which the articles and questionnaires were sent to are actually the ones who partici-
pated in the study.

6.2.3. Stimulus Material

The *strength, integrity, and effectiveness of a treatment* are central aspects of any
experimental study (Yeaton & Sechrest, 1981, p. 156). Treatment strength is defined
as the "a priori likelihood that the treatment could have its intended outcome"
(Yeaton & Sechrest, 1981, p. 156). Treatment dose, frequency and length of the
treatment define its strength. A strong treatment is aimed, because the effect size is
considered to be relatively low, given that political support is a rather stable attitude.
Regarding the strength of the treatment, different treatment strengths are used in
experimental research that explores the effects of media information on political
support. Strength ranges from one or two single articles at one point in time (cf. for
instance De Vreese, 2004; Bertram Scheufele, 2008; Valentino, Beckmann, et al.,
2001) to five days of treatment (cf. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In order to ensure
treatment strength in the present study, the treatment could be measured over the
period of two weeks, which would allow two posttests, one after each week. How-
ever, such a strong treatment involves the risk that the participants in the study get
tired (subject fatigue) and drop out (attrition). In order to use a treatment that is both
intense enough to evoke possible effects on the one hand, but is not too much of a
burden for the study's participants on the other hand, the treatment consists of one
media article per weekday and lasts over five days. Hence, five articles per partici-
pant constitute the treatment. The articles were sent to the respondents as part of
online surveys. More precisely, respondents received one survey each day over the
period of five consecutive days.

As there is a trade-off between treatment strength and generalizability of cause to
real world conditions, efforts will be made to ensure that treatments are both strong
and realistic. The authenticity of media stimuli is a very important aspect that shapes
the external validity of experimental research (Matthes, 2007b, p. 306f.; Trepte &
Wirth, 2004). Thus, this study makes efforts to ensure that the media stimuli are as
authentic as possible. A precondition of external validity is that the stimulus material
occurs in a similar form in real world situations. One way to ensure the external
validity of media stimuli is to investigate regular and characteristic patterns of mass
media content and to develop the media stimuli according to these patterns (for
instance Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Iyengar, 1987).
Therefore, results from the content analysis (Chapter 4) are used to inform the de-
velopment of the media articles that serve as treatment in the experimental study.[72]

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72 An alternative procedure could have been to conduct a qualitative content analysis. However,
    this would not allow us to derive characteristic patterns of media presentations of political
    processes. Such typical patterns, however, are reflected in media stimuli, which is why the
    development is based on findings from this quantitative analysis.

Based on the results from the media content analysis, two distinct media patterns of presenting political decision-making processes can be distinguished, namely the media's focus on the inefficiency of political processes and the media's emphasis of political discords and conflicts.

For the treatment articles, the general findings from the content analysis had to be specified and filled with precise phrases and expressions from the newspapers. Therefore, I more closely looked at selected articles that in the content analysis were found to contain aspects relating to the conflict-orientation and/or the inefficiency of political processes. These articles were scanned in search for applicable phrases and expressions. The experimental intervention consists of news articles that either contain critical media information about the lack of consensus-seeking behavior or critical media information about the lack of efficiency in political decision-making processes. Media information criticizing the lack of consensus refers to 1) power struggles or political conflicts, 2) the lack of consensus, 3) the role of collective actions, and 4) political competitions with winners and losers. Media information criticizing the efficiency refers to 1) the use of resources such as time and money, 2) the competence of political actors, 3) the role of hierarchical orders, and 4) the decisiveness of political actors. For more detailed information, the stimulus material (in German language) can be requested from the author.

The articles deal with decision-making processes in the parliament and the government. In order to ensure that the study's participants are motivated to read the articles, the issues addressed in the articles need to have certain relevance for the average citizen. In addition, the issues need to be subject of current discussion and they need to refer to problems that are of national relevance instead of international or regional importance. Based on these criteria, five issues were identified: 1) the reform of the federal old-age insurance, 2) the financing of the social long-term care insurance, 3) national climate policy, 4) non-smoker protection, and 5) disability insurance. Moreover, the articles were kept rather brief, ensuring that the two versions were equal in length.

The stimulus articles were conceptualized as news with interpretative elements. In order to have possible effects of stimulus articles on subjects' attitudes of political support, the stimuli have to be direct and obvious. Therefore, precise expressions, phrases and single indicator words are relevant. The two versions have similar leads or first sentences that concentrate on the most important facts, but are different at the core. Also, the titles are different and display the general tone of each version. In one version the focus is on conflicts. Regarding the conflict aspects, a decision had to be made on whether intra-institutional conflicts, inter-institutional conflicts or both conflict types should be included in the material. The decision was made in favor of including both conflict types in the material.[73] In the other version the focus

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[73] Durr et.al. (1997) found that intra-institutional conflicts have a negative impact on support, whereas inter-institutional conflicts might have positive effects on political support. However, as both aspects occur in media coverage, both versions were included in the stimulus material.

is on the inefficiency of decision-making procedures. The according paragraphs contain valuations, mostly in the form of direct or indirect quotes from political experts or participants.[74]

However, participants also must believe that the material is authentic and credible in order to have possible effects. Swiss journalists from different news organizations edited the articles in order to ensure the authenticity of the stimulus articles.[75] All articles contained the name or initials of a fictitious author or the identification code of a press agency.[76] In addition, with regard to the layout of the stimulus articles, they were suited to the design of regional Swiss newspapers.[77]

Experimental stimuli are evaluated with respect to their external and internal validity (Trepte & Wirth, 2004). Although stimuli can possess high levels of validity on both dimensions, there are trade-offs between the two. An important aspect of internal validity is that there are no differences between two versions of an article on other aspects than the treatment, for instance the perceived relevance of information or their comprehensiveness. The internal validity of the stimuli refers to the fact that changes in the outcome variable can be attributed to the manipulated aspects in the stimulus material. Hence, context variables must be the same across the different versions in order to eliminate the possibility of confounding effects (Trepte & Wirth, 2004, p. 78). Obviously, the more complex and diverse (and hence in most cases more realistic) the stimulus material is, the more difficult it is to eliminate the effects of the manipulated aspects from other aspects of the material. Nevertheless, efforts were made to keep the context factors constant across the two versions (conflict focus vs. inefficiency focus) of a stimulus article.

Stimuli pretests were conducted with Swiss students in March 2008 (n = 21). One group of participants received an article that focused on the conflict-orientation and discords of political processes, while the other group received an article that focused on the inefficiency of decision-making procedures. I expected that subjects in the conflict group would indicate more often that conflict-related statements were contained in the article than subjects in the inefficiency group, and vice versa. Significant differences were found in this respect. In addition, the pretests showed that the perceived trust in the articles did not differ as a function of the manipulation (t < 1).

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74 The author thanks political scientists Andreas Ladner (IDHEAP Lausanne), and Urs Scheuss (University of Zurich) who agreed to be quoted in the articles.

75 The author thanks Bettina Epper from the "Bieler Tagblatt", Michel Wenzler from "Tages-Anzeiger", Kaspar Meuli, a freelance journalist and communication officer, and Guido Keel, online editor at Luzerner Medien for dedicating part of their valuable time to the editing of the stimulus articles.

76 Fictitious authors were used so that participants were not able to look the articles up in their newspapers or the internet. For the same reason, it was not mentioned which newspaper the articles (presumably) were taken from.

77 The layout of the stimulus articles was suited to the layout of the following regional papers: "Der Bund", "St. Galler Tagblatt", "Solothurner Zeitung", "Neue Luzerner Zeitung"

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 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 α = .70), three items refer to preferences regarding the efficiency of political processes (Cronbach's α = .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 α = .74), and three items refer to the perceived efficiency of political processes (Cronbach's α = .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 α = .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

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