

**Strategic Political Communication**  
**The Functional Theory and Collective Identity**

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in International  
Relations

Supervisor: Dr. John-Harmen Valk

Word Count: ~15,989

August 31, 2020

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## Abstract

This work discusses political strategic communication through an assessment of German television debates between chancellor candidates. The analysis of the German debates, which is based on the Functional Theory and supported through the concept of collective identity, reveals that politicians construct collective identities during the political debates, in an aim to appeal to their audience and gain their votes. The Functional Theory of political campaign discourse is a widely used theory within the field of political campaign research. Most work has been conducted on television debates in the United States, yet it strives to be perceived not only as a national but as an internationally applicable theory. The paper forms a comprehensive picture of strategy within the competitive political discourse, through the application of the Functional Theory to the German political context,

## I. Introduction

General elections are major social events in most democracies. Public debates between political opponents have become a staple in the weeks and months leading up to the election day. Debates are the meeting of the most promising candidates for the office of heads of government in front of running cameras (Maier and Faas 2019, 2). The U.S. debate between Senator John F. Kennedy and President Nixon in 1960 is considered the first version of a modern presidential debate (Benoit 2014a, 28; Isotalus 2011, 31; Maier and Faas 2003, 77). Decades have passed since then and the format of a public debate has found its way into other countries and political systems. In Germany, the first television debate between chancellor candidates took place in 2002. Since then, they have taken up a prominent spot within the German political election landscape (Maier and Faas 2019, 2).

Television debates have established themselves as one of the most wide-ranging and (medially) widely discussed election campaign events (Benoit 2007, 61–63). From the voters point of view, the popularity of the format of television debates results above all from the possibility of being able to directly compare the top candidates and their positions on the central election campaign themes (Tapper and Quandt 2019, 6). In addition, the program promises a certain entertainment value due to its competitive character (Maier, Faas, and Maier 2014, 38). The participation in television debates gives the candidates an opportunity to address millions of voters directly, largely circumventing journalistic selection criteria. No other election campaign instrument has these advantages. The fact that there are also many voters who are far removed from politics and who are difficult to reach by traditional means of election campaigning further increases the attractiveness of television debates, since, according to the findings of election campaign research, they are particularly easy to influence (Maier, Faas, and Maier 2014, 38).

Political campaigns and consequently, political debate communication has been extensively studied by scholars from different academic fields (see Maier, Faas, and Maier 2014, 38). Perhaps because debates demonstrate how “[p]olitical communication is the place where political action gains significance and social relevance” (Drăgan 2018, 23). The three main fields of research focus on the content of the debates, the mass media coverage and the impact and effects of television debates on voting behavior. Least attention is being paid to the content of the debates (Maier, Faas, and Maier 2014, 38). The following work aims to address this shortcoming through use of the Functional Theory by U.S. scholar, William L. Benoit. Benoit has conducted extensive research on all the U.S. presidential debates since 1960, analyzing what communicative strategy the different candidates used. His research has shown that the behavior of politicians participating in a debate often follows a particular pattern. Benoit has created the Functional Theory of political campaign discourse, which serves as a framework to analyze presidential debates (W. L. Benoit 2007). Benoit argues that political communication during an election and as such, during a debate always follows a particular goal; it is functional in nature (W. L. Benoit 2014b, 1:196). He argues that a politician’s desire to win the election is what dictates and influences his communicative strategy (Benoit 2007, 32). According to him, only three functions of discourse can be used to increase the preferability of a politician. The different functions are an acclaim, attack and defense (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32). Acclaims are considered as positive utterances that raise a candidate’s benefit. Attacks are used to lower a rival’s benefit and draw attention to possible weaknesses. A defense is used to respond to an attack (Yaseen, Ali, and Kasim 2018).

The Functional Theory predicts, and tests different rhetorical strategies used in televised debates. It deals intensively with the driving force for a politician’s communicative strategy, concluding that it is the desire to win, to appear as the more preferable of the two candidates. It argues that such preferability is ideally achieved through positive statements about oneself. These can be statements about successful actions in the past or bright and innovative plans for the future. Attacks on another candidate that reveal certain weaknesses of the opponent can also raise one’s own standing. During a debate candidates want to show themselves from their best side (Maier and Jansen 2018, 6). After all, the point is to convince as many voters as possible of yourself and your politics just before the election. However, it does not seem sufficient to stop at this point. Perhaps the will to win the election is accompanied by another important factor that shapes the strategic communication decisions of politicians, a factor that is not addressed within the framework of the Functional Theory and can be addressed through the help of the concept of collective identity. While the Functional Theory assesses what types of

strategy are being using in a political debate and how the use of such strategies can possibly predict a certain behavior, the concept of collective identity helps to explain how politicians create a positive image about both themselves and their respective voters, through the use of the three different functions. The idea that citizens will recognize a politician's preferability simply because he uses acclaims can hardly be convincing. While the Functional Theory provides a framework to assess in what ways politicians use strategy and rhetoric within the political discourse, the concept of collective identity elaborates on how politicians engage in an imagined interactive process to construct a collective identity, which is enhanced through feelings of trust and authenticity. It is within the political discourse and the setting of television debates that politicians construct collective identities, since „[p]olitical communication is the place where political action gains significance and social relevance. Such a reality comes from capacity of the political discourse to redescribe and socially reconstruct reality“ (Drăgan 2018, 23). A feeling of a collective identity (supported through trust in a politician) results in a positive attitude towards a politician and thus raises his perceived preferability. Trust, which is closely linked to both faith and truth, describes as an "emotional attitude" a disposition towards a person or another object; as a "central category of interpersonal communication" it shapes the living together and the freedom that can be granted to the individual. In a representative democracy, trust in politics, politicians and the political process is a cornerstone for delegating one's own voice to the people's representatives (Podschuweit and Rössler 2019, 28). Trust and credibility are thus mutually dependent: a repeatedly confirmed credibility contributes to the development of trust; this trust, in turn, facilitates the attribution of credibility (Podschuweit and Rössler 2019, 28–29). This feeling of togetherness is crucial since the collective identification process is a decisive factor for the involvement in a political democracy, which ultimately manifests itself in voting for the respective candidate (Klein 2003, 37; McNamara and Musgrave 2020, 176). The following work will present an analysis of how such processes unfold during German television debates. This work argues that an analysis of the German television debates reveals that a Functional Theory, complemented with a focus on a constructed collective identity within the political discourse, serves to analyze political debates and the communicative strategies implemented to winning over voters.

The work begins with an overview on the existing literature on political debate research. The next chapter focusses on the theoretical framework of the Functional Theory by Benoit and the concept of collective identity. Following that chapter will be a part that gives a brief overview over the contextual background to the German political debates. This part is followed by a methodology section in which the author outlines how the Functional Theory and

concept of collective identity was applied to the German television debates. The analysis and discussion will analyze exemplary moments that highlight the use of functions from the Functional Theory and how these are implemented to construct collective identity.

## II. Literature Review

Over the years, three primary fields of research have emerged within the academic field of political debate research: Content, mass media coverage and impact of television debates on the public. The numerous analyses mainly deal with television debates in the USA and concentrate on three major fields of research. Most research is done on the effects of television debates on voter behavior (W. L. Benoit and Hansen 2004; W. L. Benoit, McKinney, and Stephenson 2002; Blais and Perrella 2008; Holbrook 1999; Kleinen von Königslow 2015; Schrott 1990). The question of how the content of television debates is perceived and processed at all plays a central role, including methodological implications and innovations, such as the increased use of real-time measurements of viewer reactions during such debates (Maier and Faas 2019a, 13). Overall, the research shows that the effects of television debates are highly complex and contingent: The format and course of debates play just as much a role as the preferences and prior knowledge of viewers. As far as impact research is concerned, the methods used also play an important role. Dissolving this complexity is undoubtedly a driving force for comprehensive research in this field (Maier and Faas 2019a, 13). In 1992, Schrott and Lanoue have analyzed voter response to German television debates from the years 1972-87 (1992). They make an important observation when they state that most studies on political debates aim to find out which participant won the debate. However, little research focused on determining how a particular politician has to behave in order to be declared as the “winner” (Schrott and Lanoue 1992, 449). They thus call for more research on the strategy employed by politicians during television debates.

A second line of research deals with mass media coverage (Fridkin et al. 2008; Shaw 1999). Typically, the main focus lies on the scope and structure of follow-up reporting. Fridkin et al. combined a public opinion survey with a content analysis and of the 2004 presidential debate and argues that media coverage often proves to be quite biased and has a high potential to persuade voters of a certain candidate preference (Fridkin et al. 2008). While Shaw argues that media coverage is certainly not the sole factor to influence voter choice, the scope of television coverage can influence a shift in voters’ perspectives (Shaw 1999).

The last field is dominated by content assessment of television debates (Barbaros 2012; Halmari 2008; Zarefsky 2008; W. L. Benoit 2007). This is often associated with the question

of which strategies, argumentative and rhetoric, candidates pursue during a debate (W. L. Benoit 2007; Isotalus 2011; Dudek and Partacz 2009). While the content of television debates has been expansively analyzed in the United States it remains the least explored field of research in Germany. In the United States, professor of communications, William L. Benoit, has conducted extensive content analyses of presidential candidate campaign messages (from JFK in 1960 to Donald Trump in 2016). Benoit is known as the father of the Functional Theory of political campaign discourse, a theory that he created and has so far used as his analytical framework on all U.S. presidential debates (Isotalus 2011; Yaseen, Ali, and Kasim 2018; Maurer and Reinemann 2003). In essence, he is interested in uncovering to what extent politicians use particular communication strategies to influence their popularity with their voters. According to the Functional Theory, every form of communication during a political debate serves a particular function, which is to appear as the favorable candidate for the voters and thus gain their vote and win the elections (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32). In the decision to make more topic-related or more personal statements, candidates must develop a strategy for how they want to address these issues (Maier and Faas 2019a, 44). According to the Functional Theory, candidates can choose between three strategic options to distinguish themselves positively from their political opponents (Maier and Faas 2019a, 44). Benoit calls these possible strategies functions and argues that politicians will either acclaim, attack or defend themselves in a debate (W. L. Benoit and Harthcock 1999, 343). The various strategies each have strengths and weaknesses with regard to their possible effects. While the effect of attacks in particular is controversially discussed (for an overview see e.g.: Fridkin and Kenney 2011), defenses are seen as the *ultima ratio* in communication with the opponent (Benoit 2007, 39). Maier and Faas claim that this explains the finding that candidate messages are most often acclaims, followed by attacks and defenses. This order can also be observed in German television debates (Maier and Faas 2019, 45). Benoit's theory provides a framework to understand these tactics used by politicians (Paatelainen 2016, 34).

While most of the existing research on political debates and Functional Theory remains focused on the U.S. political field, in recent years, the theory has been increasingly applied to debates in other countries. Political election debates have been analyzed in Israel (W. L. Benoit and Sheafer 2006), South Korea (Choi and Benoit 2009), Ukraine (G. L. Benoit and Klyukovski 2006a), Australia and Canada (W. L. Benoit and Henson 2007), Finland (Isotalus 2011; Paatelainen 2016), France (Choi and Benoit 2013), Poland (Dudek and Partacz 2009) and the United Kingdom (W. L. Benoit 2016). The majority of the analyses align with Benoit's findings

and conclude that acclaims are the most used function in debates (Choi and Benoit 2009; W. L. Benoit 2016; G. L. Benoit and Klyukovski 2006a; W. L. Benoit and Sheafer 2006).

Most of these analyses are single-case studies and focus on one election or a singular debate. Works which span political debate communication over years, comparable to Benoit's work in the U.S., are rather limited. This work aims fill this gap and provide a comprehensive analysis of all existing German television debates during federal election campaigns (2002-2017). It will thus add to existing research on the Functional Theory in an international context and also explore political communication during television debates in Germany.

Critics argue that while the Functional Theory is suitable to analyze U.S. political campaign discourse, yet it cannot be transferred to other countries (Isotalus and Aarnio 2006, 64). They claim that the entire framework of the Functional Theory is built on U.S. election campaigns which have very unique characteristics (Isotalus 2011, 34).

Content analyses of political TV debates using the Functional Analysis by Benoit have been widely studied in the United States, however, rather limited research has been conducted with this theory in Germany. It could be argued that this is due to the fact that the theory was developed in the United States, based on the two-party U.S. political system and is thus not applicable within a different cultural and political context. Progress has been made by applying the Functional Theory to different countries and more diverse cultural frameworks (Ukraine, South Korea, Israel, Finland, Poland) (G. L. Benoit and Klyukovski 2006b; Lee and Benoit 2005; W. L. Benoit and Sheafer 2006; Isotalus 2011; Dudek and Partacz 2009). The expansion of the use of this theory can be seen as an attempt to perceive it "[...] as an international theory which may be successfully applied in analyses of political messages in various countries" (Dudek and Partacz 2009, 367). The findings reveal that Benoit's theory can be useful in the analysis of TV debates outside the United States, despite the great diversity in political and cultural contexts of these countries. Of course, these are only a small number of countries and research projects and further research is certainly needed. In accordance to Isotalus, this work will argue that despite the differences of the political systems, applying this theory to a German context could provide valuable insights into creating an "[...] inter-culturally valid theory or to see what challenges the theory may confront in different cultures" (2011, 32).

Little research has been done at the intersection of political debates and collective identity. Perhaps the closest work to combine political debates and the concept of collective identity in the German field is the work by Maier and Jansen, in which the authors question whether the reception of television debates can increase trust in the top candidates (Maier and Jansen 2018). Maier and Jansen examine the connection between the reception of television



debates and political trust. The data basis for this are representative population surveys for the federal elections from 2002 to 2013 as well as ten representative surveys in the run-up to state elections from 2011 to 2017 (Maier und Jansen 2018, 5).

The results show that there is a positive correlation between television debates and trust in the top candidates. Based on the theoretical considerations and the specification of the models they estimated, the authors argue that there is a causal effect behind this relationship. Participation in such broadcasts can therefore be regarded as useful for politicians (Maier and Jansen 2018, 19). However, the data evaluated cannot clarify exactly which causal mechanism is responsible for the positive effect of the debate reception. With reference to the theoretical considerations on the establishment of trust, it can be concluded that the increase is a result of the fulfilled expectations of officeholders and challengers in their function as political role bearers. Even if little is known overall about what voters actually expect from election campaigns, it seems plausible to assume, given the distribution of roles in political competition, that incumbents should explain what they have achieved in the current legislative period and how they would like to continue their policies in the future (Lipsitz in Maier and Jansen 2018, 19). Challengers, on the other hand, should explain the weaknesses of government work, what the alternatives would have been and how they would shape policy in the event of an election victory. Benoit's content analyses of television debates show that incumbents and challengers are in line with their roles in terms of their chosen strategies and thus meet the expectations of the voters (Maier and Jansen 2018, 20). On the other hand, it is known from election advertising research that topic-related arguments seem more credible than statements on candidate characteristics (Groenendyk and Valentino 2002). Since the lion's share of candidate statements in television debates relates to factual topics - and not to persons (see e.g. W. L. Benoit 2014a), this could be a further explanation for the observed positive effect of television debates on the trust in top candidates (Maier and Jansen 2018, 20). While Maier and Jansen primarily focused on the audience and conducted tests to assess how the reception of television debates influenced the trust that voters have in the top candidates. This work will focus on the politicians and how they construct trust within the framework of a collective identity, through the use of the functions of the Functional Theory.

## **I. Theoretical Framework**

### **a. The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse**

According to the Functional Theory, any form of communication during a political election (in particular during a TV debate) has a particular function (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32). The approach is "functional", "expedient" or "goal-oriented" because it is based on the assumption that candidates and political parties rationally orientate their election campaign communication towards one goal, namely the maximization of votes (Ibid). Any campaign communication is thus instrumental.

The theory is based on two main pillars: Functions and topics (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32–44). Every statement by a politician is classified according to its function and topic. The functions are acclaims, attacks and defenses. The statements are also divided into policy and character. Candidates and their opponents can either talk about a policy issue (with regards to their past deeds, future plans, and general goals) or focus on the character of themselves, their party or their competitor (character statements include personal qualities, leadership ability and ideals). A statement by a politician is thus always categorized according to its function and its topic. Is a candidate attacking certain personal qualities of an opponent such as honesty or loyalty or is he acclaiming himself for political policies that were achieved in his legislative period? It is the distribution and balance of these functions and topics that is analyzed with the help of the Functional Theory.

Benoit states that politicians will choose the function that is most likely to guarantee a successful outcome (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32). Motivated by the desire to appear as the preferable candidate within a competition, candidates will either acclaim, attack or defend themselves within a competitive set-up (Yaseen, Ali, and Kasim 2018, 43). It is thus useful to analyze the function of each message within a political campaign discourse (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32).

Benoit outlines five main principles or assumptions that underly his Functional Theory. The applicability of these principles to the German debates will take place at a later point of this work.

1. Voting is a comparative act.
2. Candidates must distinguish themselves from opponents.
3. Political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves.
4. Candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending.
5. Campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy and character (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32–44).

### 1. Voting is a comparative act.

Benoit claims that the process of casting a vote is a decision inherently connected to a comparative evaluation of different political actors (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32). What this preference is based on, whether it is candidate characteristics or policy positions, is secondary (Rauh 2016, 49). Measured against the fact that no candidate will ever universally be regarded as "perfect" by all voters, every decision that a voter takes is always an expression of relative preferability (W. L. Benoit 2007, 34).

### 2. Candidates must distinguish themselves from opponents

According to the second principle of the Functional Theory, for a voter to be able to choose a candidate, it is important that the candidates are demonstrably distinguishable from each other (W. L. Benoit 2007, 34). A noticeable difference between candidates, mostly on political issues (but sometimes also on questions of character), is an essential requirement because otherwise voters could hardly make a comparative judgment between them (W. L. Benoit 2007, 34). While it is not necessary that candidates disagree with each other on all aspects, a certain difference in stance of opinions should exist (W. L. Benoit 2007, 34).

### 3. Political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves

If implemented successfully, a political campaign message is an extension of the second principle, namely that candidates should differentiate themselves from each other. A campaign message can support this goal (W. L. Benoit 2007, 34).

### 4. Candidates establish preferability through **acclaiming, attacking, and defending**

In accordance with the second and third assumption, Benoit argues that a candidate must differ from his opponents in a certain way, namely in the way that voters prefer. It is therefore not sufficient for a politician to distinguish him or herself by the content alone, the way in which he or she does so is decisive (W. L. Benoit 2007, 36). According to the Functional Theory, there are three types of campaign statements or "functions of discourse" that are capable of shaping the preference of a candidate over his competitor. These functions are defined as acclaims,

which are understood as "positive statements about oneself" or "statements that stress a candidate's advantages or benefits"; attacks, defined as "criticisms of an opponent"; and a defense, defined as "refutations of attacks from opponents" (Rauh 2016, 49). There is of course no normative compulsion for politicians to use any of these functions but Benoit claims that the rhetorical situation faced by the candidates encourages them to use these functions and thus makes them the most intrinsic options (W. L. Benoit, Blaney, and Pier 2000, 63).

Acclaims are statements that raise one's own perceived preferability and are considered the best strategic choice within a political debate (W. L. Benoit 2007, 36; Yaseen, Ali, and Kasim 2018, 42; W. L. Benoit and Sheafer 2006, 284). Acclaims are useful tools to "[...] secure recognition [...]" without running the risk of being perceived as too presumptuous (P. J. Benoit 1997, 145). The positive presentation of oneself is built on two factors: the positive assessment of an act through an audience and the individual responsibility for success (P. J. Benoit 1997, 145). Benoit argues that within a political context, efforts of individual praise can also extend to the respective political party. This way, politician can praise him or herself for having achieved a great success by lowering the unemployment rate for example or the actor can attribute that success to the own party.

Apart from acclaims, attacks are another popular function used by politicians during a political debate. Embedded within the concept of negative campaigning, attacks can disclose information that the targeted politician deliberately left out. As such it can carry informative value for the viewer. However, according to Haselmayer, attacks can also, "[...] distort political discourse, lead to polarization and party system fragmentation or demobilize voters and promote political disaffection" (Haselmayer 2019, 366). Attacks are a rather risky choice, nevertheless if successfully implemented, they can point out weaknesses and thus decrease a rival's preferability. Attacks can also reveal dominance over a situation (Dudek and Partacz 2009, 378). Within a political debate, attacks are often answered with counterattacks and the biggest caveat of an attack is that it always carries the risk of a backlash. Politicians must thus always be aware of the possible boomerang effect while using the function of an attack (Dudek and Partacz 2009, 370). According to the Functional Theory, an attack is effective when it embodies legitimate criticism, for example correcting false statements and thus helps voter to make informed decisions (W. L. Benoit 2007, 38).

The last of the three functions is the defense. The function of a defense is used as an answer to an opponent's attack (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39). Just as acclaims and attacks, defenses can focus on either policy or character. According to Benoit, a defense is a useful tool since it can "[...] (1) prevent further damage from an attack and (2) restore some or all of a candidate's

damaged preferability” (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39). A defense is used to contrast and refute attacks made by a political opponent during a debate. When making statements, politicians will often change from one function to another. A defense can thus easily turn into a counter-attack. The attacked person often uses his turn to respond to the attack (in form of a defense) and then promptly changes the topic, either to launch a counterattack or to start a whole new discussion topic to distract from the criticism against him.

According to the Functional Theory, defenses do, however, have three possible disadvantages (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39). First, to defend oneself is to be less proactive and more reactive which reduces the perceived preferability (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39; Dudek and Partacz 2009, 371). Furthermore, Benoit argues that attacks are often made on topics that are not of crucial importance to the attacked, nevertheless, the target has to respond in one way or another. The attacker turns the focus on certain topics that might leave less room to address themes that the targeted politician favors (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39). Lastly, a defense (as <sup>1</sup>a way to refute the attack) forces the attacked to draw direct attention to a certain weakness that should rather have remained hidden (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39). These factors make the defense a function that has many possible disadvantages.

5. Campaign discourse occurs on two topics: **policy and character** (W. L. Benoit 2007, 32–44).

A statement is categorized according to a function (as explained earlier) and furthermore, it is based on one of these two issues, namely policy or the character of the candidates. As such, an attack can be directed at a new law that the opponent introduced in the past or perhaps a certain character trait (arguing that the candidate is dishonest because he or her refuses to disclose tax books) (Henson and Benoit 2010, 4). Any statement during a debate is thus categorized according to both, a particular function and a certain topic (Rauh 2016, 50).

The topic of “policy” (sometimes referred to as “issue”) encompasses all statements that address governmental actions (Henson and Benoit 2010, 4). The topic can be further divided into three sub-sections. Past deeds (governmental measures realized by the candidate and/or his/her government), future plans (statements that directly address actions that the candidate promises to realize once he or she wins the election) and general goals (focusing on end results without disclosing the concrete steps it takes to get there) (Choi and Benoit 2013, 218). An example of a policy acclaim is the following statement by U.S. President George W. Bush in

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from the television debate between Chancellor Schröder (SPD) and his challenger Merkel (CDU) in 2002.

2004. He claims that he, “[...] added 1.9 million new jobs over the past thirteen months. The farm income in America is high. Small businesses are flourishing. Home ownership is at an all-time high in America” (Bush in W. L. Benoit 2014a, 63). He comments on positive changes on the job market and real estate ownership to praise himself on policy grounds that were accomplished during his presidency (“past deeds”) (W. L. Benoit 2014a, 63)

Furthermore, acclaims can be made at the character of a candidate (Isotalus 2011, 33). The focus of a statement is thus less concerned with policy matters but with personal attributes and skills of a politician. The three sub-categories are “personal qualities”, “leadership ability” and “ideals” (W. L. Benoit, Blaney, and Pier 2000, 64). The Functional Theory holds that personal qualities “[...] are the personality traits of the candidate, such as honesty, compassion, strength, courage, friendliness” (W. L. Benoit 2007, 54). Other scholars have expanded these traits to include decency, empathy and morality (Yaseen, Ali, and Kasim 2018, 43). Leadership ability focuses on the politician’s competence to enact laws within office. Comments grouped into the leadership category often focus on a politician’s work experience as a basis for this ability (Choi and Benoit 2013, 218).

The Functional Theory not only predicts the type of functions in which messages are conveyed, it also predicts the frequency with which these appear within a political debate (W. L. Benoit 2007, 42). Because acclaims are seen as the most cost-effective option in this informal cost-benefit analysis, it is expected that they will be used most frequently during a debate (W. L. Benoit 2007, 42). According to Benoit, increasing the perceived preferability works best through the use of acclaims, especially since there is a low chance that an acclaim about oneself will invite a harsh counter reaction by an opponent (W. L. Benoit 2007, 42).

To use an acclaim is a “safe” option for candidates. In second place are the attacks, because although they carry some risks (as explained before), they also have the possibility to increase your own reputation (Paatelainen 2016, 11). According to Functional Theory, defenses are the least used, since they carry the most drawbacks in comparison to the other two functions (W. L. Benoit 2007, 43).

Apart from the frequency of the functions, the Functional Theory also predicts that statements will be more likely to focus on policy instead of character (W. L. Benoit 2003, 100). Benoit refers to Levine who argues that policy issues have gained more and more importance in the last years (Levine in Benoit 2003, 101). The validity of these statements in relation to the German context will be examined in the later part of this work. This paper assesses whether statements made by German politicians can be categorized according to the three functions of the Functional Theory. It furthermore aims to analyze whether the frequency of the function

(acclaims > attacks > defenses) is consistent with the predictions made by the Functional Theory. Lastly, the hypothesis that politicians make more arguments based on policy than on character issues will be assessed.

## **b. Caveats of the Functional Theory**

While the Functional Theory is widely used by scholars to analyze political campaign discourse (especially in the U.S.), it is not without weaknesses. The Functional Theory suggests that candidates aim to appear preferable to thus win the debates and gain the citizen's votes. The theory presupposes that positive accounts about oneself are sufficient to win voter's preferability. However, are positive utterances about oneself or one's achievements sufficient to win the favorability of the voters or is there perhaps another factor that influences the perception on their politicians? This work argues that in order to appear more preferable, candidates engage in an imagined interactive process and use the functions to construct a collective identity between them and their voters. It is the political discourse that provides the stage for politicians to create collective identities. Winning is thus connected to more than mere preferability. It is associated with a feeling of togetherness, community and trust.

There are several reasons why candidates attach great importance to winning the trust of the citizens. In political science research, trust is seen as a central variable for the ability of representative democracies, their institutions and the political decision-makers to operate (Gabriel 2002, 496). In elections, citizens endow members of parliament with power. In doing so, they trust that the people's representatives do not abuse their position and make political decisions in the interests of those they represent - even without being permanently controlled (Maier and Jansen 2018, 2). If the trust placed in a politician is disappointed, he or she is threatened with loss of power at the next election (Gabriel and Westle 2012, 29-34). It must therefore be in the interest of politicians that citizens have a minimum level of trust in them to be successful in elections (Maier and Jansen 2018, 2).

But how does trust develop? Sociologist Niklas Luhmann sees trust as a mechanism for reducing social complexity. Social complexity builds on the fact that despite all efforts at organization and rational planning, one can never know exactly what the effects of one's actions will be (Lühr 2014, 6). These uncertainties must be absorbed. In companies this task is typically taken over by managers, in the state by politicians. One must trust the political representatives in advance to successfully perform the tasks assigned to them. Trust is essentially an advance payment for services that still have to be delivered. Confidence is built up, for example through

good experiences with a person in the past that are also accepted for future interactions or through personal contact with the actors (familiarity). This poses a difficulty when it comes to the political system because here citizens must be able to trust strangers, the politicians. Politicians must thus manage to construct an environment and sense of trust between them and their citizens (Lühr 2014, 6).

In this context, television debates broadcasted live on television are coming to the fore, as they could be suitable for creating a "perceived proximity" to politics and its main protagonists (Dinter and Weissenbach 2017, 242). Moreover, in such debates the (intended or already taken place) actions of politicians are clearly visible to citizens - and thus a basic prerequisite for the emergence of relationships of trust is fulfilled (Maier and Jansen 2018, 3).

Trust in political institutions and political decision-makers is regarded as a central factor in the legitimacy, stability and ability to act of representative democracies (Gabriel 2002; Gabriel and Westle 2012). Although it is controversial exactly how high the level of trust in the political system should be, it is undisputed that democracies in particular, which in contrast to authoritarian or totalitarian systems do not secure their political support through coercion, need a minimum level of trust in order to survive (Maier and Jansen 2018, 6).

Candidates thus play an important hinge role in establishing a connection between the political system on the one hand and citizens on the other. As role bearers of the political system, they represent an important "access point" with whom citizens can come into contact, gain experience and thus - provided that the expectations directed at them are met - develop trust in the system (Giddens 1990, 91). Due to their exposed position, the top candidates have a special weight in this process, even if contacts here rarely occur in person, but usually only through the media (Maier and Jansen 2018, 6). Whether citizens trust (top) candidates therefore depends above all on how they are presented in the media; normally this is the only way for them to compare expectations and experiences (Maier and Jansen 2018, 6). Especially in election campaigns, however, candidates also have the opportunity to present themselves (e.g. in the context of election advertising, interviews, discussion programs, online offers). The aim here is to anchor positive ideas ("images") of their characteristics - and in this context also the expectations that can be placed on them - in the consciousness of citizens and, if necessary, to correct negative representations resulting from media coverage or the communication of the political opponent (Maier and Jansen 2018, 6).

### **c. The Concept of Collective Identity**



Although the term "identity" has a firm place in our everyday language, its definition remains diffuse and vague. In fact, scholars from different fields of research have sought to come up with a comprehensive definition. Yet it still proves rather difficult to provide a universal definition, perhaps because the concept of identity is not a material matter or product (Pennington 2018, 621). In psychology and social psychology, personal identity usually stands for the uniqueness of the individual self. In contrast, social identity refers to the supra-individual character of the person, for example as the bearer of certain roles, holder of a certain status or member of a certain cultural group ("collective self") (Rucht 1995, 10). Following Davis et.al, this work conceptualizes the concept of collective identity as a form of group/social identity, thus allowing for a research mode that assesses the connections between the individual, interpersonal and group dynamics (Davis, Love, and Fares 2019, 268).

While one is certain of having an identity as an individual that runs through one's life and which only makes personal memory of past experiences possible, the case of collective identity is more complicated: one can belong to several communities at the same time, one can cross social boundaries, and one can consider the public presentation of a collective identity to be ideology (Seyfert and Giesen 2013, 39). Both - the individual identity of a person and the collective identity of a community - have a similar structure, however: they combine extreme self-confidence with extensive intransparency (Ibid). According to Giesen and Seyfert, we are absolutely certain that we exist, but we are incapable of giving an exhaustive description of our own identity as a person or, for example, our identity as a nation, family or ethnic group. Any attempt at such a description can be rejected as incomplete and distorted (Ibid).

As plausible as the question of personal identity is, the question of a collective identity seems problematic (Antweiler 2017, 443). Etienne Balibar, Pierre Bourdieu and Rogers Brubaker have developed critical concepts of collective identities in this context. To them, every assertion of a group is already regarded as groupism, as a false homogenization and "identitization" of individuals (see Delitz 2018, 2-3). Therefore, the concept of "collective identity" must first be clarified here. Collective identity, as examined in the following are discourse formations; they stand and fall with the symbol systems through which the bearers of a culture define and identify themselves as belonging (Hellmann, Klein, and Rohde 1995, 2-3). As such, it is always subject to discussion. There is no one universally accepted collective identity of a group, it is in constant development and progress. Furthermore, it is precisely the neutral concept of collective identity (as opposed to those of national identity, people or ethnicity) that allows one to understand the new collectives that are currently being formed (Delitz 2018, 7). After all, there is no substantial collective identity, which, after all the

discussions, does not need to be stressed any further. It is, as Max Weber already formulated, always constructed (Delitz 2018, 11). It is imaginary and must therefore be permanently discursively and symbolically updated, in cultural artefacts, in political practices, in narratives and legend formations (Hellmann, Klein, and Rohde 1995, 2–3; Haunss 2002, 13; Klein 2003, 35; Wolf 2009, 24). Collective identity can also be constructed at a political level to serve a certain goal, in this context, to win the elections.

Early social-psychological works of the 1920s and 30s still understood the identification of the individual with the masses as an irrational act and a consequence of social breakdown (Haunss 2001, 259). Against such an understanding of social movements as unconscious and irrational actors, in the 1960s the works of the Chicago School in particular emphasized the rationality of collective actors and claimed that there is no way to distinguish between "normal" and "pathological" behavior (Beinke 2008). At the beginning of the 1980s, however, these approaches were strongly criticized for their rational focus against the background of the 'cultural turn' (Daphi 2011, 13). The central point of criticism was the insufficient explanation of the formation of collectives. Researchers on both sides of the Atlantic turned their attention to cultural aspects of social movements and the construction processes of collective identities. The Italian social movement and protest scholar Alberto Melucci has developed a widely used approach to study collective identity (Haunss 2001, 260).

Collective identity can be defined as a product of forms, consciousness and expression of at least two individuals who know about their belonging together, who demonstrate this in a practical way and who are thus also perceived by their environment as belonging together (Rucht 1995, 10). This presupposes a subjective sense of "we " and thus (the fiction of) commonalities, which enable a delimitation of one's own reference group to the outside world, as well as forms of communalization, which are stabilized through ongoing interaction or organization and are symbolically conveyed both internally and externally. Our self-understanding only comes about through interaction with other people, whether they are similar or not (Poole 2010). As such, the stabilization of an inside-outside difference is based on the mutual attribution of "we" and "the others", whereby the resulting images are continuously registered and processed (Rucht 1995, 10).

Collective identity consists of characteristics that are attributed to a collective (people, nation, religious community). It is not the actual group characteristics which make up the collective identity, but characteristics which are assumed to exist. These characteristics can relate to culture, language, history, religion or ethnicity (Seyfert and Giesen 2013). A collective consciousness is not naturally generated, but socially constructed (van Stekelenburg 2013, 2).

It results consciously or unconsciously from interactions that follow social patterns and structures (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 292). Collective identity is based on a common past or a common idea of the future (Assmann 2018). It must be built into the self-concept of the individual person in order to become effective in thought and action. This means that the collective identity is considered relevant for the individual when the person is willing to commit to a group identity and to orient his or her actions and thinking accordingly (Seyfert and Giesen 2013).

In the political field, identities play a role in several ways. Politics arises in the field of tension between a) politicians, b) parties, c) administration and management (government, authorities etc.), d) associations (e.g. workers' and employers' associations), e) civil society actors (e.g. citizens' initiatives, non-governmental organizations, but also social movements as 'networks of networks') (Klein 2003, 33–34). Klein argues that especially in democracies, politics is conducted in front of an audience and with the involvement of the public (Klein 2003, 34). And in order to obtain the consent of the citizens (for example as voters or in support of political protest, for example), it is increasingly being analyzed where they are to be picked up, what expectations, worries and fears are driving them, how they are to be mobilized for their own interests (Klein 2003, 34). McNamara and Musgrave argue that the sensation of being part of a collective group and political participation are highly connected (McNamara and Musgrave 2020, 176). The following part of this work will analyze to what extent the German politicians make use of the construction of collective identities during their television debates. Attention will be paid to moments in which they make use of one or perhaps several of the codes mentioned above.

### **i. Construction of Collective Identity**

As stated earlier, a collective identity does not exist naturally, it is constructed and constantly re-negotiated (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 74). The question remains how collective identities are constructed and what codes are used for their construction. Bader argues that collective identities emerge in strategic situations of competition or struggle for resources or rewards that are perceived, experienced or defined as scarce (Bader 1991, 9). In this context, the television debates can be understood as political competitions, in which the possible votes from the citizens represent the scarce resources.

Taylor and Whittier distinguish several elements of collective identity, two of which will be discussed here. (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Their reference points are aspects that are

addressed in the literature on social movements and collective identity: First, the definition of a common "we" as a distinct group and second, the development of shared beliefs (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 111). To illustrate these aspects, they propose the following elements to be considered when analyzing the construction of collective identities in social movements: boundaries and consciousness (Haunss 2004, 73).

The formation of a collective identity does not seem to be possible without delimitation (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 74). Boundaries are central to the construction of collective identities because they refer to the social, psychological and material structures that create differences between the movement and its environment (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 111). Where a "we" is constructed, there is also an "other", usually as a negative counter-image to one's own positively understood community of values (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 74). In general, it should be noted that it is constitutive for social movements to be able to distinguish for themselves between what belongs to them and thus constitutes their unity, and what does not belong to them, whether they do so latently or - as in the case of conflict - in deliberate dissociation from the opponent (Hellmann, Klein, and Rohde 1995, 2–3). By means of such self-definitions, a group makes sure of its political, social, cultural and moral belonging; in this way, it also defines what it was, what it is and what it wants to be (Dardan 2018). This work will assess instances during the television debates in which politicians use narratives of "us" vs. "them", to construct a shared connection within the discourse between them and their prospective voters.

Taylor and Whittier describe consciousness as the interpretative framework that emerges as a result of struggles and disputes in which the collective actors formulate and realize their common interests (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 111). Consciousness encompasses the interpretative framework that emerges from disputes over the definition of common interests. Previous research suggests that group consciousness "[...] is constructed through a variety of mechanisms including talk, narratives, framing processes, emotion work, and interaction with antagonists among others" (Hund and Benford 2007, 445). As Whittier puts it, "[c]onsciousness raising entails reinterpreting one's individual experiences, seeing them as shaped by social forces and identifying as part of a group with shared experiences" (Whittier 2017, 377). It refers to the realization that one's personal past is inherently influenced by overarching societal factors and thus becomes a political issue (Whittier 2017, 377). "Instead of blaming oneself and attempting to improve one's individual life, consciousness-raising promotes collective action to address the social roots [...] of individual experiences and struggles (Whittier 2017, 377). Politicians will make use of this to address systematic problems through highlighting their own

past. Such behavior can be observed in the politicians during television debates. A politician might draw on his or her own upbringing and the difficulty as a child from a working-class family, who was the first family member to pursue a university career, when addressing social injustice and education policy. The politician makes use of a personal experience to address a bigger societal issue. Having a personal connection to this issue allows a politician to speak not only of an important issue but do this in an authentic and trustworthy way. In doing so, “[...] consciousness-raising may produce changes in individual identity, emotional transformation, affiliation with collective identities, or participation in collective action” (Whittier 2017, 377).

## II. Context

Every four years, more than 60 million eligible citizens in Germany cast their vote on a new government (Korte 2017, 7). In federal elections, voters have two votes: With the first vote they choose a candidate from their constituency (direct mandate), with the second vote they vote for a party (Korte 2017, 29–35). Decisive for the later balance of power in parliament are solely the second votes, in proportion to which the seats are distributed to the parties. In order to be elected as chancellor, a candidate requires an absolute majority of the votes of the members of parliament. That means half plus at least one vote. One also speaks of the "chancellor majority" (“Wahl Des Bundeskanzlers/ Der Bundeskanzlerin” n.d.). Usually, parties will form coalitions in order to reach the absolute majority.

Since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, the political stage has been dominated by the two largest popular parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) (together with the sister party, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria; CSU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) (Jesse in Korte 2017, 12). Both (popular) parties can be assigned to the middle of the political landscape. The CDU's programme has traditionally been characterised by conservative, liberal and Christian-social standpoints. The SPD is the oldest party in Germany and was founded in the 19th century. Traditionally being a working-class party, today, it is politically center-left oriented and works for social justice (Decker 2018). Ever since 2002, the top candidates have been meeting before every federal election for a television debate on German live television (ZDF 2002; 2005; 2009; 2013; 2017).

For the first time in German history, a federal Chancellor and his most promising challenger met directly in a television debate before the federal elections in 2002 (Breuer 2006, 5). No other event of the election campaign was able to reach a similarly large audience and no other event was mentioned in media coverage as frequently as the first debate between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and his opponent Edmund Stoiber (CDU/CSU) (Bucher 2007, 15). So far, there have been five television debates between chancellor candidates on German television, all held under similar conditions. The duration was around 90 minutes and both candidates stood at an oblique angle to each other in a studio without an audience. They were each interviewed by well-known German journalists. The general themes were decided upon prior to the event by the broadcasting stations and representatives of both parties. To ensure a balanced speaking time, the speaking time of each candidate is measured (Maier and Faas 2019b, 27–38). In addition to factual issues, the television debates also address the credibility and leadership of the two candidates, as well as personal issues (Reinemann and Maurer 2007, 198).

While the first efforts to establish a television debate, based on the US model, were made as early as 1969, it took more than four decades before this format appeared on German television. The debate of 2002 was dominated by topics centred on economic situation in Germany, especially the high unemployment rate. Further themes included the threat of war in Iraq and the flood disaster in eastern and southern Germany (Breuer 2006, 74).

The 2005 federal elections were remarkable in many ways. Not only was Gerhard Schröder the first incumbent chancellor who aimed to defend a red-green coalition with all his strength for a consecutive term, but with his challenger Angela Merkel, there was not only the first woman to run for the highest political office in the Federal Republic, but also the potentially first chancellor from East Germany (Mushaben 2017, 2). Tax policy was the most important topic of the debate. Aside from foreign policy other central topics included the pension system, the labour market as well as possible coalitions (Reinemann and Maurer 2007, 197–98). Angela Merkel defeated Schröder and became the incumbent for all subsequent television debates, until today.

The third debate was held on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009 between the (German Chancellor) Angela Merkel (CDU) and the Vice Chancellor Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD). Unlike in previous debates, her opponent was not part of the opposition but of Merkel's own government (Kauder, Larin, and Potrafke 2014, 88). Merkel (CDU) and Steinmeier (SPD) had governed the country for the last four years in a joint grand coalition. The debate revolved primarily around

how to deal with the financial and economic crisis, the job market, minimum wages and the exit from nuclear power (Bachl 2016, 5).

In 2013, the debate featured Merkel (CDU) and Peer Steinbrück (SPD), leader of the opposition. For the first time, one of the presenters, Stefan Raab, was not a recognized political journalist, but a very well-known and highly popular showmaster. Topics discussed included European policy, followed by issues in the general context of the election campaign and social policy .

The most recent debate took place on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017. For the fourth time, Chancellor Merkel (CDU) faced (her/an) opponent from the SPD, former President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz (CDU) (Grimme et al. 2017, 1). While once again, Germany had been governed by a grand coalition for the last legislative period, Schulz (SPD) had no position in the government. Key themes of the evening were migration and refugees, foreign policy, social justice and internal security (Fischer 2017).

### **III. Method**

In the first part, the Functional Theory is applied to all German television debates held during general elections. The second part will assess the debates with respect to the concept of collective identity. In other words, analyze moments in which politicians construct a collective identity during the debates. The Functional Theory, supported through the concept of collective identity, assists to analyze political debates.

So far, there have been five television debates between chancellor candidates on German television, which were all held under similar conditions (Tapper and Quandt 2019, 181). The debates took place in September of each year, usually two weeks prior to the elections. All debates were broadcasted live and shared a very similar setup. The duration of the debates was 90 minutes and to ensure a balanced speaking time, the speaking time of each candidate was measured. The candidates stood at an oblique angle to each other in a studio without an audience. Well-known German journalists and presenters moderated the events. While the general themes were decided upon prior to the event by the broadcasting stations and representatives of both parties, the candidates were not informed about the specific questions asked from the moderators (Maier and Faas 2019b, 27–38). These programs were chosen because the setting is comparable to that of presidential debates in the United States. Isotalus argues that an analysis of the political communication culture (with references to other cultures) is dependent on similar settings for this kind of research (Isotalus 2011, 36).

This work follows the content analytical mechanism created for the Functional Theory (W. L. Benoit 2016, 3). A total of five television debates, reaching a combined length of 462 minutes were analyzed. The debates were transcribed and coded using QSR N'Vivo7 software, following the coding framework of the Functional Theory (Isotalus 2011, 35). The Functional Theory provides an elaborate content analytical framework with which campaign messages can be systematically recorded and partially predicted (Rauh 2016, 49). It allows for a nuanced analysis of campaign discourse, since it refrains from merely categorizing utterances into positive and negative but rather provides a comprehensive framework to categorize different statements accordingly (Paatelainen 2016, 19).

Another advantage is the coding unit in itself (Isotalus 2011, 34). According to the Functional Theory, themes are taken as the units of analysis. As such, every debate was classified into several themes. Following Benoit and Choi, “[a] theme is therefore a argument [...] about the candidates (or parties)” (Choi and Benoit 2009, 66). Within the framework of Functional Theory, each theme is considered as a coding unit. As such, the codes can be as small as short utterances or interruptions, but also longer statements made as several consecutive sentences (Isotalus 2011, 34). Consequently, the Functional Theory can thus be applied to different formats of campaign messages (TV debate, TV spot, talk show appearances, speeches etc.). A theme can thus be an entire argument, made over several sentences or merely a short interruption by a politician. Once the themes were divided, each theme was categorized according to a function; either an acclaim, attack or defense. After that, every function was further classified whether into a topic; policy or character. The subtopics of policy and character, being personal qualities, leadership and ideals and values were also assigned.

The categorization of the statements into different functions (acclaim, attack, defense) and topics (policy, character) was followed by a comparison of the results between candidates and between the different debates. Attention was also paid to the contextual background of each individual debate and it was assessed to what extent certain statements related to specific circumstances. The work followed Isotalus, who claims: “The procedure of functional theory is based on quantitative content analysis, but in addition to the this the categories were also analyzed qualitatively and evaluated critically” ( 2011, 37).

After the functional analysis of the German television debates, focus was placed on the construction of collective identity within these debates. This work assessed instances during the television debates in which politicians constructed boundaries to create narratives of “us” vs. “them”. This served to create a shared collective feeling of connectedness within the discourse between them and their prospective voters. Statements were analyzed in which



politicians display their view of the political past or future of Germany through the creation of boundaries between “us” and “them” categories and prioritizing own opinions and experiences over other views. Furthermore, attention was paid to consciousness as a constructive element of collective identity. Here, particular moments in which politicians used their own past and experience to underline and strengthen (or perhaps weaken) an argument were discussed.

## IV. Results

Overall, 899 turns of politicians were registered<sup>2</sup>. Out of these 899 registered turns, 809 (90%) could be categorized according to the three functions and topics. 90 (10%) turns could not be categorized and were coded as “neutral”. The following tables show the results of the remaining 809 turns that could successfully be categorized according to the functions, topics and subcategories.

The following statements refer to the 809 statements, which could be assigned to a function. The theory predicts that acclaims are used most often. This statement can be confirmed with the results from Germany (see table 1 and 2). Overall, acclaims were the most used function, making up 50.4%, followed by attacks (27.4%) and defenses (22.1%).

The assertion that policy statements occur more frequently than character statements can also be confirmed. Policy turns made up 71.2%, while character turns came in at 28.2% (see table 3). Table 4 and 5 display a detailed distribution of the functions into the different subcategories. For policy utterances, acclaims were the most used functions (56.4% of all policy turns). However, for character statements, politicians used more attacks than acclaims and defenses (45.1% of all character turns).

While taken accumulative, acclaims were the most used functions in German television debates, however, the debates of 2009 and 2017 could record a higher overall use of defenses (2009: 22.4%, 2017: 27.6%) than attacks (2009: 19%, 2017: 18.6%). The results in table 2 show that the predicted frequency of the functions could not be confirmed in these debates.

An analysis of the statements in which politicians made use of boundaries and consciousness as a tool to create collective identity could be found at every debate. All of them were embedded within a function. The neutral turns included statements in which politicians either agreed with what was being said before or instances in which the candidates objectively stated facts or explained a current political situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Statements made by moderators were not included.

**Table 1:**  
**Total turns of German Chancellor Debates**

<i>Federal Elections</i>		<i>Acclaims</i>	<i>Attacks</i>	<i>Defenses</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
<b>Total Turns 2002-2017</b>	<b>899</b>	<b>408 (45.4%)</b>	<b>222 (24.6%)</b>	<b>179 (20%)</b>	<b>90 (10%)</b>

**Table 2:**  
**Coded Functions of German Chancellor Debates**

<i>Federal Elections</i>		<i>Acclaims</i>	<i>Attacks</i>	<i>Defences</i>
<b>Coded Turns</b>	<b>809</b>	<b>408 (50.4%)</b>	<b>222 (27.4%)</b>	<b>179 (22.1%)</b>
2002				
<i>Schröder (I)</i> <sup>3</sup>		47	13	20
<i>Stoiber (C)</i>		23	36	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>70 (47.9%)</b>	<b>49 (33.6%)</b>	<b>27 (18.5%)</b>
2005				
<i>Schröder (I)</i>		29	24	31
<i>Merkel (C)</i>		36	40	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>65 (38.5%)</b>	<b>64 (37.9%)</b>	<b>40 (23.7%)</b>
2009				
<i>Merkel (I)</i>		54	8	15
<i>Steinmeier(C)</i>		32	20	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>86 (58.5%)</b>	<b>28 (19%)</b>	<b>33 (22.4%)</b>
2013				
<i>Merkel (I)</i>		49	7	16
<i>Steinbrück(C)</i>		37	39	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>86 (54%)</b>	<b>46 (28.9%)</b>	<b>27 (17%)</b>
2017				
<i>Merkel (I)</i>		54	7	30
<i>Schulz (C)</i>		47	28	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>101 (53.7%)</b>	<b>35 (18.6%)</b>	<b>52 (27.6%)</b>

<sup>3</sup> I = Incumbent Chancellor  
C = Challenger

**Table 3:**  
**Topics of German Chancellor Debates**

<i>Federal Elections</i>		<i>Policy</i>	<i>Character</i>
<b>Total Turns</b>	<b>809</b>	<b>576 (71.2%)</b>	<b>233 (28.8%)</b>
2002			
<i>Schröder (I)</i>		60	20
<i>Stoiber (C)</i>		39	27
<b>Total</b>	146	<b>99 (67.8%)</b>	<b>47 (32.2%)</b>
2005			
<i>Schröder (I)</i>		56	28
<i>Merkel (C)</i>		55	30
<b>Total</b>	169	<b>111 (65.7%)</b>	<b>58 (34.3%)</b>
2009			
<i>Merkel (I)</i>		64	13
<i>Steinmeier(C)</i>		55	15
<b>Total</b>	147	<b>119 (81%)</b>	<b>28 (19%)</b>
2013			
<i>Merkel (I)</i>		60	12
<i>Steinbrück(C)</i>		63	24
<b>Total</b>	159	<b>123 (77.4%)</b>	<b>36 (22.6%)</b>
2017			
<i>Merkel (I)</i>		66	25
<i>Schulz (C)</i>		58	39
<b>Total</b>	188	<b>124 (66%)</b>	<b>64 (34%)</b>

## V. Analysis and Discussion

The following part discusses the implications of the results. For this purpose exemplary statements are taken up and analyzed. The excerpts were chosen because they communicate the core of the functions clearly and because they represented thematic key points within the debates. The results of a functional analysis of all German television debates reveal an overall consistency with the results of studies of presidential television debates from the United States. Acclaims were the most used functions, followed by attacks and acclaims. Policy was addressed more than character. The functions and topics seem appropriate to categorize statements in German political election debates, seeing that only 10% of all turns did not fall into any category. The following part analyzes how politicians utilized the functions to present their arguments as acclaims, attacks and defends.

An example of an attack, aimed at the opponent's character and the subtopic being personal qualities, is the following statement by Stoiber to his opponent, incumbent chancellor Gerhard Schröder during the same debate.

(1)Stoiber: “If you want to avoid war or warlike conflicts, also on the part of the Americans, then it is of no use to blurt out a single position, but then you have to talk to the Americans. You, Chancellor, you are damaging with your manner. That is undeniable, [...] you damage the German-American relationship.”

Here, Stoiber (CSU) criticizes Chancellor Schröder's (SDP) interaction with the U.S. American government. Schröder had already announced in advance, and repeated this several times during the debate, that Germany would not participate in any military interventions in Iraq after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Schröder is convinced that regional stability is a basic prerequisite in the fight against international terrorism (including in Afghanistan with the Taliban) and assumes that this stability would suffer from a military intervention in Iraq. Stoiber criticizes Schröder's political position, however, the attack is aimed at Schröder's behavior and personal handling of the situation. Stoiber sees it as an affront to the U.S. government and believes that Schröder's decision greatly endangers and disrupts diplomatic relations with an important partner. As such, he aims to destabilize Schröder's image of a chancellor who has weak diplomatic skills and little decency towards international allies.

The debate between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and his challenger, Angela Merkel (CDU) in 2005 offers an example of a defense concerning character and ideals and values. Earlier in the debate it had been said that a woman as the possible next German Chancellor would have been unthinkable without the Red Green coalition<sup>4</sup> and their political preparatory work. Merkel disagrees and defends herself and claims that she is not a political product of the Red Green coalition and instead answers:

(2)Merkel: “As for the result of Red Green, I was recently asked if I am a product of Red Green. I can only say that if I am a political product, then I am a product of German unity. I am proud of being a pan-German politician with East German roots [...]. And otherwise I am a product of my parents. And I'm proud of that, too.”

Merkel draws the argument back to her upbringings and emphasizes her principles and how these were shaped not through the opposing parties but by her parents and the German history.

The distributions of the individual functions shows some discrepancies to the predictions made by the Functional Theory. The debates of 2009 and 2017 saw more defenses than debates. In the years leading up to the 2009 and 2007 debates, Germany had been ruled by a grand coalition between the two biggest parties, the CDU and SPD. Only if both the SPD and the CDU with their respective desired coalition partners could not win enough votes for themselves, in order to be able to provide a majority and thus the government, the option of a grand coalition comes into play. While the CDU historically preferred coalitions with the FDP, the SPD would rather form a government coalition with the Greens (Egle 2010). The grand coalition is often described as an emergency solution or an unpopular necessity (Köcher 2006; Kister 2017). Accordingly, both Merkel (CDU) and Steinmeier (SPD) in 2009, and Merkel (CDU) and Schulz (SPD) in 2017 led the debates as government partners. This was therefore not a direct encounter between the incumbent chancellor and the leader of the opposition. Usually, opposition leaders tend to attack the incumbent for their past deeds (Dinter and Weissenbach 2017, 7). Admittedly, this is much more difficult when the challenger (or their party) him or herself was part of the previous government.

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<sup>4</sup> In Germany, the term "Red Green" is used to describe a coalition between the parties SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the Greens (Green Party focused on ecological and environmentally friendly policies). Both parties belong to the centre-left parties in Germany, which often support and focus on socially progressive issues (e.g.: same-sex marriage, women's quota etc.).

During the debates, a constant balance between praise for the achievements of past government and efforts to outline how the country's condition could be improved with another coalition partner and a new government could be observed. These statements were packaged in the forms of acclaims, functions or attacks. The following statement is by Merkel's (CDU) challenger, Steinmeier (SPD) in 2009, in which he acclaims the past deeds of their joint government. He transforms the acclaim into an attack and blames the CDU as the reason why many projects and plans could not be realized.

(3) Steinmeier: "We have achieved a great deal, some of it especially since September in the measures taken to counter the crisis. Perhaps only because there was the grand coalition. But we have not achieved everything. We, too, have remained below our possibilities, in many areas because the CDU did not support one or the other. With minimum wages, for example, but also with the limitation of manager salaries, that would have helped people".

In the summer of 2015, almost 900,000 refugees arrived in Germany via the Balkan route. Angela Merkel (CDU) announced that the German external borders should not be closed. A decision for which she received much praise and harsh criticism (Große 2019). One major point of criticism was that her decision frightened the conservative voters of her party in particular (Ibid). The crisis management of this situation continued to play a major role in the 2017 election campaign (Sola 2018, 2). The following statement reflects Merkel's lasting commitment to the decisions she had made two years go. One could also argue that the moderator accuses her of incompetence and carelessness because she has not thought through the political consequences of her decisions.

(4) Moderator: "But you have accepted with your policy to have more room to the right of the CDU".

Merkel: „No, of course I didn't, but I made decisions in certainly very dramatic situations, both when it was a question of preserving the Eurozone and when it was a question of refugees for people. And I stand by these decisions. And yet, I will put all my energy into convincing as many people as possible that this was the right thing to do and that we should continue on the way together“.

She defends herself against an attack from a moderator who criticizes her decision to leave the borders open. Merkel does not deviate a millimeter from her decision at that time. She rejects the accusation of carelessness and argues that it is necessary, especially in difficult times, to make unpleasant decisions and to stand by them.

So far, statements by politicians have been analyzed according to their function and topic. The second part of the analysis aims to assess how collective identity is created within the boundaries of the different functions. Instances of collective identity formation do not exist separate from the political discourse within television debates. They are intertwined with the discourse, the functions and the topics. Acclaims, attacks and defenses can all work to create collective identity.

During the 2002 debate, Schröder used his own experience, and the fact that this fate is shared by many other citizens, to support his acclaim on the important achievements that his government realized. He cited his personal upbringing - Schröder obtained his high school diploma via the second educational path - as proof of his commitment to equal opportunities. He skillfully parried a counterattack by his challenger by refusing to make a derogatory remark about this career. To assess the topic from a personal level allowed him to highlight the importance of equal educational opportunities and also, argue that those citizens who might share a similar or past and people who perhaps, aim to pursue their high school diploma in the same way, are hardworking and valuable members of society who need to be acknowledged and supported. Schröder touches upon the consciousness of a collective. The collective here being all those people who share his upbringing and can resonate with this experience. To quote Whittier, “[i]nstead of blaming oneself and attempting to improve one’s individual life, consciousness-raising promotes collective action to address the social roots [...]” of individual experiences and struggles (2017, 377). His own connection to the topic allows him to appear trustworthy and authentic.

(5) Schröder: “First of all, we have increased the education budget [...] by 30 percent and that is a considerable achievement. This has never been done before, after it was constantly cut in the time before us. This shows that we are setting the right priorities. Secondly, we have said that we are prepared to make 1 billion euros available to the federal states each year for improved all-day care. This will help children, especially from less affluent social classes. And of course, it also helps to bring women, career and family closer together. I have my own experience. What I don't want is for us to get into a situation in this country where children from socially weaker families -

I had to get my second chance education - are no longer able to go to Germany's high and highest schools because they can't afford them. So openness must remain. In addition, everything that helps to increase quality, also on a national scale, can be done with me. But the principle that it must also be possible for children from socially weaker families to take a high school diploma, to start and finish their studies without getting into debt is something I consider to be impossible to give up and as I said, it has a lot to do with my own biography”.

One might argue that creating imaginative boundaries during a television debate is a risky strategic move, since some voters can feel isolated or even worse, attacked by the statements. Thus, politicians ought to opt for uniting and binding statements that leave little room for confrontation or discussion. As such, the factor of boundaries as an essential factor in the creation of collective identities might not be fitting. However, as proclaimed in Benoit's Functional Theory, politicians must appear distinguishable from each other, in order for the voters to be able to make a judgment (W. L. Benoit 2007, 34). A certain form of distinctiveness, expressed through the creation of boundaries, is thus a vital aspect of successful political campaign communication.

The following opening statement by Steinbrück (SPD) in the 2013 debate clearly depicts the creation of boundaries as a tool to create a collective identity between him and his voters. Steinbrück opens with a critique on Merkel's style of ruling. Merkel is known to often observe problems for a long time before making a statement about them (Packer 2014). This is sometimes cited as her strength but Steinbrück clearly sees a weakness in this. He argues that voters want to be heard and want their leaders to clearly address the problems in the country. A noteworthy aspect is that he directly addresses the voters, beginning in the second sentence. This is quite useful, since a direct address creates “perceived proximity” between him and his audience (Dinter and Weissenbach 2017, 242). He ends his statement with directly asking for the citizen's trust. Trust becomes a crucial prerequisite on the path to becoming the next German Chancellor. The factor of trust is connected to the promise that Steinbrück will do things differently than Merkel. He will pursue a different style of government, a better one. First, he creates a clear boundary between him and his opponent, in outlining the difference between them. At the same time, he consciously enhances his style and presents it in a positive light, while he evaluates Merkel's style negatively. The creation of boundaries serves to visualize a group's political (also social or cultural) belonging, in clearly defining what it wants to be. To be able to view themselves as the “superior” group in comparison to the “other” group people



will need a positive self-representation. As Oktar puts it, the “[...] us is generally self-evaluated as holding better values that are particularly relevant to us, whereas they are perceived as ‘bad’ in the process of social comparison” (Oktar 2001, 319). Asking for citizen’s trust in his approach to governing is an invitation for voters to be a part of his journey.

(6) Steinbrück: “I would like to do that differently. People today have the opportunity to take a test, and my request is, don't get lulled in. Mrs. Merkel will describe to you a country that is on the right track by waiting and sitting out a lot. I do not believe that. You know that you cannot win the future over this and what I have heard from many people while I was on the road... Tonight, they [the people] want us to discuss their needs, their worries, their questions. I will give as precise answers as possible and not only this evening, but also in the future, if I get the trust, as Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany”.

It is noteworthy that the construction of collective identities could be detected at the functions of acclaims and attacks, yet not when politicians defended themselves. The Functional Theory ascertains that a defense is the function with the most disadvantages. One of those disadvantages is the fact that a defense is quite reactive and displays little control over a situation (W. L. Benoit 2007, 39). Acclaims and attacks can easily change topics or be used to target specific themes that are important to the politician. With a defense however, one is forced to focus attention on a topic that has been dictated by the attacker and is perhaps a weakness that the target deliberately didn't want to address (Dudek und Partacz 2009, 371). However, a crucial aspect for the construction of collective identities is the proactive and deliberate control and shaping of a discourse. Collective identity, however, is based on an active negotiation of boundaries and consciousness. With a defense, this type of interaction and engagement is difficult to realize because it doesn't give the actor the needed room for an active negotiation of themes. The active construction of collective identities through the re-negotiation of boundaries and consciousness could be realized through the use of the functions of attacks and acclaims.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper has argued that in an effort to analyze political communication during television debates, the Functional Theory, supported through the concept of collective identity serves to explain political debates and strategic behavior by politicians. Television debates provide a platform of political discourse which enables the construction of collective identities for the purpose of political victory. The analysis demonstrated how politicians make use of the different functions, choosing to attack, acclaim or defend. The exemplary excerpts from the debates demonstrate that politicians, in their attacks, acclaims and defenses, take up both the aspects of boundaries and consciousness in an effort to create collective identity. As such, collective identity is both produced on the basis of positive self-representations but also negative assessments of the “other”, whether that is a political opponent or an entire party.

Certainly, this work can only be a starting point for further research on political debates, analyzed with the Functional Theory in connection with the construction of collective identities. Surely, this work an interesting aspect for further research would be to assess the different subtopics and analyze to what extent past deeds or future goals (as an example of two subtopics) connect to the construction of collective identity. It would furthermore be useful to extend the analysis of the Functional Theory, supplemented by the concept of collective identity to other countries (of course the U.S. would provide a lot of research material but also other countries such as France or the UK would be suitable for this) whose political election debates have already been analyzed with the Functional Theory. In this context, it is certainly insightful to look at and compare the extent to which there are differences in political strategies and behavior between politicians from different parties, and how these differences extend across countries. A cross cultural analysis of the construction of collective identities from conservative or social democratic politicians can help to analyze possible connections between communicative behavior and political convictions.

## VII. Appendix

### a. Original Quotes from Politicians during the German TV Debates

- (1.) Stoiber 2002: „Wenn man den Krieg oder kriegerische Auseinandersetzungen auch vonseiten der Amerikaner vermeiden will, dann nützt es nichts, wenn man eine einzelne Position hinausposaunt, sondern dann muss man auch mit den Amerikanern reden. Sie, Herr Bundeskanzler, Sie schädigen mit ihrer Art. Das ist überhaupt unbestreitbar, [...] schädigen Sie das deutsch-amerikanische Verhältnis.“
- (2.) Merkel 2005: „Was nun das Ergebnis von Rot Grün anbelangt ich wurde neulich schon mal gefragt, ob ich ein Produkt von Rot Grün bin. Da kann ich nur sagen, wenn ich ein politisches Produkt bin, dann eins der deutschen Einheit. Darauf bin ich stolz, gesamtdeutsche Politikerin mit ostdeutschen Wurzeln zu sein [...]. Und ansonsten bin ich ein Produkt meiner Eltern. Und darauf bin ich auch stolz.“
- (3.) Steinmeier 2009: „Wir haben vieles erreicht, manches insbesondere seit dem September in den Maßnahmen gegen die Krise. Vielleicht nur deshalb, weil es die Große Koalition gab. Aber wir haben nicht alles erreicht. Auch wir sind unter unseren Möglichkeiten geblieben, in vielen Bereichen deshalb, weil die CDU das eine oder andere nicht mitgetragen hat. Bei den Mindestlöhnen zum Beispiel, aber auch bei der Begrenzung der Managergehälter, das hätte den Menschen geholfen“.
- (4.) Moderator 2017: Aber sie haben mit ihrer Politik in Kauf genommen, dass rechts von der CDU viel Platz ist.

Merkel: Nein, das habe ich natürlich nicht, sondern ich habe in bestimmten, sehr dramatischen Situationen Entscheidungen getroffen, sowohl als es um den Erhalt der Eurozone ging, als auch, als es um Flüchtlinge um Menschen ging. <unk>. Und zu diesen Entscheidungen stehe ich. Und trotzdem werde ich alle Kraft darauf lenken, möglichst viele Menschen zu überzeugen, dass das richtig war und dass wir gemeinsam den Weg weitergehen sollten.

(5.) Schröder 2002:., Schröder 2002: „Zunächst einmal wir haben den Bildungshaushalt [...] um 30 Prozent gesteigert und [...] das ist eine erhebliche Leistung. Das hat es bisher überhaupt noch nicht gegeben, nachdem er in der Zeit vor uns ständig gekürzt worden ist. Das zeigt, dass wir da richtige Schwerpunkte setzen. Zweitens wir haben gesagt, wir sind bereit, den Ländern jährlich 1 Milliarde Euro für verbesserte Ganztagsbetreuung zur Verfügung zu stellen. Das hilft Kindern insbesondere aus nicht so wohlhabenden Schichten. Und das hilft natürlich auch, Frauen, Beruf und Familie besser übereinander zu bringen. Ich habe selber eigene Erfahrung. Was ich nicht möchte, ist, dass wir in diesem Land einer eine Situation bekommen, wo es Kindern aus sozial schwächeren Familien, ich habe meine Abschlüsse über den zweiten Bildungsweg machen müssen, nicht mehr möglich ist, zu Deutschlands hohen und höchsten Schulen zu gehen, weil sie sie nicht bezahlen können. Also Offenheit muss bleiben. Daneben alles, was hilft, Qualität zu steigern, auch im nationalen Maßstab , das kann man mit mir machen. Aber das Prinzip, dass es auch Kindern aus sozial schwächeren Familien möglich sein muss, ein Abitur zu machen, ein Studium zu beginnen und abzuschließen ohne <unk> daß sie dabei sich in Schulden stürzen müssen, das halte ich für unaufgebbar und wie gesagt, das hat sehr, sehr mit meiner eigenen Biografie zu tun“.

(6.) Steinbrück 2013: Das würde ich gerne anders machen. Die Menschen haben heute die Möglichkeit, einen Test zu machen, und meine Bitte ist, lassen Sie sich nicht einlullen. Frau Merkel wird ihnen ein Land beschreiben, dass auf gutem Wege ist, indem vieles abgewartet wird und ausgesessen wird. Ich glaube das nicht. Sie wissen, dass man darüber Zukunft nicht gewinnen kann und das was ich von vielen Menschen gehört habe, während ich unterwegs gewesen bin. Die wollen heute Abend, dass wir ihre Nöte, ihre Sorgen, ihre Fragen diskutieren. Dazu werde ich so präzise Antworten wie möglich geben und nicht nur heute Abend, sondern wenn ich das Vertrauen bekomme, auch zukünftig als Bundeskanzler der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

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