

6. Short-Term Effects of Media on Process Perceptions and Political Support

An experiment was conducted in order to investigate the way in which specific aspects of media information may have short-term effects on the perception of political processes. In addition, the impact of media information on political support via its influence on the accessibility of the preferences-perceptions relationship was probed. The study's hypotheses and research questions are presented in Section 6.1. The methodological details are described in Section 6.2. Section 6.3 presents the study's results, followed by a summary and conclusion section (Section 6.4).

6.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study presented in this chapter focuses on the short-term impact of media information on the perception of political processes and political support. The investigation of the media's impact on the perception of political processes takes only two dimensions of political processes into consideration, namely consensus and efficiency. The two dimensions are selected, because the findings from the content analysis suggested that these aspects constitute characteristic patterns of media presentations of political processes. Moreover, competition as a third dimension of political processes is not considered in the analyses of media effects on political support, because competition was found to be less important in the context of Switzerland as a consensus democracy (see Section 5.3.6). Therefore, two versions of stimulus articles – one referring to the conflict-orientation of political processes, the other referring to the inefficiency of political procedures – were included in the experimental study. Whereas exposure to news articles which focus on conflicts in political decision-making processes are hypothesized to decrease the perception that political processes are consensus-oriented, exposure to news articles that focus on the inefficiency of political decision-making processes are hypothesized to decrease the perception that political processes are efficient.

- H1: Individuals exposed to conflict-oriented news articles are less likely to perceive political processes as consensus-oriented than individuals who are not exposed to conflict-oriented news articles.
- H2: Individuals exposed to inefficiency-focused news articles are less likely to perceive political processes as efficient than individuals who are not exposed to inefficiency-focused news articles.

In order to test whether the stimulus articles have an impact on preferences regarding political processes, the following research question was formulated:

- RQ1: Does exposure to the stimulus articles alter participants' preferences regarding political processes?

Following suggestions by Maurer (2003b, p. 101ff.) who argued that subjects who actually perceive the negativity of media articles are more likely to show negative effects on political support than subjects who do not perceive the mass media's negativity, I assume that there is not only a direct impact of exposure to the stimulus articles on the perception of political processes (H1 & H2) but also an indirect effect of news articles on the perception of political processes via the impressions that the articles raise in the view of the individual respondents.

- H3: Exposure to conflict-oriented news articles affects the perception of political processes as consensus-oriented via the impression that individuals gain from these articles.
- H4: Exposure to inefficiency-focused news articles affects the perception of political processes as efficient via the impression that individuals gain from these articles.

However, the relationship between the impression that the subjects gained from the articles and the perception of political processes might not be unidirectional in the sense that the article impression shapes the perception of political processes. The other direction of causality appears plausible also, i.e. the perception of political processes may shape the impression that the participants gain from the articles. This assumption is supported by the hypothesis theory of social perception. According to this theory, subjects' available considerations determine what aspects of reality they perceive, the conclusions that are drawn from these perceptions, and the likelihood of their retrieval at a later point in time (Bruner, 1957; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Lilli & Frey, 1993). Likewise, confirmation bias theory assumes that there is a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions (Klayman & H, 1987; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Hence, this study tests the assumption that there is a relationship between process perceptions and article impressions in the sense that the general perceptions of political processes influence the impression that participants gain from the news articles.

- H5: An individual's perceptions of political processes influence the impressions that the study's participant gains from the news articles.

The preferences-perceptions model of media effects assumes that media might not only affect the magnitude of the preference-perception relationship, but also the accessibility of this relationship in memory. Higgins (1987) found that an increase in the accessibility of the discrepancy between preferences and perceptions is related to an increase in discomfort, but only for subjects whose magnitude of the discrepancy is high. Temporary accessibility varies as a function of contextual priming (Higgins, 1987). Hence, media information might shape the temporary construct accessibility of incompatible beliefs through priming. For subjects with a high magnitude of the preference-perception discrepancy, I assume that the priming manipulation makes the discrepancy temporarily accessible. Thus, for subjects high in magnitude of the

preference-perception discrepancies, political support is assumed to decrease as a result of priming effects in the context of exposure to the news media articles.

- H6: For subjects high in the magnitude of the preference-perception discrepancies, exposure to the news articles decreases political support.

6.2. Method

In media effects research, experimental designs are an established method to investigate casual mechanisms (Trepte & Wirth, 2004). Likewise, Iyengar (2002) emphasized the precise causal inference that experimental designs facilitate. Moreover, experiments make it possible to investigate not only effects, but also underlying mechanisms. Experiments are “useful in helping to develop and test theories to explore whether hypothesized relationships hold and under what conditions they are operative” (McDermott, 2002a, p. 126). Hence, experiments might contribute to an increased clarity of details (McDermott, 2002b). Although political support is considered to be a rather stable attitude, empirical studies investigating the effects of media information on confidence or trust in political institutions show that experimental designs are able to identify such effects (cf. for instance De Vreese, 2004; De Vreese, Boomgarden, & Semetko, 2005; Bertram Scheufele, 2008; Schuck & De Vreese, 2006; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). An experimental study was embedded in a series of surveys (see also Section 7.2). In Section 6.2.1 the experimental design and the study’s participants are described. The procedures of data collection are depicted in Section 6.2.2. Section 6.2.3 describes the development of the stimulus material. Section 6.2.4 gives information on the operationalization of variables and Section 6.2.5 describes the methods of data analysis.

6.2.1. Experimental Design and Participants

The experimental design applied in this study is a posttest only control group design⁵⁹ with two different treatments (Alternative-Treatments Design) and a control group. One treatment (Tx₁) consists of newspaper articles⁶⁰ with negative information about the consensus-orientation of political decision-making. Articles, for in-

59 Initially, an experimental design that encompasses both a pre- and a posttest was planned. However, in order to avoid sensitization effects, subject fatigue, and attrition, this design was rejected in favour of a posttest only design with control group. More information on those aspects is provided in the following paragraphs.

60 Ideally, the experimental stimuli should consist of television newscasts, in line with the assumption of this study that television news in particular has an impact on citizens’ political support. Because the production of experimental television newscasts would have been too expensive, newspaper articles were used instead.