

## 2. The Impact of Mass Media on Political Attitudes

As outlined in the previous chapter, this study's research question is: How and under what conditions do the mass media's presentations of political decision-making processes affect citizens' political support? The mass media's impact on political support has been extensively studied in recent years. The aim of this literature review, then, is to provide an overview of the state of research that investigates the relationship between political media information and the recipients' political attitudes in order to stimulate the development of a theoretical model that attempts to explain the impact of the mass media's presentations of political decision-making processes on political support. Hence studies that investigate the relationship between mass media and political attitudes are the focus of the literature review in this chapter. Two criteria were formulated in order to guide the selection of the studies. With regard to the independent variable, studies that look at the media's impact on evaluative political attitudes related to political support are selected. The review therefore includes studies on the media's impact on trust in political institutions or politicians, political malaise, political cynicism, political efficacy, or political alienation. Studies that investigate the media's impact on evaluative attitudes not related to political aspects, such as media effects on social trust (Norris, 2002) or the media's impact on confidence in the news media, the court system or public schools (Moy & Pfau, 2000), are not included. Also excluded from this overview are studies exploring the association between media use and political behavior, for instance research interested in media effects on mobilization or political participation (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Newton, 1999). The same applies to studies that examine the media's impact on political knowledge (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; W. P. Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Tan, 1980). With regard to the dependent variable, studies that investigate the impact of political media information are chosen. Studies investigating the impact of entertainment media content on political attitudes are not the focus of this review.

Studies that fulfill both criteria and probe the impact of political media information on evaluative political attitudes were included in the literature review. The table in Appendix 10.1 presents an overview of the studies that are included in this literature overview. The studies are based on various theoretical approaches, such as videomalaise theory, framing effects theory, and priming theory. A comprehensive overview of these theories would go beyond this study's framework. Instead, this chapter focuses on substantial findings with regard to the relationship between political media information and citizens' political attitudes. Only in cases where I consider it necessary for the understanding of research findings will I refer to the theoretical foundations. The state of scientific debate concerning three core questions is reflected. Section 2.1 gives an overview of different aspects of political media information that were found to have an impact on citizens' political support:

Routine media use of political information, exposure to certain aspects of media content and exposure to strategy frames are distinguished. The purpose of this section is to provide answers to the question of which aspects of media presentations of political decision-making processes may affect citizens' political support. Section 2.2 focuses on the question of how media information affects attitudes and reflects mechanisms and mediating variables. Some studies, for instance, investigate whether the media influence political support by shaping the perception of political realities. Section 2.3 discusses conditions under which the mass media's impact on political attitudes is particularly likely. For instance studies provide evidence for the assumption that high levels of general trust in the media might enhance the likelihood of media effects. Based on this overview, those moderator variables that are most applicable for this study's research interest are selected. Generally, methodological aspects of the studies are considered in all the sections in order to inform methodological choices of the present work. Section 2.4 summarizes identified research gaps and their implications for the present study.

### 2.1. Political Media Information as a Predictor of Political Attitudes

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of studies investigating the relationship between political media information and political attitudes. In Section 2.1.1, studies that, in the tradition of videomalaise theory, explore the relationship between *routine use of political media information* and political attitudes are presented. Based on the previously described selection criteria for the literature review, I focus on those studies that are interested in effects of the use of political information. Section 2.1.2 presents studies investigating the impact of *specific aspects of media content* on citizens' political attitudes. More precisely, studies that explore the impact of content aspects which are presumed to have negative effects on citizens' political attitudes are the focus of attention here. Relevant studies investigate the impact of a variety of media content aspects, such as media attention to political scandals, the media's conflict-orientation, and media criticism. A rather narrow conceptualization of media aspects associated with negative effects on political attitudes are *media strategy frames*. Thus, I present studies on the effects of strategy frames in a separate section (Section 2.1.3). Section 2.1.4 discusses identified research voids and suggestions for the present study.

#### 2.1.1. The Impact of Routine Use of Political Media Information

Various studies focus on routine media use as a predictor of political attitudes. The "videomalaise" hypothesis by Robinson (1975, 1976, 1977) has been particularly influential. According to this hypothesis, television is held responsible for a decline of political support due to its "interpretive, sensational, aggressive, and anti-

institutional news items” (Robinson, 1976, p. 426), its “extraordinary emphasis on negativistic reportage” and the “predilection for violence and conflict” (Robinson, 1976, p. 428). Compared to the press, television is supposed to have a profound effect on political attitudes due to its high credibility and large audience. In order to investigate the impact of this presumably negativistic television news coverage on audience attitudes, media use measures were used as surrogates for media content data. Based on cross-sectional survey data, Robinson (1976) demonstrated that people who solely rely on television<sup>6</sup> during political campaigns show lower levels of political efficacy<sup>7</sup> than subjects relying on some other medium. This finding led the author to conclude that television news foster political cynicism. In general, the empirical evidence for this claim provided by Robinson is rather weak. The majority of results are based on cross-tabulations.

The work of Robinson (1975, 1976, 1977) stimulated a variety of subsequent studies, producing ambiguous results. A multitude of studies indicate that there is no significant relationship between media use and political attitudes, especially if the results are controlled for socio-demographic variables and/or other relevant factors. Recent studies from the U.S. showed that media use is a weak predictor of cynicism (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Hetherington, 1998; Pinkleton & Austin, 2002; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). For example, a study by Moy et al. (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Moy, et al., 1999) investigated the relationship between people’s use of specific communication sources (newspaper, television, political talk radio) and political attitudes.<sup>8</sup> The study encompasses media content analyses and surveys that were conducted over a two-year period. Based on regression analyses that control for other relevant predictors, the authors found a relative lack of media effects on confidence in presidency and Congress. This finding is supported by other

- 6 Television exposure was measured with the question: ‘Of all these ways of following the campaign, which one would you say you got the most information from - newspapers, radio, television, magazines?’
- 7 Political efficacy was measured with the following five items (Robinson, 1976): ‘Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on’, ‘Voting is the only way that people like me can have a say about how the government runs things’, ‘People like me don’t have any say about what the government does’, ‘The way people vote is the main thing that decides how things are run in this country’, ‘I don’t think public officials care much about what people like me think.’
- 8 Media use of political news is measured not only as exposure to a communication source but also as attention paid to that source. The media use variable was built as an average index of media use and attention measures. Confidence in institutions was measured on three levels: the global attitude toward institution (based on six differentials, i.e. foolish/wise, favorable/unfavorable, wrong/right, negative/positive, unacceptable/acceptable, bad/good), trust in institutions (untrustworthy/trustworthy) and confidence in institutions (‘How much confidence would you place in the institution?’). The content analysis employed the same measures that were used in the survey. The data analysis is not based on individual level data, however, because subjects were not assigned to indices of that media content which they actually have used. Rather, media use was included as an independent variable in the analytical models. The link with the content data was established when interpreting the results.

studies in the context of the presidential election campaigns (O'Keefe, 1980) and in the framework of an off-year election (Leshner & McKean, 1997).

Expanding the U.S. focus of research, Holtz-Bacha (1990) found that for Germany the assumption of the videomalaise theory does not hold. Findings based on a survey of the West German electorate suggest that high levels of exposure to political information in both television and print media are associated with lower levels of political alienation.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it was exposure to entertainment content in print and television that explained higher levels of political distrust. For Great Britain, a study by (Newton, 1999) provided findings that challenge the videomalaise assumption. The author used data from the 1996 British Attitudes Social Survey and showed that neither the use of political information in tabloid newspapers nor the use of political information in television was associated with political malaise. Consistently, taking a national comparative perspective, Norris (2000) found no association between television use and civic malaise in many advanced industrialized democracies based on World Value Survey data.

Recent research extends the analysis of the relationship between media use and political attitudes and investigates the effects of internet use (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Wolling, 2009). Findings based on an online survey among web users in the context of U.S. election campaigns suggest that reliance on the internet is associated with lower levels of trust in the government (Johnson & Kaye, 2003). In contrast, a study by Wolling (2009) with citizens of Germany found that the use of political information on the internet does not result in a decrease of confidence in democracy. The ambiguous findings on the role of the internet in these studies might be due to differences in the conceptualization of independent variables.

Other studies indicate that the relationship between media use and political attitudes is more complex than videomalaise hypothesis suggests. For instance, a study by Becker & Whitney (1980) suggests that the effects of media use on political attitudes are contingent upon the object of attitude, i.e. national or local government. Based on survey data, the authors investigated the relationship between media dependency<sup>10</sup>, trust in the national government, and trust in the local government. With age and education being controlled for, television use had a significant negative effect on trust in the local government, but a non-significant effect on trust in the national government. Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (1998) argue that the impact of

9 Political alienation was measured with the following six items (Holtz-Bacha, 1990): 'Politics in a democracy depends on the individual citizens', 'Politicians forget their voters once they are elected', 'People like me don't have any influence on the effectiveness of our government', 'Politics is a dirty business', 'Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on', 'Politicians never say what they really think.'

10 People are dependent upon a medium if they rely on that medium, use it regularly, and pay attention to information on local and national political affairs in that medium. Media dependency, hence, not only accounts for the use of a certain medium but also describes the relationship between the use of this particular medium and the use of other media (Becker & Whitney, 1980).

media use on political attitudes is different for emotional reactions compared to cognitive responses. “When people make judgments based on emotions, they react from the gut, which means they often react instinctively” (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1998, p. 479). Using data from a national survey of public attitudes, the authors did not find an effect of media use on cognitive evaluations of Congress. But those who rely on television or the radio – compared to newspapers – as their main source of political information were more likely to have negative emotions toward Congress.<sup>11</sup> Hence political media use appeared to be associated with emotional but not cognitive responses.

### 2.1.2. The Impact of Certain Aspects of News Coverage

The studies presented in the previous section investigate the relationship between media use and political support. Hence they cannot provide answers to the question of which precise aspects of media content may be responsible for a decline of political support. This question is the focus of research presented in this section. This overview focuses on studies that examine the impact of media content aspects that are presumed to have negative effects on political attitudes.

For instance, research suggests that the *interpretative style of news* is associated with a decrease of political support (T. E. Patterson, 1993, 1996). The interpretative style goes along with journalistic cynicism, because journalists “constantly question politicians’ motives, methods, and effectiveness” (T. E. Patterson, 1996, p. 103). Based on a content analysis of the election coverage from 1990 to 1992, Patterson (1993) found an increase in interpretative and horse-race journalism. The author reported parallel trends of an increase of interpretative news in the media coverage and a decrease of voters’ satisfaction with political leaders, Congress and the presidency in the U.S. Because of this parallelism, the author concluded that the interpretative news style leads to citizens’ dissatisfaction with political leaders and institutions.

Other studies indicate that *media presentation of political actors* may contribute to a decrease in citizens’ political support. For Germany, Kepplinger (1998, 2000) showed that negative presentations of political actors in the media coverage increased since the late 1960s. For the same time period, the author noted a decline in support for the political elite in Germany. Based on these parallel trends, the author concluded that negative depictions of political actors in the media decrease citizens’ trust in political leaders. A study by Maurer (2003a, 2003b) provides more confidence regarding the assumed causality of the relationship between media presentations of political actors and citizens’ political attitudes. Based on a data set that combines media content data and panel survey data on the individual level, the

11 Emotional evaluations of Congress are measured with questions referring to anger, unease, fear, and disgust.