

Ja, ich will, aber Merkel will nicht:

Framing the Extension of Marriage Rights to Gender and Sexual Minorities in Germany

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This research was for my Bachelor's Thesis in International Studies.

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Introduction

Debates on the legal recognition of the relationships of gender and sexual minorities, or GSM,¹ have been going on for quite sometime in Germany. When the Bundestag passed the Life Partnership Act of 2001 (*Gesetz über die Eigetragene Lebenspartnerschaft*), Germany allowed granted limited rights to GSM through civil unions. At the time, Germany was a forerunner in providing legal recognition to GSM relationships. However, political progress has stalled in recent years. The lack of political activity does not come from poor public opinion on the issue. In fact, according to a poll conducted by Forsa, 74% of Germans are in favor of extending equal marriage rights to GSM relationships as of February 2013. There seems to be a current disconnect between public opinion and political action.

While the Bundestag and Federal Constitutional court have expanded the scope of rights to civil unions, the government has yet to fully extend marriage rights to GSM. At the time of the Life Partnership Act, the Bundestag was lead by a coalition of Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, two left-leaning parties. Since 2005, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) have been the majority faction in the Bundestag. As sister conservative parties, the CDU/CSU, otherwise known as the Union, have been the biggest opposition to more inclusive marriage rights. Current German Chancellor and chairwoman of the CDU Angela Merkel refused to change the party's platform for the 2013 election for more extending rights to GSM relationships even after Forsa's study.

Research Question

Debates on marriage have included discussions on a wide array of different topics – morality, the family, gender roles, tolerance, equality, citizenship, the list continues. Germany

¹ To be more inclusive, I will not use the terms LGBT, same-sex marriage, and gay marriage.

provides an interesting case for the marriage debate because the federal government legalized civil unions, the issue has high public support, and the debate still continues today. When arguing on an issue, politicians must frame their support or opposition with their party ideology and constituents' beliefs. In my thesis, I will examine the relationship between political discourse and public opinion by answering the following question: To what extent have arguments framed by German politicians prevented the expansion of full marriage rights to gender and sexual minorities?

Literature Review

Overall, my thesis will contribute to the field of framing theory. Specifically, I plan on looking at existing literature on frame bridging, framing in competitive contexts, and framing the debate on more inclusive marriage rights. Most of the articles I have read use the United States as a case study. I would be able to advance framing theory research by applying various theories to Germany, a country with a completely different political system. Additionally, my thesis will also contribute to research on the acquisition of rights by GSM and the relationship between marriage and citizenship (Triger, 2012; Johnson, 2013).

I would first like to apply David Snow and Robert Benford's theory on frame alignment, highlighted in their 1986 article "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," to provide a time parameter and historical context for my thesis. Snow and Benford explain the four forms of frame alignment: 1) frame bridging, 2) frame amplification, 3) frame extension, and 4) frame transformation. Of these, frame building best applies to the German case.

Kollman (2007) attributes the rise of campaigning for more inclusive marriage rights to increased transnational communication between various GSM activists. The leading activist

organization in Germany is the Lesben- und Schwulenverband (LSVD). Since its founding in 1990, the LSVD has been closely affiliated with the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Organization, or ILGA (Bruns, 1990). Although the LSVD started campaign for inclusive marriage rights in 1992, a German political party did not integrate the opening of marriage to its platform until 2005 (Bruns, 1992; Bruns, *Öffnung*). This year can be seen as the first success in frame bridging, or “the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames” (Snow & Benford, 1986, p. 467) Therefore I would be able to establish 2005 to be the starting point of my research on the framed arguments of politicians.

My work would rely on several articles by James Druckman. His article with Dennis Chong “Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies” points out that framing research tends to neglect that frames occur in competitive contexts, meaning multiple frames are interacting at the same time. They identified three possible situations for differences in frequency: one-sided exposure where people hear only one side’s frame, dual exposure where people hear both sides equally, and unequal two-sided exposure where people hear both sides in different quantities. They also noted that some frames have more strength to persuade individual opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007). It provides me with two measurements to consider for my thesis – the frequency and strength of certain frames in the debate on inclusive marriage rights in Germany.

With Erik Peterson and Rune Slthuus, James Druckman published “How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation” in February 2013. Their research focuses specifically on the two-party system in United States. It would be really interesting to test polarization in Germany, which has six political parties of varying influence. Because my thesis

is looking at the effect political elites have had on the debate on the extension of marriage, I can see this article been especially influential.

Katharine McFarland (2011)'s article provides me with an exemplar methodology for looking at the framing of arguments in the marriage debate. Her article focuses on arguments in the United States leading up the seven state amendments against expanding marriage rights in 2006. She examined 600 articles from the top two most circulated newspapers in these seven states and identified a total of 17 – 7 supporting, 9 opposing, and 1 neutral (McFarland, 2011, p. 263). Her research contributes a set list of frames for which to look and a way of measuring their frequency in my German case.

Data and Methods

I would use qualitative methods to do the following: 1) codify the arguments used by German elites on marriage equality, 2) provide a percentage representing the frequency a frame was used, and 3) track the changes from 2005 to 2013. I would like to integrate some quantitative methodology to test the relationship of these frames with some other aspect – polarization or broader human values for example.

In order to find arguments and frames used by elites in Germany, I will need to look at either newspapers articles or documents from the Bundestag. Since issues of marriage have fallen under federal jurisdiction, I would need to look at the top two most circulated news resources in the entire country. The leading publications are the weekly magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Stern* (Pfanner, 2013). If I needed to use a daily newspaper, the top three are *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Die Welt*. With the exception of *Frankfurter Allegmeine Zeitung*, I can access online archives for free.

Optionally, I could use documents from the Bundestag, such as draft proposals, protocols, etc., to see how specific politicians and parties framed their arguments. Party platforms for election years could also be used as supplemental material. Using these documents would help me focus solely on the political elites without including journalistic elites. I would also have a smaller number of documents to read and codify.

I am still not sure how to incorporate a way to test the strength of a frame. I could potentially look at data from the European Social Survey. Conducted every 2 years, this survey collects data on a variety of issues in European Union member states. Germany has participated all 5 rounds. Out of all of the data sets, the two most relevant categories for my thesis are politics and human values. A question in the politics section asks to what extent respondents agree or disagree with the statement, “gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish” (European Social Survey). The human values questions ask about equality, mutual respect, adherence to customs and traditions, etc. Using this survey could help add a quantitative component to my thesis.

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