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**Massenmedien und öffentliche Meinung:
Manipulation oder Aufklärung?**

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Mass Media and Public Opinion: Manipulating or Enlightening?

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Normative theories of democracy demand competent citizens that have clear preferences and stand in for their political views. It is expected that people know what they want and that their votes reflect their true feelings and attitudes. In short, democratic theorists follow the ideal that citizens' opinions are by no means arbitrary, and the popular will is immune against manipulation. According to this reasoning, the mass media—as the major source of information on all political issues—should be unable to exert a strong impact on voter preferences. The reason is that voters' (strong) predispositions protect them against mass mediated manipulation. If citizens' opinions can be easily swayed in different directions as a result of news media reporting, then there is a concern that political opinions are arbitrary and that citizens may not be competent players in modern democracy.

But how strong is the impact of the mass media in the political opinion formation process? Throughout the past fifty years media effects scholars have maintained a healthy skepticism about strong influences of news coverage on voting behavior. It is often generally assumed that the news media might heighten public consideration of particular issues but the power to persuade or shape political attitudes is theorized to be rather limited (for a recent debate, see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). However, current trends in politics—such as dwindling political engagement, the rise televised debates shortly before voting day, or the weakened state of party identification—led public opinion researchers to revisit these assumptions. Recent developments in several European countries demonstrate a high volatility of public opinion as well as a low involvement of individuals in the course of political campaigns (e.g., Dalton, 2000). These

conditions raise the potential of mass-mediated communication to exert more than a minimal impact. Besides, campaigners spend millions of dollars to get adequate media coverage, so there are grounds to believe that the news media exerts a significant impact on political attitudes and behavior.

This paper aims to reconsider the question of powerful mass media in general and the conditions of opinion formation and opinion change processes in particular. This is done from the perspective of *framing research* (see Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2009). The basic idea of the framing perspective is that the news media select some information and highlight it to the exclusion of other information. News frames define problems, provide causal attributions, give moral evaluations, and imply a policy direction. I present data from several studies—social science experiments and real world survey data combined with an analysis of news media content—that show, in fact, that news frames can strongly shape citizens' attitudes especially when people are uncertain about their opinions.

Frames and Framing Effects

The starting point of the framing concept is that strategic actors, journalists, and audiences do not simply reflect or transport the political and social realities. In contrast, politics, issues, and events are subject to different patterns of selections and interpretations. These interpretations of issues are negotiated, contested, and modified over time. In light of this, frames are selective views on issues—views that construct reality in a certain way leading to different evaluations and recommendations. Entman (1993) summarized these functions of frames in his seminal definition:

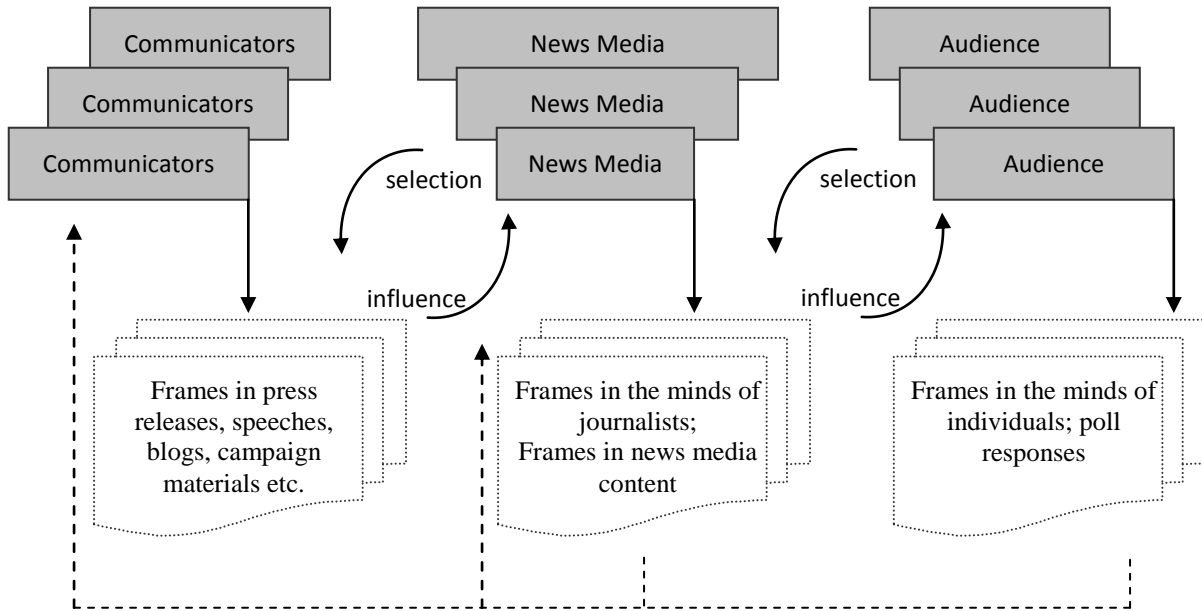
To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal

interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

(p. 52)

To give an example, the issue of abortion can be framed as killing unborn human life or it can be seen from the perspective of free choice. Both views imply a completely different problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Figure 1 summarizes the scope of framing research.

Figure 1: The Scope of Framing Research



Frames can be found in strategic communications of political and organizational actors (e.g., political parties, nongovernmental organizations, etc.), in cognitive structures of journalists, in news media content, and in the minds of media audiences. There are four principles of the framing process. First, there is always a competition of frames among elites or strategic communicators. Second, all involved actors do not simply adopt the frames of other actors; they select some frames over others, modify existing frames, or can bring in their own frames. Third, framing is a dynamic and diachronic process (Entman, 2004; Entman, Matthes & Pellicano,

2009). Framing evolves over time (i.e., political elites can react on the frames in media content or on citizens' framing of an issue revealed by public opinion polls). Fourth, frames are not singular persuasive messages or assertions. Frames exert their power by repeatedly invoking the same pattern of interpretation giving citizens a chance to notice, understand, and store the mental association for future applications (Entman et al., 2009).

From the perspective of media effects research, the key question is whether news frames can exert a strong impact of citizens' attitudes. The basic idea of this *framing effects* perspective is that by selecting some information and highlighting it to the exclusion of other information, news frames can shape the audience's interpretations of issues, candidates, and events (for a critical review, see Entman et al., 2009). It is important to note that the news media select only some frames over others, and as a consequence, they portray a selection of possible issue interpretations. This raises the question if the mass-mediated frames transported by the news media are able to impact citizens' frames about an issue. In other words, can the news media dictate and orchestrate the opinions of people?

In a series of experimental studies, Iyengar (1991) found some evidence that subjects shown episodic reports (i.e., personalized stories) were less likely to consider society responsible, and subjects shown thematic reports (i.e., background coverage) were less likely to consider individuals responsible. These effects are explained by the accessibility of considerations: "[T]he theory is that information that can be more easily retrieved from memory tends to dominate judgments, opinions, and decisions" (Iyengar, 1991, pp. 130–131). This line of reasoning is implicitly or explicitly supported by a plethora of experimental studies that have examined the impact of issue-specific and generic news frames on individuals' thoughts and cognitive responses (e.g., Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Shen, 2004). The most elaborate model of accessibility-based framing effects stems from Price and Tewksbury (1997). Price and

Tewksbury (1997) posit that the news media determine what bits of information are activated when people are called to make a judgment about an issue. Within a network of nodes in human memory, the activation of one unit can spread to interconnected units leading to the activation of related concepts. At any single point in time, only a small part of the knowledge store is subject to active thought. More specifically, Price and Tewksbury (1997) distinguish between applicability and accessibility effects. During message processing, salient stimuli of media coverage activate certain concepts. This is what they call an applicability effect. Once activated, these concepts retain some residual activation potential. When an evaluation is called for, once activated concepts compete with other chronically or temporarily activated concepts. Among those competing concepts, the one with the highest excitation potential is more likely to be used in subsequent evaluations (accessibility effect). A prerequisite for any accessibility effect is that the concepts are deemed as relevant to the situation at hand. Taken together, the key idea is that the news media highlight some considerations in the minds of citizens. They do so by framing issues in certain ways. When citizens form their political opinions these considerations gain more weight and are likely to inform attitudes and opinions.

In line with Price and Tewksbury's model, the results of a vast number of other studies give support for these kinds of effects (to name only a few, see de Vreese, 2004; Shen, 2004). However, Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) provide evidence that accessibility-based framing effects may include more elaborate processes than previously assumed. The authors state that framing effects work through a psychological process in which individuals think about the importance of relevant considerations. Slothuus (2008) has proposed a dual model of framing effects that expands the theorizing by Nelson and colleagues and incorporates moderators and mediators.

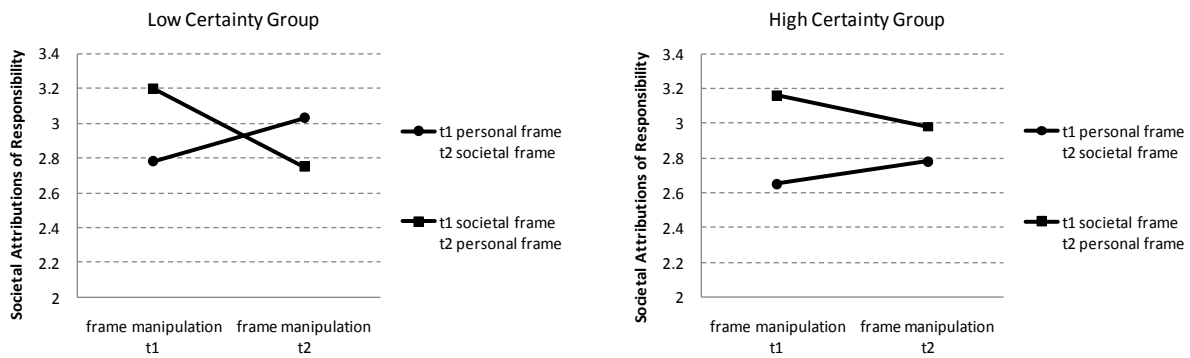
Relevance and Strength of Framing Effects

But how strong are these framing effects? In most of these framing experiments, participants are invited to read news stories about an issue framed in a specific way. Immediately after exposure to the frame, issue interpretations, beliefs, and attitudes are measured. The drawbacks of such designs are obvious. First, these studies do not tell us how long-lasting and thus relevant framing effects are. Do these framing effects last after the experiment or do they disappear entirely, say, after one day or one week? Second, the designs of these studies neglect the fact that most news frames are countered by other competing frames in the real world. It is almost a truism in communication research that democratic public policy processes involve conflict and struggle among groups with competing interests (Benford, 1997; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2004; Entman, 2004). This struggle over dominant frames can also be traced to working routines of journalists, and the concept of issue dualism in media content. Chong and Druckman (2007) conclude that “almost all prior work employs one-sided designs using either weak or strong frames” (p. 639), and therefore, “we have virtually no insight into how individuals respond to competitive frames of varying quantities and strengths” (p. 639).

Figure 2 shows the results of an experiment designed to track the effects of competing frames over time (see Matthes & Schemer, 2010). Participants in a 2x2 experiment were invited to read an online newspaper article about health conditions in the country’s prisons, either using a personal responsibility frame or a societal frame. After reading the story they were given a questionnaire and their attitudes were measured. In addition to the two versions of the news frames, attitude certainty of individuals was manipulated. That is, one half of the subjects were instructed to form strong attitudes held with high certainty, the other half did not receive this instruction. Attitude certainty was manipulated because citizens with very strong prior opinions are less likely to be influenced by subsequent media coverage. Now, and in contrast to typical

framing experiments, the same respondents were again invited for another frame exposure approximately 10 days later. This time, following the idea of frame competition, every respondent was exposed to the newspaper with the opposing frame. That is, respondents that were exposed to the personal responsibility frame at the first time point now received the societal frame, and vice versa. After the second exposure attitudes were again measured. By using this design, it could be tested if people's opinions can be switched in completely different directions when they are confronted with other media information at a later point in time. Thus, it can be estimated how long-lasting and important the framing effects at time point 1 are. In other words, this experiment set out to investigate if once established opinions can be easily changed when people are confronted with other information (for more information, see Matthes & Schemer, 2010).

Figure 2: Societal attributions of responsibility as a function of framing manipulation at time t1 and time t2 for the low and the high certainty conditions



As figure 2 demonstrates, people who formed their issue opinions with high certainty at t1 were less likely to change their views when confronted with an opposing frame at t2. That is, the attitudes that were formed in response to the first news frame remained constant over time. In contrast, when people with less certain attitudes were confronted with a counter frame 10 days

later, they completely switched their opinions. That means, when people are not very certain about their opinions, the mass media can have a massive impact on their thinking. However, when people hold strong and established attitudes, exposure to counter frames in the mass media is unlikely to change their views. This, in fact, means that not all people are susceptible to media influence. Some people can completely change their minds in response to news media information others stay unimpressed by what is reported in the news media.

Results of this experimental study imply both, strong effects of news media and literally no effects. The crucial question is how certain citizens are in their prior views. Albeit plausible, the results of this study—as most framing effects research—are based on experimental data that were collected under somewhat artificial conditions. Although this experiment was designed to provide a more valid account of framing effects than prior studies (i.e., by using competing frames; over time), still there was only one frame exposure, only two news articles, and only two points in time. As should be apparent, media effects in the real world occur under much more complex conditions.

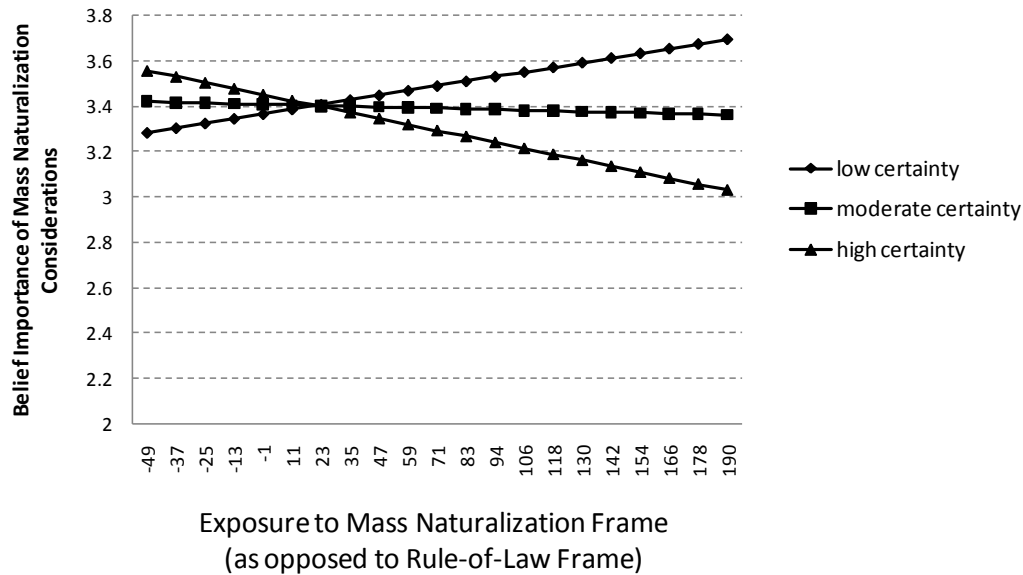
Figure 3 shows the results of a real world panel study about a Swiss campaign on the naturalization of immigrants (see Matthes & Schemer, 2010; similarly Matthes, 2008). In 2008, this populist right initiative suggested a stricter application process and tighter decision procedures for immigrants that want to attain national citizenship. They also campaigned against mass naturalizations. The opposition argued that naturalization procedures should be in line with the rule of law. This initiative was rejected by a majority of 63.6 percent of the voters on June 1, 2008.

To track the strength of framing effects, I used a combination of public opinion data and content analyses of news media. Respondents in the two-wave panel survey gave their issue opinions on the mass naturalization frame and they were invited to name up to three media

sources they had used during this campaign. The first wave was fielded from April 7 to 25, 2008, ($N = 1251$). The second interview took place right after the vote (i.e., after June 1st, 2008, $N = 999$). The sample was recruited applying a random-quota procedure and is representative in terms of sex (51.3 percent female), age ($M = 48.5$, $SD = 16.8$), education, and residence. So for all respondents in the sample we knew which media sources were used throughout the whole campaign. Based on this information, the data of a content analysis (for the period of the whole campaign, $N = 767$) of these news media sources and the panel survey were matched at the individual level. That is, for every newspaper in the sample, the occurrence of the mass naturalization frame was counted. Then, every respondent in the survey was matched with a framing score she/he was most likely to have received in a given time period, given her/his specific pattern of news media use. Some people used media sources that strongly emphasized the mass naturalization frame, others were exposed to media information that ignored the mass naturalization frame. Rephrased, for every respondent it was known to what extent she/he had been exposed to a mass naturalization frame. In addition, and in line with the experimental study described above, attitude certainty was measured, so it could be examined how certain people were in their original opinions.

As the results demonstrate, people that held their opinions with low certainty at panel wave 1 were more in favor of mass naturalization considerations when they were exposed to a mass naturalization frame in the news sources they had used during this campaign. Thus, these individuals were influenced by the news media's framing on the immigration issue. For people with moderate attitude certainty, there was no effect of the mass media on issue considerations whatsoever. Interestingly, people who were highly certain in their views tended to counter the mass media's framing on that issue: The more they were exposed to the mass naturalization frame, the less salient were these considerations in their minds.

Figure 3: Issue Opinions as a function of dominant framing at low (1 SD below the mean), moderate and high (1 SD above the mean) levels attitude certainty



Therefore, it can be theorized that attitude certainty plays a decisive role in explaining the strength of framing effects. It follows that, as Entman et al. (2009) have noted, the presence of strong prior attitudes does not imply minimal framing effects, since the strong prior attitudes may have themselves resulted from previous exposure to a strong frame. Thus, “the attitudes people have today, which may impel them to reject a framing message, are built upon the frames that influenced them in the past” (Entman et al., 2009, pp. 185-186).

In other words, when frames yield effects that lead to strong attitudes, future competitive framing attempts are unlikely to change these attitudes. The reason is that these attitudes tend to be activated automatically by the mere presentation of the judgment object. In contrast, when frame-induced attitudes are held with low certainty, future competitive framing is likely to alter these attitudes. Put differently, if different considerations are made accessible by the media’s framing, people will arrive at a different judgments (also see Lavine, 2002; Zaller, 1992).

Implications of Framing Effects for Democracy

One aim of democracy is to ensure that a government will respond in appropriate ways to political preferences of citizens. As we have seen, some citizens have clear preferences that remain immune against mass-mediated influence; others (i.e., low certainty individuals) easily change their views in response to the news media. So, on the one hand, we could conclude that some people are better equipped to be good democratic citizens than others. On the other hand, however, democracy demands citizens that remain open to political change induced by political elites. If citizens simply ignored all political ideas and arguments and just stick to their prior views democracy would not work either.

Strong framing effects for some people of the public, as shown in the studies above, are by no means a threat to the functioning of democracy. Even if some people can be easily persuaded by mass-mediated information, their attitudes are by no means based on arbitrary aspects but rather on substantial arguments or issue interpretations conveyed through media coverage. In short, these opinions are *informed opinions*. As Druckman (2001) explains,

People might shift, for example, from supporting a hate group's right to rally to opposing it because they come to believe that public safety concerns trump free speech. In this case, people's preferences do not change because a single piece of information is described positively or negatively (or in otherwise equivalent terms), but rather because a substantively different consideration is brought to bear on the issue at hand. It would be quite reasonable to conclude that they have a deliberate preference not to allow the rally (i.e., the change is not due to arbitrary information) (p. 235)

As should be apparent, the impact of mass media information depends on how certain individuals are in their views. Certainty is an issue-specific construct, so people can be very certain about their attitudes on issue A and rather uncertain in regard to issue B. Certainty can

also vary over time, so people can be very uncertain at the beginning of a campaign becoming more and more certain toward the end of the campaign. Certainty does also not correlate with education (see Matthes & Schemer, 2010) but is strongly related to issue interest (see Matthes, Wirth & Schemer, 2007). There is strong evidence that attitude certainty is triggered under conditions of high motivation (Lavine, 2002; Mackie & Asuncion, 1990). Drawing on the findings of Lecheler et al. (2009), this is most likely to occur for important issues. When individuals are highly interested in an issue, they will make up their mind at an early point in a campaign, form their opinions with high certainty, and future framing attempts will have no effect on this once established attitude.

Translated to citizens' role in modern democracy, it follows that citizens are capable of coming to enlightened preferences when they are motivated to do so. Citizens themselves can determine whether they remain open to persuasion or not: When they are interested in an issue and motivated to process media information they will form opinions that afterwards remain immune to mass-mediated influence. For less important issues or in situations of low processing motivation citizens remain open to new arguments, and they flexibly adjust their opinions to incoming information. In terms of the functioning of democracy, such media effects are unproblematic as long as there is a heterogeneity or arguments or frame competition offered by the news media. For the Swiss media system, this is definitely the case (see Gerth et al., 2009)

Taken together, we cannot really say that citizens are manipulated by media information. Even if there is an impact of news frames for some citizens, their attitudes are shaped by *substantial* political information. Furthermore, it has been found that citizens do not blindly follow media information as interpersonal discussion with others can diminish mass-mediated framing effects (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Effects of news frames for people with low-certainty attitudes thus pose thus no threat to the functioning of modern democracy.

Uninformed Media Effects

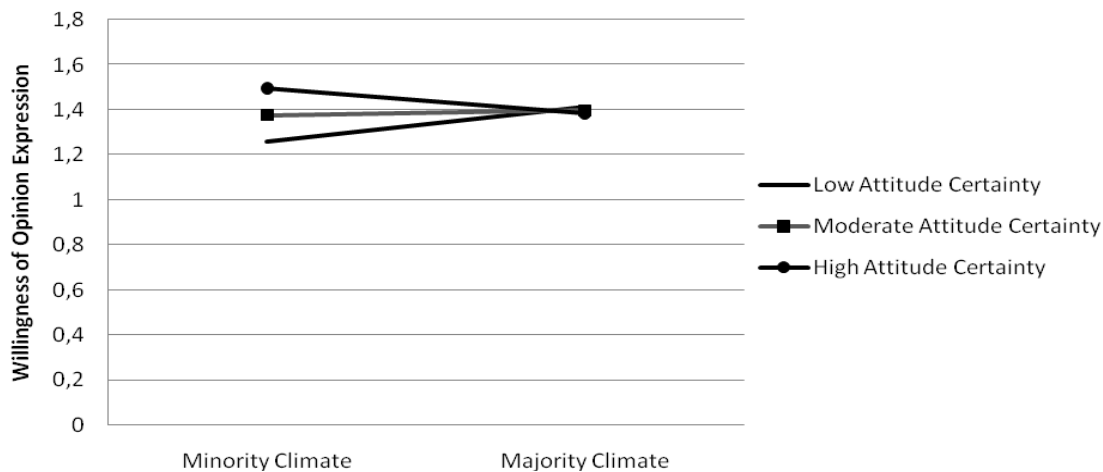
Citizens' attitudes on political issues are not only influenced by news frames. The mass media convey other, more arbitrary information, such as private information about political candidates, information about the opinions of celebrities, or information about the opinions of other people, that is, the society at large. These types of information do not refer do substantial frames, that is, the information that is transported does not contain any substantial arguments about a political issue.

To give one example, by following the news citizens learn what other people think about an issue. It has been found that knowledge about what the majority of the public thinks can exert a significant influence on voter opinions (e.g., Mutz, 1998), on people's willingness to express their views in public situations (Matthes et al., 2010), and on degree to which people participate in politics (Mutz, 2002). This social mechanism of normative influence poses a threat to democracy (Delli Carpini et al., 2004, Mendelberg, 2002): "The normative influence explanation implies that the most influential side in a conflict may not be the side with the best arguments, contrary to deliberative expectations" (Mendelberg, 2002, p. 159).

Figure 4 shows the results based on 2006 survey on Swiss citizens' attitudes about the bilateral relations of Switzerland with the European Union (see Matthes et al., 2010). Respondents answered questions about the pros and cons of Switzerland joining the E.U., and how certain they were in their opinions. At the time, this was a major and controversial topic in Switzerland leading to a political and public debate. Besides, it was asked whether respondents saw their opinions reflecting the opinions of the majority of Swiss citizens or not. Results indicate that low-certainty people who felt they were in the majority were more willing to publicly express their opinions compared to low-certainty people who felt they were in the

minority. However, when respondents were moderately or highly certain in their views, no effects of the opinion climate on opinion expression was observed.

Figure 4: Willingness of Opinion Expression as a Factor of Majority Opinion Perception and Attitude Certainty



It can be concluded that there is only an effect of opinion climate on people’s willingness to publicly express their opinions when attitudes are held with low certainty. Opinion climate by no means has an effect on all citizens. Likewise, effects of the opinion climate on voters’ attitudes are most likely “under conditions of weak commitment on the part of voters, and a shortage of information other than the distribution of mass support” (Schmitt-Beck, 2008, p. 2)

Discussion

Democratic theorists have long argued that a prerequisite for a well-functioning democracy is that citizens’ votes represent their own, subjectively determined, interests. In order to achieve this, citizens must have sufficient information provided by the news media. As we have seen, the news media transports several frames about a policy issue, and some citizens—those with uncertain prior attitudes—are susceptible to be influenced by these news frames. However, this kind of media impact poses no threat to modern democracy. The reason is that

citizens remain free to decide themselves whether or not they are open to such an influence. When they are motivated to form stable opinions, subsequent media coverage will have no impact on these once established opinions. In light of all these findings, we can neither conclude that the mass media manipulates public opinion, nor can we say that there are only minimal effects. The effects of the mass media are powerful and important. However, citizens are far more flexible in their openness to persuasion than previously thought. They hold issue-specific attitudes and their openness to political arguments varies from issue to issue, and over time. When people are open to news media frames, it can be shown that the news lead to rather informed or enlightened opinions; that is, people's opinions are *based on substantive arguments conveyed by political news coverage*, not on arbitrary information. Such an *informed media impact* is even necessary for modern democracies. Otherwise, democracy (as reflected by the votes of citizens) could not react to real world change.

However, the news media do also transport some cues that could foster rather uninformed opinions. For instance, when voters simply follow a majority's view in constructing their opinions, such opinions would be largely independent from the substantial frames put forward in the news media. Then, these opinions can be described as "uninformed opinions" because they do not correspond to substantive arguments transported in a debate. Following the majority can be a useful heuristic on the one hand. On the other hand, people can sense a normative pressure to think or behave in a certain way; and because of their fear of social isolation they adopt the majority's views as their own.

In light of these findings, the question remains if uninformed media impact poses a serious threat to modern democracy. The answer scientists regularly give to such questions is, "it depends". As long as the news media do provide the public with the substantial policy frames

about an issue, as long as several voices and a diversity of arguments are represented in the news, and as long as the public follows this discourse with some degree of interest there is certainly no serious danger for democracy. In these contexts, the effects of the opinion climate—while significant—are too small to have a substantial harmful impact. But when voters further disengage from politics because of several recent trends that can be observed in the political realm—a rising negativity of political campaigns, an increase of political trivialization and entertainization, or an decrease of trust in public media channels—such uninformed effects might increase in their importance raising questions about the performance of modern democracy. That is, the most important shield against mass manipulation is to have citizens that are motivated and interested to follow day-to-day politics. By contrast, the most serious threat to democracy is when citizens disengage from politics, when they become uninterested in substantial debate arguments and when they distrust the news media. Thus, for modern democracy, it is better to have a massive impact of substantive arguments in a campaign than to have no substantive argument impact at because of a lack of interest, a lack of motivation, and overall distrust in the news media and in politics.

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