

**Framing Contraception in the United States**  
**Examining the prominence of frames from 1923 to 1972**

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## **Framing Contraception in the United States**

The frames used in the debate over artificial contraception in the United States have varied over time. This paper demonstrates how the frames of “Health and Medicine”, “Religion and Natural Law” and “Eugenics and Population Control” persisted through the time period studied with “Health and Medicine” coming through as the most covered frame, while “Privacy and Freedom” did not emerge until the 1960s. I will show how the social construction theory described by Schneider and Ingram in 1993 supports the dominance of the “Health and Medicine” frame. For the purpose of this paper, artificial contraception does not include debates about abortion, forced sterilization, nor does it include natural methods of contraception such as *coitus interruptus* or the rhythm method.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section covers the historical background on the debate surrounding contraception beginning with the pro-contraception arguments and how they changed chronologically. After covering the pro-contraception arguments, the paper discusses the anti-contraception arguments and their evolution over time. In the following sections, I will demonstrate the key frames covered in the media and quantitatively analyze coverage of each frame in the New York Times from 1923 to 1972. I then discuss the theoretical explanations for the results I obtained for each frame from my keyword searches of media coverage in the New York Times.

## **Background**

The pro-contraception movement began to gain attention and traction in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many credit Margaret Sanger with the beginning of the pro-contraception movement, but in reality others like Emma Goldman started advocating for access contraception before Sanger (Kennedy, 1970). Margaret Sanger was, however, the most prominent figure of

the pro-contraception movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and popularized the term “birth control” (Kennedy, 1970). She illegally opened birth control clinics and published information about contraception using direct action to force contraception into the public spotlight (Kennedy, 1970). Sanger refused to plead guilty to an indictment stating it was because she wanted to “raise . . . birth control out of the gutter of obscenity and into the light of human understanding” (Kennedy, 1970, p. 78). Around the turn of the century, contraception was considered too obscene to be discussed and Sanger used what was considered to be radical action in an attempt to raise the debate of contraception into common discourse (Kennedy, 1970). During this time, Sanger often used the creator of the “Comstock Law”, Anthony Comstock, and the Catholic Church as foils for her movement, creating identifiable enemies for the pro-contraception movement which proved to be a useful tactic as anti-Catholic sentiment grew (Kennedy, 1970).

At the beginning of her career she was very concerned with the working class women. In the March 1914 edition of the *Woman Rebel*, Sanger promoted the slogan “No Gods, No Masters” and aimed her discussion towards working class women (Kennedy, 1970). She was focused on what she saw as the emancipation of women and promotion of birth control as the right and responsibility for women to control their means of reproduction (Kennedy, 1970). She deplored the conditions working women faced and often highlighted birth control as a health issue since many women died attempting to terminate their pregnancies themselves (Kennedy, 1970). This aligned Sanger more with socialist groups advocating for the working class than the wealthy elites. Other groups during this time period, like the National Birth Control League, took a less inflammatory strategy by trying to frame birth control as a purely scientific topic and aiming their efforts at repealing restrictive laws (Kennedy, 1970). These groups consisted of middle-class and wealthy white women appealing to more conservative groups (Kennedy,

1970). Sanger later moderated her approach and began to appeal to more middle-class or wealthy groups as well as doctors in an attempt to give the movement more mainstream credibility (Kennedy, 1970).

The pro-contraception movement shifted from being a women's emancipation movement to a solution to the concern over population and demographic shifts. This shift included Margaret Sanger. Influenced greatly by Havelock Ellis in England, Sanger began to promote a neo-Malthusian justification for the promotion of birth-control (Kennedy, 1970). The neo-Malthusian frame promoted birth control as a way to improve the economic conditions of the poor by limiting the number of children they had so they did not procreate beyond their economic means (Kennedy, 1970, p. 37). This neo-Malthusianism also connected to the eugenics movement of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sanger and others capitalized on the fear raised by the declining birthrate of white, native, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Kennedy, 1970). Sanger advocated for birth control for the lower-classes by describing how it would benefit the rest of society by limiting the reproduction of the "alien poor and unfit" (Kennedy, 1970, p. 113). In the 1960s, concerns many were concerned about a "population explosion" which would exceed the number of people the Earth had the resources to feed (Reed, 1984). This second wave of population control concerns continued with similar neo-Malthusian themes to the earlier eugenics movement regarding birth control (Reed, 1984).

Toward the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminist rhetoric centered strongly around right to reproductive control especially with the invention of the birth control pill (Watkins, 1998). By the late 1950s contraception use between married couples was generally seen as acceptable (Watkins, 1998). The 1960s and 1970 ushered in the dominance of the "privacy" and personal choice frames (Tobin, 2001). This is exemplified by the 1965 U.S. Supreme Court on a

Connecticut law prohibiting the use of birth control. The law was determined to be unconstitutional because it was a violation of a married couple's right to privacy (Watkins, 1998). This right was extended to unmarried people by a 1972 Supreme Court ruling (Watkins, 1998).

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the movement against artificial contraception was dominated by morality frames. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the main tactic to limit access to birth control was to condemn it as too obscene or improper to be discussed. The 1873 "Comstock Law" is a clear example of this strategy. Anthony Comstock, the secretary of New York's Society for the Suppression of Vice, successfully advocated for a law which made the distribution of "obscene" materials like contraceptives and contraceptive information a felony (Tobin, 2001). This law effectively kept contraception from public discourse and resulted in advocates for birth control, like Margaret Sanger, to be charged with felonies (Kennedy, 1970). While this frame effectively kept contraception from public discussion, it did not stop contraceptive use in private (Kennedy, 1970).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all major denominations in the Judeo-Christian world opposed contraception (Tobin, 2001). The Catholic Church in particular was one of the staunchest opponents of contraception. The Church espoused that God intended marital intercourse for procreation and any deviation from that intention would be going against natural law (Kennedy 1970). This natural law was not amenable or open to interpretation and ought to be applied to Catholics and non-Catholics alike in the eyes of the Church (Kennedy, 1970). The moral argument given by the Church focused largely on morality of personal behavior (Tobin, 2001). Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many church leaders were hesitant to even discuss contraception since it was considered so improper and obscene (Kennedy, 1970). The religious argument against

contraception greatly aligned with the frame laid out in the Comstock Law which condemned contraception to something practically unmentionable in public.

Another group which generally opposed artificial contraception included first-wave feminists. During the 1870s many feminists were supportive of “voluntary motherhood” but mostly advocated for natural contraceptive methods like abstinence (Baer, 2002). These early feminists were wary of contraception because they worried “removing the fear of conception would relieve men of any disincentives to exploit women sexually” (Baer, 2002, p.37). This final frame provided a different reason for opposing contraception. While this frame was not as prominent as the morality framework given by public officials and the Church, it provides a different view from a seemingly unlikely group.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the morality frames continued to be popular but anti-immigrant, eugenic, and population degradation frames rose in popularity. As immigration to America grew and the nation industrialized, xenophobic rhetoric was pervasive. American birth rates were declining particularly among wealthy and white Americans while immigrant parents tended to have large families (Kennedy, 1970). This concerned many people including President Theodore Roosevelt. He stated that if the United States were to become more prominent in world affairs, Americans needed to have larger families (Kennedy, 1970). In 1903, Roosevelt said America was committing “race suicide” (Kennedy, 1970). In his view this was because the “native American stock” had declining fertility rates (Kennedy, 1970). This frame took hold of anti-contraception proponents for the next forty years as they blamed contraceptive use for the declining fertility among the more “desirable” groups (Kennedy, 1970).

In the early 1900s the Catholic Church continued to oppose contraception on the grounds that it was against the natural law but as eugenic arguments grew and Margaret Sanger rose to be

a prominent figure they altered their approach. There was much criticism of Catholicism during this period. During this time, many were criticizing the mostly immigrant Catholic families of having too many children, the Church was seen as too hierarchical to be pro-democratic, the Ku Klux Klan was experiencing a resurgence, and Margaret Sanger singled out the Catholic Church as one of the greatest enemies of the pro-contraception movement (Tobin, 2001).

The Catholic Church changed its rhetoric, but not its stance on birth control as it confronted strong opposition and attacks from different groups. The Catholic Church tried to appear as patriotic and pro-American as possible while still being anti-contraception (Tobin, 2001). The natural law argument was unalterable and applied to Catholics and non-Catholics alike and so, in order to avoid appearing anti-democratic, the Church shifted its focus to supporting the anti-contraception laws that already existed (Tobin, 2001). The Church fought against the rising neo-Malthusianism with a pro-American argument stating that overpopulation concerns were not valid in the United States since it was abundant in space and resources (Tobin, 2001). It also painted Margaret Sanger as a radical that might threaten order in the United States (Tobin, 2001). The Church did not want to be seen as imposing its views on the American people and thus was careful to use patriotic arguments against contraception.

The careful tendency of the Church to appear democratic is not to say it abandoned the morality and natural law frame. In 1931, Pope Pius XI published *Casti connubii* condemning contraception as against the natural law and stated the prohibiting contraception was in the interest of the common good (Kalbian, 2014). This continued to be the stance of the Church for decades to come. Pope Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae* (1968) doubling down on the natural law argument (Kalbian, 2014). The Church also worried that the promotion of contraceptives would condone sexual promiscuity (Kalbian, 2014).

In the 1950s, contraceptive use was starting to be seen as more permissible for married women but not for unmarried women (Watkins, 1998). The frame used for unmarried women, however, depended on class. Contraceptive use by unmarried upper and middle-class women was considered unacceptable because it implied that these women were planning ahead to have premarital sex (Watkins, 1998). This concern was not extended towards poor women because at this time economic concerns over unwanted babies was considered to be of greater importance (Watkins, 1998).

To conclude, contraception moved from relative obscurity to a generally accepted practice for most individuals. Actors such as Margaret Sanger, the American Birth Control League, and feminist groups pushed for birth control access though their frames varied across time and included neo-Malthusianism, eugenics and population control, and women's rights to reproductive health and control. The anti-contraception movement largely used morality frames as well as nativist population decline frames with the later fading from prominence before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## Data Collection and Measurement

### *New York Times* Stories on Contraception

I first worked to identify all stories related to contraception and birth-control covered in *The New York Times* and available through ProQuest from 1923-1972. To achieve this, first, I identified the common terms used to refer to contraception including “birth control” and “family planning.” I made sure to include keywords relevant for each time period, for example “family planning” became extremely prominent after the 1960s as shown in Figure 1 obtained from Google Ngram Viewer. I then used those terms to search for the articles *New York Times* which pertained to contraception in the United States. I then limited the search to only news articles, editorials, cover stories, or features.

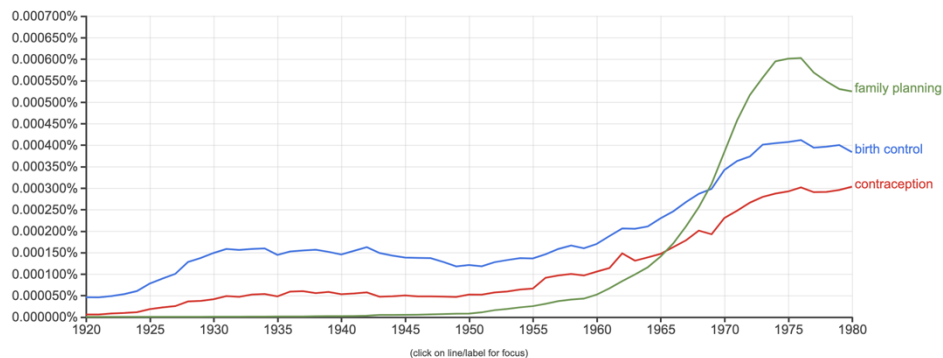


Figure 1

After reading through various articles given by the search, I eliminated various “false hits” that did not pertain to the contraception in the United States by excluding certain words and phrases. For example, many of the stories that included my keyword “birth control” and also mentioned China centered nearly exclusively on population growth in China. After I identified that pattern, I excluded any article which mentioned “China” in order to eliminate stories which did not pertain to my topic. Additionally, I excluded results that appeared in the “Books” and “Radio” sections of the *New York Times* because these results generally did not include coverage

of contraception but rather brief mentions of books about contraception or schedules of upcoming radio segments that mentioned contraception. Since my search included thousands of results, I broke my search into three time periods: 1923-1942, 1943-1962, and 1963-1972. In order to determine how well my string of search terms captured stories on contraception without false hits, I systematically examined articles in the search. I read 20 random articles in each period. For each of the three time periods, I sorted results from the oldest articles to the newest articles. In order to get as representative of a sample as possible, I divided the number of results by 20 and read an article at each interval. In other words, if there were 80 results I divided 80 by 20 to get 4 and read each article that appeared at multiples of 4 (article number 4, then 8, then 12, then 16 and so on). If the article was not related to contraception it was considered a “false hit”. I did this to ensure my “true hit” rate was at least 80%. Table 1 shows my string of search terms for each time period.

Table 1. Search Terms Used to Identify Contraception-Related Stories, 1923–1972.

<b>Years</b>	<b>Search Terms</b>
<b>1923-1942</b>	((contraception OR "family planning" OR "birth control" OR "contraceptive device") AND PUBID(45545)) NOT (China OR Japan OR Italy OR Berlin OR "developing country" OR "poor country" OR wildlife OR communism) NOT sec(books) NOT sec(Radio)) AND (at.exact("Article" OR "Feature" OR "Editorial" OR "Front Page/Cover Story") AND pd(19230101-19421231))
<b>1943-1962</b>	((contraception OR "family planning" OR "birth control" OR "contraceptive device") AND PUBID(45545) NOT (China OR Soviet OR India OR Japan OR Italy OR Berlin OR France OR "developing country" OR "poor country" OR "wildlife" OR communism OR "game management" OR "stock prices")) NOT sec(books) NOT sec(Radio)) AND (at.exact("Article" OR "Feature" OR "Front Page/Cover Story" OR "Editorial") AND pd(19430101-19621231))
<b>1963-1972</b>	((contraception OR "family planning" OR "birth control" OR "contraceptive device") AND PUBID(45545) NOT (China OR Soviet OR India OR Japan OR Italy OR Berlin OR France OR "developing country" OR "poor country" OR "wildlife" OR communism OR "game management" OR "stock prices")) NOT sec(books) NOT sec(Radio)) AND (at.exact("Article" OR "Feature" OR "Front Page/Cover Story" OR "Editorial") AND pd(19630101-19721231))

### *Five Frames*

Through background research and reading various *New York Times* articles during the period of focus I identified four key frames. These frames include subframes within them. For example, the “Eugenics and Population Control” frame includes the argument that birth control should be used to limit birth from “undesirable” groups but should not be used by “desirable” groups like wealthy white couples. The “Eugenics and Population Control” frame also includes neo-Malthusian arguments discussion birth control should be used by the United States as a means to prevent population explosion around the world.

- Religion and Natural Law: contraception is sinful and should not be used because it violates God’s natural law defining sex for procreation within a marriage
- Eugenics and Population Control: contraception should be used in ways to control or manipulate population growth

- Health and medicine: contraception is a matter of health, under the domain of doctors, and should be administered to women by medical professionals
- Privacy and Freedom: Government restriction on birth control access infringes upon an individual's right to privacy and freedom

Through reading coverage of contraception in the *New York Times*, I identified language and phrases that frequently accompany each frame. I then created a string of search terms for each frame based off of those phrases. I refined these search strings in a similar way to the way I created my general contraception search strings in Table 1. Table 2 gives the search string for each frame.

Table 2. Identifying Frames of Contraception through Electronic Search Terms

Frame	Search Terms
<b>Religion and Natural Law</b>	"natural law" OR "God's law" OR "Pope Pius" OR (sinful near/3 "birth control") OR (sinful near/3 contraception)
<b>Eugenics and Population Control</b>	"native stock" OR "immigrant poor" OR "race suicide" OR "Anglo-Saxon race" OR "inferior stock" OR "over-population" OR "eugenists" OR "feeble-minded" OR Malthus??? OR "population explosion"
<b>Health and Medicine</b>	(health W/3 women) OR (administered w/3 doctor or physician) OR prescription OR "medically supervised" OR clinical OR "Medical advice" AND NOT (race or unfit or "native population" or alien)
<b>Privacy and Freedom</b>	("private right" OR "private matter" OR "right to privacy" OR "freedom of speech" OR "women's freedom" OR "sexual freedom" OR "free to choose" OR "14th amendment" OR "first amendment" OR "comstock law" )

Note: These searches were run on the results obtained after searching for contraception-related stories with the search terms reported in Table 1.

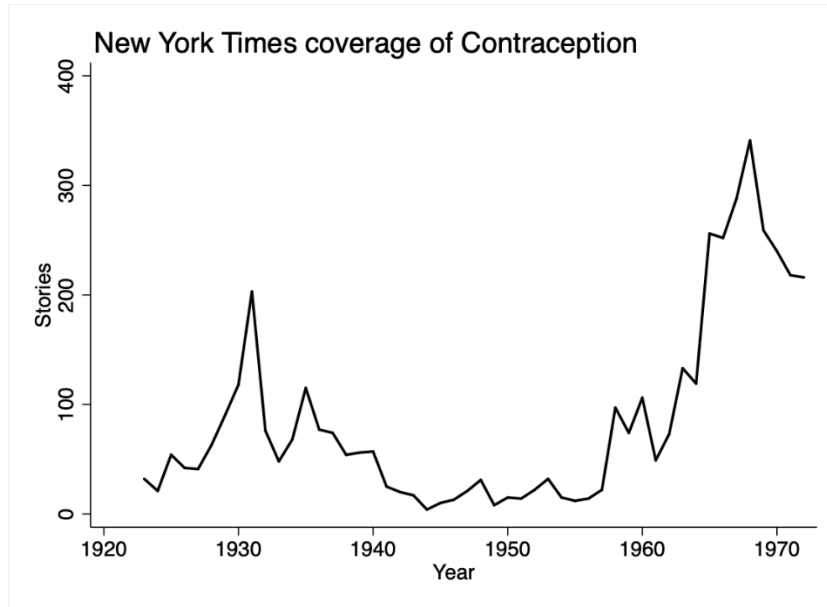


Figure 2

Figure 2 represents all coverage about contraception found in the New York Times from the years 1923-1972 using the search terms in Table 1. There appear to be two main peaks in coverage around the 1930s and between 1960 and 1970.

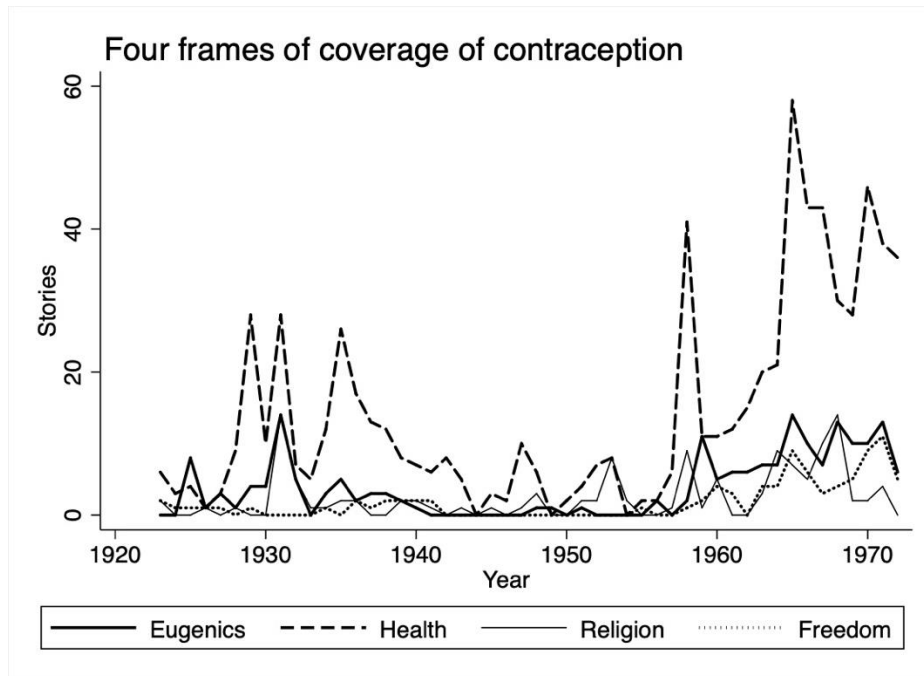


Figure 3

Figure 3 represents the number of stories that contain each of the four frames between the years 1923 and 1972. The “Health and Medicine” frame was the most covered throughout time with much more coverage throughout the 1960s than the remaining three frames. The “Privacy and Freedom” frame did not gain much coverage until around the 1960s. The “Eugenics and Population Control” frame as well as the “Religion and Natural Law Frame” were covered during both of the observed spikes in coverage but were not nearly as common as the “Health and Medicine” frame.

## **Discussion**

One theory which supports the success and prominence of the “Health and Medicine” frame comes from a 1993 paper by Schneider and Ingram on the construction of target populations. Schneider and Ingram write that policy benefits are more likely to be subscribed to positively constructed and strongly groups, known as advantaged groups, whereas benefits are likely to be undersubscribed to weak groups, such as “deviants” or “dependents” (1993). As discussed earlier, Sanger began her movement fighting for birth control access for working class and poor women. These women were generally did not hold much political power and were sometimes viewed negatively by society, especially poor immigrant women. According to Schneider and Ingram these kinds of weak and negatively constructed target groups are likely to have benefits be undersubscribed. Sanger and other pro-contraception actors eventually aligned themselves with doctors and more elite or well-respected groups. This is connected to the “Health and Medicine” frame where pro-contraception actors pushed contraception to be viewed as something under the domain of doctors. Doctors are generally positively socially constructed and hold more political power. According to Schneider and Ingram, if doctors are considered an advantaged group they are more likely to receive benefits (1993). This supports the prominence

and success of the “Health and Medicine” frame because doctors are more likely to receive benefits and if the benefits these doctors seek is the ability to prescribe birth control and provide contraceptive information they are much more likely to find success than negatively constructed groups like poor immigrant women seeking the benefit of control over their reproduction.

An explanation for why the “Privacy and Freedom” frame took much longer to take hold could be the result of a shift in the Overton window. Overton argued that the shift in what is considered mainstream or acceptable begins with the public (Astor, 2019). What is considered part of mainstream public discourse is considered within the Overton window (Astor, 2019). As discussed earlier, by the 1950s contraceptive use by married couples was generally considered acceptable (Watkins, 1998). This was the time period when the “Privacy and Freedom” frame emerged. Accompanying this shift in public approval, the Supreme court reached pro-contraception decisions in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972). Before contraception was widely used in private, it is hard to imagine public officials stating they believe access to birth control is a matter of freedom and privacy since it was considered obscene. After lots of grassroots efforts and education, birth control became widely used and accepted and stating that birth control was a matter of a right to privacy and freedom was no longer as politically controversial. In other words, once the Overton window shifted in the birth control debate, the “Privacy and Freedom” frame could emerge. Previous frames like “Eugenics and Population Control” or “Health and Medicine” promoted birth control in a much more limited scope. The “Privacy and Freedom” frame says there should be no limits on who can use birth control which would have been considered radical before birth control was widely used by the public.

The persistence of the “Eugenics and Population Control” frame is supported by the causal stories theory described by Deborah Stone (1989). In beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, many people, including Margaret Sanger and other pro-contraception advocates, began to believe that poor, mostly Catholic, immigrants were having large families while white Anglo-Saxon protestants were having smaller families contributing to fears that the “native American stock” would decline in population relative to immigrants and people of color (Kennedy, 1970). In the 1960s many in the United States became concerned about a “population explosion” which would deplete the Earth’s resources (Kennedy, 1970). The “Eugenics and Population Control” frame took what could have been seen as a natural phenomenon outside of the control of man or the government and turned it into a political problem that had a solution. The problem was families having too many children. Birth control advocates argued this was because of a lack of access to or knowledge about contraceptives. The explanation for the cause included the inadvertent cause that the families were ignorant which had unintended consequences of very large families. Stone discusses how once actors can define a problem as being within the realm of human control, they can become political problems that can be solved through policy and action (1989). This applies to “Eugenics and Population Control” because the cause went from natural or accidental into an inadvertent cause from purposeful action by individuals which had unintended consequences of too many children being born. Birth control advocates took advantage of this frame and proposed contraceptives as the solution to this problem.

The “Religion and Natural Law” frame continued to have some coverage due to the strength of religious views. The Catholic Church continued their stance throughout this time period. Individuals with strongly held religious beliefs about contraception likely did not change



their view over this time period. Lord, Ross, and Lepper wrote “People who hold strong opinions on complex social issues are likely to examine relevant empirical evidence in a biased manner. They are apt to accept ‘confirming’ evidence at face value while subjecting “discontinuing” evidence to critical evaluation” (1979). This suggests that those who hold strong beliefs on complex social issues are not likely to change their stance when confronted with empirical evidence. While the evidence brought against or in support of the religious frame was not necessarily empirical, any kind of evidence that contradicted the stance of the Catholic Church was rejected by the Catholic Church. This pattern is similar to that found by Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979). This could explain why this frame and stance by the Catholic Church persisted throughout the time period I studied.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have shown how the frames of “Health and Medicine”, “Religion and Natural Law” and “Eugenics and Population Control” persisted through the time period I studied with “Health and Medicine” coming through as the most covered frame, while “Privacy and Freedom” did not emerge until almost the 1960s. The “Health and Medicine” frame’s prominence could be explained by the social construction theory. The results of this paper suggest that while certain strong frames can persist throughout time, like the “Religion and Natural Law” or “Eugenics and Population Control” frames, in the context of contraceptive access for women, the professionalization and legitimization of linking to a positively constructed social group was particularly powerful for the movement.

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