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Domestic Conflicts and Political Success in the United  
States and Weimar Germany: A Comparison of Two Studies

Dee R. Wernette  
Kean College  
Kean College of New Jersey

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330 Packard Street #214  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and contrasts the methods and most significant findings of two quantitative studies of domestic political conflict. Gamson uses information from professional histories in explaining the success or failure of 53 American protest organizations in the period 1800-1945. Wernette's analysis of violent and non-violent political events uses reports from a national daily German newspaper. These events occurred in the two national election campaigns in which the Nazis gained their greatest victories. The data and methods used in the two studies are complementary, and the findings are theoretically consistent. Both studies find, for example, positive pay-offs for political violence. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications of the findings for the study of international conflicts.

Dee R. Wernette  
Dept. of Sociology  
Kean College of N. J.  
Union, N. J. 07083

## Domestic Conflicts and Political Success in the United States and Weimar Germany: A Comparison of Two Studies

The American social and political unrest of the last 15 years has resulted in a large number of studies on domestic conflicts. Many studies focused on these American conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Others, in contrast, tried to provide a greater perspective by studying like phenomena spatially and/or temporally removed from the immediate American past. One such study is Gamson's analysis of 53 challenge groups in American history.<sup>2</sup> Another is my own study of political activities in the two national election campaigns which produced the greatest gains for Hitler's Nazi party.<sup>3</sup> This paper summarizes and discusses the methods and principle findings of these two studies. It concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications of these studies for the study of international conflicts.

### Methods and Sources of Data

The unit of Gamson's study, the challenge group, is distinguished by five characteristics. First, a challenge group is a more or less formal organization with a clear, unambiguous identity, established generally through a name. Second, a challenge group is capable of taking action, such as demonstrations, petitions, holding meetings, etc. Challenge groups try to mobilize an unmobilized constituency; they try to create in their constituencies the commitment to act collectively. Since Gamson is not concerned with purely local conflicts, a challenge group's constituency must extend across state lines. Finally, a challenge group attempts to change a situation to which it objects. To do this, it must influence some other set of individuals, groups, or social institutions, (which

Gamson terms the target of influence) to change its decisions or policies. In addition, the target of influence may not be part of the challenge group's constituency. In restricting the study to groups trying to mobilize an unmobilized constituency, Gamson excludes clearly established organizations, such as General Motors. Purely religious and/or utopian groups are likewise excluded by the stipulation that the target of influence may not be part of the constituency.<sup>4</sup>

Having defined the universe of groups under study, the next concern is to obtain an unbiased sample of challenge groups for study. Through perusing the indexes of American history books, Gamson compiled a list of the names of organizations and collective behavior incidents which appeared likely to be challenge groups. From this gross list Gamson drew a random sample of 467 entries. Most entries failed to meet one or more of the criteria defining challenge groups, and so were excluded. Of the remaining 64 entries, reasonably complete information was available for 53 groups. These 53 groups, a random sample of all such groups in this period of American history, comprise the data base for Gamson's study.

At least several different professional histories, supplemented with primary sources when necessary, were used in gathering the information on each group. Biases in sources were duly noted, and conflicting reports were included in the group's "protocol". An identical series of questions was used in compiling each group's protocol. This questionnaire covered three main areas: the challenge group's relations and interactions with various institutional spheres, such as the law enforcement system, the mass media, political parties, etc.; attributes of the challenge group and its constituency, such

as the group's leadership structure, ideology, tactics, etc.; and the outcome of the challenge, or the degree of the group's success in attaining its goals and receiving acceptance from its antagonists. Finally, the information in these protocols was coded into machine-readable form. Since most of these codes measure categorical variables, Gamson generally employs Chi-square in his analysis of the relationships between the characteristics of the challenge groups.

Gamson's strategy is to focus on a certain kind of organization engaged in domestic conflicts. Having operationally defined and limited the kind of organization under study, one establishes a sampling frame, draws a random sample, gathers and codes the same kind of information for each organization, and proceeds with the analysis. The research strategy employed in my study was much closer to that of a case study. Whereas Gamson's study covered the period 1800-1945, I studied the two two-month periods immediately preceding the September, 1930 and July, 1932 German national elections. These two campaigns were of interest not because they were typical, but rather because they were atypical, of election campaigns. For by studying these campaigns I hoped to gain insight into both the relationships between violent and non-violent political processes, and the process of the growth of a fascist party.

Having identified the time period of interest, I located a relatively reliable, unbiased data source: the newspaper Koelnische Zeitung<sup>5</sup>. I coded all articles appearing in this newspaper during these campaigns which reported political events. Political events consist of one or more temporally continuous actions occurring in the same or proximate locations in which (A) at least one of the parties involved, (besides the police), has a clear political iden-

tity, or (B) the nature of at least one of the actions, such as handing out election literature, is clearly of a political nature. Routine political actions, such as issuing press releases, in which no large group of people participated, were not included in the study. Rather, for an event to be coded it had to include at least one of the following kinds of actions: non-violent, public, mass, political actions such as election rallies, handing out political literature in public places, demonstrations, etc.; terrorist acts such as ambushes, bombings, or attacks on property; collective violence; and actions by the police or state directed against either political parties or political activities. The data consists, then, of all political events in which either (A) masses of individuals are present; (B) non-routine, and thus generally violent, actions occur; or (C) the police or state act against either or both political parties or political activities.

Each coded event consists of one or more actions. For each action we know the type of action, whether or not one of the parties initiated the action, and the identities of the parties involved. For each event we also know the date and place, by city or township, of occurrence. Unfortunately, the newspaper provided no reliable estimates of numbers participating, killed, or wounded in the events. This information is consequently not part of the coded records. 316 events occurred in the 1930 campaign. The 1932 campaign included 569 events. Part of the analysis consists of examining the distribution of various kinds of activities in these events in the two campaigns. In addition, the events have been aggregated by date, and by city/township of occurrence. Aggregation by date enables the study of the histories of the two campaigns. Since we have voting returns by city/township, aggre-

gation by city/township of the events makes possible an analysis of the correlations between these two kinds of data.

### The Significant Findings of these Studies

Gamson studies the careers and outcomes of challenge groups to gain insight into the openness, or permeability, and responsiveness of the American political system. The permeability of the system is measured in terms of challenge groups gaining at least minimal acceptance as legitimate organizations from their antagonists. Responsiveness is measured in terms of groups gaining new advantages, i.e. attaining at least partial satisfaction on some of their goals. The outcome of the challenge group's career is measured on these two dimensions. 38% of all groups gain both new advantages and minimal acceptance; 42% gain neither; and 20% gain one or the other but not both. The American political system is clearly neither completely responsive nor completely unresponsive, neither completely open nor completely closed.

A number of factors explain why some challenge groups gain acceptance and new advantages, while others don't. Some groups, such as third parties trying to unseat political incumbents and revolutionary groups, attempt to destroy or displace their antagonists. They are overwhelmingly unsuccessful, which suggests two things. First, the entrance to the American political system is clearly not via third parties.<sup>6</sup> Second, when the underdog in a conflict states, "it's you or me", and demands "all or nothing", it generally dies broke. This does not mean, however, that the less one demands the more likely one is to get it -- Gamson finds no significant difference between the success rates of groups with "limited" goals and of groups with "more than limited but non-displacing" goals.<sup>7</sup> One additional

characteristic of a group's goals affects its chances of success: groups concentrating their energies on a single issue are more successful than groups with multiple-issue goals.

Gamson views the task confronting a challenge group as two-fold: create support and gather resources from the constituency, and apply the resources in attempting to influence the antagonist. Support from the constituency is not automatically forthcoming, even with appeals to group solidarity or individuals' self-interest. Some challenge groups use "selective incentives", such as subscriptions to the group's magazine, or membership in life insurance plans, to gain members. Such groups are considerably more likely to grow large and be successful than are groups relying solely on traditional appeals for support. Given support from the constituency, some groups are more efficient than others in using these resources. Groups with centralized power and bureaucratic organizations are most likely to gain acceptance and new advantages for this reason. Centralization of power also enables groups to be more successful in avoiding factionalism, which lessens the group's chances of success by dispersing its resources and energies.

Gamson finds that some tactics used by challenge groups are clearly more successful than others. The use of either violence, or constraints such as strikes or boycotts, increases a group's chance of success. Likewise the recipients of violence have a below-average success rate. Yet it is very difficult to establish that the use of violence has a clear effect on the success-rate, independent of other factors. For most violence-users are large groups, and few of them use violence as their chief tactic. Likewise most violence-recipients are small, weak groups which might well have collapsed anyway. In



any case, one thing is clear: the meek may inherit the earth, but the American political system is a different story.

One final factor has a significant effect on a challenge group's chances of success: the kind of period in which it makes its challenge. There is no significant long term trend in success rates from 1800 to 1945. Groups which are already established and organized often benefit from a major crisis such as a war. War-time challenges are especially likely to win acceptance. Gamson explains this in terms of pressures from third parties to the conflict.

"Although antagonists have not accepted the challenging group, its ability to survive has convinced many bystanders that the group is a permanent fixture. In noncrisis times, these third parties do not become involved in what they see as someone else's quarrel, but in times of crisis it is everyone's quarrel and they are less tolerant. While they do not necessarily support the particular demands of the challenging group, they are likely to be a strong force for institutionalizing the conflict. This means that they pressure antagonists to bargain and negotiate, and, hence, to extend implicit or explicit recognition to the challenging group. In many cases, but not always, the resultant negotiating relationship eventually produces new advantages." 8

To summarize Gamson's main findings, the challenge groups "most likely to succeed" in domestic conflicts use selective incentives in successfully mobilizing their constituencies, have bureaucratic organizations with centralized power, use violence and/or other constraining tactics, and don't try to displace their antagonists. How does the case of the Nazis as a challenge group support or contradict these generalizations? The Nazis used some selective incentives and had a highly centralized, bureaucratized organization. As we shall see, they also used violence. In these characteristics the Nazis were not unlike successful American challenge groups. The Nazis differed from most successful American challengers in one important respect: they openly tried to displace their antagonists. It is this difference which makes the comparison between the Nazis and American challenge

groups interesting. For such a comparison shows the differences, as well as similarities, between a relatively stable democratic system, and a political system moving from democracy to fascist dictatorship. We return to this comparison after summarizing the findings for the two German campaigns.

The two campaigns are similar in many respects. Less than a third of the events in either campaign consist of only non-violent electoral activities. Thus both campaigns have high levels of violence. The activities of the two extremist parties -- the Nazis and the Communists, or KPD -- dominate both campaigns. The Nazis are clearly the most active party in both campaigns. Their basic strategy in both campaigns is the same: they mix high levels of non-violent electoral activities with frequent participation in violence. In the 1930 campaign, for example, the Nazis engage in electoral activities in 21% of all events in which they participate. The corresponding percent for the KPD is 4%. As this indicates, Communist participation is predominantly violent. They initiate collective violence with greater relative frequency than do the Nazis, and their attacks are concentrated on the Nazis. The result is that although the Nazis participate as frequently in violence as do the Communists, the KPD appears in both campaigns as the more violent, aggressive party.

The comparison of these two campaigns shows not only similarities, but also interesting changes over time. The frequency of events almost doubles, from 316 in the 1930 campaign to 569 in the 1932 campaign. Events in 1932 become more violent as well. Acts of terror occur in only 8% of all events in 1930. They occur in 25% of the events in 1932. The relative frequency of collective violence likewise more than doubles, from 27% in 1930 to 57% in 1932. Events

in 1932 are also more concentrated in areas of strong leftist support. The Nazi strategy, more pronounced in this campaign than in the first, is to conduct non-violent provocations, such as rallies or marches, in areas of traditionally strong leftist support. The Nazis are generally able to respond to the ensuing violent attacks without appearing as the aggressors. An example of this is the fairly typical event from the strongly leftist, industrial city of Solingen in western Germany. The event occurs during the night of July 29-30 -- two days before the July 31 national elections. A group of Nazis are riding through the Margaret street in the back of an open truck. Their purpose is to paste up Nazi campaign posters in public places. A volley of between thirty and forty shots are aimed at them, as well as a number of stones and bottles. None of the Nazis are hit, however. The reinforced riot police are unable to find the snipers.<sup>9</sup>

The combination of electoral activities with political violence in the Solingen event is not atypical; roughly 50% of all cases of collective violence in 1930 occur in the context of electoral activities. The corresponding percentage for the 1932 campaign is considerably lower, which is primarily due to the lower over-all frequency of electoral activities in the second campaign. These findings suggest that political violence is closely related to the process of political mobilization in these campaigns. At issue in many of these conflict events is the traditionally dominant party's near monopoly on the right to use public places in its area, of support for political mobilization. By challenging this definition of public places in leftist areas, the Nazis attempt to both mobilize support for themselves, and demobilize their enemies at the same time. In some

ways this was a foolproof strategy. If their provocation was met with a violent leftist attack, they could appear as the militant foes of the Communist menace without appearing as the actual aggressors. Should no such response materialize, the leftist would lose face and the Nazis would have a new, previously unavailable resource: the right to use public places in leftist areas for political mobilization.

The above argument suggests that political violence arises from the process of political mobilization. Additional support for this comes from the findings correlating various kinds of activities with changes in the Nazi and KPD votes in these two elections. Both the Nazis and the Communists gain large numbers of votes in these elections, although the Nazi gains are the greatest. The gains for both parties, in both campaigns, are above average in areas experiencing high levels of political activities. The zero-order correlations between increased votes and political activities are higher for the KPD votes than for the Nazi votes. The correlations for both parties are generally significant at or beyond the .05 level. This does not necessarily mean that participation in political violence caused the Nazi or KPD gains. Whether these are spurious correlations will be determined only after the completion of multiple linear regression analysis. One thing is clear, however: the process of political conflict and violence is at least geographically related to the process of extremist political party mobilization.

One might argue that comparisons between political movements and conflicts in Weimar Germany and the U.S. are invalid. Germany in this period had a parliamentary system based on proportional representation, in which over a dozen political parties competed.

The chances for growth and success for a small, extremist party are clearly better in such institutional circumstances than in the more stable American two-party system. I have no doubt that differences in the institutional settings are significant in explaining why a fascist movement succeeded in Germany and not in the U.S. Such differences, however, do not invalidate the comparisons, but rather only limit the generalizations which can be made from such comparisons.

The same depression which gave the Nazis an upsurge in voter support produced a significant number of American challenge groups with the similar goal of displacing the antagonist. One such group, included in Gamson's sample, was the American equivalent of the Nazis: the German-American Bund. Nor was this the only group with similarities to the Nazis; Gamson's sample also included Father Coughlin's Christian Front against Communism. How does one explain the Nazi success, in contrast to the failure of similar groups in America. Let us first reject one explanation implicit in many histories: this is not primarily due to Hitler's charismatic personality or superior rhetorical skills -- Father Coughlin, after all, was no mean demagogue. The analyses reviewed above suggest, rather, the importance of the political process and of the characteristics of the political organizations in explaining success or failure.

The analysis of the two election campaigns points to the importance of political actions and interactions in explaining the increases in Nazi support. In particular, this analysis points to the importance of the existence of a radically militant Nazi counterpart, able to play a credible role in the polarization process, and of the Nazi strategy of militantly-provocative political mobilization.

From the German and Italian cases, one might assume that a strong, militant, and politically-organized working class is a prerequisite to the rise of a fascist movement. Given this assumption, previous repression of the left and inclusion of working-class organizations in the New Deal coalition may have prevented the rise of a massive fascist movement. This may have operated by preventing the kind of large, militant, left-wing organization which could have acted as a polarization partner to an American version of Hitler's Nazi party. In any case, the lack of such a political organization deprived American fascist movements of the benefits to be accrued from the kind of provocative political mobilization used by the Nazis in Germany.

The above explanation rests on the assumption that the process producing a fascist victory is in some way significantly different from "normal" democratic processes. This may be the case, but Gamson's findings point to other factors in explaining why the Nazis succeeded while their American counterparts failed. As noted above, the Nazis' characteristics fit those of an "ideal-typical" successful American challenge group in all but one respect: the Nazis wanted to displace their antagonists. In contrast, Coughlin's CFAC neither used selective incentives nor had a bureaucratized organization. Given such handicaps, it is no wonder that Coughlin failed while Hitler succeeded. This type of explanation suggests that no basic difference exists between politics producing a fascist dictatorship, and more routine political processes. The answer, rather, lies in the capabilities of the challenger to mobilize its constituency and effectively apply resources to the target(s) of influence. Needless to say, these types of analysis complement, rather than compete with, each

other. The relationship between changing organizational capabilities and political interactions is also worthy of future study. In any case, our present findings bring us this far and no farther.

#### Implications for the Study of International Conflicts

I see four main implications for the study of international conflicts from these two studies. The first concerns the rationality of the behavior of parties to conflicts. Both studies implicitly assume that the explanatory power of irrationality in political outcomes is negligible. Rather, to understand the actions of a party to a conflict, one should look at the party's position in the political system, its goals, its resources, and the options open to it. To the extent to which something analogous to a "polity" exists in the international arena, one might view various "national liberation fronts" as analogous to challenge groups. An interesting hypothesis from this line of thought would be that the use of terror by such groups as the P.L.O. is due in large part to their position vis-a-vis this international polity. Such a study would show, among other things, how a party's position outside the international polity affects its options, resources, and the influences on its goals.

A second implication of these studies is that the primary base of political power is in the support and resources given by a constituency. Neither study assumes that power is an intrinsically scarce resource in a world of power-hungry groups. Likewise, the spread of support for political goals is not seen as solely a function of the public relations skills of the individuals advocating them. Rather, issues and goals are at least somewhat related to the constituency's social, political, and economic positions and historical experiences. A third implication follows from this: to understand the

flows of support and resources in an international conflict, relate the actions of the parties to their constituencies' understandings of these issues. For to the extent that international actors are like challenge groups, actions are chosen not only with an eye to the antagonist's response, but also with the future support of the constituency in mind.

The last implication of these studies is something of a caveat: the findings suggest that a number of different factors affect the outcomes of domestic conflicts. The party's abilities to mobilize and effectively use support from its constituency, and the nature of the party's goals, tactics, and interactions with its antagonists -- all appear to have some relation to the final outcome of the domestic conflict. To the extent that these domestic conflicts are similar to international conflicts, the student of the latter ignores any of these factors at his or her own risk.



FOOTNOTES

1. For a list of much of this literature, see the "References" cited by Anthony Oberschall, Social Conflict and Social Movements, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973, pp. 346-364
2. Wm. A. Gamson, The Strategy of Social Protest, Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1975
3. Dee Richard Wernette, "Political Violence and German Elections: 1930 and July, 1932", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Michigan, 1974
4. Gamson uses four additional criteria in restricting the universe of groups under study. Only groups whose members are either American citizens or are striving to become such are studied. Groups attempting to mobilize only other groups are excluded from the study, as are splinters of groups which lack an independent operating structure, and satellites of other groups. For further details and discussion, see Wm. Gamson, op. cit., pp. 17-18.
5. For further details on the gathering and manipulation of this data, see Dee Wernette, op. cit., Ch. 3 and Appendix 1.
6. This is not to suggest, however, that successful challenge groups avoid the electoral system like the plague. To the contrary, Gamson notes (p. 191) that 52% of the electoral challengers gained new advantages, and 38% of such groups gained acceptance. Since all of the third-party challenges failed, these successful groups used the electoral system in other ways.
7. Groups with "limited" goals attempt to change only the content of some specific policy of the antagonist(s). Groups with "more than limited but non-displacing" goals attempt to alter at least one, if not more, of the following: the antagonist's scope of authority; the antagonist's personnel; or the antagonist's procedure(s). This discussion summarizes some of the findings from Gamson's Ch. 4. Gamson's discussions of the effects of selective incentives, violence and other constraints, and of bureaucracy and centralization of power are found in Chapters 5-7.
8. Wm. A Gamson, op. cit., p. 118.
9. Koelnische Zeitung, Cologne, Germany, July 30, 1932, Edition No. 412. The translation is my own.
10. Gamson does not address this question. Rather, I am using his findings to suggest an additional explanation. This explanation is solely my responsibility.