

## Representations of pro-choice protesters in US news media

Charlotte-Rose Kennedy (Birmingham City University, UK)

Gavin Brookes (Lancaster University, UK)

### Abstract

In June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned the landmark *Roe v. Wade* ruling and, with that decision, revoked access to safe abortion for many women across the country. The decision was anticipated and immediately followed by protests from pro-choice campaigners, who challenged the decision, arguing that it would pose a threat to the health of women across the US and compound existing inequalities relating to ethnicity and social class. In this article, we use a corpus-based approach to Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the representation of the protests in US national newspapers between May and July of 2022. Focusing in particular on the representation of the protests' worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment, we find that generally the protests are afforded legitimacy in the coverage, with only the representation of worthiness bucking this trend. Following the analysis, we consider the possible motivations for this somewhat complex picture and consider the broader implications and future directions for similar such protests and women's reproductive rights more generally.

### 1. Introduction

On 22 January 1973, the United States (US) Supreme Court passed a decision known as *Roe v. Wade*, which established women's legal right to have an abortion under the constitutional right to privacy. The ruling effectively made it unconstitutional for any state to ban abortion outright, and it was predicated on the 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection under the law. The decision allowed for unrestricted abortions during the first trimester of pregnancy, permitted states to regulate abortions to protect the mother's health in the second trimester, and allowed states to restrict or ban abortions during the third trimester in cases where the foetus would be viable outside the womb. *Roe v. Wade* represented a landmark decision in terms of the advancement of women's reproductive rights and health (Joffe 2013). Yet while the decision was welcomed by those on the so-called "pro-choice" side of the debate, it was also met with opposition from those, mainly from conservative and religious groups, held an "anti-abortion" stance (Hull and Hoffer 2010). Accordingly, the ruling has represented a divisive issue within US society, with its implementation subsequently being subject to state-level legal challenges that have variously sought to limit its scope and essentially erode its effectiveness (Hull and Hoffer 2010).

Fast-forward to 24 June 2022, and the US Supreme Court has revoked the constitutional right to access safe abortion care, thereby overturning the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision. The decision means that, at the time of writing, individual states within the US now have the authority to implement their own laws concerning abortion. The ruling can be viewed as part of a broader anti-gender movement, fuelled in recent years by the global momentum of right-wing populism (Graff and Koralczuk 2022), which has resulted in a broader "rolling back" of women's hard-won reproductive rights in the US and elsewhere (Chalupnik and Brookes 2022).

The issue of abortion rights is thus a profoundly gendered one, and the capacity to control one's own reproductive decisions—including the choice to terminate a pregnancy—impacts women's lives in numerous ways, including with respect not only to their physical health, but also their educational prospects, economic stability, and psychological and

emotional well-being (Berg and Woods 2023). When viewed through a bio-political lens (Foucault 1978), control over women's reproductive rights and choices can be interpreted as a mechanism for controlling women themselves. As such, the denial of abortion rights can be seen to represent a particular articulation of—or may even be interpreted as an effect of—hegemonic power. This form of bio-political control both derives its power from and sustains a gender order that privileges most men and marginalizes most women (Repo 2015).

The overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling in June 2022 therefore represented a controversial decision, and was swiftly followed—and indeed anticipated—by intense social, political and legal fallout. Some of the most visible expressions of this opposition have come in the form of protests staged throughout the US (and beyond) both prior to and in the immediate aftermath of this latest ruling. In this paper, we consider how the news media in the US represented these protests, based on an analysis of a corpus of newspaper articles published in the month of, prior to, and in the wake of the ruling. Our specific aim is to determine, through our corpus-based critical discourse analysis, the extent to which such coverage can be interpreted as legitimating (or alternatively, delegitimizing) the protests. Following the analysis, we will consider the motivations for the representations identified, and consider their implications for wider debates around reproductive rights within the US. Before introducing our methods and analysis, we will first explore the role (and importance) of the news media in terms of constructing and legitimating protests, and thus in ultimately influencing public perceptions of and support for particular protests.

## **2. The news media and the legitimization of protest**

### **2.1. News media representations of protest**

The news media has significant social power with which it is able to influence its readership, limiting freedom of action and influencing knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies (Van Dijk 1996, 84). This is particularly pertinent in the context of protests, since the news media provides a platform through which protests can air their causes and—if that news coverage is sympathetic or broadly positive—build support for those causes and even recruit new members. News media coverage of protests can therefore play a key role in building (or, conversely, suppressing) public support for a protest's cause—public support that can, in turn, translate into the kind of support from politicians and policymakers that protests often require in order to meet their aims and achieve political victories (Laschever 2017, 359).

By their nature, protests have the potential to be newsworthy, dramatic, and violent (Greer and McLaughlin 2010, 1041). As such, critical analysis of their mediated representations has typically found denigrative coverage. For example, Nijjar (2015, 9) found that the British tabloid *The Express* constructed the 2011 English riot participants as “the folk devils of society,” interpreting the unrest as “an episode of destruction and apocalypse.” Focusing on environmental ecotage protests, Wagner (2008) found that US newspapers used a discourse of fear to frame ecotage as “ecoterrorism,” redirecting public anger away from callous corporate polluters towards the “terrorist” protesters. Meanwhile, Hart (2014) found that of six national daily UK newspapers that covered the 2010 student demonstrations against higher tuition fees, only *The Guardian* called into question police violence against protesters. *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Express*, and *The Daily Mail* were all found to legitimate police actions and to delegitimize those of the protesters, framing the demonstrations as a “deviation from normative behaviour” that authorities must defend against

(Hart 2014, 180). Moreover, in their analysis of the media representations of the anti-austerity Right to Water protests that took place in Ireland in 2014, Power, Haynes, and Devereux (2016, 272) argue that while some protesters were described by political elites as “reasonable people,” this was merely an attempt to fragment the burgeoning social movement into disparate groups (“reasonable people” versus the “sinister fringe”) and garner support for their announcement of a revised water charges schedule (i.e., what political elites perceived to be the “middle ground” between their policies and the demands of the protesters). Disagreements between the protesters and the state were therefore represented as “external to the realm of reasoned argumentation” and accordingly delegitimated (Power, Haynes, and Devereux 2016, 271). Elsewhere, Donson, Chesters, Welsh, Tickle (2004, 8) researched the largely peaceful anti-capitalist 2000 May Day protests in London to find that these were portrayed by the media as “incoherent, chaotic and dangerous,” possibly in an attempt to justify the tough tactics the police intended to take to deal with similar protests in the future. Similarly, von Zabern and Tulloch (2021, 38) found that the peaceful climate change protesters from the Fridays for Future movement—all of whom were children—were disparaged in the press as “truants with questionable motives” and a threat to the political and socioeconomic order.

As perpetrators of status-quo-enforcing ideologies, the news media’s habitual, delegitimizing representations of protests work to silence alternative voices, not only in relation to the issues about which a given set of demonstrators might be protesting, but also in relation to wider debates regarding the very rights of citizens to protest in the first place (Donson, Chesters, Welsh, Tickle 2004, 2). As exposure to just one news story slanted against demonstrations can make audiences more critical of protesters and more supportive of powerful institutions, unfavourable media coverage which seeks to delegitimize protests and their causes can therefore “inhibit the growth of movements, hasten their decline, and hinder their effectiveness” (McLeod 1999, 43–44).

## 2.2. (De)legitimizing protest

Rojo and Van Dijk (1997, 528) argue that social and political legitimation involves the pursuit of normative approval through expressions that are consistent with society’s moral order and the principles agreed upon by the majority of the public. One of the ways in which such legitimation can be evoked is by reference to authority (Van Leeuwen 2018, 147)—be that institutional authority or the authority of conformity. Reference to authority answers the implicit question *why should I do this?* with the response *because I say so*, where the *I* is someone in whom authority is vested (Van Leeuwen 2007, 94). For example, it is likely that a protest’s perceived legitimacy will be enhanced through reference to authorisation if a politician—a powerful authority—endorses a social movement. Conversely, if a politician demonises or undermines a social movement, it is likely that the protest’s perceived legitimacy will diminish (Kennedy 2023). Reference to conformity answers the implicit question *why should I do this?* with the response *because everybody else is and so should you* (Van Leeuwen 2007, 97). This is because a large group of people shown to be in collective agreement constitutes a valuable display of support and endorsement (Van Leeuwen 2007, 96), which are key aspects of legitimation (Reyes 2011, 782). Newspaper reports of hundreds of thousands—or even millions—of attendees at a protest could therefore have a mobilising (conforming) effect on readers.

Reports of high turnouts also imbue a protest with a sense of legitimacy through moral evaluation: a large protest characterises its effectiveness, strength, and force, and therefore its

legitimacy (Tilly 2006). This is particularly pertinent for increased mobilisation, as the greater the perceived legitimacy of a protest, the higher the probability of future participation becomes (Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez 2018, 245). Moral evaluation legitimisation is based on moral values: what is good or bad, what is right or wrong. Van Leeuwen (2007, 97) argues that such values are scarcely made so explicit and are instead hinted at implicitly through value-laden adjectives that convert moral discourses into more generalised motives (Van Leeuwen 2007, 97–98).

Legitimation can also be realised through instrumental rationalisation, which constitutes expressions of purpose that explain why social practices and actions exist (Van Leeuwen 2007, 101). That is not to say that all purposes are legitimate: in order to serve as legitimations, purposes must contain an element of moralisation (Van Leeuwen 2007, 101). This is because it is rooted in the philosophical traditions of morality that explicitly argue for purposefulness as a criterion of ethical behaviour (Van Leeuwen 2018, 148). Implicit moral attributes of behaviours therefore need to be recognised in order for the legitimisation of an action to be effective or persuasive (Gasaway-Hill 2018, 9).

Given the power of news media to legitimate or delegitimize protests, the aim of the present study is to examine the extent to which the US news media could be considered to legitimate or delegitimize the protests surrounding the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. We seek to determine this through a corpus-based approach to the Critical Discourse Analysis of the discursive representations of the protests in newspaper articles published at the height of the demonstrations. To our knowledge, this represents the first study of the representations of these recent protests. In the next section, we describe our methods, including the data assembled for this study and the approach we take to it.

### **3. Methods: Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis**

Our approach to examining the representation of pro-choice protesters in the US news media combines techniques from corpus linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Corpus linguistics can be considered a collection of methods (and a field of research) that involves studying naturally occurring language use in (large) bodies of machine-readable text (McEnery and Hardie 2012). This body of text is known as a corpus (pl. *corpora*). Corpora are typically large (often too large to be analysed manually) and are designed to be representative of a language or of a particular context of language use. CDA, meanwhile, is an interdisciplinary field of problem-oriented research that focuses on the analysis of language as a social practice through which ideologies and power relations are expressed, maintained, and challenged (Fairclough 1995, 2015). CDA combines analysis of language in use or “discourse” with due consideration of the political, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it takes place. On a theoretical level, the analytical approach we take in this paper aligns with Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA. These dimensions are: (1) *text* (the product of discursive practice); (2) *discursive practice* (the link between texts and socio-cultural practices); and (3) *socio-cultural practice* (the conditions that govern discursive practices).

Our interpretation of the discursive representations of the pro-choice protesters is also informed by Tilly’s (2004, 2006) concept of WUNC (Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, Commitment). This concept provides something of a theoretical scorecard against which a protest’s potential success, strength, and impact can be measured. WUNC displays embodied effective demonstrations and represent “serious stakes”—they convey crucial political

messages that say “pay attention to us; we matter” (Tilly 2006, 292). As such, a protest with high displays of WUNC—i.e., high levels of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment—is more likely to convince the public and politicians to support its goals. On the other hand, a protest that displays low levels of these qualities (or that does not display these qualities at all) is less likely to gain support. Because of this, disputes over protest actions often centre on the components of WUNC. For example, a protest’s critics will be more likely to say it attracted a smaller turnout than its advocates will be (Tilly 2006, 291). Because it is primarily through the mass media that the public and politicians observe demonstrations, coverage that affords protests high levels of WUNC make it more likely that a protest will gain sympathy and support (Wouters and Walgrave 2015, 112). Conversely, if a protest’s WUNC is downplayed, discredited or completely omitted from coverage, it is unlikely that a protest will achieve its aims. Editors and journalists therefore have the power to discursively lessen or heighten a protest’s mediated WUNC displays in a way that serves and is consistent with the ideological or commercial interests of the media organization or individuals involved (Kennedy 2022a). On a practical level, our CDA is guided, at the interpretive stage (described below) by Tilly’s (2004) WUNC framework, which we apply through a corpus linguistic methodology, following Kennedy (2022a; 2022b). In the following sub-sections, we first describe the compilation of our corpus data, before outlining our corpus-based approach to CDA, which we characterise in terms of the analytical stages of description, interpretation, and explanation.

### 3.1. Data

The data analysed in this study is a corpus comprising US national news articles reporting on the pro-choice protests that anticipated and followed the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. Using the online news repository *Lexis Nexis*, we searched for articles (including those from newspapers and web-based publications, but not news blogs) published in the US that contained the term *protest\** in the headline and/or lead paragraph (note, the asterisk acts as a wildcard to stand in for any chain of contiguous characters, thereby including not only the term *protest* itself, but also terms such as *protests*, *protesting*, *protesters*, and so on). To ensure the protests being covered were indeed related to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, we also stipulated that the body of the article should contain either the term *roe v wade* or *roe vs wade* at least once. We focused on articles published over a three-month period: May (the month prior to the ruling), June (the month of the ruling), and July (the month that followed the ruling). Using May 1, 2022 to July 31, 2022 as the timespan for our data, we further narrowed our focus to those newspapers that published at least 5 articles during this period. The resulting corpus comprises 632 articles (504,894 words), contributed by 28 print and online newspapers.

### 3.2. Analytical approach

Our corpus-based CDA of representations of the pro-choice protesters in this corpus proceeds, in a practical sense, across three stages: i. description, ii. interpretation, and iii. explanation (see Fairclough 1995). We will describe our analytical approach in terms of each of these steps, below.

The first stage, description, involved analysing structural and linguistic features. Here, we employed the corpus linguistic method of collocation analysis, a computational technique in which statistical measures are used to determine the extent to which two or more words have a measurably strong preference to occur together, as opposed to being randomly associated (Brookes and McEnery 2020).

The identification and analysis of frequent or statistically salient collocational relationships can grant insight into a given word's "company" or "relation", in turn shedding light on its associations, connotations, and patterns of use. Analysing a word's collocates is therefore useful when considering representation because collocates can reveal how the phenomenon with which they co-occur is evaluated in discourse (Kennedy, Brookes, and Cherniaeva forthcoming). To conduct our collocation analysis, we first uploaded our corpus to the online analysis tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff, Rychlý, Smrž, and Tugwell 2004). This tool automatically tags the language in the corpus for grammatical information, which allows the user to search for particular syntactic patterns in the data using the "word sketch" function (see Brookes and Chałupnik 2023). For this analysis, we identified collocates of the word *protester*\* (LogDice score:  $\geq 8$ ; minimum frequency: 5), and restricted our focus to those collocates that Sketch Engine's automated grammatical annotation identified as denoting processes of which *protester*\* was the subject. This allowed us to describe the processes that were attributed to the protesters (in other words, what they were represented as *doing*), which we then proceeded to interpret in terms of their representational functions.

The second stage, interpretation, involved focusing on the processes by which discourse is formed. Here, we manually analysed all uses of the qualifying collocates in context (using Sketch Engine's "concordance" function) and interpreted these uses in terms of their capacity to legitimate or delegitimize the protests. For this, we used Kennedy's (2022a, 2022b) "linguistic WUNC framework," which operationalizes Tilly's (2004) aforementioned conceptualisation of WUNC for CDA. Within the framework, worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment constitute representational axes, whereby protests can be represented as exhibiting "high" or "low" displays of these positively valued qualities. The four elements of WUNC variously encode legitimation through reference to authority, conformity, and morality, meaning that protests represented as being "high" in these qualities are afforded greater legitimacy than those that exhibit a "low" level of these same qualities. Below, we briefly demonstrate each of these qualities, using examples from our corpus to demonstrate how these were operationalized in our analysis (for more detail on the linguistic manifestations of WUNC, see Kennedy 2022a, 2022b).

### *Worthiness*

Tilly (2008, 121, 144) argues that respectable protesters who behave with decorum and discipline display worthiness. The participation of such good and deserving citizens indicates that a protest is worthy: its participants avoid violent activity, they protest peacefully and make demands legitimately. Choosing to report on protesters' actions through transitive verbs that express violent behaviour can lessen their mediated displays of worthiness ("U.S. senators could be *targeted* by protesters at their homes" [Newsweek.com]). On the other hand, choosing to represent protesters' actions through transitive verbs that encode peaceful behaviour can increase their mediated displays of worthiness ("The protesters *expressed* frustration with politics and joy in community" [Tampa Bay Times]). Protests are also said to be worthy when they are attended or supported by elite people (in other words, those with vested institutional authority [Van Leeuwen 2007, 92]) who imbue a demonstration with a sense of legitimacy (Tilly 2004, 4; Kennedy 2022b, 93). In contrast, elite and institutionally authoritative people who

speak out against or criticise a protest impact its perceived worthiness (Kennedy 2022b, 97).

### *Unity*

Tilly (1999, 261) defines high displays of unity as those that express direct affirmation of a goal or identity, signalled by collectively marching, dancing, singing, and cheering, as well as dressing uniformly. Broadcasts of unity can be realised in discourse through predication and referential strategies that describe protesters wearing matching clothes, or when protesters are the collectivised agents of transitive clauses (Kennedy 2022a, 617), for example: “As the numbers grew, the *protesters* started to *simultaneously chant*” (*University Wire*).

### *Numbers*

High displays of numbers are broadcasted through large numbers of activists filling streets and signing petitions (Tilly 2004, 4). Numbers can be realised linguistically through verbs (“Protesters [...] *flooded* streets and state Capitol steps” [*Newsweek.com*]) and referential strategies that infer high numbers through aggregation (“*thousands* of protesters” (*The Salt Lake Tribune*) or collectivisation (“*a large group* of abortion rights protesters” [*USA Today*]) (Van Leeuwen 2008, 37). However, aggregation and collectivisation (as well as individualisation) can also be used to reduce mediated displays of numbers if they express small turnouts (“*about 15* protesters” (*Telegraph Herald*); “*A small group* of pro-abortion protesters” [*The Daily Caller*]).

### *Commitment*

Tilly (1999, 261; 2004, 4) defines broadcasts of commitment as persistence in “costly or risky activity,” “declarations of readiness to persevere,” resistance to attack and repression, “braving bad weather,” visible participation by elderly people or those with illnesses or disabilities, and “ostentatious” sacrifice, subscription, and benefaction to a cause. High displays of commitment can be expressed through transitive verbs that describe protesters engaging in sacrifice or risk (“The protesters were *prepared for the possibility of arrest* at the onset” [*The Philadelphia Daily News*]). Referential and predication strategies could also represent high levels of commitment if they describe the characteristics Tilly (2004, 4) deems “committed” (for example, old age: “the *grey haired and wrinkled protesters* outnumber the millennials and Gen Z’s” [*University Wire*]), risk (“*Topless* pro-Roe protesters stormed the court” [*Insider*]), or persistence (“Sadie Kuhns, an organizer with Our Rights DC, a group created by protesters in May that has *organized more than 30 protests* outside the homes of the conservative justices, said...” [*New York Times*]).

Following this framework, we analysed all uses of the qualifying collocates (cumulative frequency: 524) in concordance lines. Of these, 383 (73.09%) were found to provide representations of pro-choice protesters. We manually coded all 383 of these cases with one of the following codes, based on the WUNC framework described above: high worthiness, high unity, high numbers, high commitment, or low worthiness, low unity, low numbers, low commitment. Applying the linguistic WUNC framework thus granted us a means of

determining the degrees of legitimacy (broadly, *high* and *low*) that were afforded to the protests in relation to these particular qualities. While the above outline of discursive WUNC displays is not exhaustive, it provides detail of some of the ways in which news media texts are able to construct protests as (il)legitimate in the ways they represent displays of WUNC in their coverage of demonstrations.

The final stage of our analysis, explanation, involved examining the discourse features identified through the previous stages within their social, political, and cultural contexts. This stage is reported primarily within Section 5, where we draw on wider sources and our contextual knowledge in order to explain observed patterns and, with reference to the three dimensions of discourse outlined by Fairclough (1995), account for their potential motivations and societal implications with a particular focus on the reproductive rights of women in the US and elsewhere.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Quantitative findings

As described in the previous section, we began the analysis by searching for collocates that denoted processes of which the term *protester\** was the subject. The qualifying collocates that met the statistical and frequency thresholds are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Collocates denoting processes of which *protester\** is the subject, ranked by frequency.

Rank	Collocate	Frequency	LogDice score
1	<i>be</i>	70	8.3
2	<i>gather</i>	38	10.9
3	<i>have</i>	38	8.7
4	<i>march</i>	28	10.6
5	<i>chant</i>	24	10.4
6	<i>take</i>	19	9.6
7	<i>hold</i>	14	9.5
8	<i>demonstrate</i>	12	9.5
9	<i>show</i>	12	9.0
10	<i>rally</i>	10	9.1
11	<i>block</i>	8	8.8
12	<i>target</i>	7	8.7
13	<i>attempt</i>	6	8.5
14	<i>shout</i>	6	8.5
15	<i>follow</i>	7	8.4
16	<i>express</i>	6	8.4
17	<i>stand</i>	6	8.3
18	<i>wave</i>	5	8.2
19	<i>descend</i>	5	8.2
20	<i>walk</i>	5	8.2
21	<i>carry</i>	5	8.2

Of all 383 concordance lines analysed, 276 (72.06%) were found to constitute representations of protests' worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. Of these, 202 (73.18%) included high levels of WUNC and 75 (26.81%) featured low levels of WUNC (Table 2).



Table 2: Quantitative analysis of representations of WUNC displays in

<b>WUNC display</b>	<b>Total occurrences</b>	<b>High displays</b>	<b>Low displays</b>
Worthiness	76	14 (18.42%)	62 (81.58%)
Unity	109	103 (94.5%)	6 (5.5%)
Numbers	43	39 (90.7%)	4 (9.03%)
Commitment	48	46 (95.83%)	2 (4.17%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>74</b>

As shown in Table 2, coverage of pro-choice protesters most frequently focused on their worthiness and unity. However, in the concordance lines in which worthiness is present, protesters were represented as displaying low levels of worthiness in 81.58% of instances, compared to high displays of worthiness in 18.42% of instances. In contrast, the protesters were, in the vast majority of cases, shown to display high levels of unity (94.5% of occasions), numbers (90.7% of occasions) and commitment (95.83% of occasions) throughout the coverage. The overall representation of pro-choice protesters on the WUNC scorecard (Tilly 2006) therefore shows high scores in unity, numbers, and commitment, but low scores in worthiness.

#### 4.2. Worthiness

The pro-choice protesters tended to be represented with low levels of worthiness, with only 18.42% of concordance lines identified as representing degrees of worthiness being coded as “high.” Worthiness was interpreted as low in instances where news coverage employed hostile verbs to describe the actions of the protesters (this occurred in 33.87% of the concordance lines to which the low worthiness code was applied), when the protests were discredited through the reported speech of institutionally authoritative people (29.03%), when protesters were represented as lacking dignity and decorum (“Protesters have at various points reportedly *used obscenities and been confrontational*” [USA Today Online]) (22.58%), and when coverage included reports of heightened police presence (“*Police stood guard against protesters demonstrating at the homes of Supreme Court justices*” [The Daily Caller]) (14.52%). Due to space constraints, only the two most frequent categories—those that feature the reported speech of elites and those that include hostile transitive verbs—are considered in the analysis outlined below.

When journalists select a particular verb choice to describe an action, they do so by suppressing some other available representational option (Fowler 1991). Journalists who choose to report on the actions of protesters using verbs that indicate violent or disorderly behaviour therefore lessen the demonstrations’ mediated displays of worthiness (Kennedy 2022a).

1. Elsewhere, pro-abortion protesters *targeted* churches on Mother’s Day. (*The Daily Caller*)
2. Violence and vandalism by pro-abortion protesters has *erupted* throughout the country since the leaked draft majority opinion indicating the Court is set to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in May. (*University Wire*)

In extract 1, the verb *targeted* suggests that the protests inflicted harm upon churches, thus emphasising displays of unworthy behaviour. What's more, Tilly (2004, 4) notes that members of the clergy and mothers with children are the embodiment of good and worthy people. The targeting of churches on Mother's Day therefore further lessens the protests' mediated displays of worthiness. In extract 2, the verb *erupted* likens the violence and vandalism of the protesters to a volcanic eruption, representing the demonstration as volatile, dangerous, and therefore unworthy.

The reported speech of institutionally authoritative and elite people, including United States cabinet members, state senators and representatives, and law professors, also largely contributed to lessening the worthiness of the pro-choice protests. For example:

3. *Former Vice President and staunch anti-abortionist Mike Pence* told an audience in Spartanburg, South Carolina, Thursday evening to pray that *conservative Supreme Court justices who've been targeted by abortion rights protesters* stand firm and overturn *Roe v. Wade*. (*USA Today Online*)
4. The *White House* pivoted Monday as it *condemned protesters acting with "violence, threats or vandalism"* over the *Roe v. Wade* draft opinion and *backed the ability for Supreme Court justices "to do their jobs without concern for their personal safety."* (*The Daily Caller*)

Extracts 3 and 4 report on the protesters' violent and threatening towards Supreme Court justices, who have been targeted (extract 3) and are concerned for their personal safety (extract 4). While this coverage represents the protesters as agitated and hostile, their worthiness is further decreased because Former Vice President Mike Pence and the White House are the orators of the criticism. As these sources benefit from the authority that their powerful institutional roles bestow on them (Van Leeuwen 2007, 94), their words are deemed legitimate and therefore serve to delegitimize the perceived worthiness of the pro-choice protests.

#### 4.3. Unity

In 94.5% of cases, the unity of the protesters was represented as high. Of these, 13.59% of cases where the high unity code was applied concern collective chanting, cheering, or booing ("As numbers grew, the *protesters started to simultaneously chant*" [*University Wire*]) and 29.13% report on the collaborative material actions of protesters, such as activists collectively gathering, demonstrating, holding signs, and waving banners ("*protesters gathered across the country in opposition to the ruling*" [*Insider*]). More than half of all cases of the high unity code included reports of the unified speech of protesters (57.28%), including the "visual voice" on the signs (Ku 2020, 157) they were collectively carrying:

5. The *protesters chanted "Women's right are human rights" and carried placards that read "Bans off our bodies" and "Leave my vagina alone"* in what almost certainly was the city's most vigorous protest ever against a Supreme Court opinion that had not yet been handed down. (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*)
6. *Protesters said* the decision to end federal rights to abortion, made in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, *defies the will of the public and called on officials to find alternate ways of protecting abortion*. (*University Wire*)

The act of including the unified voices and opinions of the activists also works to legitimate the protests. While we saw that the protests were largely represented as unworthy, McLeod and Hertog (1999, 313) argue that coverage that includes the voices of protesters generally tends to be more sympathetic to the protesters' cause, and Kilgo and Harlow (2019, 522) note that allowing protesters to speak for themselves can "contribute to a more objective narrative." What's more, including the speech of protesters showcases their motivation or purpose for demonstrating. Such expressions of purpose are aspects of instrumental rationalisation that contain implicit references to moral values: reasonableness, appropriateness (Gasaway-Hill 2018, 9), and importance (Pérez-Arredondo 2019, 71). Such rational and moral depictions of protesters are evident in extracts 5 and 6. It is *appropriate* to leave other peoples' body parts alone; it is *reasonable* not to defy the will of the public; and it is widely accepted that protecting human rights is *important*. Therefore, not only are the pro-choice protesters shown to be highly unified, they are also represented as legitimate.

#### 4.4. Numbers

Because "numerical strength aligns with the majoritarian logic of representative democracy," a protest with a high turnout suggests that a large portion of the public supports its views (Wouters and Walgrave 2017, 367–368). The coverage of the protests' high numbers, which occurred in 90.7% of instances, therefore offers a valuable display of support and approval, which are key components of legitimation (Reyes 2011, 782). In the coverage of pro-choice demonstrations, high displays of numbers were conveyed through aggregated referential strategies in 38.46% of the cases of the high numbers code (see, for example, extract 7), referential strategies in 35.9% (extract 8), and verbs that express large quantities of people in 25.64% (extract 9).

7. *More than 15,000* protesters are expected to gather in downtown Washington, according to a permit filed with the National Park Service. (*USA Today*)
8. *A large crowd of protesters* had assembled outside the Arizona Capitol building on Friday following the release of the Supreme Court's opinion overturning the two landmark abortion cases. (*Newsweek.com*)
9. Across the street, protesters had *swarmed* the Supreme Court building in the wake of an historic ruling that overturned both *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* and revoked the constitutionally protected right to an abortion in America. (*Business Insider US*)

Because in society "the majority rules", reports of high numbers are often employed in discourse to "manufacture consensus opinion" and legitimate practice (Van Leeuwen 2008, 37). As such, the coverage of the protests' large turnout could work to legitimate the protests through reference to consensus.

#### 4.5. Commitment

Of the occasions in which concordance lines were coded as displaying high commitment, 54.35% report on protesters engaging in risky activity, and 45.65% construct protesters as exhibiting persistence and determination:

10. The meeting comes after *protesters took the unprecedented step* of marching to justices' homes earlier this month. (*USA Today Online*)

11. In Twitter posts, the Capitol Police said the protesters were *blocking traffic*, and *after the “standard three warnings” they began making arrests* for crowding, obstructing, or incommoding. (*The Philadelphia Daily News*)
12. Some protesters said they had been invested in the fight for abortion access *for generations*. (*Richmond Times Dispatch*)
13. *Despite remarkably hot weather* with temperatures in the mid-90s and a blazing sun, the number of *protesters remained strong throughout the three-hour event*. (*University Wire*)

In extract 10, protesters are reported to have engaged in risky activity by blocking traffic—an illegal form of protest in the US. Their commitment is further reinforced by the coverage of them continuing to block traffic, despite being warned by the police on multiple occasions. Although it could be argued that being arrested is “disreputable” and therefore constitutes unworthy behaviour (Tilly 2006, 291), we argue that engaging in potentially criminal behaviour with the knowledge of possible arrest in order to advocate for a cause also symbolises the kind of “ostentatious sacrifice” that is indicative of high levels of commitment (Tilly 2004, 4). Extracts 12 and 13 construct the activists as persistent, through the inclusion of specific circumstances (circumstantial elements that provide additional detail about processes in discourse). Both extracts include the extent of the circumstance—expressing frequency (*for generations*) and duration (*throughout the three-hour event*)— showing the protesters’ readiness to persevere. Extract 13 also includes the circumstance “concession,” marked by the preposition *despite*, which describes the activists’ commitment as exemplified by their willingness to brave bad weather (Tilly 2004, 4). This coverage of protesters displaying such high commitment to their cause represents the demonstrations as legitimate through implicit reference to moral evaluation legitimation; displaying unwavering perseverance and ostentatious sacrifice for a cause implies that it is worth fighting for, which in turn triggers moral concepts of righteousness and justice.

## **5. Discussion and concluding remarks**

Tilly (2006) argues that WUNC is a theoretical scorecard against which a protest’s potential success, strength, and impact can be measured. Our analysis of the US national news coverage of pro-choice protesters shows that the protests scored highly on unity, numbers and commitment, but received a low score on worthiness. At this point, we revisit the points in the preceding analysis, to consider how the representation of each of the WUNC qualities, as well as the overall cumulative representations, might be shaped by the socio-cultural contexts within which the news texts under investigation were produced and designed to be consumed. An important factor to consider here is that news outlets in the US, as in many other countries, operate within a capitalist economy. This means that in order for news organizations to be commercially viable, they must produce news that not only serves whatever ideological agenda they wish to pursue, but is also consonant with a large number of readers who they would like to see consume their news either by purchasing copies of a newspaper or by visiting their website (thereby generating income by increasing the value of paid-for advertising spaces on those sites).

The overall representations of protesters engaging in violent behaviour, as well as reports of authoritative figures’ criticisms of the protests, reduced their mediated worthiness. The protests were thereby delegitimated through transitive verbs that infer negative moral

evaluation (*targeted, erupted*), resulting in a reported lack of support from institutional elites (in other words, a lack of legitimisation through authorisation). That said, while Della Porta (2016, 15) notes that when it comes to strategies of protest, “the aims do not justify the means,” our findings suggest that the protesters’ aggressive acts may in fact not put off potential supporters. Interestingly, these representations tend to focus on the protesters’ actions (rather than the protests’ cause), which might result from news media outlets—which research suggests have become more conservative in recent years (Pew Research Centre 2020)—trying to reflect public attitudes about protest-related rights in the US.

Although depicted as unworthy, the protests were also represented as highly unified, large in size, and committed—factors that have the potential to legitimate the protests in a number of respects. High displays of unity and numbers signify large groups expressing collective agreement (i.e., that *Roe v. Wade* should not be overturned), legitimating the protests through reference to consensus. Such high displays suggest that the cause is worth fighting for, thereby further legitimating the protests through implicit moral evaluation. High displays of commitment also legitimate the protests through implicit moral evaluation: engaging in risky activity shows *bravery*, personal sacrifice (getting arrested) shows *selflessness*, and persistence shows *dedication*. These more favourable depictions of the protests could again be a result of the news media attempting to represent trends in public attitudes towards the issue of abortion rights. Although the issue remains contentious within the US, research suggests that most people in the country are supportive of women’s right to abortion (Salam 2023), and the majority of the national population disapproves of the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* (Pew Research Centre 2022).

While the picture is mixed, the preponderance of legitimating displays of unity, numbers, and commitment could compensate for the delegitimizing displays of worthiness. This is because Tilly (2006, 291) argues that on the WUNC scorecard, a high display of one component can compensate for a low value of another: “a very small number of highly worthy, unified, and committed persons can produce a larger impact.” This point notwithstanding, Tilly (2006, 291) also notes that if any of the four components of WUNC are low or not present, protests can lose their strength: “entirely unworthy or completely uncommitted participants, regardless of how numerous and/or unified, quite undermine the impact of any demonstration.” Although Tilly (2006, 291) specifies that it is “entirely unworthy” protests that impact effectiveness, there are still some (albeit few) occasions in which displays of worthiness are high in the dataset (18.42%). What’s more, readerships that also condemn the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* may view the protesters’ “unworthy” behaviour as justified. The overall depictions of the protests as unified, numerous, and committed (in other words, legitimate through reference to consensus and morality) could rationalise violent forms of protest—particularly because such actions symbolise protesters’ conformity to the normative moral value of justice (Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez 2018, 236). Readerships that are also angry about the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* may therefore view the pro-choice protesters’ tactics as an appropriate (and therefore legitimate) response, suggesting that the ends may indeed justify the means (Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez 2018, 245).

The protests whose representations we have examined in this study provide, for those who need it, a timely reminder that we still “need feminism” (Mills and Mullany 2007, 23). Amidst a global rise of populism, and a concomitant rolling back of women’s reproductive rights in many countries, issues of sex, power and control over reproduction have, as Kiessling (2019) points out, become “the main issues that seem to concern feminist political activism.”

To counter the hegemonic control that both enables and is furthered by rulings such as *Roe v. Wade*, the likes of Butler (1990) have argued that subversive acts, such as fighting for abortion rights, can destabilize established gender norms. In this way, advocacy for reproductive rights becomes not just a campaign for individual freedoms but part of a broader struggle against a patriarchal system that seeks to define and limit the roles and rights of women.

While the media texts we have analysed could be viewed as furthering this cause in their generally favourable, and legitimating, representations of the protests surrounding *Roe v. Wade*, an interesting hypothesis emerging from our analysis is that the coverage might be favourable to the extent that the news outlets providing that coverage perceive the protests to be consonant with the values held by their target audience. The decidedly less favourable representations of the worthiness of the protests hints at a perception on the part of the organizations that their readers will be less positively inclined towards the manner of the protests, or even the act of protest itself. For an issue such as *Roe v. Wade*, where the protesters' perspective is largely shared by the public, this possible anti-protest stance has not seemed to lead to the overall delegitimation of the protesters' cause. However, it remains to be seen, and indeed to be explored in future research, whether this might be the case for protests surrounding other issues where public views might be more divided (or indeed, stacked against the protests), but for which the stakes are just as high in terms of challenging patriarchal power and illuminating and challenging the many interlinked forms of oppression.

## References

- Berg, J. and Woods, N. 2023. "Overturning Roe v. Wade: consequences for midlife women's health and well-being." *Womens midlife health*. 9(2).
- Brookes, G. and Chałupnik, M. 2023. Militant, annoying and sexy: a corpus-based study of representations of vegans in the British press. *Critical Discourse Studies*. 20(2): 218–36.
- Brookes, G. and McEnery, T. 2020. Corpus linguistics. In: S. Adolphs and D. Knight (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of English Language and Digital Humanities*. London: Routledge: 378–404.
- Butler, J. 2020. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Chałupnik, M. and Brookes, G. 2022. "Discursive acts of resistance: a multimodal critical discourse analysis of All-Poland Women's Strike's social media." *Gender and Language*. 16(3): 308–33.
- Della Porta, D. 2016. "Protest in Social Movements." In: K. Falenbrach, M. Klimke and J. Scharloth (eds.). *Protest Cultures: A Companion*. New York: Berghahn Books, 13–25.
- Donson, F., Chesters, G., Welsh, I. and Tickle, A. 2004. "Rebels with a Cause, Folk Devils without a Panic: Press jingoism, policing tactics and anti-capitalist protest in London and Prague." *Internet Journal of Criminology*. 00(0): 1–31.
- Fairclough, N. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. 2015. *Language and Power* (third edition). London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon.
- Fowler, R. 1991. *Language in the News*. London: Routledge.
- Gasaway-Hill, M. L. 2018. *The Language of Protest: Acts of Performance, Identity and Legitimacy*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graff, A. and Koralczyk, E. 2022. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. London: Routledge.
- Greer, C. and McLaughlin, E. 2010. "We Predict a Riot? Public Order Policing, New Media Environments and the Rise of the Citizen Journalist." *The British Journal of Criminology*. 50(6): 1041–59.
- Hart, C. 2014. "Constructing contexts through grammar: Cognitive models and conceptualization in British newspaper reports of political protests." In: J. Flowerdew (ed.). *Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics* (Volume 3). London: Bloomsbury Academic: 159–83.
- Hull, N. and Hoffer, P. 2010. *Roe v. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History* (second edition). University Press of Kansas.
- Joffe, C. 2013. "Roe v. Wade and Beyond: Forty Years of Legal Abortion in the United States." *Dissent*. 60(1): 54–9.
- Kennedy, C. R. 2023. "The mediated representations of Brexit protests in the UK press: a corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis." Ph.D. thesis, Nottingham Trent University.
- Kennedy, C. R. 2022a. "Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment: strengthening qualitative corpus methods in the critical discourse analysis of protest press coverage." *Discourse & Society*. 33(5): 611–30.
- Kennedy, C. R. 2022b. "Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment: analysing reported speech in the pro- and anti-Brexit press." *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*. 14(1): 86–106.

- Kennedy, C. R., Brookes, G. and Cherniaeva, A. Forthcoming. “Collocates: what are they and how can they be used to explore representation?” In: C. Taylor and F. Heritage (eds.), *Analysing Representation: A Corpus and Discourse Textbook*. London: Routledge.
- Kilgo, D. K. and Harlow, S. 2019. “Protests, Media Coverage, and a Hierarchy of Social Struggle.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 24(4): 508–30.
- Kilgarriff, A., Rychlý, P., Smrž, P. and Tugwell, D. 2004. “The Sketch Engine. Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX International Congress”: 105–16.
- Ku, E. K. 2020. “‘Waiting for my red envelope’: discourses of sameness in the linguistic landscape of a marriage equality demonstration in Taiwan.” *Critical Discourse Studies*. 17(2): 156–74.
- Laschever, E. 2017. “Are they not worthy? How partisan political blogs legitimize the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street.” *Sociological Forum*. 32(2): 359–80.
- McEnery, T. and Hardie, A. 2012. *Corpus Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- McLeod, D. M. 1999. “The Protest Paradigm and News Coverage of the ‘Right to Party’ Movement.” In: D. A. Schultz (ed.). *It’s show time! Media, politics, and popular culture*. New York: Peter Lang.
- McLeod, D. M. and Hertog, J. K. 1999. “Social control and the mass media’s role in the regulation of protest groups: The communicative acts perspective.” In: D. Demers and K. Viswanath (eds.). *Mass media, social control and social change*. Ames: Iowa State University press: 305–30.
- Nijjar, J. S. 2015. “‘Menacing Youth’ and ‘Broken Families’: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Reporting of the 2011 English Riots in the Daily Express Using Moral Panic Theory.” *Sociological Research Online*. 20(4): 1–12.
- Pérez-Arredondo, C. 2019. “Why Do They Protest?: The Discursive Construction of ‘Motive’ in Relation to the Chilean Student Movement in the National Alternative Press (2011–13).” In: C. Hart and D. Kelsey (eds.) *Discourses of Disorder: Riots, Strikes and Protests in the Media*. Edinburgh University Press: 54–74.
- Pew Research Centre. 2020. “In Views of U.S. Democracy, Widening Partisan Divides Over Freedom to Peacefully Protest.” Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/02/in-views-of-u-s-democracy-widening-partisan-divides-over-freedom-to-peacefully-protest/>.
- Pew Research Centre. 2022. “Majority of Public Disapproves of Supreme Court’s Decision To Overturn Roe v. Wade.” Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/07/06/majority-of-public-disapproves-of-supreme-courts-decision-to-overturn-roe-v-wade/>.
- Power, M. J., Haynes, A. and Devereux, E. 2016. “Reasonable People vs. The Sinister Fringe: Interrogating the framing of Ireland’s water charge protestors through the media politics of dissent.” *Critical Discourse Studies*. 13(3): 261–77.
- Reyes, A. 2011. “Strategies of legitimization in political discourse: From words to actions.” *Discourse & Society*. 22(6): 781–807.
- Royo, L. M. and Van Dijk, T. A. 1997. “‘There was a problem, and it was solved!’ Legitimizing the expulsion of ‘illegal’ immigrants in Spanish parliamentary discourse.” *Discourse & Society*. 8(4): 523–67.
- Salam, E. 2023. “Gallup survey shows support for abortion in US remains strong.” *Guardian*. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/15/gallup-survey-abortion-support-united-states>.



- Tilly, C. 1999. "From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements." In: M. Giugni, D. McAdam and C. Tilly (eds.). *How Social Movements Matter*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press: 253–70.
- Tilly, C. 2004. *Social Movements, 1768–2004*. New York: Routledge.
- Tilly, C. 2006. WUNC. In: J. T. Schnapp and M. Tiewes (eds.). *Crowds*. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 289–306.
- Tilly, C. 2008. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk, T. A. 1996. "Discourse, Power and Access." In: C. R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds.). *Texts and Practices. Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge. 84–104.
- Van Leeuwen, T. 2018. "Moral evaluation in critical discourse analysis." *Critical Discourse Studies*. 15(2): 140–53.
- Van Leeuwen, T. 2008. *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. 2007. "Legitimation in discourse and communication." *Discourse & Communication*. 1(1): 91–112.
- Wagner, T. 2008. "Reframing Ecotage as Ecoterrorism: News and the Discourse of Fear." *Environmental Communication*. 2(1): 25–39.
- Wouters, R. and Walgrave, S. 2015. "(De)Mobilizing description? Television news coverage of protest and the dWUNCness of collective action." In: L. Bettens, F. Gillet, C. Machiels, B. Rochet and A. Roekens (eds). *Quand l'image (dé)mobilise. Iconographie et mouvements sociaux aux XXIème siècle*. Namur: Presses universitaires de Namur: 111–30.
- Wouters, R. and Walgrave, S. 2017. "Demonstrating Power: How Protest Persuades Political Representatives." *American Sociological Review*. 82(2): 361–83.
- Zlobina, A. and Gonzalez Vazquez, A. 2018. "What is the right way to protest? On the process of justification of protest, and its relationship to the propensity to participate in different types of protest." *Social Movement Studies*. 17(2): 234–50.