

moderator effects (for instance Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Regarding those studies that did so, a variety of approaches was found. Most studies included interaction terms as well as the original predictor and moderator variables into regression models (J. M. Miller & Krosnick, 2000) or analysis of variance models (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Another approach found in more recent studies is testing interactions by means of group comparisons using structural equation modeling (Matthes, 2007b).

2.4. Summary and Suggestions for the Present Study

Based on the reviewed literature, it seems that the relationship between political media information and citizens' attitudes can best be described as a dynamic process. The media's impact on political support appears to be influenced by reality perceptions, issue accessibility or political knowledge, for instance, and is contingent upon a variety of factors that describe the individual susceptibility to media effects, such as the perceived credibility of media information, the level of political sophistication or individual values. Overall, media effects on political support tend to be strongest when the level of political sophistication of the recipients is low (Zaller, 1992), the audience holds low levels of partisanship (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and the media information is perceived to be highly trustworthy (Druckman, 2001b). Whereas negative media content is found to weaken approval, positive media content does not necessarily strengthen support (Maurer, 2003b).

Several limitations of previous research were discussed. This section summarizes suggestions for the investigation of the impact of media presentations of political decision-making processes on political support in this study. First, the *majority of studies focus on election and campaign coverage*. Little is known about the impact of the media's presentation of political decision-making processes on citizens' political support: "There have been no attempts to tie media coverage of legislative process to citizen approval" (Morris & Clawson, 2007, p. 3). Studies from political science, however, indicate that political decision-making processes are an important factor in shaping citizens' political support. "The frustrating conflict and unsatisfying compromise inherent in the process erode public confidence in the institution's membership and leaders" (Morris & Clawson, 2005, p. 311). Hence, the *present study will look at the effects of media depictions of day-to-day political decision-making processes*. Stimulated by findings provided by studies that investigate the effects of distinct aspects of media coverage on political attitudes, the impact of media presentation of political processes in terms of conflict-orientation and procedural maneuverings will be the focus.

Second, previous research concentrated on examining the direct relationship between media information and political attitudes. Thus, studies neglected to explore the way *how media information affects political attitudes*. The question of how the effects occur is addressed by studies that consider mediating variables in order to explore effect mechanisms. The overview of literature that is summarized in Appen-

dix 10.1 shows that only 13 out of the 49 studies that are summarized in the table consider mediating variables. “We need to move beyond descriptions of whether an effect occurs or not and focus more on explaining why and how those effects occur” (Potter, 1993, p. 597). What Potter (1993) formulated with regard to cultivation research refers also to media effects research in general. A variety of studies have shown that media content might harm political support by shaping the perception of political realities. Hence, the *present study focuses on reality perceptions as a mediator* of the relationship between media information and political support. Reality perceptions are considered to be most applicable with regard to this study’s research question, because it seems very plausible to assume that media information about political processes affects the perception of these processes. The perception, in turn, may predict political support.³⁰ Other mediators discussed in the literature are considered to be somewhat less appropriate. For instance, it seems less warranted to suggest that media information about day-to-day political processes (not distinct processes that might include potential for emotional arousal) raises emotional reactions such as fear or anger.

Third, research tends to neglect the considerations of *conditions under which the media’s impact on political attitudes is particularly likely*. In media effects research, “less common are studies that consider differential impacts among different categories of people. Yet, a strong theoretical literature suggests such work is precisely what is required in order to better understand media effects during campaigns” (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001, p. 348). The overview of literature summarized in Appendix 10.1 shows that only 15 out of the 49 studies that are summarized in the table consider possible moderators of media effects. Considering moderating variables is important, as the failure to consider moderators might prevent researchers from finding significant effects and, hence, result in an underestimation of media effects. “One of the keys to uncovering this ‘buried’ stronger effects is to identify ‘third variables’ that are suppressing the relationship” (Potter, 1993, p. 591). With respect to this study’s research question on the impact of media depictions of political processes, literature from political science emphasizes the role of preferences regarding political decision-making processes (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Hence, the role of *individual preferences* as a sort of predisposition will be of particular interest in this study.

The literature review was also used to inform methodological choices for the present study. The majority of research is based on aggregate level data that are criticized for their inherent risk of ecological fallacy. Hence, this study will be based on *individual level* data. The data analysis, moreover, will apply *multivariate models* that simultaneously control multiple influencing factors. The use of socio-

30 Based on the literature reviewed, the present study assumes that routine media use may not predict attitudes of political support. However, media use may account for variances in the perception of political processes (see Section 3.2.1). Hence, there might be an indirect relationship between routine media use and political attitudes through the perception of political processes.

demographic control variables in the present study will be guided by explicit formulations of indicator functions and intervention assumptions (Bertram Scheufele & Wimmer, 2006). Although studies provide evidence for the assumption that negative media content is related to low levels of political support, the *direction of causality* is not explicitly addressed in the majority of studies. Most studies investigate the media's impact on political attitudes based on cross sectional survey data. These studies are not able to provide evidence for the assumed causality of the relationship between media information and political attitudes. For instance, it seems plausible to argue that "cynical people are drawn to those communication sources that reflect their attitudes" (Pfau, et al., 1998, p. 741). Likewise, Tan (1981, p. 145) based on an analysis of survey data concludes "that causal models taking mass media use variables as effects rather than causes of political orientations have some validity, particularly for white samples". Besides the implementation of experimental or panel designs, considering the mechanisms by which media distort or enhance political attitudes might contribute to the investigation of causality. Thus, by considering *mediation* the present study might contribute to the investigation of the causal mechanisms by which media information shapes political attitudes. The majority of studies presented in this chapter do not apply data analytical procedures that provide a strict test of mediation. In order to gain more confidence in the assumed mechanisms, more applicable methods of data analysis will be applied in the present work.

In general, this study makes efforts to contribute to media effects research by exploring the relationship between media presentations of political processes, citizens' perceptions of political processes, individual preferences regarding political processes, and political support. The focus of the present work is in line with recent findings from political science showing, first, that aspects of political process explain political attitudes (for instance John R. Hibbing & Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, 2001a) and, second, that the relationship between perceptions and preferences predicts political attitudes (for instance Kimball & Patterson, 1997). The following chapter elaborates the theoretical argument of the present study.