

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

vein, the institution's role to engage in extensive debates shaped by partisanship and conflict was found to account for low levels of support for Congress, because the institution diverges from citizens' expectations of how Congress should act (Durr, et al., 1997; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Building on the discrepancy argument, this study more precisely assumes that the relationship between perceptions of political processes and according preferences explains citizens' levels of political support.

In order to explain how media information about political processes affects citizens' political support, this study assumes that the way political processes are presented in the media affects citizens' perceptions of political processes. This argument is in line with cultivation theory (W. P. Eveland, Jr., 2002; Gerbner, 1998) and is backed up by previous studies showing that the mass media shape the perception of social realities (for instance Pfau, et al., 1995). Particularly in situations where direct experiences are missing, media effects are considered to be strong. Hence, it seems warranted to suggest that for routine political decision-making processes on the national level – a field where direct experiences are unlikely for the majority of citizens – mass media's impact on the perception of such processes is rather strong. Both short-term and long-term effects of media information on the perception of political processes appear plausible. The assumption of long-term effects of the media on reality perceptions is in line with cultivation theory. In addition, findings from experimental research in the tradition of framing effects suggest that short-term effects of media information on reality perceptions may occur also.

The perception of political processes, in turn, is assumed to influence citizens' levels of political support. Thus, the model argues that media presentations of political processes affect political support indirectly via the perception of these processes. In general, then, the model assumes that the audience's perceptions of political processes act as mediator of the relationship between media presentation of political processes and political support.

- Proposition 1: The media's presentations of political processes shape the perception of political processes. Process perceptions, in turn, influence political support.

Little is known about the media's impact on citizens' preferences concerning political decision-making processes. Studies in political science have emphasized the role of the political culture in shaping citizens' process preferences (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Kaase & Newton, 1995; Linder & Steffen, 2006). It remains an empirically open question whether process preferences are influenced by the mass media. Hence, the present study takes into consideration that media information may not only shape the perceptions of political processes but also influence citizens' preferences as regards political processes. Especially long-term effects of media use might be considered in this respect as part of political socialization.

In order to specify the conditions under which the impact of media's presentations of political processes on political support is particularly likely, the model builds 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). Hence, stronger effects on political support are assumed if there is a large magnitude of the relationship between what individuals prefer and what they perceive is actually the case. A large discrepancy exists, for example, when a person perceives political processes as conflict-oriented,

but prefers compromise-seeking endeavors. In that case, the model assumes that the perception of political processes as conflict-oriented has a strong impact on that person's level of political confidence. Thus, the model suggests that the impact of media-shaped perceptions of political processes is particularly strong when according preferences are strong. In general, then, the model argues that media information which challenges citizens' preferences might account for lower levels of political support. This study's argument is that media impact on political support is moderated by individual preferences as regards political decision-making processes. Media patterns, then, are not a challenge to democratic attitudes per se, but certain media patterns would have a negative impact on political support for those persons for whom media information contributes to a negative preference-perception discrepancy.

- Proposition 2: Process preferences moderate the impact of political perceptions on political support.

The assumption that process preferences moderate the media's impact on political attitudes is in line with studies in media effects research which consider the role of individual expectations. For instance, Maurer (2003b, p. 97) hypothesized that media effects are especially strong if the media give the impression that political actors do not provide the political solutions or outputs that are expected by the public. Likewise, Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2009) suggested that ambiguous news about the government's policy plans on a given issue decrease citizens' satisfaction with the government information relating to that issue, precisely because the news coverage contradicts their preferences: "News consumers want distinctive policy ambitions" (Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2009, p. 6). This argumentation implicitly assumes that the impact of news coverage (ambiguity) on satisfaction results from its discrepancy with citizens' expectations (decisiveness). The findings support the assumption that ambiguity in the news coverage decreases satisfaction with government information. The proposed conditionality of the effect on citizens' preferences is not probed, however, since there is no empirical investigation of the underlying assumption that people want distinctive policy. The argument that not only the audience's perceptions but also its individual preferences matter is put forward in a study by Mutz & Reeves (2005) as well. The authors (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 9) argued that

"people expect political actors to act in a predictable manner, an expectation based on the world of face-to-face interaction, where civility is the norm. When politicians do not act according to these expectations, they create negative reactions in viewers" (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 9).

Media presentations of political debates, then, were assumed to decrease political support by shaping the relationship between perceived incivility in political discourses and citizens' expectation that political actors obey the same social norms as ordinary citizens. In a similar vein, Morris & Clawson (2007) argued that media effects are based on the relationship between media presentations of bureaucratic elements and the political views of the audience that does not favor such bureaucratic procedures. The authors contended that Americans dislike legislative manoeuvring and expected a significant relationship between legislative manoeuvring coverage and support for Congress. The combination of content analysis data and longitudinal survey data provided evidence for this assumption: Support for Congress significantly drops when legislative procedure becomes more visible via the media.

Moreover, the model's assumption regarding the moderating impact of preferences is in line with priming research. Priming research assumes that issues that are considered to be important have a stronger impact on evaluative attitudes than issues that are considered to be unimportant (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; J. M. Miller & Krosnick, 1996, 2000). In line with the assumption of priming effects research, this study's model assumes that the more weight citizens give certain aspects, the greater the influence of media information about these aspects on evaluative judgments will be. Some similarity can also be found with respect to the expectancy value theory which assumes that "the subjective value of each attribute contributes to the attitude in direct proportion to the strength of the belief" (Doll & Ajzen, 2008). Hence, this study's general argument integrates into a larger tradition of research interested in the moderating effects of value judgments or issue importance. The added value of the analytical model presented in this study is that it aims to differentiate the general statement that negative or critical media information generally decreases political support. Instead, the model assumes that media information has negative effects if it challenges an individual's preferences.

A precondition for the preferences-perceptions relationship to have an impact on political support is that this relationship is available and accessible. This assumption is based on arguments of self-discrepancy theory made by Higgins (1987). This theory stems from cognitive psychology and was developed in order to explain attitudes concerning the self. Availability and accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship can be understood in the following way:

"Construct *availability* refers to the particular kinds of constructs that are actually present (i.e. available) in memory to be used to process new information, whereas construct *accessibility* refers to the readiness with which each stored construct is used in information processing" (Higgins, 1987, p. 320; emphasis in original).

With respect to political processes, the relationship between process preferences and process perceptions is available, if an individual has beliefs about the relationship between process perceptions and preferences stored in memory. Drawing on self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), the availability of beliefs referring to the discrepancy between preferences and perceptions is assumed to depend on the magnitude of the preferences-perceptions discrepancy. The greater the incongruence between process perceptions and process preferences, the more the discrepancy

belief is available. In other words, the more a person believes that political processes are not in line with individual process preferences, the more this belief will be available in memory.

An available discrepancy between process preferences and process perceptions will be without consequences for political support, however, if it is not activated to be used in the processing of information and the formation of attitudes. The likelihood that an available self-discrepancy will be activated is contingent upon its accessibility. “Another important purpose of self-discrepancy theory, then, is to introduce construct accessibility as a predictor of when available types of incompatible beliefs (and which of the available types) will induce discomfort” (Higgins, 1987, p. 320). This assumption is in line with expectancy value theory, which assumes that attitude changes can occur either by changing already accessible beliefs or by making new beliefs accessible (Doll & Ajzen, 2008). The accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship describes the readiness with which this relationship can be used in information processing. If beliefs about the preferences-perceptions relationship are easily accessible, they are at the top of an individual’s head. The accessibility of a discrepancy belief depends on the recency of activation, the frequency of activation and the applicability for information-processing tasks (Higgins, 1987). The more recently and the more frequently a discrepancy is activated, the more likely it is to be used for information processing. In addition, the more applicable a construct, the greater is the likelihood of activation. The greater the accessibility of the discrepancy between process preferences and perceptions for a citizen, the greater is the likelihood that this discrepancy will have an impact on that citizen’s political support. Hence, increasing the temporary accessibility or the chronic accessibility of the discrepancy between process preferences and process perceptions results in attitude changes, but only for those subjects with a high magnitude of discrepancy.

- Proposition 3: Accessibility of the preference-perception relationship enhances the effects of the preference-perception relationship on political support.

External factors can produce temporary differences in the accessibility of generally available constructs, for example through exposure to construct-related stimuli, i.e. through priming. Hence, media information might not only affect the magnitude of the preference-perception relationship but also the accessibility of this relationship in memory. If the magnitude of the discrepancy is already high, media might affect political support through priming without actually changing either process perceptions or process preferences. Besides temporary accessibility, Higgins (1987, p. 320) distinguishes chronic individual differences in construct accessibility. Chronic accessibility is given if certain aspects have high activation potentials at all times. Frequent activation might make constructs chronically accessible. Hence media information might alter the chronic accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship over time, especially when the media regularly provide highly consistent messages. “It may well be that structural consistencies in the news – tendencies to emphasize conflict, dramatic themes, personalities, timeliness, and

proximity – do contribute over time to chronic accessibility of certain constructs” (Price & Tewksbury, 1997, p. 200). In line with assumptions by Zaller (1992, p. 85f.), this study assumes that people with high levels of political awareness are more likely to hold chronically accessible preference-perception relationships than people with low levels of political awareness. A chronically accessible preferences-perceptions relationship might increase the likelihood of media effects on political attitudes. Hence, the effects outlined above might be stronger for people with high levels of political awareness compared to people with low levels of political awareness, because for the high politically aware, there is a chronic accessibility of the preference-perception relationship. Higgins (1987) argued that both the temporary and the chronic accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship can be stimulated by activating a single component of the discrepancy, i.e. either preferences or perceptions.

Figure 3.1 presents a graphical depiction of the model. An example shall illustrate the model’s assumptions: A person A thinks that it is important that political processes are shaped by compromise. If the media present political decision-making processes within a certain political institution – the government, for instance – as being shaped by conflicts and power struggles instead of compromise-seeking endeavors, the media might affect this person’s perception of decision-making processes within the government as conflict-oriented. Thus, there is a high magnitude of the discrepancy between this person’s process preferences and perceptions. As compromise preferences are strong and compromises are not perceived to play a role in political decision-making within the government, a negative discrepancy between preferences and perceptions exists. Hence, this person will presumably have a low level of confidence in the government. Instead, if the media regularly present political decision-making processes within the government as compromise-oriented, the same person A might perceive political decisions as being based on compromises. Thus, there is a small magnitude of the discrepancy between preferences and perceptions. In fact, the preference-perception discrepancy in this case might even be a positive one, indicating that compromise-seeking endeavors are perceived to play a greater role than is important for that person. Hence, this person will presumably have higher levels of confidence in the government.

Imagine another person B who has also been exposed to conflict-oriented media content but does not consider compromise-seeking endeavors to be an important aspect of decision-making procedures. In that case, the magnitude of the preferences-perceptions relationship is small and media information is assumed to exert no negative impact on political confidence. In other words, the probability that the political support of person A is stronger than the political support of person B, given that both are exposed to the same media content, increases with the incongruence of preferences and perceptions of person A compared to that of person B. The greater the magnitude of this negative discrepancy, the less supportive citizens are considered to be, given that the discrepancy between process perceptions and process preferences is accessible in memory.

With regard to the role of the accessibility of the discrepancy between process

preferences and perceptions, the following may be considered: The more recent and frequent the activation of the discrepancy between preferences for compromises and perceptions of discord held by person A, the more accessible this discrepancy is hypothesized to be. As a consequence, the lower this person's political support will be. Because the magnitude of the discrepancy between person B's lack of compromise preferences and conflict perceptions is low, increasing the accessible of this discrepancy will have no effects on this person's level of political support.

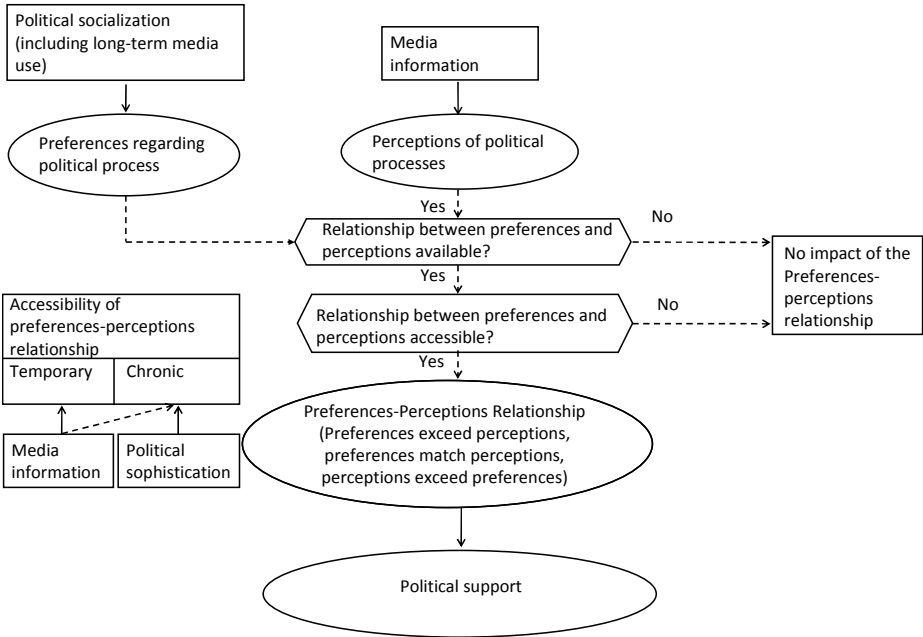


Figure 3.1. Flow Diagram of the Preferences-Perceptions Model of Media Effects. Circles Represent Mental Processes, Dashed Lines Represent Implicit Assumptions that Are Not Tested Empirically

Although the model's assumption that the relationship between perceptions of political processes and related preferences explains political support is backed by a multitude of empirical findings and appears to be intuitively plausible, three aspects merit special consideration. First, citizens might not have very specific preferences concerning how political decisions should be made. If individuals do not hold process preferences, their levels of political support might not be affected by the relationship between process preferences and process perceptions. This scenario is relatively unlikely, however. According to self-discrepancy theory, people need not to be aware of the relationship between preferences and perceptions for this relationship to affect evaluative attitudes. People must only be able to retrieve attributes of

the relationship between process perceptions and process preferences when asked to do so (Higgins, 1987, p. 324):

“I should note that self-discrepancy theory does not assume that people are aware of either the availability or the accessibility of their self-discrepancies. It is clear that the availability and accessibility of stored social constructs can influence social information processing automatically and without awareness [...] Thus, self-discrepancy theory assumes that the available and accessible negative psychological situations embodied in one’s self-discrepancies can be used to assign meaning to events without one’s being aware of either the discrepancies or their impact on processing. The measure of self-discrepancies requires only that one be able to retrieve attributes of specific self-state representations when asked to do so. It does *not* require that one be aware of the relations among these attributes or of their significance.” (Higgins, 1987, p. 324; emphasis in original).

Hence, it seems plausible to assume that although they might be unable to say which aspects of political processes are particularly important to them, people might have the impression that they do not want the processes they perceive.

Second, research suggests that predictors of political support differ with respect to different objects of evaluation (cf. Easton, 1975; Fuchs, 1993). Thus, the question arises whether the argument that the relationship between process preferences and process perceptions explains political support holds in a similar manner for attitudes towards the government, the parliament, political actors, and democracy.³⁷ The relationship between process perceptions and process preferences might not predict support for a political object if people either had no perceptions of political processes related to this object or if people had no preferences with regard to decision-making processes related to this object. The assumption that citizens have no opportunity to develop perceptions of political processes related to different political objects appears somewhat implausible, because mass media offer information about political decision-making processes in a variety of different contexts. The assumption that citizens do not hold any preferences with respect to political decision-making processes related to different political objects also appears to be somewhat implausible. As I have already argued, process preferences might exist without individuals being aware of them. Thus, I posit that the model’s assumptions are of a rather general type and therefore hold for a variety of different objects of evaluation. The explanatory power of the model in this study will be investigated for different political objects of evaluation, i.e. the parliament, the government, political actors, and democracy in order to test this assumption.

Third, the argument that the relationship between preferences and perceptions predicts political support implicitly assumes that citizens are able to differentiate between preferences and perceptions. This assumption is not tested in the majority of studies. However, previous research has shown that large individual discrepancies between preferences and perceptions exist (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 706ff.; S. C. Patterson, et al., 1969). Such large individual differences between preferences

37 Attitudes of political support towards the government, the parliament, political actors, and democracy are the focus of the present study.

and perceptions could be seen as an indicator for the assumption that people do recognize preferences and perceptions as different cognitive constructs. Nevertheless, the present study will test the discriminant validity of process preferences and process perceptions in order to provide empirical evidence for the assumption that citizens do distinguish between the perception of political processes and related preferences.

3.4. *This Study's Empirical Program to Test the Model*

The preferences-perceptions model of media effects takes central account of the relationship between media information, perceptions of political processes, preferences as regards political processes, and political support. Thereby, the model explicates the mechanisms by which media information about political processes is assumed to affect citizens' levels of political support. The model proposes that media induced changes in the perception of political processes account for variances in political support. Hence, citizens' perceptions of how political decisions are made and how political processes look like are presumed to act as mediator of mass media's effects on political support. In addition, the model specifies the conditions under which the media's impact on political support is particularly likely. The model assumes that the media's impact on political support varies as a function of individual process preferences. Hence, process preferences are supposed to act as moderator of the media's impact on political support. The model aims to contribute to media effects research by differentiating the general statement that negative or critical media information enhances the political malaise. Instead, the model assumes that effects of media information on political support are stronger if media information contradicts individuals' preferences.

In order to test the assumptions, the present study encompasses the following empirical program (see Figure 3.2): First, *media information of political decision-making processes* in Switzerland is analyzed in order to derive characteristic patterns of media presentation of decision-making procedures (Chapter 4). Previous research indicates that decision-making processes are visible in the media (Morris & Clawson, 2005). The dominant focus on conflicts in parliamentary coverage that was found in several studies (Lichter & Amundson, 1994; Morris & Clawson, 2005, 2007), led Lichter & Amundson (1994, p. 139) to conclude that the media coverage of the parliament is "adversarial". However, the media might not generally present political processes as adversarial; rather, a nation's political communication might be shaped by its political culture. As most studies investigate news coverage of parliament in the U.S., further research is needed in order to gain insights into the manner in which political processes are presented in other nations. The purposes of the content analysis are to derive characteristic patterns of media presentations of political processes in Switzerland, to inform the development of stimulus articles for the experimental study, and to provide background information for the findings as regards the relationship between media use, process perceptions, and political support.