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052179045X - Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States

Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
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## Shaping Abortion Discourse

Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany  
and the United States

Using controversy over abortion as a lens through which to compare the political process and the role of the media in these two very different democracies, this book examines the contest over meaning that is being waged by social movements, political parties, churches, and other social actors. Abortion is a critical battleground for debates over social values in both countries, but the constitutional premises on which arguments rest differ, as do the strategies that movements and parties adopt and the opportunities for influence that are open to them. By examining how these debates are conducted, and by whom, in light of the normative claims made by democratic theorists, the book also offers a means of judging how well either country lives up to the ideals of democratic debate in practice.

Myra Marx Ferree is Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She is the co-author of *Controversy and Coalition: The New Women's Movement Across Three Decades of Change* (2000) and co-editor of *Re-visioning Gender* (1998).

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Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. *Communication, Society and Politics* probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.

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# Shaping Abortion Discourse

DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN  
GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES

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Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Tables and Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Foreword</i> by Friedhelm Neidhardt	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Glossary</i>	xix
<b>Part I: Introduction</b>	
1 Two Related Stories	3
2 Historical Context	24
3 Methods	45
<b>Part II: Major Outcomes</b>	
4 The Discursive Opportunity Structure	61
5 Standing	86
6 Framing	105
<b>Part III: Representing Different Constituencies</b>	
7 Representing Women’s Claims	131
8 Representing Religious Claims	154
9 Representing the Tradition of the Left	179
<b>Part IV: The Quality of Abortion Discourse</b>	
10 Normative Criteria for the Public Sphere	205
11 Measuring the Quality of Discourse	232

Cambridge University Press  
052179045X - Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany  
and the United States  
Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

12 Metatalk	255
13 Lessons for Democracy and the Public Sphere	286
<i>Methodological Appendix</i>	305
<i>References</i>	325
<i>Index</i>	339

Tables and Figures

TABLES

3.1 Total Number of Articles Published and Sampled by Years by Newspaper	<i>page 47</i>
3.2 Weighted Number of Articles, Speakers, Utterances, and Ideas by Newspaper	53
5.1 Overall Standing by Country	90
5.2 Social Movement Organizations in Germany and the United States: Comparing Resources and Media Sophistication	95
6.1 Summary of Abortion Frames	109
6.2 Overall Distribution of Frames by Country	111
7.1 Women's and Abortion-Rights Organizations by Country	148
8.1 Relative Standing of Religious Speakers by Country	167
8.2 Media Relations by Type of Anti-Abortion Group and Country	170
10.1 Normative Criteria in Democratic Theory	229
11.1 Proportionality of Bundestag Seats and Media Standing by Legislative Period	234
11.2 Center and Periphery in U.S. and German Articles	235
11.3 Dialogic Structure of Articles by Country	240
11.4 Rebuttal Rate and Incivility by Country and Dialogic Structure of Articles	242
11.5 Rebuttal Rate and Incivility by Co-Presence of Center and Periphery and Country	243

TABLES AND FIGURES

FIGURES

1.1	Theoretical Model of Forum	11
3.1	Number of Articles in Sampling Frame by Year by Country	49
3.2	Number of Utterances by Year by Country	51
5.1	Standing for Nonstate, Party Speakers over Time by Country	93
6.1	Anti-Abortion Frames by Country	117
6.2	Pro-Abortion-Rights Frames by Country	119
6.3	German Constitutional Cluster by Country	124
6.4	U.S. Constitutional Cluster by Country	124
7.1	Women's Standing by Country	134
7.2	Gender and Framing Direction by Country	135
7.3	Women's Rights Frames by Gender, Country, and Time Period	138
8.1	Policy Direction by Type of Civil Society Speaker	172
8.2	Fetal Life Frame by Type of Civil Society Speaker	175
9.1	Inclusion of Social Injustice Ideas by Country over Time	187
9.2a	Use of Social Needs and Autonomy Ideas in Germany	190
9.2b	Use of Social Needs and Autonomy Ideas in the United States	191
9.3a	Abortion Positions for Party Speakers in the United States	195
9.3b	Abortion Positions for Party Speakers in Germany	196
9.4	Social Problems/Autonomy Balance Among Pro Party Speakers	198
11.1	Inclusion of Social Movements as Framing Speakers in Civil Society	237
11.2	Use of Autonomy Language by Women Pro and Neutral Speakers	238
11.3a	Focusing of Framing over Time by Country (All frames)	249
11.3b	Focusing of Framing over Time by Country (Pro frames)	249
11.3c	Focusing of Framing over Time by Country (Anti frames)	250



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052179045X - Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States

Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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## Foreword

Friedhelm Neidhardt

*Shaping Abortion Discourse* supplies the reader with a highly condensed product of a long and complicated research process that generated a great mass of data. Literally thousands of newspaper articles and hundreds of documents about the abortion conflict in Germany and the United States were systematically analyzed, and thousands of speakers, utterances, and ideas were identified and interpreted. In addition, many interviews with actors and observers of the abortion issue were carried out. All of this covered an almost three-decade period of public abortion discourse in two countries, carried out by a U.S./German research team with the idea that in the end a monograph should be jointly written to present the core results of the comparative research.

The demand for consensus set by this ambitious goal required an unusual level of transatlantic cooperation. The “same codebook for content analysis, the same survey questionnaire, and to some extent the same interview schedule” had to be designed and agreed upon. Working with these instruments brought up many practical questions that had to be solved with balanced procedures on both sides. And because data produced by these procedures do not speak for themselves, a difficult and sometimes controversial discussion among the authors about the cross-cultural meaning of these data had to be carried out in order to develop a single line of describing and interpreting the research findings.

At the beginning, I myself was heavily involved in the research project. Then I was elected to an office that so much absorbed my capacity that I was not able to stay on as a member of the research team. But I remained in contact with my colleagues, heard this and that, and became more and more curious about the comparative outcome of the project. Would they be able to do it at all? And what could be learned

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Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

## FOREWORD BY FRIEDHELM NEIDHARDT

from the final product? Was it worthwhile investing so much man- and womanpower into the joint effort?

This first answer is clear: They did it; the book is finished. The second answer is clear for me: It is a good book with exceptional data quality and many interesting findings and ideas. I am surprised by how much we can learn about two countries when a single issue is analyzed. Of course, one must be careful not to overgeneralize the findings about the abortion conflict in Germany and the United States. The abortion case is an extraordinarily moralized issue in both countries, mobilizing questions, actors, and constellations not typical for social and political business as usual. But not being part of “business as usual” brings, in this case, the advantage of demonstrating underlying cultural dimensions of the social and political routines that are always relevant, even if they usually cannot be seen. One does not need to agree with all of the arguments and interpretations of the authors to find their book instructive far beyond the abortion issue.

The illuminating quality of the book is not only the effect of the issue and the empirical data gathered about it in Germany and the United States. The quality of the findings about this debate is also dependent on the quality of the questions asked and the analytical framework used by the researchers. Let me outline very selectively what seems to me theoretically remarkable and convincingly demonstrated by the analysis described in this book.

I was skeptical when Bill Gamson, at the beginning of the project, came up with the proposal to use the concept of *frames* in order to analyze the thematic content of the abortion discourse expressed in American and German newspapers. This concept seemed to me to be too loose and scarcely usable in a mass-data enterprise. In the meantime, I learned that it is possible to work practically with the concept. Furthermore, the book demonstrates that it makes sense to use it for description and explanation. Understood as a “thought organizer,” framing “deals with the *gestalt* or pattern-organizing aspect of meaning.” For understanding meaning processes the concept of frame has similar functions to the concept of social structure for understanding interaction processes. Although they do not logically fix concrete norms and positions, frames privilege certain meaning elements at the cost of others. If speakers in the abortion dispute, for example, choose the Fetal Life frame to argue their case, this does not force them to vote in favor of restrictive abortion regulations, but there is a rather strong

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Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

## FOREWORD BY FRIEDHELM NEIDHARDT

tendency for them to do so. It is easier for an actor to be in line with the built-in preference structure of the frame chosen.

Because of the more or less strongly articulated “loading” of a frame, disputes about certain decisions that have to be made can be understood as a competition between frames. Of course, frames do not compete by themselves. They have to be constructed and communicated by certain speakers. To understand the dynamics of a discourse, it is therefore necessary to ask about the actors who are meeting within the arena of public discourse, an arena that is most effectively organized and structured by mass media in modern societies. It is a highlight of *Shaping Abortion Discourse* that this book systematically deals with the ensemble of the speakers that shaped public controversy in both countries during the last decades, investigating the relative *standing* of different categories of speakers, finding very strong differences in this respect between the composition of the American and German public arenas, and asking for explanations for these differences.

In Germany, state actors and the political parties are by far the most influential actors within the abortion debate, while in the United States actors of the political periphery, above all movement organizations, have a very strong voice in “the master forum” of the mass media, much more so than in Germany. It is right to conclude, as the authors do, that the participatory elements of public life that provide for some sorts of “popular inclusion” are significantly more developed in the United States. And this circumstance influences the status of the mass media as well as the quality of the discourse and its outcome. The authors discuss this in the context of different *democratic theories of the public sphere*, focusing on divergent criteria for normative evaluation. Concerning the quality of the discourse and its outcomes, they operationalize and use criteria dealing with the dialogical structure of the ongoing communications of speakers, with the degree of civility with which they treat each other, with the range of communicative styles that they use, and with the conditions that lead to “closure” in the discourse and the degree of consensus finally reached by the actors involved. Once again, one need not completely agree with all of the methodological procedures and analytical judgments of the authors to find this analysis, too, fruitful and instructive.

I find very convincing the authors’ explanation of the, in part, considerable differences between American and German characteristics of their public sectors. In this respect, the heuristic function of the concept

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Frontmatter[More information](#)

## FOREWORD BY FRIEDHELM NEIDHARDT

of *discursive opportunity structure* proves extremely valuable. In *Shaping Abortion Discourse*, the socio-cultural, political, and mass media components of “discursive opportunity structure” seem to me intelligently developed in order to identify certain background factors for framing and standing characteristics. The career of these frames as well as the standing of the speakers competing for voice in the public sphere are, of course, dependent on the strategies and the talent of the speakers themselves.

But they operate under circumstances that selectively privilege or restrict certain classes of actors as well as certain frames. It becomes obvious that those circumstances are deeply rooted in long-standing cultural traditions and institutionalized patterns. With the authors, I am struck by the power of history that can be found in a wide range of national peculiarities. Asking what the background factors are that help to explain the dominant status of political and legal state actors among the speakers and the dominant status of the Fetal Life frame within the public debates in Germany brings up impressive examples for the concept of “path-dependency.” It is necessary to understand this country’s *Rechtsstaat* and welfare state tradition and to take into account the German traumata caused by the Nazi period to understand certain features of standing and framing relationships that differ from American ones, for better or worse. It is a sign of the quality of *Shaping Abortion Discourse* that those dimensions are addressed systematically.

Having read the manuscript of *Shaping Abortion Discourse*, I regret not having been with Myra Marx Ferree, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht when they wrote the book, although I know that it was not easy for them to bring this ambitious project to its end. I would have been proud to be a co-author with them.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

This book represents a collaboration in the fullest sense of that word. All four of us were heavily involved in every stage of the work – in the theoretical development and research design, in the development of research instruments, in the lengthy data collection process, and in the analysis and interpretation of results.

Close collaborations among any set of four people are complicated and difficult, but this one was especially challenging. We had to face complicated and subtle differences across lines of national cultures, gender, and epistemological approach. At numerous times, we all harbored doubts about our ability to produce a collective product. But we persevered and, in the end, we believe that we have produced a book that reflects us all and is richer than anything we could have produced individually.<sup>1</sup>

In a book that focuses on the shaping of discourse, we have had to be especially self-conscious about our choice of language. What does one call the antagonists on the issue of abortion? How does one refer to the organism growing in the womb of a pregnant woman? There are no frame-free answers to these questions. Our solution has been to use the language of the two U.S. newspapers that we analyzed, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

This means that we use “pro-abortion–rights” to refer to those who would lessen or remove legal or practical restrictions on abortion. We use “anti-abortion” to refer to those who would increase legal or practical restrictions (or defend those that exist from liberalization).

<sup>1</sup> For earlier publications stemming from this project, see Ferree and Gamson (1999, 2002); Franz (1999); Gamson (1999, 2001); Gerhards (1996, 1997, 1999); Gerhards, Neidhardt, and Rucht (1998); Gerhards and Rucht (2000); and Neidhardt (1996).

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Frontmatter[More information](#)

## PREFACE

Often we will use the shorthand terms of “Pros” and “Antis” for the two sides.

Following journalistic practice, we call the organism in the womb of a pregnant woman a “fetus.” We recognize that these labels, and others such as “partial birth abortion,” are not neutral and frame-free, but (unlike labels such as “pro-choice” or “anti §218”) they are comprehensible in both countries and reflect our own efforts (like those of U.S. journalists) to seek neutral language in a discourse where it typically does not exist.

We have tried to make what we have to say as accessible as possible, and this means, among other things, avoiding the use of unfamiliar acronyms. However, political parties in Germany and various organizations in the United States are often better known by their acronyms than their full names, and the reader will still encounter a fair number. To make things easier, we have included a glossary of frequently used acronyms for easy reference.

In a project that has taken us most of the past decade to complete, we have accumulated a long list of institutions and people to whom we are indebted. On the German side, we wish to thank the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, which has generously financed a great deal of data collection. We are also grateful to our former colleague, Monika Lindgens, who collaborated with us in an early period of the research; Barbara S. Franz, who supervised the coders; Bettina Becker, Uwe Breitenborn, Sabine Hödt, and Inken Schröder, who did the hard work of coding more than 1400 articles; Verena Rösner, who organized the standardized survey of the collective actors in Germany; Anne Hampele, who conducted interviews with a subsample of these actors; and Andreas Dams, who was responsible for large parts of the data management.

On the U.S. side, we thank the National Science Foundation (grant SBR-9301617) for its financial support for three years of data collection. We particularly want to extend our thanks to Lynn Resnick DuFour, Julia McQuillan, Silke Roth, and Joan Twiggs, who at various times handled overall project scheduling and management; codebook development; coder training and supervision; reliability testing; in-person interviewing; survey formatting and mailing; and data cleaning, entry, and management – a wide variety of complex and challenging work. At Boston College, Michelle Carpentieri, Karen Ferroggiaro, Janine Berkowitz Minkler, and Christine Schneider contributed in numerous ways in the data collection process. Other graduate students have also contributed significantly to particular parts of the project at different

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Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jurgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht  
Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

times: Mark Swienicki as a coder, Danielle Currier and Mary Murphy as interviewers, and Cory Lebson as a data manager. David Merrill has been invaluable in the final stages of this project, cleaning up past errors, preparing tables and charts for publication, documenting the various decisions and stages of work, and creating the Web site for future references.

As graduate students, they took on the demanding day-to-day responsibility for organizing reams of data and supervising dozens of undergraduate coders, as well as pitching in to code, clean, check, and enter data when needed. Without their skills and efforts, we might well have been swept away by the tide of data that we were generating. We reached many practical decisions collaboratively in team meetings, and their insights as well as hard work contributed much to bringing this massive endeavor to a successful conclusion.

Moreover, we are indebted to the German American Academic Council, which has supported our collaborative effort by financing, among other things, travel expenses for joint meetings in both the United States and Germany and technical assistance to put this book together.

Finally, we are grateful to a number of readers who have commented on the manuscript in various stages: Lee Ann Banaszak, Sabine Berghahn, Christine Bose, Lisa D. Brush, Gene Burns, Carol Hagemann-White, Paul Lichterman, Jenny Mansbridge, Patricia Yancey Martin, David Meyer, Sandra R. Levitsky, Friedhelm Neidhardt, Silke Roth, Frances Rothstein, and Carol Turbin.

# Glossary

We have tried to minimize our use of acronyms, but many political parties and organizations are better known by their acronyms than by their full names. For reference, we provide this glossary of frequently used acronyms.

- §218** = The section or paragraph of the German criminal code, going back to the formation of the German state in 1871, that makes abortion illegal
- ACLU** = American Civil Liberties Union
- ALI** = The American Law Institute, an organization that developed and disseminated a model abortion law as part of the abortion reform movement of the 1960s
- AWO** = *Arbeiterwohlfahrt*, a welfare organization associated with the German Social Democratic Party
- CDU** = The Christian Democratic Union, a political party that, in alliance with the independent CSU in Bavaria, forms the Christian Union in Germany
- CFFC** = Catholics for a Free Choice, a U.S. organization
- CSU** = Christian Social Union, the Bavarian Christian Democratic Party, which with the CDU forms the Christian Union in Germany
- FAZ** = The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of the two German newspapers analyzed
- FDP** = The Free Democratic Party, a German classical liberal party
- FRG** = Federal Republic of Germany, “West Germany” before unification
- GDR** = German Democratic Republic, the former “East Germany”



GLOSSARY

- KPD** = The Communist Party of Germany that was declared to be “unconstitutional” in 1956 (we only refer to it in the Weimar period)
- LAT** = *The Los Angeles Times*, one of the two U.S. newspapers analyzed
- NARAL** = The National Abortion Rights Action League, later the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League
- NCCB** = National Conference of Catholic Bishops (U.S.)
- NOW** = National Organization for Women (U.S.)
- NRLC** = The National Right to Life Committee (U.S.)
- NYT** = *The New York Times*, one of the two U.S. newspapers analyzed
- PDS** = Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor to the Socialist Unity (Communist) Party in Germany following unification
- RCAR** = Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights; later RCRC for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (U.S.)
- R2N2** = Reproductive Rights National Network (U.S.)
- SZ** = *The Süddeutsche Zeitung*, one of the two German newspapers analyzed
- SPD** = The Social Democratic Party in Germany
- taz** = *die tageszeitung*, *The Daily Newspaper*, a left-alternative newspaper based in Berlin, created in 1978