Challenges to Political Campaigns in the Media:
Commercialization, Framing, and Personalization

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Abstract

Due to an increasing interdependence between mass communication and political processes, the role of media in political campaigns generated much debate. In this paper, we identify commercialization, framing and personalization as three key challenges to the way the media face political campaigns. We theoretically derive three theses, one for each of those challenges. Based on data from expert interviews as well as from a content analysis, the validity of each thesis is surveyed. The results do not confirm an assumed lack of providing campaign relevant news in the media coverage. Further they demonstrate the use of different frames for the presentation of competing positions in a political debate. Finally, personalization appears as an important strategy of news selection, focusing on a small number of prominent actors.

Keywords

Commercialization, Framing, Personalization, Media Challenges, Political Campaigns
Challenges to Political Campaigns in the Media: Commercialization, Framing, and Personalization

The role of (mass) media in contemporary political campaigns has generated much debate (Pinkleton et al. 1998:34; Hall Jamieson and Waldmann 2004), especially about the decision making process of citizens based on information gathering. Bakir (2006:69) suggests one way media exposure impacts policy—influencing citizens’ policy expectations, thereby influencing politics itself (for the interaction between media and politics see e.g. McCombs and Shaw 1972; Patterson 1980; Weaver et al. 1981; Mutz 1998; Semetko 2004).

It is generally argued that the media fail to serve the public well, because they do not provide diverse, well-balanced political information. This might be true for entertainment-oriented media such as most television and the tabloid press, but, as Page (1996:7) points out, extensive political information is available elsewhere in the system. Furthermore, although afforded little attention, a significant quantity of information is transmitted from opinion leaders and cue givers to ordinary citizens, leading to deliberation on such information within their social surroundings. However, Postman (2004:4) states that, while technology now permits a constant flow of unedited and unrelated facts, this information has lost the overarching narrative that helped to guide citizens on how to process such information. The media's constant flow of information is traditionally edited by journalists, the narrators of modern times. Therefore, media act as an opinion leader or cue giver, as many of the messages potential voters receive about campaign issues do not come directly from political activists, but from the news media (Kepplinger 2007:3; Ridout and Mellen 2007:44).

Aside from the ongoing debate about the role of journalists, or the even broader discussion concerning the power of the media, we identify three main challenges to political campaigns: commercialization of the media, framing, and personalization in the media.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we focus on the theoretical framework surrounding three aspects of the challenges to political campaigns. Second, we present specific details on direct democratic campaigns in Switzerland, as well as on the campaign selected for this analysis itself, before describing our methodology. Third, we present empirical results for these three aspects separately. Finally, we present specific conclusions. More broadly, we outline the relation between our findings and the influence of shortcuts and heuristics to the voter’s decision-making process.
Commercialization

Mass media are normatively expected to provide relevant, diverse, pluralistic, and carefully investigated information to the public. Furthermore, the media should place relevant information within a broader context, within diverse perspectives, and should provide commentary about its various characteristics. In this respect, media play a vital role in the functioning of democratic societies, as they substantively inform citizens about politics (Picard 1998; Croteau and Hoynes 2001). However, media—especially privately owned media—are also economically driven institutions and need to behave in an economically rational manner. These two conflicting tasks—contributing to the functioning of democracy and being commercially successful—challenge media companies to find a balance “between the public interest and their own financial self interest” (Picard 1998:337). These two tasks are inextricably linked with each other; only financially strong companies have the resources to act independently and to offer a wide range of information.

As Croteau and Hoynes (2001:31) put it, commercialization of the media industry is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that has accelerated. In the scientific debate, there is a broad consensus that media are increasingly oriented toward economic goals, rather than on their contribution to the functioning of democracy (McQuail 1992; Picard 1998; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Siegert et al. 2005). Cost control is becoming more important: outsourcing of parts of the production chain is expected to help to minimize costs, the number of staff in newsrooms is shrinking, external sources such as Public Relation (PR) are becoming more important, and costly investigation of topics is restricted (Siegert et al. 2008). As a result, optimizing cost efficiency is gaining dominance over optimizing the quality of the product. Or as Picard (2005) states, commercial pressure is coming to dominate content decisions. “News that sells” has become the maxim in many news rooms (Gaunt 1990; McManus 1994; Picard 1998; Iyengar et al. 2004; Hamilton 2004). This leads to the “homogenization of information and ideas” (Picard 1998:209), and the range of opinions reflected in media reporting shrinks (Entman 1989). Media companies see their audiences increasingly as consumers who can be targeted as different groups, rather than as citizens to be kept informed (Gandy 2004). At the same time, media create advertising-friendly content to attract more advertising. Boundaries between advertising and editorial content are fading, and media are becoming increasingly dependent on advertisers. Consequently, they become vulnerable to outside pressure (Picard 2005). Picard (2005:346) summarizes this situation, “in the heavily commercialized environment of media,
content increasingly marginalizes information and discussion of community, national, and world, issues in the pursuit of entertainment and diversion that may attract audiences and advertisers that can produce higher income."

In summary, one of our basic assumptions is that media organizations must be seen not only as journalistically oriented organizations, but also as economically oriented. As these two orientations are largely incompatible, each media organization is obliged to choose its own set of tradeoffs. Thus, we derive the following thesis, which we call the thesis of the supply problem: “It cannot be taken for granted that the media provide the public with the information needed for political participation.”

**Framing**

What is meant by the term “framing”? This theoretical and empirical concept is receiving increasing interest from communications researchers (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2007). However, most framing scholars agree that there is a mismatch between the quantity of empirical studies and the quality of the theoretical and conceptual work in this field (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2007; Entman 2007; Dahinden 2006). Entman developed the following classic definition of framing, which can be considered a point of reference:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment and recommendation for the item described. (Entman 1993:52)

This description encompasses the following four key elements of a frame: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment/recommendation. The definition of frames can be operationalized in a convincing manner, because it is both sufficiently specific to be used in content analysis, and sufficiently open to be adapted to any issue of public controversy.
Table 1: Typology of general frames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>General problem definition, causal interpretation</th>
<th>Key values for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>There is a conflict of interest about this issue between various social actors.</td>
<td>Distributional equity, power balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>The issue is presented from an economic perspective.</td>
<td>Efficiency, effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>Scientific knowledge plays a key role in the presentation of the issue.</td>
<td>Expertise, truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>The issue is debated on the background of moral, ethical and legal questions.</td>
<td>Moral, legal and ethical standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodic</td>
<td>The issue is presented from the personalized perspective of an individual.</td>
<td>Emotional (sympathy, antipathy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Iyengar 1991; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000; Dahinden 2006)

Political campaigns can be regarded as social learning processes: When a new political issue is put on the public agenda, media use specific characterizations and presentations of news that influence how the audience understands the issue. Media control the selection of content and frame new information such that individuals are able to make sense of the issue and to formulate a decision. Therefore, our second thesis is as follows: “Media use different frames for the presentation of competing positions in a political debate.”

**Personalization**

Personalization in terms of customization is widely used in a positive way when it comes to customized marketing strategies, service commitments, knowledge management, and learning practices, among others (e.g. Surprenant and Solomon 1987; Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 2006; Sense 2007; Tseng and Piller 2003). The conception as well as the perception of personalization changes with
the analysis of media influence and mass communication content with regard to politics and political campaigning.

The discussion of mediatization and tabloidization—especially regarding political coverage—by various scholars (e.g. Hallin 1991; Thompson 1995; Ekström 2000; Patterson 2000; Plasser 2005; and for various country-specific reports and (theoretical) findings see Swanson and Mancini 1996; Gunther and Mughan 2000; Entman 2008) offers more than a glimpse of a potential change in politicians’ “handling” of the media, or their efforts to influence coverage conveyed by the media, and vice versa. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999:251) even assume that the language of politics has been married with that of advertising, public relations, and show business. In addition, these authors argue that mass media attention rules, production routines, selection criteria, and molding mechanisms are well known in the world of politics, and political actors are able to adapt their behavior to media requirements. Personalization strategies are seen to be part of such processes and necessities.

Personalization in the media is often associated with the emergence of political television coverage. Analyzing the democratic political process in Germany, Kaase (1994) argues that television, with its emphasis on the individual, may depoliticize politics and the political process itself in the eyes of citizens, in the long run. Boll (1995:136) states that intensive use of TV (and the new media) by parties results in increasingly personalized campaigns, projecting some politicians as the only individual choice of competence and quality. Competing parties can either follow the path of the personalized campaign, or passively lag behind it. However, strengthened by TV coverage, these trends are also observed in "classical" newspaper reporting.

Changes in the content and presentation styles of news are an indicator of the way in which the public perceives the political process today. Tabloidization, or the adoption of presentation styles used by tabloids and magazines, is introduced as an operational concept to measure these changes. Tabloidization tendencies can occur in content (decrease in policy coverage), form (e.g., more personalization), and style (e.g., shorter sequences) (Donsbach and Büttner 2005). Or as Bek (2004:377) points out, the personalization of politics can be seen in news items that focus on the human dimension of politicians. Personalization and simplification of complex matters are important elements of media strategy. Hence, personalization is presumed to be an essential method for conveying highly complex political information to laymen audiences, and it therefore establishes a specific kind of relationship between everyday life and politics (Heinrich 1998:339; Holtz-Bacha et al. 1998:241; Weiss 2002:285, 292).
From the above discussion, we derive the following thesis, which we call the thesis of personalization strategy: “The strategy of selection within newsrooms is geared to a small number of prominent actors, therefore personalization may become evident.”

Political Campaigns in Switzerland

The Swiss political system of direct democracy provides favorable conditions for NGO’s and other political actors to place new issues on the official political agenda that are then voted on by Swiss citizens (Linder 1994). As a result, Swiss citizens are exposed to political campaigns much more often (about a dozen per year) than citizens in other democratic countries, who typically vote once every legislative period.

This paper focuses on a specific type of participation, the referendum (Kriesi 2005:19ff) for a comprehensive discussion of other instruments). A referendum is a reactive instrument that slows down the political process. It is typically used in order to oppose a decision taken by the government and the parliament. A successful referendum requires the collection of 50,000 supporting signatures (about 1% of the voting population) within 100 days, and has the effect of placing a decision of the government and the parliament to a vote by the entire voting population.

The asylum policy was subjected to three referenda in Switzerland in 1987, 1999 (Bundeskanzlei 1987, 1999) and most recently (as examined in this paper), the referendum on the new law of asylum of September 24, 2006. This restrictive law was initiated by the minister of justice of the time, a member of the right-wing “Swiss people’s party” (SVP). Accordingly, it is not surprising that the new law was intended to tighten the asylum policy through various procedural requirements (e.g., the requirement that asylum seekers have a valid passport, the right of customs officials to refuse access to the asylum process in cases of “obvious lack of asylum reasons,” etc.). The law passed the deliberation and decision making process in parliament and the government, but it was opposed by a coalition of left-wing parties, churches, and charity organizations via referendum. This left-wing coalition was also supported by several centrist politicians from the Christian Democratic Party, and by several prominent business managers. Compared to other votes in Switzerland, there was an especially intensive political campaign around this referendum. (For example, a group of 700 artists was formed to actively oppose the law.) Nevertheless, the restrictive law passed the popular vote without much difficulty: 67.8% voted “yes,” and only 32.2% voted “no” (Bundesrat 2006).
Method

To examine the referendum campaign against the law of asylum through the lens of our theses, we chose a media sample consisting of 18 high-circulation newspapers (13 in German speaking Switzerland, 5 in French speaking Switzerland), as well as the main newscast of Public Service TV, both in German and French speaking Switzerland. Our examination employs two methods: First we conduct structured interviews with editors-in-chief and leading business managers of the media organizations, as we contend that both professional groups are relevant to journalistic output. We tried to interview each expert twice, once before and once after the referendum, at the end of September 2006. Overall, we conducted 28 face-to-face interviews before the referendum (each lasting about one hour), and 25 follow-up interviews after the referendum, over the telephone (each lasting about 10 to 15 minutes). Our second method is content analysis. We collected a census of campaign-relevant articles in the above-mentioned newspapers, as well as campaign-relevant TV newscasts. The underlying sample period consists of 16 weeks, starting in June, and ending on the 24th of September, the day of the referendum, leading to a total of 1487 coded newspapers issues, 232 evening newscasts, and 16 TV newsmagazines.

Findings

Commercialization

The thesis of the supply problem states that it cannot be taken for granted that the media provide the public with the information needed for political participation. How can one operationalize this thesis in the concrete case of a referendum campaign? Further, do our empirical results foster the assumption?

First step we examine the media coverage itself. Although we cannot give the percentage of coverage on the referendum campaign as a proportion of overall news coverage, our content analysis shows that with an absolute coverage of 1001 print articles and several TV stories on Public Service broadcasting during the 16-week timeframe, the issue of the referendum campaign was covered quite intensely.

The weekly distribution of the analyzed articles shows that rather few articles were published during the first 11 weeks, with a subsequent increase in the following two weeks of the census. The peak appeared four weeks before the day of the vote. These weeks of greatest coverage were followed by a significant decline in the final week.
Concerning the number of articles per media outlet, different Swiss regions offered varying degrees of coverage in campaign-related reporting; however, all analyzed Swiss regions received coverage. With regard to the various languages spoken in Switzerland, it can be stated that in German written newspapers, the average number of articles is about 0.8 per issue; in French written newspapers, the average number of articles is just above 0.5 per issue.

From a media economics perspective, there is an alternative way to operationalize the supply problem, namely by allocation of (scarce) editorial resources. Media coverage represents the output of a news organization, and thus can be considered as the result of the invested editorial resources, such as manpower or time. The allocation of these resources provides clues on the quantitative importance of political news coverage to media management in general, and of news coverage of the referendum campaign in particular. The production of political news coverage is a complex and multidimensional activity that cannot be standardized. Thus, we cannot state that allocation of more resources automatically leads to better news coverage. However, we do assume a relationship between invested editorial resources and the quality and quantity of the output.

We asked media representatives how editorial resources are distributed among the various sections / editorial departments, and how the allocation of these resources takes place.

We found that almost all experts consider political news coverage important or very important, both absolutely and in comparison to other news segments. Only experts from the free newspapers, a newspaper category that has gained considerable importance in Switzerland over the last several years, do not consider political news coverage essential. Generally, there are also some critical statements, calling the commitment to political news coverage somehow into question, for example by assuming that coverage of national politics has become less important during the last several years. Confirming our assumptions with regard to journalistic production, the experts are able to quantify the editorial resources used for political news coverage in only a very limited way, or as one expert puts it: “[…] to answer your question precisely: I can’t do that, how much would be the percentage, and how exactly this would be subdivided.” Some answers do hint at the fact that the practice of detailed planning and budgeting in the media business is limited, or as one expert says: “the elections in 2007, for example, are a fixed date. But something as the war in Lebanon, you cannot budget that.”
Still another approach to operationalizing the supply problem from a media economics perspective is the strategic positioning of a media organization. The relevant question in this context is how qualitatively important political news coverage in general, and news coverage of the referendum campaign in particular, is to a media organization’s management. In order to examine this question, we attempted to determine whether the experts regarded political coverage as part of their brand identity, and thus a core competence of their media organization (Siegert 2001:133ff, 2002:192ff). For newspapers and magazines, brand identity is something like the philosophy of the media outlet. The outlet represents a certain journalistic philosophy, including the basic objectives of a title, which runs like a thread through every new edition, allowing for a particular positioning in the market (Schroeder 1994:26f). Consequently, we asked the media managers what role marketing considerations and the positioning of the brand play in the process of allocation of editorial resources for political news coverage. The results show once more that nearly all interviewed experts consider political news coverage to be crucial. For most of them, political news coverage is a crucial part of their brand identity and a core competence. Only experts representing the free newspapers do not consider political news coverage to be essential. Some regional newspapers seem to place their focus increasingly on the coverage of regional and local issues, partly at the expense of coverage of national politics. One expert puts it as follows: “The most important change during the last years was the increase of the resources for the local section, in fact at the expense of the national, of the international, and of the business sections.”

Framing

In this paper, we operationalize frames by means of arguments that are put forward within the debate. Arguments are evaluative statements that inform about the position of a political actor (pro, con) by promoting a specific problem definition and causal interpretation that are judged by reference to explicit moral or other standards. The following statement was a key argument in the debate and can serve as an illustration for how arguments are used as indicators of frames: “The new, tightened law of asylum should be rejected because it is breaking with the humanitarian tradition of our country.” This argument can be decomposed into the four key elements mentioned in Entman’s (1993:52) frame definition:

- Problem definition: tightened law of asylum
- Causal interpretation: (no explicit information in this argument)
• Moral evaluation: break with humanitarian tradition
• Treatment/recommendation: reject the law

We identify frames through an inductive process. In the first step, we develop a total of 89 individual arguments. All the media publications are coded using that comprehensive catalogue of arguments. Second, these arguments are grouped into a total of ten lines of argumentation. Each line of argumentation is used by both camps, either in a pro or a contra version of the argument. Third, these lines of argumentation are linked to a typology of general frames (see Table 2). This bottom-up process of identifying frames in several steps, and linking them to more general constructs has the advantage of providing full transparency to the researcher and reader.

Table 2 shows the results of the content analysis by contrasting the lines of argumentation of the pro and contra sides.
Table 2: Lines of argumentation by the two sides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines of argumentation</th>
<th>General Frame</th>
<th>Pro camp</th>
<th>Contra camp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>keeping humanitarian tradition</td>
<td>Moral and legal</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improving efficiency of implementation</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing attractiveness for asylum seekers</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing crime</td>
<td>Moral and legal</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protecting national labor market</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing impacts on schools and health system</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keeping general legal standards</td>
<td>Moral and legal</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing discrimination and xenophobia</td>
<td>Moral and legal</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing costs for cities</td>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal attack on opponents</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other arguments</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N (Absolute number of arguments per camp)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1165 (35% of all arguments)</td>
<td>2149 (65% of all arguments)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own data

Chi-Square Test: Pearson Values: 3314; degrees of freedom: 21; two-tailed level of significance: .000

Analyzing the results in Table 2, we highlight the following four points:

Out of the catalogue of ten lines of argumentation, the debate focuses on only the three lines that are addressed by both camps with a greater than 50% frequency. These key
lines of argumentation cannot be monopolized by either side, rather, they are contested. Each key argumentation is followed by a counter-argumentation from the opponent.

It is not surprising that the frequencies of the lines of argumentation differ between the two camps. On the one hand, the pro-camp’s two most important arguments are that the new law is “reducing the attractiveness for asylum seekers” (30.3%), and is “improving the efficiency of the implementation” (17.3%) that can both be assigned to an economic framing of the asylum issue. On the other hand, the main line of argumentation of the contra camp can be labeled as a moral and legal framing of the problem. From this opposing point of view, the main argument against the new law is its conflict with the “humanitarian tradition” (33.5%). The next argument is a negation of the main argument of the opponents (“reducing the attractiveness for asylum seekers”) (18%), followed by “keeping general legal standards” (9.5%).

While two general frames (economic, moral) were very prominent in our data, other general frames were rather rare (conflict, episodic) or completely absent (progress).

Political campaigns can be regarded as competitions between two or more actors aiming to maximize their support among the citizenry. From that point of view, it is not only important to know which frames (say: rows in Table 2) have gained how much attention, but also how much media space was dedicated to each of the positions in the conflict (say: columns in Table 2). These columns can be regarded as the bias dimension of framing (Entman 2007). The last line in Table 2 shows the absolute number of observations and highlights that the media coverage was by no means balanced: The ratio of pro to contra argument is 35% to 65%.

Personalization

Regarding the thesis of personalization strategies, we registered a total count of 1178 actors in newspapers and television during the analyzed campaign process. The numerous actors depend on the selection criteria respectively the operationalization of the term actor. We define actors as all appearing individuals or groups that express their opinion in at least one argument, articulating support or non-support with respect to the new law of asylum. Actors are therefore not limited to politicians, parties, or any other campaigning group, but may include, for example, the author of a letter to the editor. Excluding 227 letter writers, 965 arguing politicians, parties, and campaign groups remain in our sample. In the majority of cases, these specific actors are mentioned only once, that is, in one newspaper article or once in a television report,
whereas the top ten appearing actors aggregated 280 coder recordings, nearly 30 percent of all coder recordings.

Table 3: Top ten actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>“Acted” in articles (frequency)</th>
<th>Offered arguments (frequency)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christoph Blocher</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Dreifuss</td>
<td>contra</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markus Rauh</td>
<td>contra</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karin Keller-Sutter</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claude Ruey</td>
<td>contra</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ueli Maurer</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chistoph Darbellay</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduard Gnesa</td>
<td>pro</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans-Jürg Fehr</td>
<td>contra</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micheline Calmy-Rey</td>
<td>contra</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td></td>
<td>280</td>
<td>865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top five proponents</td>
<td></td>
<td>165 (58.93%)</td>
<td>509 (58.84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top five opponents</td>
<td></td>
<td>115 (41.07%)</td>
<td>356 (41.16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own data

The largest number of mentions is credited to Christoph Blocher, the minister of justice during the referendum campaign, and a highly influential member of the right-wing “Swiss people’s party” (SVP).

Blocher “acted” in 97 articles or television reports, giving 347 arguments in favor of tightening the asylum policy. The leading opponents, Ruth Dreifuss and Markus Rauh, argued 47 respectively 24 times, giving 138 respectively 79 arguments against the more restrictive asylum policy in the analyzed media. Therefore, the pro-referendum
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Blocher can clearly be regarded as the dominant actor during the campaign. Concerning the estimation of the importance of political actors during this specific campaign, the media experts also identified Christoph Blocher as the dominant advocate, and churches and charitable organizations as groups, plus Ruth Dreifuss and Markus Rauh as individuals, as the most important opponents.

Comparing the performance of proponents and opponents within the top-ten actors list, with the frequency of five to five, shows that the proponents subsume 59 percent of articles and arguments, whereas the opponents subsume 41 percent of both figures.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our first thesis, the thesis of the supply problem, states that it cannot be taken for granted that the media provide the public with the information needed for political participation. Both our results from content analysis, as well as from expert interviews do not hint at a supply problem, which we derived from the theory of commercialization. On the contrary, our findings draw a picture of a nearly ideal Swiss media landscape from a normative point of view, at least for the concrete case of the observed referendum campaign on the law of asylum. However, the confrontation between the "pessimistic" theory of commercialization and the "optimistic" point of view of the media experts must not be seen as a final result from this project, but, quite contrarily, as a conceptual starting point for further research in the context of the commercialization debate. Further research stemming from our content analysis and survey will thus help to empirically test the described contrary perspectives.

Our second, framing thesis suggests that media use different frames for the presentation of competing positions in a political debate. On this background, our second thesis must be supported. As there is no direct impact on the voting results, further reflection and consideration is needed. Is this an illustration of weak media effects? This question cannot be answered with reference to the necessary empirical data, because our analysis is based only on data from a media content analysis, without survey data on individual reasoning and motives. Nevertheless, we note the following competing explanations for this result that can be considered as starting points for further research. This paper focuses on journalistically edited media content, and sheds no light on the political campaign in terms of advertisements. One could speculate that it is the quality of an argument, rather than its quantity and visibility in the media that makes the difference in a voter's mind. The supporters of the new law
framed the debate in an economic perspective, and though this perspective received substantially less attention in the media, it might have resonated better with the existing schemas and predispositions of the voters than the moral and legal framing of the opponents of the new law. Again, this interpretation of the given data needs to be complemented by additional survey data.

Our third thesis, the thesis of personalization strategies, argues that the strategy of selection within newsrooms is geared to a small number of prominent actors. As the data show, personalization is truly an important strategy, and political parties and campaigners increasingly personalize their strategies while adapting to the changing media environment, a circumstance that Schultz et al. (2005:68) described. Although we record a large number (965) of arguing actors, the top-ten counted are individual actors—not groups or parties—and subsume about 30 percent of that count, giving the most prominent protagonists an advantage within the media coverage. This personalization strategy is more often applied by the pro camp, the proponents of the tightening of Swiss asylum policy. This question of imbalance seems to be more complicated than that of personalization as a whole and—as Entman (1989:33) points out—much more complex than either news critics or defenders have acknowledged.

These results demonstrate why it is important to monitor the challenges of commercialization, framing, and personalization in the media. But besides this focus on news distributed by the media, it should also be noted that there is a considerable body of research highlighting the fact that citizens lack the resources required for in-depth processing, and argument-based decision making on political issues. People instead rely on heuristic information—such as party affiliation, sociodemographics, and elite endorsement—to process information about politics and political campaigns. Although there is an uncertainty about the effectiveness of these shortcuts, nearly every theory of voting and decision making (in the American politics literature) includes, for example, party identification as a critical factor explaining people’s choices (Andrew 2007:24; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Graber 2001). Knowing that those political parties in favor of the new law also have a majority share of the vote in Switzerland, this explanation seems another valid predictor for the outcome of the analyzed campaign. Accordingly, and as neither individual journalists nor news organizations truly control the version of reality that their messages construct (Entman 1989:18), further research is needed—especially additional survey data.
Notes

1 This data is provided by a project analyzing how individuals form their political opinions during campaigns, under what circumstances opinions change and how political and media strategies impact public opinion, and vice versa, which is also part of the below-mentioned research network “Changing processes and strategies of political participation and representation”.

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References


Challenges to Political Campaigns in the Media


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