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## Working Paper

# The observation of public opinion by the governmental system

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**The Observation of Public Opinion  
by the Governmental System**

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Der Beitrag befaßt sich mit der Beobachtung der öffentlichen Meinung als einer möglichen Form der Kommunikation zwischen dem Regierungssystem und seiner Umwelt. Wir gehen von der Prämisse aus, daß öffentliche Meinung eine zentrale Bezugsgröße des Regierungssystems darstellt, wenn es um die Frage geht, wie und wie stark das Regierungssystem auf die Interessen und Wünsche der Bürger reagiert. In unserer Analyse versuchen wir, die Vorstellungen über die Ziele und Mittel der Beobachtung öffentlicher Meinung, die das Handeln der Akteure in den Öffentlichkeitsabteilungen der Regierung determinieren sowohl theoretisch als auch empirisch zu analysieren. Da öffentliche Meinung ein vielschichtiger und vager Begriff ist, beginnen wir mit einer Diskussion unterschiedlicher Bedeutungen und versuchen dann, die Beobachtung öffentlicher Meinung durch das Regierungssystem in seinem spezifischen Kontext, und zwar in systemtheoretischer Perspektive, zu explorieren. Im empirischen Teil untersuchen wir die Images von öffentlicher Meinung, die die Wissensstruktur jener kollektiven Akteure prägen, die für die Beobachtung der öffentlichen Meinung im Regierungssystem zuständig sind. Unsere zentrale Hypothese lautet, daß die Beobachtung öffentlicher Meinung in erster Linie durch eine systematische Berücksichtigung von Meinungsumfragen geschieht. Gleichwohl fanden wir, daß aufgrund der Annahme starker Medieneffekte in den Öffentlichkeitsabteilungen der Regierung die Beobachtung der Massenmedien eine ebenso wichtige Rolle spielt.

## **Abstract**

The paper addresses the observation of public opinion as one form of communication between the governmental system and its environment. It starts with the premise that public opinion is the major point of reference of the governmental system, when it comes to the question of how and how strongly the government responds to the interests and demands of the citizens. In our analysis we aim to determine both theoretically and empirically the rationales and conceptions regarding the observation of public opinion held by actors in public information agencies of the government. As public opinion is an ambiguous concept we begin with a discussion of the concept and then seek to explicate the observation of public opinion from a systems theory point of view. In the empirical part we present evidence about the images of public opinion which make up for the knowledge structure of those collective actors whose task is the observation of public opinion. Our main hypothesis was that the systematic monitoring of opinion polls and surveys is the focus of observing public opinion. However, we found that in addition, the assumption of the importance of media effects leads to an equally important observation of the mass media.

## 1. Introduction

The observation of public opinion by the governmental system is a relevant topic of political analysis in two related perspectives. First, from a systems theory point of view it concerns the communication between the governmental system and its environment whereby the interests and demands of the citizens are conveyed. These messages can - at least provisionally - be called public opinion, while the actors in the governmental-system environment can be collectively referred to as the public (Luhmann 1970). Second, from a democratic theory point of view, the question arises of how and how strongly the governmental system responds to public opinion. The evaluation of the impact of public opinion however must be based on an analysis of the communication between the governmental system and its environment.

Our methodological approach to the subject is *not* to describe the actual processes by which the governmental system observes public opinion but to discover the *images*<sup>1</sup> held by actors in the public information agencies of the governmental apparatus.<sup>2</sup> This approach was chosen for two reasons: In pragmatic terms, the empirical reconstruction of actual observation processes is extremely arduous; such a study is possible only in relation to specific topics and therefore creates the problem of generalisation. The second, substantive reason is that governmental-system actors' images of the relevant environment influence how they communicate with it. These constructions of public opinion determine the media, the forms and to some extent the messages of communication between the governmental system and its environment.

Most social scientists will have an intuitive understanding of public opinion. However, it is an ambiguous concept, and one can imagine many ways in which it can be observed. Thus, we begin with a discussion of the concept of public opinion, then seeking to explicate the observation of public opinion by the governmental system. This provides the basis for

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1 An alternative term for the same concept is "construction", which is used synonymously throughout this paper.

2 Herbst (1993) has recently carried out a comparable analysis. She is concerned with the construction of the image of public opinion among different groups of citizens on the basis of focus group data. However, her analysis differs in two essential aspects from ours. Whilst she interrogated citizens with differing ideological orientations, our respondents are exclusively role actors within the governmental system with responsibility for public information; and whereas she takes an exploratory approach, our argumentation is based on systems theory.

identifying expectations about the images of public opinion and its observation held by actors in governmental-system public information agencies. These expectations are subsequently tested in the empirical section. The analysis closes with a summary and discussion of the findings.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1 The Concept of Public Opinion*

In modern liberal democracies, the norm of popular sovereignty is achieved formally through competitive elections, and at the substantive level through the responsiveness of the decision makers to public opinion. There is a high degree of consensus on the salience of public opinion in the democratic process. However, there is a lack of agreement on what public opinion actually is. Almost all studies using this concept start off by stating that public opinion is ambiguous, hazy, or even mysterious. Then another definition of *public opinion* is added, which often only contributes to the ambiguity of the concept. Our approach is to escape this dilemma. Instead of reiterating the history of meanings of public opinion, our aim is merely to explore the semantic field and thereby bringing some order to the various interpretations.

The two component elements of public opinion are our point of departure. An opinion presupposes an object about which one can form an opinion. In the context of the political system, the most important objects are political issues and political actors. Opinions on issues and actors can be expressed in two quite different ways. First, by a general evaluation in the sense of good/bad, right/wrong, strong/weak, etc. Secondly by a substantive preference with regard to the issue or the programmatic positions of actors. This substantive preference may then be evaluated further. These two interpretations of opinion in the sense of a general evaluation of an object or a preference among competing alternatives refer to the obvious meaning. Within mass communication research, a third interpretation has developed, relating primarily to the object rather than to the opinion about it. One of the well established findings of mass communication research is that the issues discussed in the mass media make up for the agenda of issues that citizens actually discuss (Rogers/Dearing 1988). The agenda-setting function of the mass media is relevant for the formation of opinion to the extent that the issue also determines the standards and contents of attitudes towards political actors (Iyengar/Kinder 1987).

The semantic field of the element "*public*" in the concept public opinion is somewhat more complex. It can be meaningfully approached by the binary distinction of public vs. private (Luhmann 1970, Peters 1995). Thus, public opinion implies leaving the private sphere and entering a public sphere. Incidentally, private space can mean two things. Private can be understood as what occurs only in the mind of an individual - without being further communicated between individuals (Luhmann 1984: 142f, 239f). Private can also be taken to mean what is restricted to the primary sphere of one's own family (and perhaps close friends). Against these definitions of private, an expression of opinion is public when it is delivered before others, i.e., before a public, whereby the public is every other person or only other people with whom one is unfamiliar.

Neidhardt (1994: 7) employs the metaphor of the public as a forum where speakers in an arena communicate in front of an audience on a gallery. The heuristic metaphor refers to places like public squares, halls, or streets, constituting "small publics", or the mass media, which are forming "large publics" (Gerhards 1993: 33f; Neidhardt 1994: 10). Although the distinction between small and large publics is determined by the size of the space, it relates unambiguously to the number of people constituting the audience. The public/private dichotomy is thus joined by a second dimension of the element public in the public opinion concept: the size of the public that congregates in the given public space and forms an opinion about an issue or actor. But what magnitude is necessary for opinions expressed in a public space to be public opinion? When everyone or almost everyone present agrees? When a majority holds a given opinion?

While the two dimensions of meaning we have hitherto discussed concern the quantitative aspects of the size of the public space in which opinions are communicated and the number of people who share these opinions, a third dimension concerns the quality of public opinion. This qualitative perspective focuses on the way in which public opinion *comes about*. From a normative point of view, not all publicly expressed opinions can be defined as public opinions, but only those that are the outcome of *public discourse* (Habermas 1962). This concept of public discourse has a long tradition in democratic theory. It has recently been incorporated into a comprehensive theoretical context by Habermas (1992). Peters (1995) has taken up this perspective, conceptualizing public opinion as "exigent" public opinion that *arises from public discourse* and which can thus lay claim to reason and legitimacy (Peters 1995: 47). Thus, only a public opinion that arises from discourse can be understood as a legitimate.

These three dimensions<sup>3</sup> of the public opinion concept can be combined in various ways. But two dominant variants have developed in the literature, each stressing a different aspect. First, in Anglo-American social science a conception of public opinion as the *aggregate of individual opinions*, i.e., a statistically determinable distribution of citizens' attitudes about a certain object (issue, actor) predominates. This approach is clearly apparent in the definition provided by Finifter (1995: 1027):

"[public opinion is] the political values, attitudes, or opinions of the general public of a country or other political unit, usually understood to include voting patterns or other political behaviour... In the light of the central importance of 'the people' in democracy, ... public opinion and its influence on political decisions must be considered in evaluating the extent of democracy in any political system".

With reference to the principle of popular sovereignty, this definition of public opinion relates only to the totality of citizens in a given democracy. The public/private distinction plays no part in this concept. That is, the question of whether the opinions of individual citizens are communicated in a public space, is not relevant, but only what opinions the members of the political community have at any given time. This view of public opinion is so predominant in the American social sciences that it is frequently taken for granted (Converse 1987; Jacobs/Shapiro 1994; Steiner 1994; Zaller 1994).

Gerhards (1993: 25) and Neidhardt (1994: 26) demur, asserting that aggregate individual opinions do *not* constitute public opinion. In accordance with Luhmann (1990: 172), the authors draw a sharp distinction between the consciousness of individuals and any communication between individuals, restricting the concept of public opinion to the latter only. For Gerhards and Neidhardt, the primary point of reference is thus the public/private dichotomy, limiting public opinion to issues and opinions on topics that are communicated in a public space. As for public space they propose a differentiated constellation of locations (Gerhards/Neidhardt 1990: 19ff.), but focus largely on communication through the mass media. Both authors justify the relevance of analysing public opinion with its salience in the democratic process, especially in influencing the activities of political actors in the decision-making system. With reference to Noelle-Neumann (1979), they see publicly communicated opinions as likely to influence the decision-making system only if it consolidates into a relatively uniform public opinion (Gerhards 1993: 11, 24f) or leads to consonance in public opinion (Neidhardt 1994: 26). The analytical distinction between the

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3 A fourth dimension of meaning is represented by definition of the *objects* of public opinion. In the general view, they are everything that is covered by the term "public affairs". But "public affairs" cannot be defined a priori but only as the outcome of political processes. For this reason we do not account for this dimension in our discussion.

multiplicity of published opinions on a topic and a uniform public opinion on that topic is a useful one. But Gerhards and Neidhardt point out that such consolidation or consonance is rare. This raises the problem that public opinion would seldom play a part in the democratic process, which is clearly not consistent with political reality.

Regarding the principal approaches to public opinion in the literature, the crucial point is the multiplicity of signified content in different combinations covered by the same signifier (public opinion). There are three strategies one can adopt to escape from this dilemma of ambiguity:

1. One can set up different concepts for differing content, thus establishing greater accord between signified and signifier.
2. One can assert one of the multiple meanings to be the pertinent attribution of the signifier, taking this to be "real" public opinion.
3. One can assume that there are in fact several meanings of the term and then state precisely which of them one chooses to call public opinion and why.

It seems to us that the first two strategies are not very promising. The concept of public opinion is one that has developed in the course of history.<sup>4</sup> This explains its complexity of meaning, but also sets limits to ambiguity because it is far too current in everyday and scholarly communication. We feel that the only solution can be the third alternative, in explicating the context of analysis in which public opinion plays a role and in discussing the meaning of the term in this particular context. We will attempt to do so focusing on the specific rationality of the governmental system and its communication with its environment as guided by the system's specific understanding of public opinion.

## 2.2 *Communication Between the Governmental System and Its Environment*

From a systems theory perspective, the political system is one of the primary societal subsystems. Each of these subsystems is differentiated from society in accordance with three criteria. First, through a certain *function* that it has to perform for society. The extent to which such functional definitions can be made quasi-objectively by an analytical observer is a controversial issue in systems theory. We agree with Mayntz (1988) that one can speak of a differentiated subsystem only if the function ascribed to it is also rooted in the subjective orientations of the actors both within the system itself and in the relevant environment.

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4 On the history of the public opinion concept see Noelle-Neumann 1994.

The risk of relatively arbitrary system definitions is otherwise too great. In the case of the political system the matter is relatively unproblematic. The general view is that the societal function of the political system is to attain collective goals by producing collectively binding decisions.

In order to perform these functions certain *role complexes* develop in relation to them. This is the second and presumably most unambiguous differentiation criterion. These role complexes are defined in legal terms by the constitution, and they determine what actions and interactions are permissible and required in the subsystem. The role complexes comprise the structure of the system, differing structural configurations constituting different system types. The particular type of political system existing in the Federal Republic of Germany is generally referred to as liberal democracy, or in more concrete terms as parliamentary democracy.

A third differentiation criterion is the development of a specific *system rationality* distinct from the rationalities of other systems in the environment. In the case of this criterion, too, we assume that it only applies if the actors of the system act in accordance with this rationality. As we seek to show, the specific rationality of the governmental system is closely related to the structure of the system.

As in all liberal democracies, the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany evidences a quite specific *internal* differentiation. It consists in a centralisation of actual decision-making activity in a subsystem of the political system that can be referred to as the *governmental system*, and which in any case includes parliament, government (in the narrower sense of the term) and administration. The pertinent environment of the governmental system is the public, which in liberal democracies is made up primarily of voters. The role of voter is the decisive role of the public, through which it participates in the decision-making activities of the governmental system.<sup>5</sup> In systems-theory terminology, the exchange processes between a system and its environment are termed communications. Such communications can, of course, be looked at from both points of view, but it is the governmental system perspective that is relevant for our purposes. According to Luhmann (1984), the communication of every system with its environment is highly selective. This selectivity is based on *observation* of the environment by the system from points of view internal to the system. System communication with the environment is to this extent *self-referential*. Of the infinite multiplicity of possibly environmental events and environmental states, the system perceives and accepts as information only those that are important for

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<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, further formal and informal participatory roles, like that of the petition signer, the protester, etc. But the most important of these is the role of voter, since it is decisive for the selection of the decision-making personnel and for the effectiveness of the government/opposition mechanism.

systemic operations. Vice versa, if the environment imparts any sort of impulse or stimulus to the system - in the case of the governmental system primarily citizen wishes and demands - they can attain relevance only through the filter of systemic operations. Luhmann (1986: 40) proposes the concept of *resonance* to describe this state of affairs in which the system is capable of reacting to the environment only in accordance with its own structure and rationality.

In order to clarify the way in which system observation of the environment and the resonance produced in the system by the environment are actually controlled, the systems theoretical frame of reference must be given an action-theory twist.<sup>6</sup> Since there are always concrete actors actually shaping communication between the system and the environment, it must be possible to locate these selective systemic operations in the action orientations of system actors. If the action orientations are shared by *all* actors as system roles, one can speak of a *generalised action orientation*, which as such constitutes the specific rationality of the system. When analysing concrete systems it is always difficult to determine a priori what the systemic rationality could be and where it comes from. Possible points of departure can be historical considerations or structural constraints. Since the latter are somewhat less speculative, we prefer to choose this path, which in the case of the political system permits plausible conclusions.

In liberal democracies, the decisive constraints on the action of polity actors are in the following institutionally determined areas:

1. The production of collectively binding decisions can occur only by occupying the decision-making positions assigned to this purpose.
2. These decision-making positions are filled by the citizenry through periodic elections within the framework of party competition.

Because of these structural constraints, the fundamental and generalised action orientation of all governmental-system actors can be regarded as the attempt to occupy these decision-making positions, i.e., first to win seats in parliament and then especially to form the government or continue in office. Even if the primary motive of an individual or collective actor is to attain certain programmatic goals and not the instrumental motive of gaining or retaining power, occupation of the decision-making positions is the necessary condition. Luhmann (1986: 170) therefore describes the binary code of government/opposition as the special code of the political system in modern societies.

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the relationship between systems theory and action theory as the two major paradigms of social science, see Münch (1983), Schimank (1985), Fuchs (1993) and Gerhards (1994).

The generalised action orientation of governmental-system actors thus consists in gaining or retaining decision-making positions, which is in the hands of the electorate. This generalised action orientation, based primarily on fundamental structural components of the political system, is the most important constraint on the choices of all actors. In periodic elections, the choices themselves consist in the different programmes and candidates of the parties, and, during the legislative period, in the decision as such. In anticipating coming elections, decision-making feeds back into the government/opposition mechanism. The decisive question for governmental-system actors is thus what choices or concrete options for action they should embrace for the purposes of this generalised action orientation. However, the electoral result as such provides only little insight into what the electorate actually wants from a substantive point of view. Moreover, voters' preferences can change in the course of the legislative period. For this reason the governmental-system actors must take permanent account of *public opinion* as an expression of what the citizenry wants and what will affect their electoral choices. The observation of public opinion by the governmental system thus is a prerequisite to find resonance in the environment. Luhmann (1986: 175) puts it succinctly: "Political resonance arises primarily through 'public opinion' as the real sovereign implying differential chances of re-election".

We have thus arrived back at the concept of public opinion that we discussed in the preceding section. By examining the structural context in which actors within the governmental system act, our investigative perspective has gained a clear point of reference. What conception of public opinion must the actors of the polity have if public opinion relates to the generalised action orientation of the polity or to "differential chances of re-election"?

### 2.3 *Observation of Public Opinion by the Governmental System*

The two most important variants of the public opinion concept we have identified are the aggregate of individual citizen's opinions and the publicly communicated opinions of widely differing actors. If our sole premise is that the specific rationality of the governmental system consists in the government/opposition code, it is quite clear that public opinion must be understood primarily as the *aggregate of individual opinions* of the citizenry. It is accordingly no longer necessary to justify why governmental-system actors consider the individual opinions of citizens to be an authoritative public opinion, but why opinions publicly communicated in the media should play any role for them at all. Gerhards (1993: 26) has addressed this problem, although the consequences for him are

somewhat different than in our case: "The strength of the influence of public opinion [in the sense of published opinion] results from the relation to other channels of influence. Public-opinion polls represent a functional equivalent. The better and more accurately they assess the opinions and needs of the citizenry, the less important will public or published opinion become as a *substitute indicator* (highlighting by Fuchs/Pfetsch)." In view of the professionalization of public opinion research and the consequent accumulation of methodological knowledge until today, it is hardly plausible to take recourse to media opinions as "substitute indicator" for observing relevant individual citizen opinions.

Despite these arguments the fact remains that the mass media are also continually observed by practically all governmental-system actors. As there is hardly any empirical information, we must only speculate about the reasons. The first possibility is that governmental-system actors make certain assumptions about the relationship between citizen opinions and mass media. These actors might suppose that citizens' opinions are in flux permanently on the one hand and that they are not only the autonomous product of the individual member of the public but also an outcome of mass-media communication on the other hand. If we are to assume that mass media opinions influence opinion formation among the audience, it is reasonable for governmental-system actors at least to observe and if necessary to influence these determinants of citizen opinion formation *as well*. It is interesting to note that the mass media were already observed in times when the predominant view in mass-communication research was that the mass media had little effect on citizen opinions. However, given the competition between parties, politicians could at no point afford to ignore a possible determinant of a factor so crucial for them: incidentally, the competing party could gain a lead by taking note of published opinion.

The second assumption has to do with the importance of mass-media communication for the governmental system from substantive points of view. On the one hand the mass media are among the most important sources of information, from which the governmental system can obtain information on societal problems which need to be solved on its part. Such problems can but are not necessarily reflected in the perceptions of citizens only. On the other hand, mass-media communication is a sensitive system capable of rapid reaction, which the governmental system can use as a sort of feedback facility. It provides information on how its identification of problems and the proposed solutions are received in the system's environment, and on what is politically feasible (Pfetsch 1993). This can be brought to a point using Luhmann's terminology (1986: 51ff.): it is a matter of self-observation of the governmental system by means of observation of the external observation by the mass media. Through this self-referential communication of the governmental

system with its environment, it gains information that determines its resonance in the environment.

The third assumption has to do with implications of the structural differentiation of public information departments in the governmental system. These agencies have to conform with constitutional norms and legal provisions. According to various verdicts of the Federal Constitutional Court, the primordial task of public information of the governmental system is to inform about measures and projects in such a manner that the public are able to assess them properly (Schürmann 1992). Public is to be understood here as including both citizenry and the mass media.

Our argument thus far permits several conclusions. Given the specific rationality of the governmental system, the actors understand public opinion to be both the aggregate of individual citizen opinions and the publicised opinions in the mass media. The first view is directly coupled with the electoral behaviour of the citizens. For the public information agencies of the governmental system the most efficient way to observe citizen opinions is to use surveys. The functional equivalent of observing the mass media would be systematic content analyses, but their reliability and practicability are limited and do not compare well with the efficiency of poll-taking. We thus assume that observation of mass media opinions is less systematised than survey research.

Governmental-system actors might see the two variants of public opinion as being related in the sense that mass-media opinions have an impact on citizen opinions. If we take the hypothetical case of an equal distribution of the two different opinions on a given issue, every shift in distribution is important because this is where majorities begin to form that could produce differential electoral chances. The public opinion on issues and actors relevant for the governmental system are accordingly all opinion distributions recorded in the media *and* among citizens.

Taking as our point of departure the rationality of the governmental system, assumptions have been elaborated on *what* system actors understand by public opinion and *why* they observe it. We have yet to discuss the *resonance* that observed public opinion produces. There is an *active* and a *passive* dimension to this resonance. The passive dimension is *responsiveness* to observed public opinion, i.e., the greater or lesser account the system takes of public opinion in the decision making. This responsiveness is on the one hand a democratic norm and on the other a rational necessity if power is to be retained. The resonance of the governmental system and this passive responsiveness are presumably not in immediate equation. Every system tries to increase its autonomy vis-à-vis its environment,

and one of the most important constraints on the autonomy of the governmental system is public opinion. The most efficient way to reduce dependence on the environment and to increase system autonomy is to control what one depends on. In our case this means *actively exerting influence* on public opinion on the basis of systemic perspectives. The active dimension of resonance, the exertion of such influence, falls primarily within the purview of public information agencies (see also Marcinkowski 1993: 219). The roles of such public information agencies thus include not only observing but also influencing public opinion. The differentiation of these roles presupposes that public opinion is in principle open to influence. The extent to which this assumption is actually tenable has yet to be definitively established. The importance of these functions within the governmental system increases as decision-makers are convinced that public opinion can be influenced and that public information agencies are adequate means. In any case, the influenceability of public opinion is a rational fiction that permits the possibility of gaining greater autonomy to be envisaged in the first place. Consequently, no risk can be taken that public opinion can indeed be influenced and is indeed being influenced by competing actors.

The primary function of the governmental system is to produce and implement collectively binding decisions. Although this decision-making activity is an *output* of the democratic process, there must be a feedback loop to public opinion at the *input* side of the process. This imperative is a result of the specific rationality of the system, which has already been characterised in the government/opposition code. To enhance functional efficiency, the public information agencies of the governmental apparatus are differentiated as specialized departments with the task of both observing public opinion and reporting their observations to the governmental system, but also of influencing public opinion. Observing and influencing public opinion are the ways in which public information agencies communicate with the public. This communication is determined by constructions or images that public information actors hold of public opinion and its impact. We have elaborated a series of assumptions in a systems theory perspective with an action theory component. In the coming section we summarise them in more succinct form as hypotheses to be qualified in empirical analysis.

## 2.4 *Hypotheses on the Observation of Public Opinion by the Governmental System*

### A. The Conception of Public Opinion in the Governmental System<sup>7</sup>

*Hypothesis 1:* By public opinion, the governmental system understands both the aggregate of citizen opinions and opinions communicated in the media. The former view has relative priority. Other images of public opinion play no role in the governmental system.

*Hypothesis 2:* By public opinion every distribution of opinion is understood and not only consonance or consensus of opinion.

*Hypothesis 3:* The relationship between citizen opinions and media opinions is understood as one of influence in which media opinions exert influence on citizen opinions. Little influence is exerted in the opposing direction.

### B. The Investigation of Public Opinion by the Governmental System

*Hypothesis 4:* Public opinion is investigated by poll-taking (citizen opinions) and by observation of the mass media (media opinions). Contacts with people and public events do not play an important role.

*Hypothesis 5:* Because the electronic media have a wider audience than print media, they are the primary source of mass-media opinion observation.

### C. The Resonance Produced By the Governmental System In Public Opinion

*Hypothesis 6:* The governmental system is responsive to observed public opinion while at the same time seeking to influence it.

*Hypothesis 7:* This responsiveness occurs primarily with the aim of retaining power and only secondarily to conform with the democratic norm.

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<sup>7</sup> To be more exact, it is a question of the conception of public opinion of actors within the public information departments of the governmental system. Since the public information agencies represent the governmental system in their function as observers of public opinion, the shorter formulation is justified.

### 3. Empirical Analysis<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.1 *Sample, Survey Method and Category Schema*

The empirical analysis of public-opinion observation by the governmental system has two aims. First to reconstruct the image of public opinion held by actors in the governmental system, and second to test the hypotheses specified in the preceding section. Since the governmental system has differentiated special agencies for observing and influencing public opinion, it seems obvious to study these entities. The organisation of public information corresponds with the organisational structure of the governmental system (Schürmann 1992: 403), i.e., there are roles for public information both within the parliamentary fractions and in the administration. As the government is organised according to the departmental principle, each Ministry and the Federal Chancellery disposes its own public information roles. However, the most important organisational unit for public information in the governmental apparatus is the so-called "Press and Information Office of the Federal Government". Despite its size - it has a staff of about 750 - and its complex internal structure, it is not an independent Federal department (Schürmann 1992). Instead, the office is subordinated to the Federal Chancellery, and its Director not only is answerable to the Federal Chancellor, he is also the official spokes person of the head of the government. This position indicates how strongly governmental public information are concentrated at the real decision-making centre of the apparatus.

Since both the Ministries, the Federal Chancellery, and the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government - which we will refer to as the Federal Press Office - have a hierarchical structure, our investigation includes the holders of top positions in the public information agencies. This approach of selecting respondents is quite common in empirical elite studies. A total of 38 top-ranking officers in public information departments in the governmental apparatus and in the parliamentary parties were included in our study. The study was carried out from summer 1994 to spring 1995. Because of the extraordinary salience of the Federal Press Office, 16 leading officers from this agency were interviewed (representing 42 per cent of the total sample). With 29 respondents (76 per cent), officers directly connected with the center of the governmental apparatus (as compared with the public relation roles of the parliamentary bodies and party organisations) constituted the greater part of the sample. Thus, we have succeeded in recruiting almost all top position

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<sup>8</sup> We would like to thank Angelika Costa, Andreas Dams and Jan Flickschu for their competent collaboration in this study. Angelika Costa participated in developing the coding scheme and coded all interviews. Andreas Dams processed the data and carried out all computations. The tables and figures were prepared by Jan Flickschu.

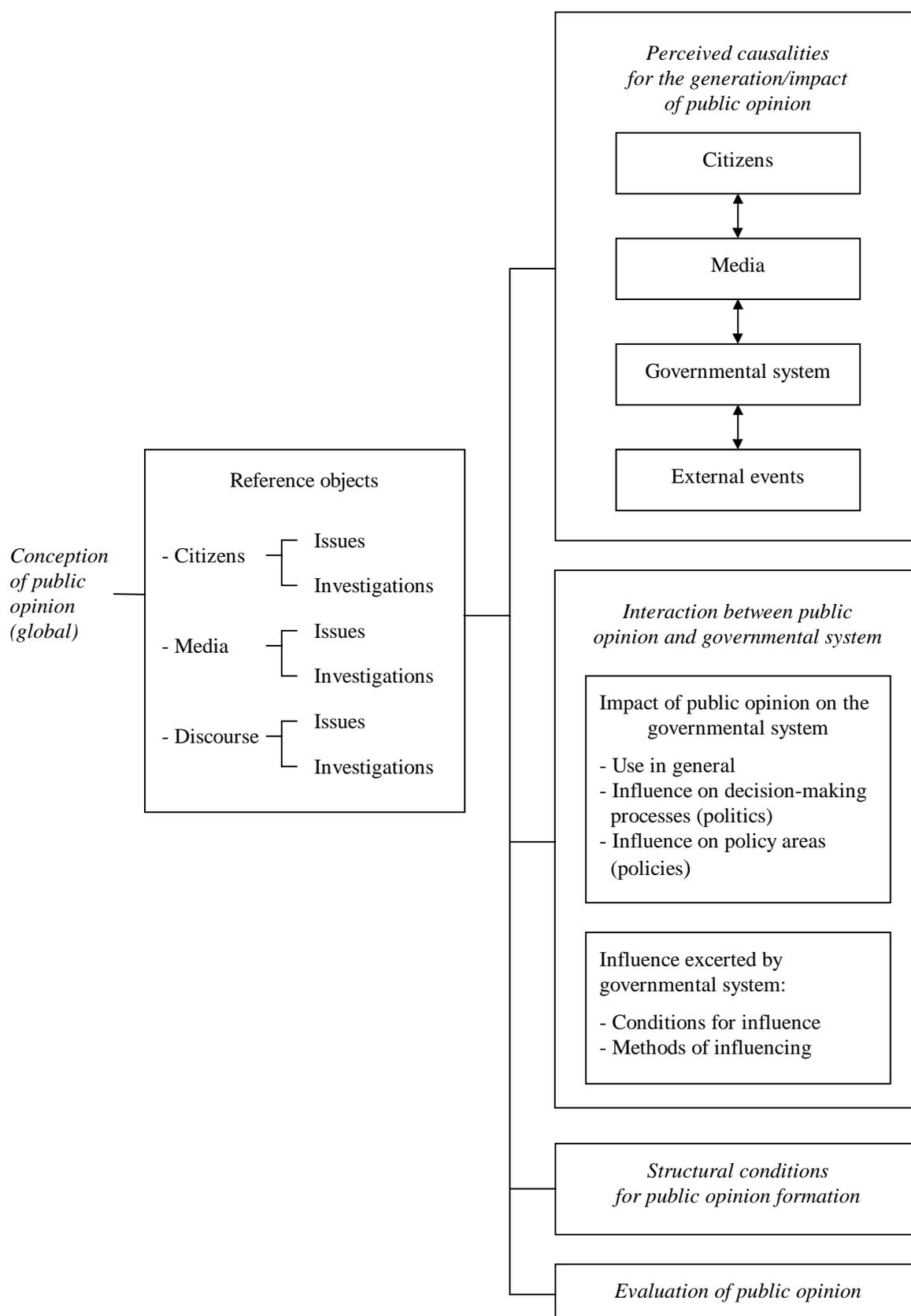
holders in public relation roles in the German governmental system. The method employed was the focused interview according to a semi-structured questionnaire. Such open interviews offer the advantage of eliciting the ideas of the respondents themselves rather than pressing them into a closed structure of answer categories. We felt that this method was adequate because we lack reliable preliminary data and we had to assume that the semantic field of the concept public opinion was subject to ambiguity. The disadvantage of such open-ended interviews is their susceptibility to disturbance from contingent situational factors that can arise in communication between interviewer and interviewee. In our case, however, this disturbance factor was somewhat reduced in so far as all interviews were conducted by one of the co-authors of the present analysis.

The approach of analysis was hermeneutic-classificatory content analysis (Roller/Mathes 1993), which combines the hermeneutical interpretation procedure of discourse analysis with elements of quantitative interpretation methods. The transcriptions of the interviews were coded on the basis of a category schema, which was elaborated with close reference to the interview material. Both, the interviews and the category schema relating to the observation of public opinion covers five dimensions: 1. the conception of public opinion; 2. the determination of public opinion; 3. the sources of public opinion; 4. the impact of public opinion on the governmental system; 5. governmental system influence on public opinion.

Figure 1 reiterates the structure of the category schema.

The opening question in all interviews was: "What do you understand by public opinion?" On the basis of the answers, categories of public opinion were constructed. In the coding process, the conception of public opinion functioned as basic reference objects of further substantive elements (determination, sources, impact, influence). The *coding unit* was respondent statement defined as coherent semantic units which in its basic form includes a subject of speech, a reference object and an evaluation. The data set was constructed though that the respondents could also be used as an *unit of analysis*. In fact, the findings which are reported in the following section are based on the latter unit of analysis.

Figure 1: Structure of the *Classification Schema* for Observation of Public Opinion



## 3.2 Testing the Hypotheses

### 3.2.1 The Governmental-System Conception of Public Opinion

Hypothesis 1 postulates that: (1.) governmental system actors understand the aggregate of citizen opinions and mass media opinions communicated as public opinion; (2.) that aggregate of citizen opinions takes relative priority over mass media opinions; (3.) conceptions of public opinion other than the two mentioned play no role in the governmental system. The empirical findings are shown in table 1, whereby the 38 respondents form the percentaging basis for all categories in the table, i.e., the italicised supracategory *and* the three subcategories relating to citizen opinions and media opinions respectively. In order to record more complex conceptions of public opinion as well, multiple answers by individual respondents were admitted.

*Table 1: The Concept Of Public Opinion In The Governmental System*

|   | Percentage <sup>a</sup> | (Respondents) |
|---|-------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Citizen opinions</i>                     | 76                      | (29)          |
| of which:                                   |                         |               |
| - General reference to citizen opinions     | 40                      | (15)          |
| - Majority opinions among citizens          | 37                      | (14)          |
| - Opinion of opinion-leaders among citizens | 8                       | (3)           |
| <i>Media opinions</i>                       | 76                      | (29)          |
| of which:                                   |                         |               |
| - General reference to media opinions       | 68                      | (26)          |
| - Majority opinions of the media            | 8                       | (3)           |
| - Opinions of media elite                   | 5                       | (2)           |
| <i>Outcome of public discussion</i>         | 13                      | (5)           |
| <i>Diffuse phenomenon</i>                   | 3                       | (1)           |
| <i>Other concepts</i>                       | 3                       | (1)           |

a The percentaging basis is all respondents (N=38). Multiple answers are possible both at the supracategory level (in italics) and the subcategory level.

The first postulate is clearly confirmed by the data. 76 per cent (n=29) of the 38 respondents understand public opinion to be citizen opinions, and the same percentages take it to be mass media opinions. Thus only nine respondents - 24 per cent - did *not explicitly* mention either citizen opinions or media opinions when they were asked to give their understanding of public opinion. However, this does not necessarily mean that they rejected either view. As table 3 in the following section shows, 100 per cent of respondents state that

they determine public opinion by observing the mass media and virtually every respondent said that he/she uses polling or survey data. In both cases this makes sense only if one has a corresponding conception of public opinion. On the basis of the empirical evidence we thus conclude that practically all actors understand public opinion to be *both* citizen opinions *and* media opinions.

The second part of hypothesis 1 seems not to be confirmed, since the percentages under citizen opinions and media opinions are identical. No relative priority of citizen opinions is apparent. However, as respondents had no occasion in the open interview to address the issue on request or by a direct follow-up question, this element of the hypothesis must to some degree remain unresolved.

The third element in hypothesis 1 is a negative assertion, namely that the governmental system understands by public opinion *nothing else* but citizen opinions and media opinions. The attempt was made through coding every meaning of public opinion recorded. As table 1 shows, only one respondent is assigned to the residual category "other conception", and only one respondent also understands public opinion as a "diffuse phenomenon". By contrast, five respondents see public opinion as an "outcome of public discussions". Their notion comes close to the discursive concept of public opinion. However, this concept must be regarded to supplement the other concepts of public opinion. After all, the five respondents also understand public opinion to be citizen and/or media opinions *as well*.

Hypothesis 2 addresses the question how opinions have to be distributed among citizens and mass media actors for public opinion to come about. In contrast to a widely held conception, the hypothesis claims that, consequent on its specific action rationality, the governmental system does not understand public opinion to mean only a consonance of opinion or a consensus of opinion but every distribution of opinion about a political issue or actor. As table 1 shows, 37 per cent of respondents understand public opinion to be a majority opinion among citizens and 8 per cent a majority opinion in the media. Only one respondent spoke of consensus. One could argue that the difference between majority and consensus is negligible and that those who refer to majority opinion among the citizens are inconsistent with hypothesis 2. However, they still represent a minority of respondents and for the governmental system in any case this is an informative point of reference regardless of how large the group is in a particular instance. The empirical findings show that the governmental system understands public opinion not to be a consonance or consensus of opinion. Moreover, public opinion is neither associated with the messages articulated at *public events* or *citizen protest actions*, as such notion was dismissed. In *determining* pub-

lic opinion, on the other hand, public events played a certain role (see the following section).

All in all, governmental-system actors see public opinion as citizen opinions and media opinions. However, the two elements of the conception are seen as influencing one another. This influence is hypothesized and according to table 2 confirmed to be an effect of the media on citizen opinions, whereas the reverse pattern does not hold to the same degree. No less than 89 per cent of respondents believe that the media have an impact on the public, while only 29 per cent see the opposite effect.

*Table 2: The Relationship Between Citizen Opinions and Media Opinions from the Point of View of the Government*

|  | Percentage | (Respondents) |
|--|------------|---------------|
| <i>Media opinions influence citizen opinions</i> | 89         | (34)          |
| <i>Citizen opinions influence media opinions</i> | 29         | (11)          |

a The percentaging basis is all respondents (N=38). Multiple answers are possible

The empirical findings on the notion of public opinion in the governmental system corresponds with our theoretical expectations about the specific rationality of the governmental system in general and of the public information agencies in particular. The degree to which the semantic complexity of the public opinion concept is reduced in accordance with this rationality is remarkable. Four categories suffice to describe the conceptions expressed in the interviews.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Determining of Public Opinion by the Governmental System

Public opinion can only produce resonance in the governmental system to the degree that it is actually observed by the system. According to our analysis so far, this means that citizen opinions and media opinions in particular must be observed. How they are to be observed depends also on the technical infrastructure and its efficiency. In the theoretical section and in hypothesis 4 it was assumed that public opinion polls are the most efficient and reli-

<sup>9</sup> The "other conception" refers to international public opinion, mentioned by one actor with responsibility for international public information.

able instrument for determining citizen opinions. Table 3 shows that almost every respondent stated that surveys are actually used in the governmental system to ascertain public opinion. But since polls can relate only to citizen opinions, it is also clear that practically all respondents understand public opinion to be, among other things, citizen opinions, even if not explicitly expressed. The same applies with regard to the mass media. Only 29 respondents explicitly stated that they understood public opinion to be media opinions (see table 1), but the data in table 3 show that all respondents determine public opinion through observing the mass media.

*Table 3: The Ascertainment of Public Opinion By the Governmental System*

|  | Percentage <sup>a</sup> | (Respondents) |
|--|-------------------------|---------------|
| Public opinion polls                                 | 97                      | (37)          |
| of which:  |                         |               |
| - General reference to polls                         | 63                      | (24)          |
| - Own polls  | 32                      | (12)          |
| - Polls of other institutions/ organizations         | 24                      | (9)           |
| <i>Observation of the mass media</i>                 | 100                     | (38)          |
| of which:  |                         |               |
| - General reference to observation of the mass media | 26                      | (10)          |
| - Observation of the print media                     | 97                      | (37)          |
| - Observation of the electronic media                | 89                      | (34)          |
| <i>Contacts with people</i>                          | 74                      | (28)          |
| of which:  |                         |               |
| - Contacts with citizens                             | 42                      | (16)          |
| - Contacts with politicians                          | 37                      | (14)          |
| - Contacts with journalists                          | 26                      | (10)          |
| <i>Public events</i>                                 | 11                      | (4)           |

a The percentaging basis is all respondents (N=38). Multiple answers are possible both at the supracategory level (in italics) and the subcategory level.

There is, however, an essential difference between observation of media opinions and observation of citizen opinions. Although the Federal Press Office uses modern information processing techniques to record the mass media,<sup>10</sup> systematic sampling and regular quantitative analysis on this basis is not the rule as in public-opinion research. Instead, the ob-

<sup>10</sup> According to an information brochure issued by the Federal Press Office in 1993, the Office developed its own news processing system.

servation of the mass media follows political motives. Therefore, many respondents state that their method of observing the mass media consists merely in taking cognisance of certain newspapers, in other words, reading them. The only more or less systematic form of mass media observation explicitly mentioned in the interviews was to take notice of the newspaper clippings which are collected on a daily basis by the information service of the Federal Press Office. Our interviews allow to conclude that, although the governmental system does continually observe the mass media, such observation is less professionalized than observation of citizen opinions. The lack of reliable and efficient instruments might be part of an explanation.

In hypothesis 5, the electronic media are attributed greater importance than the print media in the observation of mass-media opinions because of their broader range. However, the majority of respondents observed the electronic media but also the print media, the latter to a slightly greater extent. One of the reasons for the predominance of the print media could be the technical ease of processing printed information. A press review consisting of newspaper commentaries is, for example, easier to compile than a video recording of television broadcasts. The depth of information presented in newspaper articles is possibly also greater for the governmental system, providing it with more instructive information for its decision-making activities. However, the difference between the electronic media and the print media in the perception of governmental spokes persons should not be overestimated.

We have yet to consider our statements regarding public opinion in relation with "contacts with people" and "public events". The reason for attributing a minor role to these dimensions might lie in the limited efficiency of both forms of observation, since they relate to comparatively small and highly selective audiences only. According to table 3, this assertion is largely confirmed with respect to "public events" but not with regard to "contacts with people". No less than 74 per cent (n=28) of respondents maintain that they obtained information via contacts with people. Obviously, the more or less systematic observation of public opinion in surveys and press clippings apparently does not fully replace direct contact with citizens, journalists, and politicians. It seems that these two rather abstract methods of investigation have to be complemented by such intuitively more accessible direct contacts with people. Furthermore, personal communication with politicians and journalists belongs to the routines for the respondents.

### 3.2.3 Governmental System Resonance In Public Opinion

Regarding the governmental system resonance in public opinion, we advanced two hypotheses. First, *responsiveness* to a given public opinion is necessary if the government in power wishes to be re-elected. Second, public opinion is not to be understood only as a given factor but also as something that can be *influenced*. The frame of reference here is the generalised action rationality of the governmental system and its endeavours to enhance its autonomy. Our data do not permit direct and differentiated testing of this rationality but only of the implications contained in hypothesis 6 that governmental-system actors' image of public opinion includes both responsiveness and influenceability.

*Table 4:* The Resonance of the Governmental System In Public Opinion

|                        | Percentage <sup>a</sup> | (Respondents) |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Responsiveness</i>  | 82                      | (31)          |
| - to citizen opinions  | 50                      | (19)          |
| - to media opinions    | 50                      | (19)          |
| <i>possible impact</i> | 74                      | (28)          |
| - of citizen opinions  | 47                      | (18)          |
| - of media opinions    | 55                      | (21)          |

a The percentaging basis is all respondents (N=38). Multiple answers are possible both at the supracategory level (in italics) and the subcategory level.

According to the findings recorded in table 4, 82 per cent of respondents claim that public opinion plays a role in governmental-system decision-making and that the governmental system is in this sense responsive. Fifty per cent of respondents explicitly mentioned one or both of citizen opinions and media opinions. Seventy-four per cent of respondents stated that public opinion can be influenced by the governmental system. In this connection, 47 per cent explicitly mentioned citizen opinions and 55 per cent media opinions. The slight predominance of media opinion is plausible here, as the action repertoire of public information agencies for directly influencing the citizenry, i.e., circumventing mass media communication, is very limited. It is largely restricted to paid media advertisement and the distribution of self-produced posters, brochures, leaflets and magazines. There is far more options for influencing media reporting. First, the continuous contacts that members of public information agencies necessarily maintain with journalists. These professional information channels include regular press conferences, informal contacts and background

briefings, and the supply of information to news agencies. There is a further factor that is closely linked with the particular nature of governmental-system rationality. The active role of the government in decision making and its duty to implement these decisions almost automatically generates events with high news value. Media attention is attracted both by the prominence of the political personnel like the Chancellor and Ministers, and by the relevance of their decisions.

The last step in the empirical analysis deals with the impact of observed public opinion *within* the governmental system. This is addressed by hypothesis 7, which postulates that the responsiveness of the governmental system to public opinion stems from the desire to retain power primarily, while conforming with a democratic norm is secondary.

*Table 5: The Use of Public Opinion in the Governmental System*

|                             | Percentage <sup>a</sup> | (Respondents) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Power retention</i>      | 74                      | (28)          |
| <i>Policy making</i>        | 100                     | (38)          |
| <i>Policy communication</i> | 53                      | (20)          |

a The percentaging basis is all respondents (N=38). Multiple answers are possible.

According to table 5, we have categorized the respondents' statements on this subject as to three theoretically meaningful dimensions. Respondents understand the purpose of governmental-system observation of public opinion to serve "power retention", "policy making" and "policy communication". In contrast to the other two categories, the term "power retention" was not used by respondents in interviews, but is a label for statements with reference to the government/opposition code. Respondent statements were quite general, but mostly concerned with elections. Little speculation is needed to interpret that winning elections and thus remaining in office is one of the prime motives of the respondents. Thus, 74 per cent of respondents (28 of 38) maintained more or less directly the retention of power as reason for the governmental system to observe and influence public opinion. Moreover, all respondents mentioned policy making as a reason for observation. However, policy making is an ambiguous concept, which, although it may have to do to power retention, in principle also fulfils a democratic norm. The same holds for the communication of policies, the third reason that respondents mention for observing public opinion.

We interpret the findings in table 5 as confirming hypothesis 7, which gives clear priority over the normative postulate to the instrumental character of public opinion observation. This interpretation is not only justified by the findings given in the single table, but also by the overall pattern of the respondents' statements.

#### **4. Summary and Discussion**

In this final section we address this overall pattern and the relationship between the instrumental and normative aspects of governmental system observation and use of public opinion. Thus, we discuss the issue brought up in the introductory chapter, namely how the systems theory and democratic theory perspectives can be combined.

The image of public opinion does not relate to individual actors but to the collective of actors in top positions in governmental-system public information agencies. In social psychological terms it is a matter of the "knowledge structure" (Galambos/Abelson/Black 1986) or "cognitive heuristics" (Sherman/Corty 1984) of a collective. From the substantive point of view it consists of a network of objects linked by relations of influence. As depicted in figure 2, both the objects and their interrelations are mental constructions of the pertinent actors. The objects naturally include agencies of the governmental system in which public information roles operate. They also include the subsystem to which the activities relate, namely government as the actual decision-making entity. The information on public opinion collected through observation is passed on to the government, and through the strategies and decisions of the government, public information agencies receive instructions on what they are to observe. Communication relations between the public information agencies and its environment has been discussed at length in the course of the study. However, two aspects have not yet been addressed: (1) the events in the environment of the political system, and (2) the actions and decisions of the government. The empirical evidence of the interviews shows that events are regarded as constitutive factors in opinion formation, but relatively rarely. This can be interpreted as a further indication of the self-referential nature of system communications with the environment, for events are factors external to the system. More important is a direct effect - internal to the system - which is postulated as a direct impact of governmental decisions on the formation of public opinion. This effect, that is not mediated by public information activities, but points to independent reporting by the media, was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. Thus,

governmental decisions are also registered by the mass media independently of public information mediation. Moreover, some decisions have an impact on people's lives in certain areas, without being mediated.

The most important gain of our study is information about the images and reasons for observing public opinion. However, our analyses record correlations only. This leaves two important questions open. First, the causal direction between the two correlated factors, and second the *reason* for the correlation. In the action theory perspective we have integrated in our analysis, this deficit can at least be partially compensated, since the perceptions and cognitive orientations of the public information actors are the focus of the empirical study.

The third point concerns the relationship between the systems theory perspective and the democracy theory perspective, or, in more exact terms: How are empirical findings obtained in a systems theoretical frame of reference with an action theoretical component to be evaluated under aspects of a normative democracy theory? The point of reference we can take is Habermas' (1981: 384, 446) distinction between strategic action and communicative action. Habermas defines strategic action as instrumental action to maximise one's own benefit, whilst communicative action, as the term indicates, is defined as communication-oriented action. The construction of public opinion by governmental system actors on public opinion and the interactions with public opinion can be described as strategic action. The mobilisation of public opinion for the purpose of retaining power of the government is the guiding purpose. This strategic orientation, which arises from the rationality of the system, is made possible or facilitated by technical developments only. These consist first in the expansion of mass media and second in the methodological progress in the realm of opinion polling. Both developments foster communication between government and citizen in each direction.

Now, one could argue that strategic action by governmental-system actors guided by calculations of power retention only does not hold up to the democratic norm that the governmental-system decision-making must be in the interests of the general public. However, this argument ignores the institutional aspect of competitive elections. This institutional mechanism forces governmental-system actors to take account of the public interest in pursuing their own interests. Thus, the institutional setting of liberal democracies brings the action rationalities of the governmental system and the public together to the effect that the instrumental action-rationality of the governmental system does not run counter to the central democratic norm. This is - in our eyes - the "trick" in the institutional arrangements of liberal democracies.

Another question is the development of public opinion. To what extent is it generated by strategic action or by communicative action on the part of actors within the public? What role does the strategic action of the governmental system actually play as an influencing factor external to the public? With regard to this latter consideration, Habermas speaks of covert strategic action, which implies the possibility of manipulation. These questions must be left open, as they address communications between actors and systems within the public, instead of communications between the polity and the public.

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