

affect citizens' process preferences above and beyond the impact of political culture, or whether process preferences are rather independent from media information. Thus, the present study takes into consideration that media information might not only shape the perceptions of political processes but also foster certain process preferences. This might be the case, because mass media act as agent of socialization. Hence long-term effects of media use on preferences regarding decision-making processes might be plausible. This might also be the case if media information continuously contains claims that political processes should be more efficient or more efforts should be made to find a compromise between diverging interests, for example. The media's descriptions of the status quo might also shape attitudes towards how the situation should be instead. For instance, media effects on the audience's preferences as regards the efficiency of political processes might occur if the media depict political processes simply as inefficient.

3.2.3. The Media's Presentations of Political Processes

The assumption that media presentations of political processes may affect citizens' perceptions of political processes and possibly preferences as regards political processes raises the question of how the media depict political decision-making processes. In order to inform propositions concerning the media's impact on citizens' perceptions of such processes and their levels of political support, this section presents research that analyses how the mass media present political processes.

A variety of research indicates that mass media not only mirror political realities but present a picture of political life that is shaped by the rules and norms of the news production process. This could result in media depictions of political processes that might challenge the way in which political institutions actually operate (Marcinkowski, 2005). Many recent studies have focused on the media's presentation of election campaigns. The news coverage of election campaigns was found to be shaped by references to who is going to win and who is going to lose, attention to performances and perceptions of political actors, the language of wars and games, and a generally negative tone (Druckman, 2005; Rhee, 1997; Semetko & Schoenbach, 2003).

Whereas the majority of media content research investigates mass media's presentations of election campaigns, fewer studies examine the media's depictions of routine political decision-making processes. Arnold (2004, p. 16) maintained that "most of the literature focuses on how the press covers wars, presidents, election campaigns, and policy issues. Scholars have largely ignored press coverage of Congress and its members". Little is known about the characteristics of media coverage of day-to-day political processes, either within Congress, the executive branch or the administrative branch. Likewise, Morris & Clawson (2007, p. 3) argued that "given the importance of understanding how the media portray Congress, the limited scope of this field of research relative to other political institutions, events, and issues is surprising."

Studies which analyze the news coverage of the parliament might provide some answers to the question of how the media presents routine decision-making processes. Based on data from a national comparative content analysis of media coverage of parliament (Negrine, 1998, 1999), Marcinkowski (2000) reported findings on media depictions of the parliament in Germany. The author concluded that the majority of media articles about the parliament provide information about political decision-making procedures, but less information was found with respect to the substance of political decisions in the parliament. Based on an analysis of the parliamentary coverage in television networks³⁶ between 1972 and 1992, Lichter & Amundson (1994) found that attention to scandals and the focus on unethical behavior increased during the investigated period. News coverage of policy debates, in contrast, decreased. Moreover, the findings indicated that the media increasingly focused on political discord and that the news coverage was shaped by a rather negative tone. These changes are interpreted by the authors as trends towards more adversarial news coverage. In general, then, the authors concluded that the news coverage of the parliament “reflects the tendency of journalists to emphasize conflict over concord, politics over policies, and personal foibles over institutional functions” (Lichter & Amundson, 1994, p. 139). The authors assumed that these characteristics of the news coverage of parliament reflect the journalists’ “impatience towards the messiness and inefficiency of representative institutions” (Lichter & Amundson, 1994, p. 139). Similarly, a study by Lawrence (2000) showed that at the level of the nation state, political discourses in the media are shaped by the game frame, i.e. the news contained stories about politicians winning or losing elections, legislative debates, or strategies for winning. Political debates on the state level were not shaped by the game frame, in contrast.

A study by Morris & Clawson (2005, 2007) takes a more detailed look at congressional news coverage and is interested in how the media portray this “complex and dynamic institution” (Morris & Clawson, 2007, p. 5). Based on a content analysis of the New York Times and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) evening news coverage of the U.S. Congress from January 1990 through June 1998, Morris & Clawson (2005) investigated whether the stories discussed processes of legislative maneuvering, such as committee hearings, floor procedures and tactics, or vetoes. The role that conflicts, compromises, and scandals play in the news coverage was also probed. The authors found that procedural issues make up a substantial part of media coverage of Congress; in particular, democratic legislative processes which include conflict, debate and to a lesser extent compromise are covered in the news. Overall, congressional conflict was much more prominent in the news than compromise. “Conflict is highly present in congressional news” (Morris & Clawson, 2005, p. 306). In general, the results suggest that legislative maneuvering is very visible in the news. “The legislative process is not only prevalent in the media dur-

36 National Broadcasting Company (NBC), American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS)

ing major policy debates, but also in day-to-day coverage” (Morris & Clawson, 2005, p. 311).

In general, then, there is empirical evidence that the day-to-day business of politics, i.e. routine decision-making processes, is visible in the mass media. 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). On the whole, the empirical results lend support to the assumption that congressional news coverage is rather adversarial, focusing on discord instead of consensus. The conclusion that the news media adopt an adversarial style when depicting political processes refers mainly to news coverage of political processes in the U.S., from which the majority of empirical evidence comes. Comparatively less is known about media presentations of political processes in Europe, Switzerland in particular. There is research that suggests that the general trend towards an increase in adversarial media content may either be hampered or strengthened by a nation’s political culture. For instance, Marcinkowski (2006) argued that news media coverage reflects a nation’s political culture. In a consensus democracy like Switzerland, media presentations of political processes are expected to be shaped by consensus-orientation rather than focusing on competition and power struggles. In order to test whether the adversarial style of news coverage of political processes also holds for the case of Switzerland, this study includes a content analysis of the presentation of decision-making processes in the Swiss media (see Chapter 4).

The finding that news media focus on political discord and negative aspects of political processes gives particular cause for concern in view of what is known about citizens’ process preferences. Apparently, the aspects that are unfavorable, rather than favorable, to citizens’ political support are those aspects that news media focus on. What consequences, then, might media-shaped perceptions of political decision-making processes have for citizens’ political confidence? This question is at the core of the preferences-perceptions model of media effects.

3.3. Outline of the Preferences-Perceptions Model of Media Effects

The argument of discrepancy theory that the relationship between perceptions and according preferences predicts evaluative attitudes is widely considered in health research, marketing studies, and also in political science. With respect to media effects research, however, the argument has stimulated less research. The purpose of the present study is to build on discrepancy theory in order to explain the impact of media presentations of political decision-making processes on political support. Hence, this chapter presents a preferences-perceptions model of media effects.

Drawing on self-discrepancy theory from social psychology, this study argues that the relationship between reality perceptions and according preferences predicts political evaluative attitudes. This argument was also advanced in previous studies. For example, Kimball & Patterson (1997) show that legislators’ inability to live up to the public’s overall expectations fosters disapproval of Congress. In a similar