

# Democracy on Air: The Radio Show “Prominente Zu Gast” and Political Discussion Culture Beyond Parliament, West Germany 1950s- 1980

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## Abstract

In the context of broader debates on civic participation and a “democratization of all aspects of life”, historians have argued that West German political culture since the late 1960s saw an increased importance of “discussion” as a core value of democracy. Based on the radio show *Prominente zu Gast* (RIAS, 1951-1991), in which school classes (teenagers and young adults) engaged in debates with well-known politicians, this paper will trace changes and patterns in an emerging “culture of debate” from the 1950s to 1980s. It will, firstly, examine the students’ political expectations and the interpretative framework within which political roles as citizens and representatives were negotiated. Secondly, it will line out the communicative practices at the heart of these shows to trace changes in political discussion culture such as an alleged decline of deference and an increased confidence of these young adults as political actors. The paper scrutinizes changing notions of adequate discussion behavior and norms of debate as well as the speaker roles ascribed to citizens and politicians by comparing the findings to existing studies on cultures of debate both inside parliament and in the public sphere. While recent scholarship suggests a “boom” of debate shows in radio and television since the 1970s, the case study shows that, in an educational context, discussion as a means to “learning democracy” was already granted great importance and was widely experimented with on the radio in the “long 1950s”.

## Author information

**Malte Fischer** is a Visiting Scholar at Humboldt University and a PhD candidate at Radboud University Nijmegen and visiting scholar at Humboldt University Berlin. He is part of the joint project “Voice of the People. Popular Expectations of Democracy in Postwar Europe”. Malte investigates how the interaction between citizens and politicians shaped postwar political culture in West Germany between 1945 and the 1980s through the lens of, e.g., letters and petitions citizens send to their MPs and shows in radio and television engaging politicians and citizens in debates.

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**Wednesday, 16 June** - Session 4 - **9,00-10,30 CET (Webex)** - Panel – *The culture of debate in and beyond parliament: a comparison of Britain, Germany and The Netherlands, c. 1870-1990*

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