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Mass Media's Impact on Confidence in Political Institutions: The Moderating Role of Political Preferences

A Preferences-Perceptions Model of Media Effects

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Abstract

This paper focuses on mass media's impact on citizens' confidence in political institutions. Drawing on research within the field of political science that builds on the discrepancy theory from cognitive psychology, the paper argues that citizens' preferences of how political institutions should work and the outcomes they should produce moderate mass media's impact. Building on research of media framing effects on political attitudes an preference-perception model of media effects is developed. The model explains how the relationship between political reality perceptions that trace back to media coverage and political preferences derived by socialization in a political culture accounts for variations in political confidence at the individual level. The paper also develops a distinct set of specific media frames that correspond to a variety of political preferences as well as aspects of political legitimation. The model contributes to further specifications of the relationship between mediated political information and political attitudes.

Keywords

media effects, political communication, political attitudes, confidence, political institutions, media frames

Contents

Problem and objectives

This paper focuses on mass media's impact on citizens' confidence in political institutions. In modern societies that are characterized by functional differentiation, confidence appears to be a highly relevant social resource as it serves the reduction of complexity and hence facilitates individual behavior as well as collective actions (Luhmann, 1989). Thus, Kaina (2004) states that it is the concept of confidence in particular which is linked to the issue of stability and persistence of democratic systems. Without citizens' confidence in distinct public institutions, the stability of a highly fragmented society would be threatened.

Are citizens confident because they have the impression that political institutions ensure the opportunity to actively participate in the democratic process, like referenda in direct democracy for instance? Is confidence in a political institution based on the perception that the institution aims at integrating differing positions in finding a solution that is based on a broader consensus? Or does confidence in institutions depend on the perceived effectiveness of their problem solutions? Certainly, all those aspects might have an impact on the highly complex attitudes of political support. However, recent research indicates that citizens' confidence in political institutions does not only depend on the perception of political realities, but also on corresponding preferences of the citizens. Studies show that the discrepancy between citizens' preferences and the perception of certain aspects of politics explains variance in confidence levels (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Kimball & Patterson, 1997).

This paper thus emphasizes the moderating role of political preferences. As this paper focuses on media effects on political attitudes, it makes an effort to integrate preferences as moderating variable in a model of media effects on political confidence. The paper's main argument is that political preferences moderate the impact of media information on political confidence.

Whereas political preferences are conceptualized as political values that are developed within the process of socialization within a political culture, the perception of political realities in modern democracies is mostly mediated through mass media. Media framing research indicates that the way events and issues are framed in the media can „fundamentally affect how readers and viewers understand those events and issues" (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997, p. 482). Capella and Jamieson (1996) conclude that strategic media frames foster political cynicism. In order to

improve the understanding of why media coverage negatively affects political attitudes, Besley and McComas (2005) propose to derive more specific media frames that refer to aspects of external efficacy, respect, trustworthiness, and neutrality of political processes. This paper builds on the argument of Besley & Mc Comas and derives specific media frames that correspond to both citizens' various preferences of political actors and institutions as well as aspects of political legitimation as discussed in the literature.

The model to be developed in this paper captures individual-level differences in confidence in political institutions and takes central account of the relationship between media information, individual political reality perceptions and individual political values. The general aim of this paper is to contribute to the specification of the relationship between political information and political attitudes.

The paper builds on two lines of theorizing that I will briefly review in the following section. Both strands are combined in an analytical model that is at the core of this paper. Finally, it is argued that media coverage patterns do not per se challenge political support. Rather, certain media patterns threat political confidence if they challenge a citizen's political preferences.

Confidence in political institutions and mass media

The role of preferences and different dimensions of political confidence

According to Easton (1965, 1975) confidence is a dimension of diffuse political support. In general, Easton (1975, p. 436) defines political support as "an attitude by which a person orients himself to an object either favorably or unfavorably, positively or negatively." In contrast to specific support which is related to the "satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performances of the political authorities" (Easton, 1975, p. 437), diffuse support refers to "evaluations of what an object is or represents […] not of what it does" (Easton, 1975, p. 444).[1] Although political support might refer not only to attitudes but also to

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[1] Empirical results show that the distinction between different attitudes of political support is not only analytical relevant but also empirical. A variety of studies indicates that citizens do differentiate between different forms of political support like satisfaction and confidence for instance (cf. Easton, 1975; Fuchs, 1981). This supports the assumption that the concept of confidence as an analytical category is useful.

behavior (cf. Easton, 1975, p. 436), the interest of this paper is limited to the aspect of political support as empirically observable evaluative attitudes of citizens.

The concept of confidence used here follows further developments of Easton's concept by Fuchs (1993, pp. 100-108) and Kaina (2004). The authors suggest to include both, characteristics of political input (i.e. the responsiveness of political actors to citizens' demands) as well as features of political outputs (i.e. the effectiveness of political actors to realize those demands) as aspects that confidence is related to. Consequently, confidence here involves both a political process and a political output perspective. As regards political processes the focus lies on the way political decisions are made ("how"). As regards political outputs Kaina (2004, p. 528) points out that in contrast to specific political attitudes, confidence is based on certain characteristics of political outcomes and their implementations rather than precise results.

The question of whether citizens refer to institutional structures or authorities as regards their attitudes of confidence is an empirical open question. Thus the term in this paper refers to both citizens' attitudes towards institutionalized structures and rules of formal as well as informal nature (cf. Kaina, 2004, p. 529) and attitudes towards incumbent authorities.

Regarding the influencing factors of confidence levels a variety of studies indicate that citizens' preferences matter. Studies draw on arguments from cognitive psychology, the discrepancy theory namely. Patterson and collaborates (S. C. Patterson, Boynton, & Hedlund, 1969) were among the first researchers to investigate the role of citizens preferences as determinant of political support. Their study on perceptions and preferences of the legislature lends support to their main hypothesis that congruence between perceptions and preferences fosters support, whereas incongruence leads to low support. Hence the authors conclude that perception-preferences differentials explain variations in support of the legislature.

Further empirical validity to this line of theorizing is given by a study of Kimball & Patterson (1997). In telephone interviews preferences towards incumbents, their motives and connections were measured, as well were according perception of those aspects. The authors state that "public attitudes toward Congress hinge very much upon public preferences, [and] citizens perceptions of congressional performance" (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 722).

In their study on process preferences and public approval of government, Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (2001a) were able to show that the preference-perception discrepancy matters not only regarding attitudes based on the perception of political actors, but also regarding aspects of political processes. Their research indicates that the combination of citizens' preferences concerning how political processes should be and the perception of how actual procedures takes place explains confidence (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001a, 2001b). A process that matches an individual's preferences of how a political process should work increases approval, whereas discrepancies decrease support. The authors conclude that "the extend to which individuals believe actual processes are inconsistent with their own process preferences is an important variable in understanding the current public mood" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001a, p. 145).

I, then, will build on a solid foundation in assuming that citizens form evaluative attitudes regarding political institutions based on their preferences. I assume that preferences regarding incumbent characteristics, aspects of political processes as well as political outcomes matter.

As regards the question of where citizens' preferences come from, the literature refers to the role of political values. For instance Fuchs (2002a) states that citizens support a political regime to the extend they belief that it is corresponding to their political values. Following Almond (1980) it is argued that preferences citizens have regarding the political regimes are shaped by their political culture. Preferences refer to this part of political values that relates to normative attitudes regarding how a political institution should work, the output it should produce or the norms according to which political actors should behave. In other words, preferences are those political values that define a sort of prototype of preferable political institution or actor (cf. Parsons, 1971). Those norms are internalized within the process of socialization (Fuchs, 2002b). In line, others refer to political socialization (Kimball & Patterson, 1997, p. 704) as source for the development of a prototype regarding the ways members of an political institutions should behave.

Media framing effects on political attitudes

Since confidence is conceptualized as a cognitive attitude it is related to the subjective perception of political realities. As argued above, mass media's impact on preferences is assumed to be rather low given the role of socialization within a political culture. In contrast, media's influence on social reality perceptions is

assumed to be rather intense. Drawing on the concept of subjective perception one would argue that neither political processes nor performances themselves are vital for the support of political institutions but the citizens subjective perception of it (cf. Pfau et al., 1998). The subjective perception is affected by both, a persons socio-demographic characteristics as well as the information a person got. Past research shows that knowledge of political objects (issues, actors, institutions) exerts more influence than the socio-demographic status (Pfau et al., 1998, p. 731). Since in modern democratic societies citizens' knowledge of political objects mostly relies on mass information (cf. Blödorn, Gerhards, & Klinger, 2005, for Germany) the role of media presentation is emphasized. Citizens' perceptions of reality are shaped by media information.

Concerning media effects on political attitudes a variety of studies focuses on media use as explaining variable. Following the tradition of „video malaise" research (Robinson, 1976) studies test the assumption that the more time citizens spend watching television, the lower is the level of political support. Recent research indicates that the relationship between media use and political attitudes is more complex than this hypothesis suggests (cf. Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999; Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Norris, 2000).

Building on video malaise research, studies examine the effect not of media use in general, but of specific media content aspects. Negative media content in particular is identified as determinant of low levels of public confidence. For instance, Miller and collaborators (Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979) found that media criticism led to dissatisfaction with political leaders and policies. In line, several studies indicate that negative media content affects attitudes particularly towards persons (Kepplinger, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006), but also towards institutions like the presidency or the government (T. E. Patterson, 1996).

Moy and Pfau build on this argument and further investigated the role of negative media tones (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999). The authors criticized existing research for two reasons, the restricted media sample and it's focus on presidency and the congress. Moy and Pfau did address those voids and combined data from two extensive media content analyses of depictions of specific institutions and data from multiple surveys conducted over a period of time. They analyzed the linkages between how specific media presented certain institutions, people's media

use and the individual perceived confidence of the institution. Contrary to their preferences, the authors did find huge variations of media effects. The use of newspapers and televisions was associated positive with some institutions and negative with others. Regarding the relative lack of mass media influence on perceptions of presidency the authors referred to balanced reporting as one aspect that might account for it.

In general, results on the effects of media negativity on political attitudes tent to be modest, media use accounts for limited variance in the dependent variable. Further studies focus not on valence of media coverage but on media interpretations of political events and issues, that is media frames, and their effects on confidence. In general terms, framing research indicates that the way events and issues are framed in the media can „fundamentally affect how readers and viewers understand those events and issues" (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997, p. 482). Media frames do not only alter the interpretation of a message, but also the activation of knowledge that the interpreter brings into the interpretative process. Framing in that sense enhances the activating of a set of mental concepts in long-term memory. This set then is used in further cognitive tasks, which leads to alterations of individuals' considerations of reality (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Rhee, 1997).

Cappella and Jamieson (1996) investigated the claim that strategic news frames in contrast to mass media's focus on political issues fosters political cynicism. Strategic frames are defined by "winning and losing as the central concern; the language of wars, games, and competition; a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; heavy weighing of polls and the candidate's standing in them" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 33). Cynicism is measured through a series of questions about motives of politicians, honesty, superficiality and self-interest. Based on various experimental studies results indicate that strategic media frames activate distrust as they remind the audience of the self-interests of political actors and foster negative perception of election campaigns.

Subsequent research delivers further evidence for media framing effects on political cynicism. Moreover, research suggest that strategic media framing not only has an effect on attitudes towards particular actors in that stories, but also on general confidence in government (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). Results of a study on media effects on attitudes towards the enlargement of the European Union by De

Vreese (2004) do not support the idea that strategic news coverage affects policy support, however. Furthermore, research that is not based on laboratory experimental settings but panel surveys in combination with media content data indicates that "strategic reporting is not per se cynicism-invoking" but is contingent upon the intervening condition of the level of strategic reporting in news coverage (De Vreese, 2005, p. 284).

Regarding moderating variables of media framing effects, literature holds evidence that besides socio-demographic variables like age and gender, political sophistication and involvement matter. Studies indicate that media's impact on political cynicism is stronger for people with low levels of political sophistication or involvement than for people with higher levels (De Vreese, 2005; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). Further, the intervening effect of the intensity of exposure to strategic media frames is emphasized (De Vreese, 2005). Possible intervening effects of peoples' political preferences have not been analyzed, however.

Besley & McComas (2005) suggest to derive specific media frames of political strategies in order to improve the theoretical understanding of why strategy-oriented media coverage negatively influence political attitudes. The authors propose to further differentiate generic, that is issue-unspecific frames such as strategy orientation, to find answers to such questions as: „Do frames that highlight the neutrality and trustworthiness of the decision makers, or, instead, that focus on a politician's dishonesty […] influence satisfaction with the outcomes? Do frames that emphasize the voice that citizens had in the decision or, conversely that emphasize that they were turned away at the polls […] influence citizens' sense of political efficacy?" (Besley & McComas, 2005, p. 429). Drawing on research that emphasizes the effects of procedural justice on evaluative attitudes (cf. Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Tyler, 2000) the authors suggest both control frames that refer to aspects of political efficacy as well as frames that refer to relational aspects such as fair and respectful behavior of political actors.

This paper makes an effort to enhance the understanding of why strategy frames have negative effects on citizen's attitudes by drawing on the work of Moy and Pfau (2000), Cappella and Jamieson (1996) as well as arguments of Besley and McComas (2005) and Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (2002). In the following paper section an preference-perception model of media effects is developed as well as a distinct

set of specific media frames that correspond to a variety of political preferences and aspects of political legitimation.

An preference-perception model of media effects on confidence

The analytical model developed in this section draws on two arguments elaborated in the previous sections of the paper, the moderating role of preferences as intervening variable and the deduction of specific media frames as influencing factor of political reality perceptions. The model explains how the relationship between political reality perceptions that trace back to media coverage and political preferences derived by socialization in a political culture accounts for variations in political confidence at the individual level.

Regarding political preferences, the distinction of Tyler, Degoey, and Smith (1996) between a relational and instrumental explanation of process based attitudes is transferred to outcome based attitudes also. Hence, a set of four dimensions of political confidence is distinguished here. For the input dimension: procedural control (instrumental) and procedural justice (relational), for the output dimension: distributive justice (relational) and outcome utility (instrumental). The following paragraphs will explain those dimensions.

Drawing on work from social psychology it is argued that procedural justice affects attitudes towards institutions (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Tyler, 2000). Concerning explanations why perceived fairness matters, research indicates that the impact of perceived fairness it is not only motivated by self-interest, but also by relational arguments. In the framework of an instrumental explanation it is argued that "when they give up control to a third party, people seek to maintain some degree of indirect control over the decisions of those authorities, for example, through the presentation of evidence" (Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996, p. 913). However, studies indicate that the impact of perceived fairness, neutrality or trustworthiness of processes is not only motivated by self-interest but also can be explained by relational judgments. Relational explanations refer to the group-value model that assumes that "fair treatment and decision-making by group authorities communicates to group members two symbolic messages" that relate to feelings of pride and respect, which in turn moderate group-related attitudes (Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996, p. 914).

A variety of studies attests the influence of indicators of political outputs such as economic growth, unemployment, inflation as well as individual perception of those aspects on confidence (Citrin, 1974; Gilley, 2006). Rational explanations of that relationship refer to citizens' self-interest and argue that a political institution is supported to the extent that it provides the preferred outcomes. An instrumental explanation of the relevance of output aspects could thus be called outcome utility. On the other hand, people might support political decisions if those decisions ensure distributive justice. A relational explanation hence would refer to the equitable distribution of costs and revenues among the citizenry.

Preferences are conceptualized as individual normative political values that are developed in the process of socialization within a political culture. The term value here refers to relatively stable, individual-level predispositions on how political institutions should work and the sort of output they should produce.[2] Political culture shapes the importance or weight citizens give to different set of values, fairness of political processes (procedural control), respect of political actors (procedural justice), effectiveness of political decisions (outcome utility) and the outcome contribution to the common good (distributive justice), namely. In consensus democracies like Switzerland for instance, citizens expect that political decisions should be made by trying to find a compromise between diverging interests (Linder & Steffen, 2006). Accordingly, procedural justice aspects like respect, fairness and neutrality of political processes are rather important values in consensus democracies. Further, due to direct democratic elements, internal efficacy is of greater value. In contrast, citizens of adversarial systems like the US, Great Britain, and to certain extend also Germany[3] (which also holds consensus elements), are not as much interested in forms of direct participation, but would expect the majority to make their own decisions. Accordingly, aspects like the effectiveness of decisions and their contribution to the public good are very important values in adversarial democracies (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

This paper argues that confidence is based on the perception that the expected norms are institutionalized or political actors behave according to those individual

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[2] The rather broader conceptualization of preferences with focus on the role of socialization results from two concerns. First, citizens might not have any more specified preferences concerning how institutions should work (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001b). Further, the influencing role of media information is assumed to be rather low in that case, as values are conceptualized as relatively stable attitudes.

3 Research however indicates that there is not one political culture in Germany, but people in East- and West-Germany hold different attitudes (Fuchs, 1999). The project will take this into account.

preferences. The perceptions of political realities are shaped by media coverage. From the assumption that preferences moderate mass media's impact it follows that criteria for the analysis of media content have to be reconciled with those preference items. In other words, measures of strategic news frame have to be refined and a distinct set of specific news frames is to be developed. The specific frames are to be derived from political legitimation aspects as discussed in the literature and have to correspond to the different dimensions of political preferences

I draw on the comprehensive work of Hurrelman and collaborators (Hurrelmann, Krell-Laluhová, Lhotta, Nullmeier, & Schneider, 2005; Hurrelmann, Krell-Laluhová, & Schneider, 2005) which have extracted patterns that play a prominent role in the theoretic literature on legitimation and continuously expanded this list with new patterns the authors identified based on an analysis of legitimation-related mass media content in Great Britain, Switzerland and the United States. Besides responsiveness as an relevant aspect of political processes (Fuchs, 1993, p. 102ff.), other aspects of political process that relate to the input dimension are transparency, participation, accountability, respectfulness, fairness, credibility, neutrality, accountability, esteem and efficacy (Hurrelmann, Krell-Laluhová, Lhotta, Nullmeier, & Schneider, 2005). As for the quality of political outcomes, Fuchs (1993, p. 102ff.) focuses on the aspect of their effectiveness. Other output related aspects are the efficacy of political decisions, the favorability of political outcomes, their contribution to common good, distributive justice, acceptance and individual favorability of political decisions (Hurrelmann, Krell-Laluhová, Lhotta, Nullmeier, & Schneider, 2005).

In total, 17 specific media frames are distinguished in this paper, they can occur in media coverage in positive, negative, or ambivalent valence. Those specific frames are conceptualized as differentiation of the established generic frames and can be assigned to them accordingly. Table 1 displays the classification of generic and specific media frames. Drawing on framing theory, it is argued that media frames of political processes and outputs affect the citizens' pictures of how a political institution operates and the quality of the outcomes. Thus, the assumed political reality perceptions that those media frames evoke and the dimension of political preference that those aspects relate to are also included in table 1.

Generic Media Frame	Specific Media frames with positive / negative valence	Political Reality Perceptions	Dimension of related political preference
Personalization vs. Collective orientation	**Transparency** of behavior of political actors	Political decisions are the result of individual actors´ interests and actions / collective interests and actions.	Procedural control (instrumental) (input, throughput)
Conflict orientation vs. Consensus orientation	**Respectfulness** of behavior of political actors **Fairness** of behavior of political actors	Political actors or institutions disagree, political processes are shaped by power struggles. Political decisions are / are not made by finding compromises, talking to each other and finding a consensus. Political actors do / do not treat each other respectfully. Political decisions are / are not made collectively and not just by a few decision takers high in their hierarchical standing. Political actors do / do not treat each other fairly.	Procedural justice (relational) (throughput)
Moral framing	**Responsiveness** of political actors or institutions (External efficacy) **Impact of citizens** on political actors or institutions (Internal efficacy) **Credibility** of political actors or institutions **Neutrality** of political actors **Accountability** of political actors **Participation** of citizens / in institutions **"Closed doors"**	Political actors or institutions take account / do not take account of citizens´ needs. Citizens' opinions have / do not have an impact on political decisions / actions. Political actors or institutions are / are not credible. Political actors are / are not neutral and not let by the interests of others. Political actors or institutions are / are not responsible and accountable for their decisions and actions. Political institutions ensure / do not ensure citizens´ opportunities to actively participate in political processes. Intimacy is a relevant aspect of successful political decisions / Political decisions should not take place behind closed doors.	Procedural control (instrumental) (input, throughput)
	Esteem of citizens by political actors	Political actors do esteem / do not esteem citizens as responsible and rational partner in a democracy.	Procedural justice (relational) (throughput)
	Common good **Distribution**	Political decisions do / do not take responsibility of the common good. Political decisions do / do not consider that costs and revenues are equitably distributed.	Distributive justice (relational) (output)
Failure vs. Success	**Effectiveness** of political outputs **Efficiency** of political decision-making or actions	Political decisions are / are not an effective solution of the societal problem. The expenses of finding a problem solution and implementing it are / are not appropriate.	Outcome utility (instrumental) (output)
	Acceptance of political outputs	Political decisions are / are not accepted by the citizenry.	Distributive justice (relational) (output)
Winning and losing	**Favorability** of decisions	Political decisions are / are not more useful for certain groups in society that it is the case for others.	Outcome utility (instrumental) (output)

***Table 1:** Media frames, political reality perceptions and related political preferences*

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Generic frames and specific media frames constitute the independent variable of the preference-perception model of media effects to be developed in this paper. More precisely, those frames that define regular and salient media patterns of describing political decision-making procedures and political outcomes are the independent variable.[4] Drawing on framing theory of media effects, salient and regular media patterns are assumed to shape citizens' perceptions of political reality and constitute some sort of the "input" of the evaluative judgment regarding confidence in political institutions. As the media frames are related to different confidence dimensions (procedural control, procedural justice, distributive justice and outcome utility, cf. figure 1) the corresponding aspects of political reality are altered.

The main argument of this paper is that preferences moderate mass media's impact on political confidence. Preferences here refer to political values that define normative prototypes of how political processes should work and the outcomes they should produce. Four dimensions of those preferences are distinguished here: procedural control, procedural justice, distributive justice and outcome utility. Shaped by the political culture which individuals are socialized in, they give different values to those dimensions. The value of the normative dimensions influences the evaluative judgments in the way that important aspects of political confidence and according preferences will exert more influence than less important ones.

Confidence in political institutions, then, results from the relationship between perceptions ("input" of evaluative judgments) and preferences (benchmark), as the model in figure 1 illustrates. To illustrate this with an example: By presenting a political process as determined by conflicts between various groups of actors, media might affect a person's perception of the fairness aspect of political decision-making. The impression might be that political actors do not treat each other fairly. Given that this person values procedural justice to be important in order to come to collectively binding decisions, media information would influence confidence of this person in a specific political institution negatively. For another person that was exposed to the same media content but does not value procedural justice, media information would exert less influence on confidence in this institutions.

Based on the model in figure 1 it is possible to derive specific hypotheses on the question of why media content fosters decline in confidence and under what circumstances this is the case. The model suggests that the greater the discrepancy

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[4] Which frames define regular and salient media patterns is a question open to empirical research and will be addressed in the project.

between preferences and perceptions, the lower the levels of confidence. In that sense, media information that challenges citizens' preferences might account for lower confidence levels. The more weight citizens give those aspects, the greater the influence of media information on the evaluative judgments will be. In other words, the probability that the confidence level of an individual A is higher than the confidence level of an individual B, given both are exposed to the same media content, increases with the congruence of preferences and perceptions of individual A compared to that of person B.
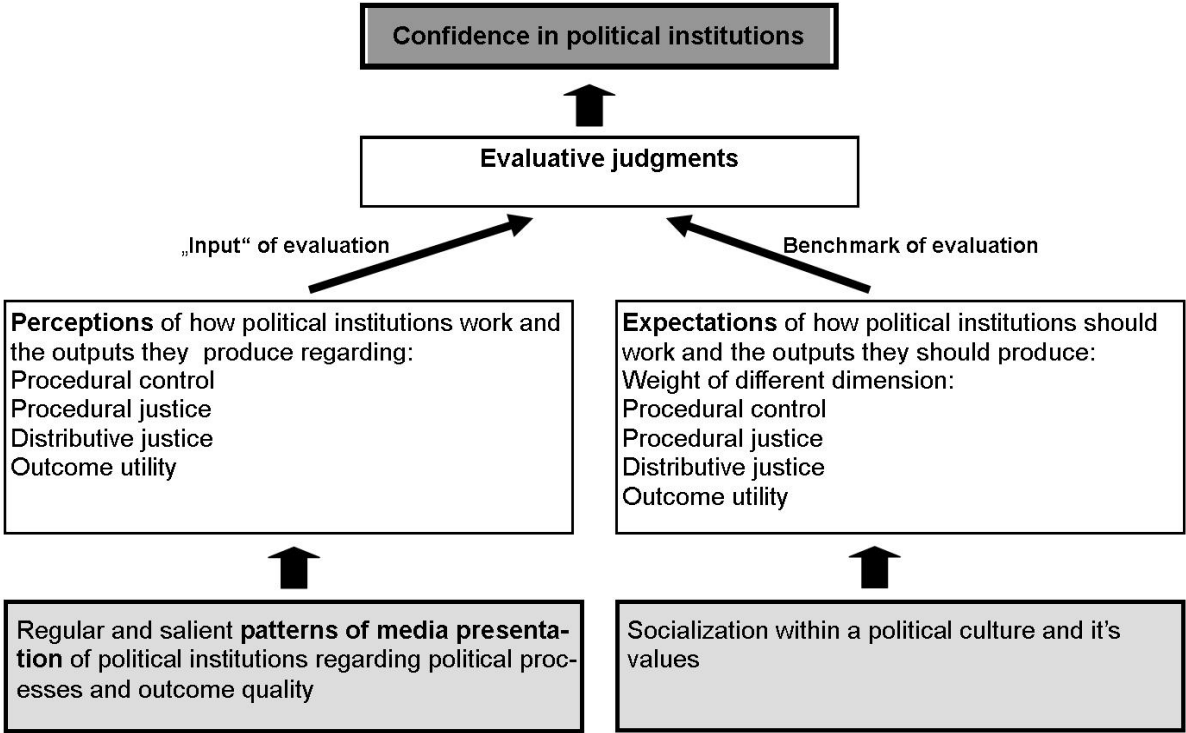

Figure 1. *Preference-Perception model of media effects on confidence*

Considering the role of political culture in shaping individuals' preferences, hypotheses not only on the individual level but also on a macro level could be derived from the model. For instance, the following hypotheses could be tested: In consensus democracies, media coverage that positively highlights relational aspects of political processes has a major positive effect on confidence, whereas media information that positively highlights aspects of distributive justice has a minor positive effect. In adversarial democracies, outcome utility focused media information with positive valence has a major positive effect on confidence, whereas media information with positive reference to procedural justice has a minor positive effect.

Discussion

This paper argues that mass media's impact on political attitudes is moderated by citizens' political preferences. The novelty of the model developed in this paper is the integration of political preferences as moderating variable. The model's aim is to contribute to the empirical investigation of important questions. On this basis it is possible to derive specific hypotheses that consider the intervening role of political preferences. Furthermore, the paper proposes specific media frames that can be operationalized. On this basis, the global statement, media coverage tends to foster a decline in levels of political confidence could be further differentiated.

Further, the model developed in this paper seeks to provide answers to the question of why certain media coverage negatively affects political attitudes. Moreover, it allows defining circumstances under which media patterns might contribute to a increase in confidence levels. Although recent research takes those aspects into account, they are still research voids.

The most important implication that can be drawn from the proposed model is that media coverage patterns are not per se a challenge for political support in democracies. Rather, certain media patterns threat political confidence if they challenge a citizen's political preferences. Political preferences serve as explanation of individual-level variations in confidence levels. Moreover, the model could be used to explain dynamic changes in opinion levels as a response to shifts in perceived political realities due to changes in media patterns a person is exposed to. As the paper emphasizes the role of political values that an individual derives within a political culture, the model might also be useful for the investigation of variances in confidence levels in different political cultures or nations.

Altogether, then, the preference-perception model contributes to the analysis of citizens' political attitudes. It specifies in greater detail than previous research how patterns of media coverage interact with existing political preferences in forming individual attitudes of political confidence.

To test if the assumed relationships and causal links hold, empirical research is needed. A study will be conducted within the project's framework. The project's empirical program combines a media content analysis in a comparative perspective across countries (Germany and Switzerland), and time (1960ies, 1980ies and years of 2000), survey data in both a time- and nation- (political culture) comparative perspective as well as an experimental study with 589 Swiss citizens.

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