effects on Political Support

Based on the literature review in the previous chapter, I have formulated three suggestions for the present study. First, this study extends the focus of media effects research on the context of election campaigns by investigating the effect of media presentations of day-to-day political decision-making processes on citizens' political support. It thus focuses on media depictions of discussions of possible solutions to political problems and decision-making processes within the government, the parliament, or the political administration. The impact of media presentations of referenda or other processes that are geared towards citizens' participation is not considered here. Second, this study aims to explain the mechanisms by which media information about political processes affects citizens' political support. Drawing on cultivation theory and the assumption that subjects' reliance on mass media accounts for perceptions of social reality (Eveland, 2002), this study investigates the role of audience perceptions of political processes as mediator of the relationship between media information and political support. Third, the present work endeavors to specify the conditions under which media presentations of political processes are particularly likely to have an impact on political support. Building on research that shows that the relationship between perceptions of political institutions and related preferences explains confidence levels (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Kimball & Patterson, 1997), media effects are assumed to vary as a function of individual preferences as regards political decision-making processes.³¹

Considering these three suggestions, this chapter develops a theoretical model that captures individual-level differences in political support and takes central account of the relationship between media information, perceptions of political processes, preferences as regards political processes, and political support. Citizens' process perceptions as well as their process preferences and attitudes of political support are conceptualized as cognitive attitudes. In general, the definition of an attitude is "simply that it is a hypothetical construct involving the evaluation of some object" (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008). This definition by Roskos-Ewoldsen encompasses three aspects of attitudes: First, attitudes are hypothetical, meaning that they cannot be observed directly and need to be measured indirectly with a variety of different items. Second, attitudes involve evaluations. Third, attitudes are directed

31 Research investigating the role of preferences with respect to policy issues does not fall within the scope of the present study. Policy preferences are considered in spatial models of voting, for example. These models compare the distance between voters' and candidates' positions on political issues in order to predict vote choices (Enelow & Hinich, 1990). Similarly, A. H. Miller (1974) argues that citizens hold low levels of trust in the government if they are unsatisfied with the policy alternatives offered to solve current problems.

towards objects, i.e. things, ideas, individuals, or groups. The concept of attitudes encompasses affective, behavioral, and cognitive components. Emotional reactions and feelings toward an object of evaluation are affective attitudes. The behavioral component encompasses actions directed towards the object of evaluation (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008). Cognitive attitudes, which are the focus of this study, are thoughts and beliefs about an object of evaluation.

Process preferences in this study are understood as citizens' expectations of how political decisions should be made and how political institutions should operate. Hence, process preferences "determine what people want" (De Mesquita & McDermott, 2004, p. 276). More precisely, preferences are conceptualized as "a comparative evaluation of (i.e. a ranking over) a set of objects" (Druckman & Lupia, 2000, p. 2). Building on this definition of preferences as a ranking of various options, process preferences in this study describe which aspects of decision-making processes are relatively important for an individual compared to other process aspects. The preferences are hypothesized to be stored in memory and to be drawn on when people make decisions (Druckman & Lupia, 2000, p. 2). The term "preferences" instead of "expectations" is used here in order to emphasize the role of comparative evaluations and judgments about the relative importance of different process aspects. The term "expectations", which is used in some studies to describe what people want (Kimball & Patterson, 1997; S. C. Patterson, et al., 1969), is not used in this work, because it is mainly used in the literature to refer to what people think will happen in the future (Dolan & Holbrook, 2001, p. 28).

Process perceptions refer to the pictures that citizens have in their heads about the way political decisions are made. Because "the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind", man makes "trustworthy pictures inside his head of the world beyond his reach" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 29). Since perceptions of political processes are "attitudes and beliefs about others" (Shrum, 2008), they can be conceptualized as social perceptions. Characteristic for social perceptions is that different individuals may hold diverse perceptions of the same group of other people, because social perceptions are an "active and constructive process" (Samochowiec & Wähnke, 2008). "How individuals interpret the real world around them" (Hoffmann & Glynn, 2008) is, for instance, influenced not only by experiences but also by individual expectancies and motivations (Shrum, 2008).

The purpose of the preferences-perceptions model of media effects that will be developed in this chapter is to explain alterations in political support as responses to media-induced changes in the perception of political processes. In addition, the mass media's impact on political support is assumed to vary as a function of individual process preferences. The model's arguments are backed up with references to established theories and selected empirical evidence. Section 3.1 refers to the role of the preferences-perceptions relationship as predictor of political support. Section 3.2 elaborates the assumption that media presentations of political decision-making processes shape the audience's perception of these processes. In addition, the chapter elucidates the argument that process preferences are rooted in the political culture of a nation and discusses possibilities for media effects on process preferences. It

also presents research that investigates how the media depict political decision-making processes in order to inform propositions about possible effects of the media on citizens' perceptions of political processes and political support. Section 3.3 then summarizes the main assumptions and outlines the propositions of the preferences-perceptions model of media effects. This study's empirical program to test the model is presented in Section 3.4.

3.1. The Preferences-Perceptions Relationship as Predictor of Political Support

The role of process aspects as determinant of political evaluations is emphasized in a variety of studies. "Given that people are often ambivalent, agnostic, or uninterested in specific policy, citizens often use their views about process to inform their political decisions" (Dyck & Baldassare, 2009, p. 552). Empirical research interested in the impact of procedural justice on public approval of authorities and institutions supports this assumption. "According to the procedural justice perspective citizens are not only sensitive to outcomes in evaluating leaders. In addition, they respond to their judgment of the fairness of procedures by which outcomes are allocated" (Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985, p. 703). For example, Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw (1985) based on data from two empirical studies concluded that perceptions of procedural fairness and justice have more influence upon the approval of political leaders and institutions than do outcome-related concerns. Based on panel survey data Grimes (2006) showed that the perceived fairness of processes by which collective decisions are taken predicts public approval of political institutions. The perceived justice of procedures was also found to impact the approval of the Supreme Court (Tyler & Rasinski, 1991). In line with this result, Ramirez (2008) found that subjects exposed to information that presented Supreme Court proceedings as fair showed higher levels of support for the Court than subjects exposed to information that presented the proceedings as unfair. Similar findings are reported by Baird & Gangl (2006). Besides the analysis of the impact of perceived procedural fairness, there is a "need to identify those procedures which citizens feel are fair" (Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985, p. 721). This question, however, is not addressed in procedural justice research so far.

This section elaborates the argument that the relationship between citizens' perceptions of political processes and their preferences concerning political decision-making processes explains variations in political support. The role of the preferences-perceptions relationship as predictor of political support is based on the basic assumption that "evaluations of individual, social or political objects are partly grounded in disparities between expectations and perceptions" (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 703). The notion that inconsistencies in a person's beliefs system result in personal discomfort has a long history in social psychology, e.g. in concepts such as dissonance, imbalance, incongruence (cf. Higgins, 1987, p. 63).

The argument that political support is shaped by the relationship between perceptions of political processes and according preferences is in line with findings from

studies in political science which show that confidence in political institutions or actors varies as a function of the relationship between citizens' perceptions and preferences. These studies emphasize the point that it is not only the perception of political realities that explains evaluative attitudes. Instead, political preferences matter also. Patterson et al. (1969) were among the first researchers to investigate the role of perceptions-preferences relations as predictor of political support. Their study investigates the role of the perceptions-preferences differential on support for legislators:

"We expect high levels of legislative support from citizens whose feelings about what the legislature is like come close to their expectation of it. And, low levels of legislative support should be exhibited by those for whom there are wide gaps between their perceptions of the legislature and what they expect of it" (S. C. Patterson, et al., 1969).

Perceptions were measured with items on a 10-point scale that indicate whether respondents think that legislators are influenced by several actors or agencies. In addition, items which measure the extent to which legislators have certain characteristics were included in the survey. Expectations were measured with items on a 10-point scale measuring whether legislators should be influenced by a series of actors or agencies and the extent to which members of the legislature ought to have certain characteristics. Hence, both perception and expectation items refer to two aspects of the representative legislature: influencing agencies and legislators' characteristics. Using survey data from a representative sample of citizens in Iowa State, the authors assessed the impact of the relationship between perceptions and expectations on subjects' support for legislators. In order to do so, the authors assigned the subjects to two groups, indicating congruence or incongruence between perceptions and expectations towards the legislators. The congruent group showed higher mean support scores than did the incongruent group. The authors interpreted these results as support for their hypothesis that congruence between perceptions and expectations fosters support, whereas incongruence leads to low levels of support. The authors concluded that perceptions-expectations differentials explain variance in support for the legislators.

A study by Kimball & Patterson (1997) gives further empirical validity to this line of argument. The authors expanded previous research by investigating the impact of the expectations-perceptions discrepancy on attitudes towards Congress in a multivariate explanatory environment. Using data from a 1994 post-election survey with citizens in Ohio State, the authors analyzed citizens' expectations regarding motives and connections of incumbents as well as according perceptions. Based on calculations of the difference between expectations and perceptions, discrepancy items were built. By means of factor analysis, two dimensions of the expectations-perceptions discrepancy concerning Congress were derived: A candidacy factor including attributes such as individual motivation and connections, and an experience factor embracing aspects such as training, experience, loyalty, and reelection interests. The multivariate estimation by means of multiple regression (including socio-demographic variables, party identification, political involvement) shows that the two discrepancy factors have a direct and significant impact on evaluations of

Congress. In order to compare the explanatory power of the two discrepancy factors against the predictive power of expectation and perception measures, the authors ran a multivariate model that included perception measures and expectation measures. This model showed lower levels of fit than the model that includes the two discrepancy factors. Thus, the authors conclude that “public attitudes toward Congress hinge very much upon public expectations, [and] citizens’ perceptions of congressional performance” (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 722).

More recent research on political support underscores the importance of political processes (John R. Hibbing & Elisabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001; John R. Hibbing & Elisabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a, 2001b; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that citizens hold preferences not only with respect to political actors, but also with regard to political processes. “Dissatisfaction usually stems from perceptions about how government goes about its business, not what the government does. Processes, I argue, are not only means to policy ends but, instead, are often ends in themselves” (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 35). The authors assume that discrepancies between process preferences and the perception of political processes account for variances in support levels (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Their study on process preferences and public approval of government (John R. Hibbing & Elisabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a, 2001b; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) provides evidence for this assumption. The authors used a specially designed national survey of 1,266 randomly selected adults as well as focus group discussions in order to investigate the governmental procedures that people want and the perceptions of the working of government. In the focus group discussions, the authors found that

“people tend to speak more directly and with more confidence about the flawed processes of government than they do about intractable policy dilemmas. The more I listened to them describe their perceptions of government, the more I was taken with the fact that people care deeply about procedures by which policies are produced” (John R. Hibbing & Elisabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a, p. 147).

Using measurements of process perceptions and process preferences in the standardized survey³², the differential was built to obtain a measure for the perceived process gap. In a multivariate setting controlling for socio-demographics, political knowledge, party identification, and policy satisfaction, the authors found a significant effect of the process gap variable on approval of the government. A process that matches an individual’s preferences as to how a political process should work in-

32 Citizens’ process preferences are measured with the questions: “Some people say what I need in this country is for ordinary people like you and me to decide for ourselves what needs to be done and how. Others say ordinary people are too busy and should instead allow elected officials and bureaucrats to make all political decisions. Still others say a combination would be best. Imagine a seven-point scale with 1 being ordinary people making all decisions on their own and 7 being elected officials and bureaucrats making all the decisions on their own while 2,3,4,5, or 6 indicate in-between opinions on the two extremes. Which number from 1 to 7 best represents ...how you think government should work? ... how you think the national government in Washington actually works?” (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 412).

creases approval, whereas discrepancies decrease support. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995; 2002) maintained that aspects of political processes such as conflict, compromise, bargaining, intense debate and deliberation, competition between diverging interests, and procedural inefficiency are considered particularly unappealing by the American public. Instead, Americans want efficiency and decisiveness from their government. The authors conclude that “the extent to which individuals believe actual processes are inconsistent with their own process preferences is an important variable in understanding the current public mood” (John R. Hibbing & Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a, p. 145).

Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997), in their study on congressional approval, came to a similar conclusion. The authors used time-series containing a quarterly measure of approval from 1974 to 1993 in order to analyze the impact of congressional actions on public attitudes towards Congress. The authors assumed that at times when Congress acts as required by its institutional role, support declines because expectations of decisive action and efficiency are not being fulfilled. The findings indicate that mass support for Congress tends to drop when major legislation is under consideration, legislation via the veto override occurs, and the level of conflict within Congress is high:

“As the representatives of a diverse and heterogeneous country, members seldom find themselves in agreement. The resulting contentiousness can permeate Congressional activity, frustrating those who look to Congress for decisive action and making the process appear overly political and petty. When it does act, particularly on broad issues culminating in major legislation, the inability of the outcome to satisfy all sides can reflect poorly on the institution. To the public, then, the very activities which characterize Congress and the legislative process – deliberation, debate, and decision making – cause it to appear quarrelsome, unproductive, and controversial, and thus diminish it in the public eye. In sum, I contend that changes in levels of Congressional approval are related to characteristics of Congress and the legislative and representative tasks with which it is constitutionally charged” (Durr, et al., 1997, p. 176).

The assumption that the perception of legislative work challenges citizens’ expectation is part of the general argument: “Congressional approval can therefore be understood as a byproduct of Congress’ constitutionally-defined role and the public’s perhaps unrealistic expectations.” (Durr, et al., 1997, p. 200). However, this assumption was not investigated empirically, as no measures of citizens’ expectations of Congress were applied in the study. Likewise, Patzelt (2001) argues that confidence in parliament decreases because quarrels and conflicts are visible, whereas people expect corporate actions instead.

I, then, build on a solid foundation in assuming that the relationship between the perception of political processes and related preferences contributes to the explanation of political support. This argument is consistent with studies from other fields. For instance, a study by Kehoe & Ponting (2003) shows that the degree to which respondents feel that health policy leaders share with them the support for the Canada Health Act value of ‘equal accessibility’ determines trust in health care policy actors and the health care system. In line with this finding, Boxx, Odom, & Dunn (1991) argue that value congruence fosters organizational commitment. According to the authors, organizational performance would be enhanced if the organ-

izational culture is congruent with the values and beliefs of the employees. In line with their expectations, the authors found that commitment, satisfaction, and cohesion are strengthened if the organization is shaped by values which employees believe should exist. In addition, there are studies which indicate that the preferences-perceptions relationship affects consumers' satisfaction with products. For example, Cadotte, Woodruff, & Jenkins (1987) showed that if a brand (in this case a fast food restaurant) performs worse than expected, the dissatisfaction with the brand decreases.

Moreover, the argument that the relationship between preferences (i.e. some sort of a prototype or ideal image) and perceptions of reality predicts political support is in line with a variety of definitions of political trust or support. For instance, Miller (1974, p. 989) defined political trust as “the belief that the government is operating according to one’s normative expectations of how government should function”. And Barber (1983, p. 80f.) argued that political distrust is “a realistic critique of political performance and/or of fiduciary responsibility in the light of accepted democratic values.” Walz (1996) contended that political support is based on the assumption that political institutions decide as expected. And Fuchs (1999a) maintained that one condition for the stability of democratic systems is the development of a political culture that is congruent with the implemented structure.

3.2. The Media's Impact on the Preferences-Perceptions Relationship

Although the media is hypothesized to be an important source of political information, previous research has tended to neglect the role of the media in shaping the preference-perception relationship. This section elaborates the media's impact on the preferences-perceptions relationship. An exception to the tendency of research to neglect the role of the media is a study by Kimball & Patterson (1997). This study considers the media's role in influencing the preference-perception discrepancy and the consequences for political support.³³ The authors assumed that

“citizens exposed to the admittedly negative political news emanating from the media, and particularly those exposed to the drumbeat of ‘Congress-bashing’, may thereby experience larger expectation-perception discrepancies and, accordingly, be less supportive of Congress than the media-underexposed” (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 721).

In order to test this assumption, the authors investigated the impact of attention paid to political news in the media on the discrepancy variables. The findings support the assumption: Subjects exposed to the media showed higher levels of preference-perception discrepancies and, as a consequence, exhibited lower ratings of Congress. Thus, the authors concluded:

33 For more information on the study by Kimball & Patterson (1997) see the description of this study in Section 3.1.