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Support for a legal right to work from home: Do those who need it, support it? The COVID-19 pandemic as natural experiment

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Abstract

Germany's work culture, historically shaped by strong male breadwinner and ideal worker norms, has gradually shifted toward more flexible working arrangements. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, access to working from home was highly restricted. Despite its expansion during the pandemic, significant inequalities in access persist. This study examines the evolution of public support for a legal right to work from home in Germany over the course of the pandemic as a 'natural homeworking experiment'. Drawing on normative policy feedback theory, we hypothesize that support initially increased among groups with lower bargaining power before diffusing to the broader population. We use longitudinal data from 2705 individuals (8368 person-years) surveyed four times between January 2020 and January 2022. Findings confirm that public support for such regulation increased over the first 2 years of the pandemic, with temporary stagnation in fall 2021 but stronger growth towards the end of containment measures. At that stage, support also grew among groups initially less supportive of the law. Notably, support was not limited to those working from home and followed clear socio-economic patterns: women, young individuals, and low earners consistently expressed higher approval. These results underscore the necessity of legislation guaranteeing access to work from home.

KEYWORDS

flexible work, ideal worker norm, natural experiment, normative policy feedback, remote work, telework, work from home

INTRODUCTION

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home (WFH) was uncommon in Germany: while 40% of employees considered their jobs suitable for it, only 12% of these were actually WFH (Brenke, 2016). Comparing 30 European countries, Germany exhibited the third lowest rate of employees WFH in 2015 (Chung, 2022). Predominant, inflexible work arrangements reflected a path-dependent trajectory, aligned with a strong ideal worker norm demanding physical presence at work, constant availability and prioritization of work demands over private life (Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Stamm et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2013). WFH is thus mainly reserved for some specific groups of the working population. Strong links exist between WFH and the employee's education, income and company hierarchy level: workers WFH are often highly educated, high earners and advanced in their careers (Brenke, 2016; Emmler, 2025; Federal Statistical Office, 2020; Samtleben et al., 2020). Despite a substantial increase in the share of employees WFH since the pandemic, considerable potential remains to expand access to WFH and increase the amount of hours spent WFH (Emmler, 2025). The prevalence of individual work arrangements and 'flexibility through privilege' (Kossek & Kelliher, 2023) carries the risk of exacerbating social inequalities in the workplace in terms of access to and benefit from flexible work arrangements. A variety of terms are used to refer to work arrangements with flexibility in the work location (Chung, 2024). In this article, we use the term 'working from home' (WFH) to refer specifically to the performance of paid work from within private homes. This focus reflects the context of mandatory containment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required many employees to carry out their work from their homes.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted several European countries to introduce legal frameworks for WFH, including formal rights to request workplace flexibility (Vargas Llave et al., 2022). Some countries, including France, Lithuania, Portugal, and the Netherlands have introduced provisions granting employees the right to request WFH (Vargas Llave et al., 2022). In these countries, employers are obliged to consider such requests and must provide reasonable justification if they choose to reject them (KVK Netherlands Chamber of Commerce & CBS Statistics Netherlands, 2024; Vargas Llave et al., 2022). In some cases, the obligation of providing a justification for rejection is limited to requests from specific groups, such as employees with disabilities or caregiving responsibilities (Direction de l'information légale et administrative, 2025; Vargas Llave et al., 2022).

In Germany, various efforts have been made to establish a legal right to WFH. Despite considerable support from several governing parties, efforts to establish such a right have remained unsuccessful. Other initiatives promoting a right to flexible work, such as the EU Directive 1158 on 'Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers' from 2019, have not been fully implemented in Germany. Consequently, jurisdiction over claims related to workplace flexibility rests solely on the employer's unilateral right to discretion. As the Scientific Advisory Board at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs critically observed, this leaves employees, including parents of young children, without any legal entitlement to determine their place of work (Nebe et al., 2024).

Policy effects can manifest at the resource level, expanding or cutting off the resources of different actors, and the interpretive level, influencing the worldview of actors (Pierson, 1993). At the resource level, WFH expands employees' opportunities by enabling access to spatially more distant workplaces, thereby enhancing flexibility in choosing an employer (Coskun et al., 2024). It also offers time savings by reducing commuting and facilitates the balancing of professional and family obligations (Carstensen et al., 2022). However, WFH may simultaneously exacerbate stress and work–family conflicts (Hsu & Engelhardt, 2024; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018; Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021; Yucel & Chung, 2023). Among colleagues, tensions can emerge when task redistribution becomes necessary to accommodate WFH arrangements, potentially leading to resentment or envy (Maier et al., 2022). From employers, such a policy demands resources, including the establishment of appropriate workplace procedures, digital infrastructure, and compliance with legal obligations, such as safeguarding employee health and data safety (Bürkle & Flüter-Hoffmann, 2022; Donnelly & Johns, 2021; Grunau & Wolter, 2024). Despite potential benefits for employers—such

as cost savings through reduced office space, efficiency gains driven by digitalization, and employee retention—employer representatives oppose a legal right to WFH (BDA, 2023; IHK, 2021). At the interpretive level (Pierson, 1993), a legal right to WFH might be perceived as implicitly endorsing reduced work commitment or even facilitating work–time fraud, potentially conflicting with prevailing ideals of workplace culture that emphasize physical presence and constant availability of employees. Consequently, while the proposal promised to provide valuable resources to broad segments of the population, it also provoked concerns among political actors and interest groups rooted in both resource-related challenges and interpretive considerations (Schmid, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic, marked by extensive government-mandated WFH periods, significantly shifted public discourse on workplace flexibility and expanded access to WFH for individuals who previously have been exempted from it. The pandemic-induced periods of containment measures thus represent a large 'natural homeworking experiment' (Felstead & Reuschke, 2020), which demonstrated the feasibility of widespread WFH over considerable durations. During the first lockdown in spring 2020, WFH, where possible, was highly recommended. Between January and June 2021 (Occupational Safety Act, Corona-ArbSchV § 2, 2021) and November 2021 until March 2022 (German Infection Protection Act, IfSG, 2021), employers were obliged to allow employees to WFH unless impossible for operational reasons. The months-long periods of WFH obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic may have mitigated some of the resentments against the legal right to WFH, both at the interpretive and resource levels. Serving as a disruptive moment in time, this period offers the opportunity for attitudinal change that supports policy adaptation.

In this article, we investigate the impact of pandemic-induced WFH obligations on public support for a legal right to WFH in Germany. We argue that the large-scale WFH experiment has mitigated an ideal worker norm that previous studies have identified as prevalent in Germany, leading to an increase in support for a legal right that provides access to workplace flexibility. For our analysis, we are able to draw on data from the German Internet Panel (GIP), providing a high-quality longitudinal dataset that includes bi-monthly surveys since 2012 and continued surveying participants even in the early stages of the pandemic. Its distinctive approach—combining offline recruitment with online surveys—ensured ongoing data collection during this critical period. This allows us to trace the evolution of support for WFH regulation across four time points over a 2-year period. Approaching macro-level support from the perspective of normative policy feedback theory, we examine different subgroups of the population and ask from a rational choice perspective whether subgroups that have lower individual bargaining power —as we will outline in the theory section— show stronger support for the law. Additionally, we consider how the experience of WFH during the pandemic affects support.

The question regarding support for WFH was surveyed for the first time in the GIP in January 2020, approximately 6 weeks before the first containment measures, referred to here as the *pre-pandemic baseline*. The second measurement was in July 2020, during an *early pandemic phase*, when initial strict containment measures had been partially lifted, yet daily life remained profoundly shaped by the ongoing pandemic and the absence of available vaccinations. By the time of the third data collection in September 2021—referred to as the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*—infection rates were largely under control and vaccinations were being promoted. The fourth and final data collection was conducted in January 2022. At that time, new containment measures were implemented to curb the spread of a new virus variant, while overall the pandemic was understood to be ending soon. This phase is therefore referred to as the *late pandemic phase*.

The article is structured as follows: we first situate the research question within the broader context of the German labour market characteristics and its regulation of WFH. It then outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on normative policy feedback theory and rational choice to explore the implications of WFH legislation. The methodology section details the longitudinal data used and the analytical approach, focusing on random-effects panel regressions accounting for between-subject changes backed by robustness checks using fixed effects. It concludes with a discussion of the findings, reflecting on the pandemic's role as a critical juncture and considering the implications for future workplace policies and research.

LABOUR MARKET REGULATION IN GERMANY: COORDINATION AND FRAGMENTATION

Germany's labour market is historically rooted in a coordinated market economy (Streeck, 2005), characterized by policies and regulations that provided employees with a high level of protection. This framework contributed to a high-wage and low-inequality economy during the post-war period (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Thelen, 1991). Central to this system is a strong regulatory framework and rigorous health and safety standards for employees. As a corporatist welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), Germany relies on state legislation defining a regulatory framework, which is further detailed through collective and company-level agreements, emphasizing the responsibility and autonomy of collective actors to make agreements on working conditions without state involvement. In principle, this allows for a fine-grained regulation of the labour market, tailored to the specific needs of both employers and employees in branches and sectors, based on balanced negotiations between collective actors.

However, for decades, coverage rates of collective agreements have been declining in Germany (Haipeter, 2020) which contributes to the consolidation of a labour market dualism. In 2022, 41% of German employees were neither covered by a collective agreement nor represented by a works council (Lübker & Schulten, 2024). Labour market 'insiders', employed in sectors with a long-standing corporatist tradition, benefit from robust protections and well-negotiated standards. In contrast, 'outsiders', often in precarious employment situations, are excluded from these agreements, highlighting a persistent and growing divide within the labour market. Since the early 1990s, labour market inequality has risen significantly, driven by the expansion of the low-wage sector (Dustmann et al., 2009). The labour market reforms of the early 2000s, which aimed to flexibilize the low-wage sector, further exacerbated these inequalities (Palier & Thelen, 2010).

In Germany, access to WFH is generally subject to the discretionary approval of employers, except in cases where collective or company-level agreements provide specific regulations. However, the extent of collective bargaining coverage governing WFH remains fragmented and is notably limited in sectors dominated by small enterprises and precarious employment conditions (Dittmar, 2024). Employees covered by collective agreements do not exhibit higher rates of WFH compared with those not covered (Emmler, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant shift in how WFH is used: while it was previously employed as a means of managing irregular demands (Grunau & Wolter, 2024) and extending work time, it has since evolved into a more routine practice that combines working from an employer's premises with WFH (Chung, 2024).

The pandemic may have contributed to the formalization of WFH policies and the development of standardized procedures within companies. These developments could provide a foundation for individual agreements that benefit both employers and employees by promoting equal treatment through transparent and structured processes in the sense of idiosyncratic deals (Hornung et al., 2018). For German employers, offering WFH as a negotiable benefit has become an essential strategy for attracting skilled workers (BDA, 2023). However, the extent to which employees can negotiate WFH arrangements depends largely on their individual bargaining power. This dynamic raises concerns about the potential for favouritism and personal biases in decisions regarding workplace flexibility.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENT AND HYPOTHESES

Public support for the welfare state has been shown to be contingent on two main factors: prevailing societal norms and individuals' perceived benefits from specific policies (Sachweh & Olafsdottir, 2012; Svallfors, 1997; van Oorschot, 2006). From a rational choice perspective, individuals tend to support policies that provide them with either monetary or non-monetary advantages. Those who benefit from a policy support it (Gelissen, 2000; Naumann et al., 2016; Svallfors, 1997). Furthermore, individuals may develop policy preferences based on their social environment. Cultural factors—including values, morals, and ideology – shape perceptions of welfare state policies beyond individual benefits

(Pfau-Effinger, 1998, 2004). These cultural foundations are typically established early in life and remain relatively stable over time (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982; Kiley & Vaisey, 2020). However, norms can evolve not only through cohort replacement (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004) or period-based processes (Johnson & Schwadel, 2019) but also through life-course transitions or policy interventions, as suggested by normative policy feedback theory (Gangl & Ziefle, 2015). Building on this argument, the pandemic triggered a sudden, large-scale shift in working routines based on ad-hoc regulations implemented on short notice. This exposure to novel working conditions may have influenced individual preferences, fostering greater support for workplace flexibility, and in turn, increasing backing for a legal right to WFH. However, a distinctive feature of the pandemic context is the acceleration or adjustment of usual policy cycles. Moreover, containment measures, including closures of daycare and schools, contact restrictions, and travel bans, caused simultaneous disruptions to daily routines (Fuchs-Schündeln, 2022; Giorgi et al., 2020; Mata et al., 2021), which may have counterbalanced the potential positive effect of increased exposure to WFH on support for a legal right to WFH.

As a form of labour market regulation, a legal right to WFH prompts debates about fairness and equality (Ahlers et al., 2021; Chung & Yuan, 2025; Lott & Abendroth, 2020), as well as about the role of the state in enhancing individual capabilities to foster autonomy and self-determined life choices. As a comparatively new work arrangement, it simultaneously challenges prevailing workplace norms (Chung, 2022) and raises questions regarding managerial discretion and decision-making authority (BDA, 2023). Implementing WFH policies requires organizations to establish new monitoring mechanisms, adapt workflows, and ensure productivity without direct supervision. Furthermore, coordinating WFH and onsite teams increases administrative complexity and may lead to concerns about team cohesion, knowledge transfer, and work culture.

The ideal worker norm (Williams, 1999; Williams et al., 2013) represents a concept of collectively shared ideals related to the sphere of work and employment. According to this norm, employees who work full-time and exhibit high levels of work devotion are regarded as ideal workers and rewarded with promotions, salary increases, and professional recognition. Work devotion is demonstrated through constant availability, a willingness to work overtime, and the absence of competing obligations outside of work (Blair-Loy, 2003). Conversely, employees who take career breaks or work part-time face stigmatization (Williams et al., 2013). WFH can exacerbate this stigma when it is perceived as a departure from conventional workplace norms. As a result, employees using flexible work arrangements – thereby diverging from the ideal worker norm – feel compelled to compensate for this perceived privilege by demonstrating heightened productivity (Chung, 2022).

The ideal worker norm has a gendered dimension (Williams, 1999) and is closely tied to single- or main-earner family models (Trappe et al., 2015). Traditionally, this norm is embodied by a male breadwinner (Lewis, 2001), who is able to meet the demands of the ideal worker because a partner – typically a woman – assumes the majority of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities that might otherwise interfere with full workforce participation and devotion to work (Blair-Loy, 2010). Men may be particularly inclined to conform to it due to concerns about deviating from prevailing norms of masculinity (Vandello et al., 2013). Empirical research has identified Germany as a country where the ideal worker norm substantially shapes working conditions and workplace behaviour, aligned with a predominant male breadwinner model (Althaber & Leuze, 2020; Bernhardt & Buenning, 2020; Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Lott & Klenner, 2018). The high prevalence of onsite work prior to the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that this norm has acted as a barrier to the widespread adoption of WFH arrangements.

According to normative policy feedback theory, attitudinal change resulting from policy unfolds through two primary mechanisms: First, (new) legislation acts as a normative focal point, legitimizing individual preferences in the short run (normative anchoring) and second, in the longer run, cultural diffusion occurs as shifts in individual preferences emerge in response to observed changes in others' behaviour (Gangl & Ziefle, 2015). In this theoretical framework, we argue that the widespread shift to WFH during the pandemic established a 'new normal' in workplace perceptions. National legislation aimed at preventing infections legitimized WFH as routine work arrangement, thereby mitigating the ideal worker norm. Subsequently, we expect that employees who stood to benefit directly from a legal

right to WFH – an argument we develop in greater detail in the following – exhibit higher levels of support for such regulation during the *early pandemic phase*, a period leading up to the initial easing of containment measures following the first pandemic lockdown in Germany (March–July 2020). However, as WFH became increasingly normalized through cultural diffusion, support also grows among others, albeit towards the final termination of WFH obligations, in the *late pandemic phase* (January–March 2022). As a first analytical step, we explore attitudes at the macro-level and expect to observe the following pattern among the working population:

> **Hypothesis 1.** *Support for a legal right to WFH increases over the course of the pandemic, with a weaker increase in the early pandemic phase developing into a stronger increase in the late pandemic phase.*

As a second analytical step, we turn to the experience of WFH, conceptualizing new homeworkers as direct beneficiaries, having gained access to a mode of work that had previously been inaccessible to many employees. This shift, however, occurred under challenging conditions: the abrupt transition to WFH disrupted established routines in both work and family life, while organizational structures and technical infrastructure were often not yet adequately adapted. Moreover, limited digital competencies and a widespread lack of prior experience with WFH likely compounded the initial difficulties, particularly in the *early pandemic phase*.

Nonetheless, we argue that these employees can be regarded as clear beneficiaries, for several reasons. First, unlike in many other countries, Germany's WFH mandates during the pandemic were legally binding only for employers. They were required to offer WFH where feasible, but employees were not obliged to accept it. Consequently, individuals with strong aversions to WFH may have continued working onsite. In contrast, those WFH likely held jobs that were structurally compatible with WFH. This group may have included a substantial number of employees who, prior to the pandemic, had been excluded from WFH opportunities even though their positions were well suited to such arrangements. Second, despite the constraints of the pandemic context, employees who transitioned to WFH experienced tangible benefits – most notably, a reduced risk of infection and improved opportunities for reconciling work and private life (Canales-Romero & Hachfeld, 2022). Third, while pandemic-related challenges might be expected to diminish the positive effects of WFH, empirical evidence indicates that such effects were limited. In Germany, no significant effects on either family or job satisfaction were observed during the early phase of the pandemic (Möhring et al., 2020). Furthermore, stress levels and overall quality of life among homeworkers were only minimally affected, if at all, as a range of studies demonstrate (Barone Gibbs et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2021; Lipert et al., 2021; Şentürk et al., 2021, all included in a systematic review by Elisabetta et al., 2025).

Continuous onsite workers likely include both employees whose jobs are inherently incompatible with WFH and those who hold strong preferences for onsite work. From a rational choice perspective, employees in the former group derive no direct benefit from a legal right to WFH, as their work tasks cannot be performed remotely. Those with strong aversions to WFH may be motivated by norms aligned with the ideal worker norm – such as perceiving onsite presence as preferred by employers – or by personal preferences (Frodermann, 2021; Lott & Abendroth, 2019): limited technological literacy, a desire for in-person interaction with colleagues, or the importance placed on maintaining a clear separation between work and private life may also play a role. Accordingly, onsite workers can be expected to exhibit comparatively lower levels of support for a legal right to WFH.

By comparison, experienced homeworkers – those who were already WFH before the pandemic – are not direct beneficiaries of a legal right to WFH either, as they had access to this mode of work prior to the crisis. However, we expect this group to exhibit elevated levels of support for such regulation, though likely for cultural rather than instrumental reasons. As 'early adopters' of WFH, they may hold more favourable views of this work arrangement and thus support the institutionalization of WFH rights as a way of extending this opportunity to others.

A residual group comprises employees engaged in WFH prior to the pandemic but subsequently discontinued doing so. This group likely consists of employees who changed jobs and may have actively

chosen to abandon WFH. Given the small size of this group in our analytical sample, we can include them only in the descriptive analysis, and thus refrain from formulating specific hypotheses regarding their attitudes. Based on these considerations, we expect that:

> **Hypothesis 2a.** *Support for a legal right to WFH is highest among new homeworkers and lowest among onsite workers. Experienced homeworkers are expected to show higher levels of support than onsite workers, but lower levels than new homeworkers.*

Over time, experiencing WFH, as a change in daily routines, supports attitudinal change due to exposure. Furthermore, as assumed in Hypotheses 1, cultural diffusion leads to an overall decline in scepticism towards WFH, and as a consequence, less rejection of a legal right to WFH. Due to normative anchoring, support increases in early phases of the pandemic among those benefiting from a legal right to WFH and towards the final termination of WFH obligations also among those without direct benefit from the law. Thus, we expect that:

> **Hypothesis 2b.** *Support for a legal right to WFH increases among new homeworkers in the early phase of the pandemic and in the late pandemic phase also among experienced homeworkers and onsite workers.*

In addition to these cultural aspects and exposure to WFH, as a third analytical step, we argue from a rationale choice perspective that support varies across different social groups based on structural inequalities in access to WFH and bargaining power in the labour market. In the absence of legal regulation or collective agreements, access to WFH depends on individual negotiations with employers, which challenges employees with weaker bargaining power. An individual's bargaining power is supposed to push requests for individual arrangements with the employer (Guerrero & Bentein, 2022). Thus, employees with greater capacity to negotiate individual agreements are probably less reliant on a legal right to WFH. Conversely, employees with weaker bargaining power stand to benefit most from legal regulation. Previous research has identified women, low-income workers, and older employees as groups with (perceived) reduced negotiating power in work arrangements (Olsen, 2016; Sönderbergh, 2007). Younger workers may also experience difficulties in accessing WFH, despite their familiarity with digital technologies, due to their lower status in workplace hierarchies (Laumer & Maier, 2021). We therefore outline our assumptions about group difference in levels of support and their specific period effects on support for women vs. men and different income and age groups.

At the normative level, the high prevalence of part-time employment among women in Western Europe (Eurostat, 2024; Maestripieri, 2023) makes them less likely than men to conform to the ideal worker norm. Consequently, cultural barriers pose a greater obstacle for women than for men in accessing WFH opportunities (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). In addition, 'informal segregation' reduces women's career prospects and professional development due to exclusion from informal networks and high-trust relationships (Rusconi & Solga, 2008). The current regulatory framework, which leaves decisions on WFH to employer–employee negotiations, likely disadvantages women in accessing WFH due to informal segregation. Simultaneously, women have greater needs for reconciling work and family obligations than men due to their role as primary caregivers for children and elderly relatives (Kelle & Ehrlich, 2024). The availability of WFH opportunities can therefore be expected to benefit women more than men in balancing these responsibilities, translating into greater support of women for a legal right to WFH.

In terms of age, employees under 24 and those over 65 have the lowest rates of WFH adoption in Germany (Federal Statistical Office, 2024). Younger employees may have a stronger preference for WFH due to their familiarity with digital tools and greater willingness to adopt new work models (Reifenscheid & Möhring, 2022). However, their lower workplace seniority may limit their ability to negotiate WFH arrangements. Older employees, by contrast, may be more sceptical of WFH due to concerns about productivity, workplace cohesion, and technological adaptation (Hamouche &

Parent-Lamarche, 2023). Despite the potential vulnerability of older employees to severe illness from a SARS-CoV-2 infection, previous research shows no higher use of WFH among this demographic during the pandemic (Reifenscheid & Möhring, 2021). Although WFH offers potential benefits for older employees, including reduced health risks and relief from the physical and mental strain that may be higher when working onsite, we expect lower levels of support among this group compared with younger employees due to differences in adherence to traditional work norms and digital literacy.

Furthermore, access to WFH is more limited for low earners than for high earners (Zandt, 2022). Low income may result from working fewer hours, being employed in a low-paid profession, or holding a lower position within an organization's hierarchy – factors that make it more likely these individuals cannot conform to the ideal worker norm and thus face greater reluctance in being granted access to WFH. In contrast, high earners are more likely to hold managerial positions. Managers may have an interest in maintaining the status quo, where WFH remains at their discretion rather than being a legal entitlement. Both groups, low and high earners, are thus likely to face direct consequences from a legal right to WFH that motivate differences in support. Building on these considerations – where variation in support is attributed to differences in adherence to the ideal worker norm and unequal bargaining power to negotiate workplace flexibility – we expect that:

> **Hypothesis 3a.** *Women, younger individuals, and those in low-income groups are more supportive of a legal right to WFH than men, older individuals, and high-income groups, respectively.*

Due to cultural diffusion, we expect that those with an initially more negative attitude towards a legal right to WFH will also show an increase in support over the course of the pandemic, although with a temporal lag compared with the increase of early supporters of the law. Therefore, based on our argument on group differences in period effects, as an expression of normative anchoring and cultural diffusion, we expect that:

> **Hypothesis 3b.** *Support for a legal right to WFH increases over time in all groups, but the onset of this increase occurs earlier for women than for men, earlier for younger than older individuals, and earlier for low earners than high earners.*

By incorporating these theoretical perspectives, our analysis examines how exposure, bargaining power, and societal norms shape public attitudes towards a legal right to WFH over time.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the analysis, we use data from the GIP. The GIP participants were recruited offline through a multistage probability sampling process, representing the German population living in private households (Blom et al., 2015). Since 2012, the GIP has conducted bi-monthly surveys, collecting data on individual behaviour, socio-economic characteristics, and attitudes across a wide range of topics, including social policies, political developments and consent to containment measures. The surveys are administered via self-completed web-based questionnaires (CAWI). Sample refreshments were conducted in 2014 and 2018 (Blom et al., 2017; Cornesse et al., 2022). Between March 20 and July 10, 2020, the GIP implemented a special study to capture the unique living conditions and societal developments during Germany's first lockdown. For this study, named the 'Mannheim Corona Study' (MCS), 7/8ths of the GIP sample were randomly selected and invited to take part in additional weekly surveys (Blom et al., 2020; Cornesse et al., 2021).

For our analysis, we use data from four time points, as detailed in the introduction: (1) January 2020 (*pre-pandemic baseline*); (2) July 2020 (*early pandemic phase*); (3) September 2021 (*advanced mid-pandemic phase*); and (4) January 2022 (*late pandemic phase*). At these four time points, the dependent variable, support for a legal right to WFH, was measured using the following question (translated

from German): 'We are interested in your opinion on a legal regulation concerning homeoffice [translator's note: literally, 'working from home']. …What is your opinion on a law that would grant employees the right to work from home, provided that their job generally allows it?' Responses were recorded on a four-point scale ranging from (1) *totally in favour* to (4) *totally against*. For the analysis, we reverse the scale so that higher values indicate stronger support. General personal information is collected annually in September as part of the GIP. The response rates for the relevant GIP waves (January 2020, September 2021, and January 2022) range from 51 to 59 percent, while the MCS, including the second measurement of the dependent variable in July 2020, achieved a response rate of 62%. Observations with fewer than two valid responses on the dependent variable, as well as individuals who were out of work at all time points, are excluded. Furthermore, we restrict the sample to individuals below retirement age. To safeguard participant anonymity, certain information in the GIP is aggregated – for instance, exact years of birth are grouped into 5-year intervals. Thus, the oldest persons in the sample fall within the 65–70 age group. In the data we use, the youngest recruitment cohort was born in 2001 (Schmidt & Steinacker, 2018), thus, 18 years old at the time of our first data point. Missing data on income of 483 individuals is imputed based on gender, occupational status, age group, and educational attainment using a regression-based single imputation. We provide a correlation matrix of the imputation variables in Table A2 in the Appendix A reporting descriptive statistics before and after imputation. An examination of the correlations between income and the predictor variables before and after imputation confirmed that the procedure preserved the expected associations and did not introduce systematic bias.

Similar to other surveys, a comparison with official German census data indicates an underrepresentation of individuals with lower educational attainment in the analytical sample. This can partly be explained by the exclusion of unemployed and older individuals from our analysis as well as the underrepresentation of the German migrant population in the GIP, which is generally more difficult to reach in surveys. Where applicable, education is included as a control variable in the analysis. Given that our study covers a relatively short observation period of 2 years, panel attrition is negligible, and the analytical sample remains comparatively stable over time. In total, we use 8638 observations from 2705 individuals. Table A1 in the Appendix A provides an overview of all variables used for the analysis.

Since our analysis focuses on group-specific differences in support for the law and includes time-invariant variables, we estimate several random-effects models (Bell & Jones, 2015; Hill et al., 2020; Wooldridge, 2010). We compare pre-pandemic levels with three time points during the pandemic to examine how support evolved across subgroups based on workplace, gender, income, and age. The economic downturn and containment measures implemented in response to the pandemic had a significant impact on employment in Germany (Fitzenberger & Walwei, 2023). To account for these dynamics, we include changes in employment status (full-time, part-time, or non-employment) as a time-variant variable in the models. Random-effects models do not inherently control for time-invariant individual differences. To address this, we incorporate additional factors beyond employment status, including family arrangements and individual characteristics such as health status and political orientation. Control variables thus include employment status, economic sector, presence of children under 16, availability of a separate workspace at home,[1] educational attainment, East or West German residency, self-rated health status, and left–right political self-placement. To prevent potential sample bias due to item nonresponse, we create separate 'no answer' categories for education, political self-placement, and the availability of a separate room for work at home. As a robustness check, we employ fixed-effects panel regressions, which inherently control for time-invariant differences, to analyse within-person changes in support for the law while controlling for changes in employment status. In both random and fixed-effects models, we use cluster-robust standard errors at the individual level, accounting for potential correlation of observations within individuals over time.

[1]As a robustness check, all models were also estimated without this variable, which may act as a mediator between WFH and the dependent variable. Results remained substantively unchanged.

TABLE 1 Descriptive overview of sample by socio-economic characteristics and WFH.

Variable	All	WFH	Not WFH
Gender			
Women	.46	.35	.65
Men	.54	.42	.58
Age			
Up to 30 years	.11	.39	.61
31–50 years	.43	.45	.55
51+ years	.47	.32	.68
Income			
Up to EUR 1500	.20	.22	.78
EUR 1500–3000	.57	.36	.64
EUR 3000+	.23	.59	.41

Note: Missing values on income imputed; no weights applied.
Source: Own estimations based on GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and MCS.

For the analysis of group-specific differences, we distinguish gender as female or male. Personal net income is categorized into three groups: (1) the lowest earning quartile (up to 1500 euros), (2) the middle quartiles (1500–3000 euros), and (3) the top quartile (more than 3000 euros), following the income distribution provided by the German Economic Institute (Niehues & Stockhausen, 2022). For age, we define three groups: (1) up to 30 years, (2) 31–50 years, and (3) 51–70 years, which divides the sample into three groups spanning roughly similar amounts of years. Table 1 presents the distribution of onsite workers and individuals able to WFH during the pandemic.

Workplace indications (WFH or not) are based on survey responses from January 2020, July 2020, and September 2021. The distribution of WFH across groups highlights inequalities. Men, middle-aged, and high-earning individuals had higher WFH shares compared with women, younger and older age groups, and especially lower income groups.

RESULTS

The four measures of public support for a legal right to WFH took place in distinct epidemiological and political phases. Figure 1 illustrates the development of public support for a legal right to WFH at four time points between January 2020 and January 2022. It is juxtaposed with the stringency of political containment measures, the share of the working population WFH, and the epidemiological phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany.

At the *pre-pandemic baseline* (January 2020), support was already relatively high, averaging 3.08 scale points (SE = .01; CI [3.05–3.12]) on a 4-point scale. At that time, 17% of the working population was WFH. Shortly thereafter, in March 2020, the government implemented extensive containment measures, including the closure of schools and non-essential retail businesses.

While there was no legal obligation to WFH, it was strongly recommended. In the first pandemic year, the stringency index reached its peak in April and May 2020. Simultaneously, the share of employees WFH increased significantly to 44% in April 2020, though it gradually declined thereafter in both the absolute number of employees and the proportion of work time spent WFH (Frodermann, 2021). In June 2020, the share of the working population WFH decreased to 33%. This level, well above that of the *pre-pandemic baseline*, remained broadly stable, with fluctuations of no more than five percentage points (January 2021), and persisted through the end of the final containment measures as well as throughout 2022 and 2023 (Emmler, 2025).

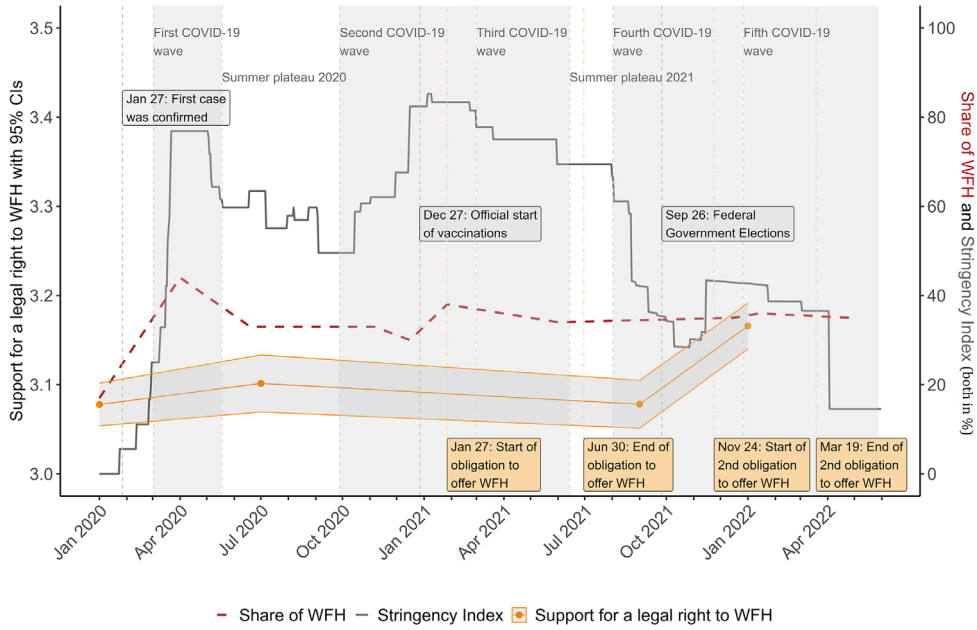

FIGURE 1 Mean support for a legal right to WFH at different stages of the pandemic, stringency of containment measures, and share of the working population WFH, 2020–2022. No weights applied. The Stringency Index ranges from 0 to 100 with higher values indicating stricter containment measures. *Source*: Support for a legal right to WFH: GIP waves 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations; Stringency Index: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2021); Share of WFH: WSI Institute, Erwerbspersonenbefragung (Emmler, 2025); Epidemiological phases: Robert Koch-Institut (Schilling et al., 2021; Tolksdorf et al., 2022). Figure by Reifenscheid, M. & Möhring, K., licensed under CC BY 4.0. https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/3GVH7.

Compared with the *pre-pandemic baseline*, public support for a legal right to WFH had increased slightly in the *early pandemic phase* (July 2020), a period marked by a partial easing of the initial strict containment measures. However, until the availability of vaccinations, restrictions remained relatively stringent. At this time, infection rates were comparatively low, positioning July 2020 within the first summer plateau of the pandemic. Between this phase and the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*, the pandemic unfolded through a second and third wave, culminating in an all-time peak of containment stringency in early 2021. In June 2021, vaccination prioritization was lifted, making vaccines available to the general adult population. Consequently, by August and September 2021, containment measures had been significantly relaxed after 9 months of severe restrictions. This included the expiry of the first obligation for employers to offer WFH after being in effect for 5 months. Support for the law in this *advanced mid-pandemic* phase (September 2021) slightly declined, returning to pre-pandemic levels. This period also coincided with the federal elections for the German parliament. Four months later, at the final measurement point in the *late pandemic phase* (January 2022), support had risen to a mean of 3.16 scale points (SE = .02; CI [3.13–3.19]), reaching the highest level recorded across all time points. By this time, the fourth COVID-19 wave had seamlessly transitioned into the fifth. For the second time, a legal obligation to WFH was reinstated. By this stage, the pandemic had lost much of its initial severity, and despite high infection rates, it was considered manageable. In November 2021, the declaration of a national epidemic emergency was lifted, and decision-making authority for many containment measures was transferred to the federal states (Federal Ministry of Health, 2021). Given this shift, it was reasonable to expect that the WFH mandate, as a containment measure, was approaching its end and unlikely to be reinstated. By March 2022, most containment measures, including the WFH obligation, had been lifted (Hausding, 2022).

To test the hypothesis on a cultural shift in the ideal worker norm in light of the pandemic-induced WFH practices and legal regulations supporting WFH, we first calculated a random-effects panel regression model controlling for work characteristics, household situation, and individual characteristics including health and political self-placement as detailed in the methods section. Regression results are displayed in Table 2.

The change in support for a legal right to WFH reveals a significant increase in support between the *pre-pandemic baseline* and the *late pandemic phase* (see Table 2). The increase in support observed in the *early pandemic phase* is less pronounced but not statistically significant. In the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*, support for a legal right to WFH marginally decreases compared with the *pre-pandemic baseline*, though this decrease is also not statistically significant (see Table 2). The findings broadly confirm Hypothesis 1 on the pandemic-driven increase in support for a legal right to WFH. As a robustness check, we calculated fixed-effects panel regressions, which yielded very similar results in terms of coefficients and statistical significance. Results of the fixed-effects regression are displayed in Table A4 in the Appendix A.

In the following, we test our hypothesis regarding the support for a legal right to WFH by WFH experience and in the subgroups with differences in bargaining power and access to WFH. For both, we analyse group-specific period effects. The correlation patterns displayed in Table A3 in the Appendix A align with the theoretical expectations, indicating that the variables are meaningfully related, without suggesting problematic levels of collinearity. We employ four random-effects panel regression models, interacting in each one group variable (1 WFH, 2 gender, 3 age group, 4 income group) with period dummies for the different time points. Results of the regression models, labelled according to the group variable used in the interaction, are reported in Table A5 in the Appendix A. Based on these models, we calculate predictive marginal effects. Figure 2 presents the predicted marginal effects for group differences and their temporal development across those with WFH experience vs. onsite workers, gender, age, and income groups, derived from the random-effects panel regressions.

As Figure 2 illustrates, exposure to WFH significantly shapes attitudes towards a legal right to WFH. Across all observed time points, support for such legislation is statistically significantly higher among experienced homeworkers – those who were WFH prior to the pandemic – compared with onsite workers. In contrast, the distinction between new homeworkers – those who began WFH during the pandemic – and experienced homeworkers appears to be of lesser importance.

Support for a legal right to WFH remains consistently high across both groups of homeworkers. This finding partially confirms Hypothesis 2a, which posits that support is higher among homeworkers than onsite workers. Contrary to our expectations, experienced homeworkers exhibit the highest levels of support, while new homeworkers, although direct beneficiaries, show slightly lower levels of support across most phases. This difference persists throughout all periods except the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*. However, differences between the two groups of homeworkers are not statistically significant. The temporal dynamics of support differ across groups. Unlike experienced homeworkers, new homeworkers exhibit a steady increase in support from the onset of the pandemic through to the late pandemic phase. By contrast, experienced homeworkers, as onsite workers, show a decline in support during the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*, followed by a renewed increase in the *late pandemic phase*. Among onsite workers, support in the late pandemic phase exceeds the *pre-pandemic baseline* at a statistically significant level. These findings offer partial confirmation of Hypothesis 2b, providing evidence consistent with processes of cultural diffusion.

In the following, we examine the results for the various subgroups, differentiated by their bargaining power and access to WFH as specified in Hypothesis 3a, as well as by periodic patterns as outlined in Hypothesis 3b. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, women exhibited significantly higher levels of support for a legal right to WFH compared with men, and this finding is sustained for all periods under observation. The periodic pattern observed in the random-effects regression for the total sample is similarly evident among women: As the pandemic progressed, support for the policy increased, apart from a minor decline in the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*. The increase in support among women between the *pre-pandemic baseline* and the *late pandemic phase* is statistically significant, while the smaller increase in support between the *pre-pandemic baseline* and the *early pandemic phase* is not statistically

TABLE 2 Random-effects panel regression: Support for a legal right to WFH throughout January 2020 to January 2022.

January 2020	Ref.	
July 2020	.0402	(.0247)
September 2021	−.0206	(.0170)
January 2022	.0815***	(.0167)
Gender		
Male	Ref.	
Female	.122***	(.0269)
Age group		
Up to 30 years	Ref.	
31–50 years	−.148***	(.0388)
51+ years	−.265***	(.0388)
Income group		
Up to EUR 1500	Ref.	
EUR 1500–3000	−.0152	(.0302)
EUR 3000+	−.198***	(.0447)
Experience of WFH		
Not WFH	Ref.	
WFH before and during pandemic	.189***	(.0382)
WFH only during pandemic	.176***	(.0350)
WFH only before pandemic	−.333**	(.123)
Employment		
Full-time employment	Ref.	
Part-time/marginally employment	.0128	(.0249)
Not working	.0507	(.0343)
Economic sector		
Industry	Ref.	
Service	.0132	(.0255)
Public/education	.0227	(.0269)
Education		
Without professional degree	Ref.	
In (re-)training	−.130	(.103)
Apprenticeship	−.130^{+}	(.0668)
University degree	−.130^{+}	(.0703)
Else	−.115	(.107)
Residency		
West Germany	Ref.	
East Germany	−.0411	(.0358)
Self-rated health status (good-bad)	.0300^{+}	(.0179)
Parental status		
No children	Ref.	
Children	.0307	(.0320)
Availability separate office		
No separate office	Ref.	
Has separate office	.0402	(.0301)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

No answer	.0278	(.0283)
Political self-placement		
Left	Ref.	
Centre	−.130***	(.0323)
Right	−.183***	(.0340)
Not indicated	−.112**	(.0353)
Constant	3.295***	(.0881)
R^2 within	.008	
N Observations	8638	
N Individuals	2705	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, $^{+}p<.1$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.

Source: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.

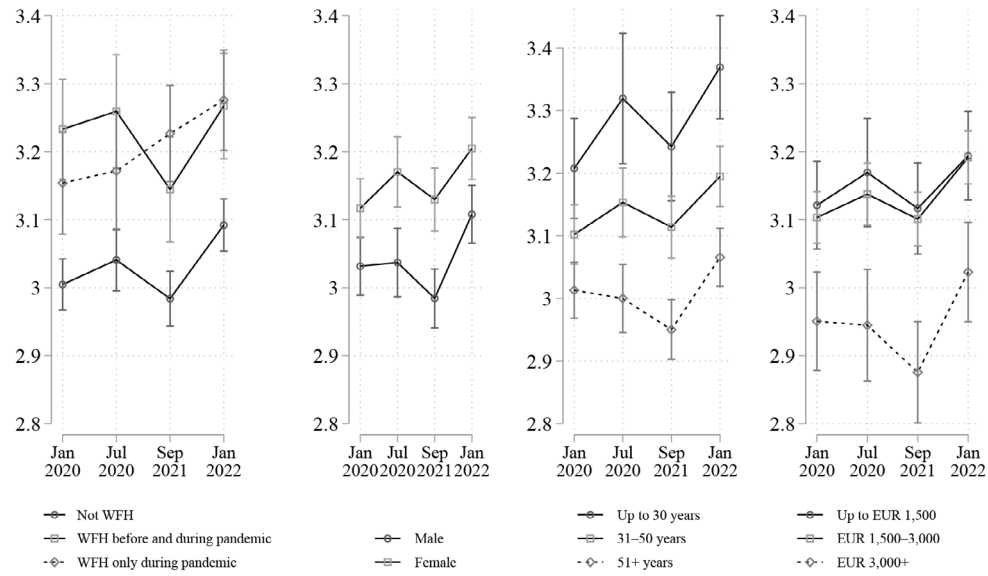

FIGURE 2 Predicted marginal effects for a legal right to WFH, different subgroups. Based on different random-effect models with interaction effects for WFH, gender, age groups, and income groups. Regression results are displayed in Table A4 in the Appendix A. *Source*: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations. Figure by Reifenscheid, M. & Möhring, K., licensed under CC BY 4.0. https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/3GVH7.

significant. A comparable trend is observed among men, with an overall increase in support apart from a smaller decline in the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*.

Since access to WFH may be particularly relevant for parents, as a robustness check, we examine differences between childless men and women on the one hand, and mothers and fathers on the other. The results of this subgroup analysis are depicted in Figure A1 in the Appendix A. Among mothers, approval follows a modest but continuous upward trend. In contrast to the overall population – as well as childless men, childless women, and fathers – there is no decline in support in the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*. Apart from this aspect, childless women and mothers appear to show similar patterns and levels of support; fathers and childless men are less supportive of the law. However, the differences in support over time observed among mothers are not statistically significant, and the confidence intervals are relatively wide, as it is the case for the other subgroups in this robustness check on gender differences.

The results for different age groups reveal a pronounced age-related divide in support for a legal right to WFH between the youngest and oldest age groups. The level of support among the youngest age group is similar to that of individuals aged 31–50 years, though statistically significant differences emerge in the *early* and *late pandemic phases*, where support of the youngest age groups is higher. Over time, support within the youngest age group also follows the pattern observed in the overall population, exhibiting an increase at all time points compared with the *pre-pandemic baseline* and a decline between the *early and advanced mid-pandemic phases*. The increase in support between the *pre-pandemic baseline* and *late pandemic phase* is statistically significant. In contrast, the oldest age group displays a different trajectory: support moderately declines comparing the *pre-pandemic baseline* and *early pandemic phase*, and more pronounced, between the *pre-pandemic baseline* and *advanced mid-pandemic phase*. However, at both time points, differences in support are not statistically significant. Ultimately, support increases in the *late pandemic phase* also in the oldest age group, though not at statistically significant levels.

Given the comparatively low case numbers in the youngest age group, we conduct a robustness check by re-estimating the model using alternative cut-off points for the youngest and middle age groups (up to 35 years instead of up to 30 years; 36–50 years instead of 31–50 years). Predicted marginal effects for these specifications are presented in Figure A2 in the Appendix A. The main patterns remain largely consistent with those observed for the original age group definitions.

Group differences in support are also confirmed for the different income groups. At all time points, support for a legal right to WFH is statistically significantly higher among individuals in the lowest income group compared with those in the highest income group. Low- and middle-income groups exhibit similar levels of support and follow comparable patterns in their development over time. Across all income groups, support is consistently higher in the *late pandemic phase* than before the onset of the pandemic. Notably, support increases only in the lowest income group at statistically significant levels.

Overall, the results provide support for Hypothesis 3a as women compared with men, younger compared with older individuals, and those in the lowest and middle compared with the highest income group exhibited significantly higher levels of support for a legal right to WFH. Hypothesis 3b is only partly confirmed: older individuals and those in the highest income group show a somewhat lagged, yet insignificant, increase in support. Men, however, exhibit a pronounced and statistically significant increase in support in the *late pandemic phase*.

DISCUSSION

This article examines the evolution of public support for a legal right to WFH throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The pandemic served as a natural experiment, providing an unprecedented opportunity to enable employees to WFH and to observe its effects on daily routines, collaboration with colleagues, and time use. At the same time, however, the pandemic introduced extraordinary societal challenges, situating this natural experiment within a unique context. Drawing on normative policy feedback theory (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009, 2015) and rational choice (Svallfors, 2010), we investigate whether and how the large-scale shift to WFH challenged the dominant cultural norm of the 'ideal worker' (Williams, 1999). Specifically, we ask whether the widespread experience of WFH brought about by the pandemic increased public support for a legal right to WFH, and how this support evolved at different time points shaped by distinct epidemiological conditions and policy frameworks.

Theoretical implications

Based on normative anchoring – where policies legitimize adaptations of preferences – and cultural diffusion – where normative adaptations extend to broader segments of the population (Gangl &

Ziefle, 2015) – we hypothesized that support would first increase among those benefiting from such legislation and later diffuse to the general population.

We confirm that public support for a legal right to WFH increased over the first 2 years of the pandemic. While support in the general population exhibited a small, yet insignificant, rise in the *early pandemic phase*, it became more pronounced towards the end of government-imposed containment measures. This pattern underscores the relevance of large-scale WFH experiences, which were not confined to those directly subject to WFH obligations. Indeed, support for the law increased also among onsite workers. These results provide empirical evidence for cultural diffusion, as support increased not only in the general population but also among groups who do not benefit directly from it (Gangl & Ziefle, 2015).

On this note, support for the law follows clear patterns of group affiliation, highlighting its perceived importance among groups disadvantaged in terms of bargaining power (Olsen, 2016) or access to WFH. Women, young individuals, and low earners express higher levels of support than men, older individuals, and high earners. These cleavages were already apparent before the onset of the pandemic and persist over time. While these findings support our argument for cultural diffusion, they offer limited evidence for normative anchoring, which we had expected to emerge more clearly among direct beneficiaries. Although the overall pattern is consistent with our expectations, no group shows a statistically significant increase in support during the *early phase of the pandemic*. The expectation that a reversion to the traditional onsite work model was forthcoming may have mitigated the momentum for expanding formal rights to WFH, resulting in a less pronounced increase in support at that stage.

Furthermore, support appears to be influenced by broader political dynamics and, potentially, by pandemic fatigue. Notably, in the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*—a period marked by habituation to living with the virus but also prolonged restrictions and uncertainty regarding the pandemic's trajectory—support for the law declined, in part reverting to pre-pandemic levels or in some groups even below. The federal parliamentary elections held at that time point to a possible link to electoral politics, as WFH policies were a campaign issue. Compared with the *pre-pandemic baseline*, this decline is not statistically significant. However, shortly after the decline in the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*, older individuals, men, high earners, and onsite workers—those with initially lower support—exhibit a resurgence in support in the *late pandemic phase* that is pronounced and statistically significant compared with the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*. This raises questions regarding the long-term stability of cultural diffusion: If support for a legal right to WFH is contingent on political partisanship or larger political debates, then cultural acceptance of WFH may prove unstable once the removal of government mandates has persisted for a longer period.

In contrast, two groups display a notably stable trajectory in their support for a legal right to WFH: new homeworkers and mothers (displayed in Figure A1 in the Appendix A). From the *pre-pandemic baseline* to the *late pandemic phase*, support among these groups increases steadily and does not decline during the *advanced mid-pandemic phase*. Although this increase is not statistically significant, it signals relative stability in support, even amid political debates, partisan divisions, or pandemic fatigue. This pattern may suggest that these groups are particularly constrained by the ideal worker norm and therefore view continued access to WFH as essential, especially as containment measures are about to be permanently lifted. By supporting maternal employment through access to WFH and signalling broader acceptance of flexible work arrangements, a legal right to WFH could help facilitate a transition away from the conventional male breadwinner model that has historically shaped the German labour market (Lewis, 2001).

Practical implications

The observed support for formalized regulation indicates that many individuals, particularly those with weaker bargaining power, perceive a need for structural protection to navigate their professional lives effectively. This is particularly relevant for individuals who, due to their socio-economic position or job characteristics, lack the leverage to secure WFH arrangements on their own. This finding suggests that the existing individualized approach – where WFH arrangements are largely negotiated between employees and employers – may be insufficient in ensuring equal access to flexible work options. In this

regard, national-level legislation may be more effective than company-level regulations in mitigating the dominance of the ideal worker norm (Lott & Klenner, 2018), as it establishes a universal framework rather than leaving flexibility subject to individual workplace negotiations or collective agreements. Given that workplace flexibility has been shown to profoundly shape employees' lives and expand opportunities to select and find jobs, the regulation of WFH is not merely a question of individual preference but one with significant labour market implications.

Since employers offer workplace flexibility strategically to attract skilled workers (BDA, 2023), legally granted access to workplace flexibility could be an important factor in encouraging higher work volumes among groups with potential to extend work hours, such as women, particularly mothers, and younger workers (Eurostat, 2024). Conversely, return-to-office policies have the capacity to impede work integration, particularly among individuals for whom flexibility is indispensable for their participation in the labour market. Although this may also be relevant to older workers, previous research did not demonstrate that access to WFH prolonged their participation in the labour force (Davis et al., 2023) and the use of WFH among older adults remained comparatively low even at the height of the pandemic (Reifenscheid & Möhring, 2021). Accordingly, our findings indicate a relatively high degree of scepticism towards a legal right to WFH within the group of older employees, which may be linked to stronger adherence to the ideal worker norm. In addition, comparatively lower levels of digital literacy may further contribute to their reluctance to embrace WFH (Skalacka & Pajestka, 2024). For this group, employer-provided support, particularly through further training, may play a key role in WFH use and maximizing its benefits.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our analysis is subject to several limitations. First, our measure of respondents' work location is limited to a broad distinction between WFH and not WFH, as well as whether this experience occurred before or after the onset of the pandemic. This restricts our ability to capture more nuanced work arrangements that may influence attitudes towards a legal right to WFH. In particular, we are unable to assess the duration or intensity of individuals' experiences with WFH. Moreover, limitations in our sample size prevent us from testing further interactions of WFH with age or gender that might reveal important nuances in support for the law.

Second, distinguishing between parents of younger and older children may be particularly relevant for understanding support among mothers of small children. However, our data do not include information on children's ages. Depending on the age of the child, mothers may differ in their perceptions of flexibility stigma (Chung & Seo, 2024) and consequently differ in support for a legal right to WFH.

Third, our study captures how attitudes towards access to WFH evolved during a period of rapid and unprecedented change. The exceptional nature of WFH during the period we look at, often mandated and associated with broader crisis management, may have shaped attitudes in complex and ambivalent ways, potentially limiting support despite increased exposure to WFH.

Future research could build on these findings to assess the long-term stability of cultural diffusion regarding access to WFH and toward WFH more broadly as the exceptional conditions of the pandemic recede and temporary government mandates lose influence. Furthermore, given persistent social inequalities in access to WFH, and the group-specific patterns of support for legal regulation demonstrated in this study, an important direction for future research is to examine whether the legal codification of WFH rights helps equalize access across social groups and to increase work volumes that can be implemented while WFH.

CONCLUSION

Our findings highlight that the pandemic served as a catalyst for cultural change in attitudes towards facilitating access to WFH. Support for a legal right to WFH is strongest among those with limited bargaining

power, underscoring the need for structural regulation rather than reliance on individualized negotiations. At the same time, the observed volatility in support, particularly among more advantaged groups, suggests that cultural acceptance of granting access to WFH is not yet firmly anchored. It also indicates that even those initially sceptical of a legal right to WFH can grow more supportive as it becomes increasingly normalized in their environment. In conclusion, if policies succeed in reinforcing and stabilizing cultural change toward greater workplace flexibility, they could help ensure equitable access to WFH and, in doing so, contribute to challenging persistent inequalities in the organization of work.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Maximiliane Reifenscheid: Conceptualization; methodology; software; data curation; investigation; validation; formal analysis; supervision; visualization; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Katja Möhring:** Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; validation; formal analysis; supervision; funding acquisition; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences at https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14322, reference number: ZA7592; https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13588, reference number: ZA7642; https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14324, reference number ZA7763; https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13946, reference number ZA7877; https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13700, reference number ZA7745. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: https://www.gesis.org.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Overview of variables.

Support for a legal right to WFH	Mean	3.1
(min. 1 max. 4)	SD	.77
	Missing	.14
Experience WFH		
Not WFH		.69
WFH before and during pandemic		.15
WFH only during pandemic		.15
WFH only before pandemic		.01
	Missing	.03
Gender		
Women		.46
Men		.54
	Missing	.08
Age group		
Up to 30 years		.11
31–50 years		.43
51+ years		.47
Income group (after imputation)		
Up to EUR 1500		.20
EUR 1500–3000		.57
EUR 3000+		.23
Employment status		
Full-time		.68
Part-time		.26
Not working		.06
	Missing	.08
Economic sector		
Industry		.29
Service		.42
Public		.29
Education		
Without professional degree		.03
In (re)training		.02
Apprenticeship		.58
University degree		.35
Else		.03
Residency		
West Germany		.87
East Germany		.13
	Missing	.003
Health status, self-assessed	Mean	2.17
(min.1 max. 5, good-bad)	SD	.69

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

Missing	.01
Children	
No children	.76
Children	.24
Separate room for work at home	
No separate office	.36
Has separate office	.36
No answer	.28
Political self-placement	
Left	.44
Centre	.19
Right	.22
Not indicated	.15

Source: GIP, waves 43, 45, 55, 57, and MCS, own estimations.

TABLE A2 Correlations between imputed income and predictor variables. Before and after single regression-based imputation.

	Before imputation	After imputation
Income and gender	−.1122***	−.1217***
Income and education	.1904***	.2162***
Income and age group	−.0682***	−.1030***
Income & occupational status	−.2926***	−.3205***

Note: $^{+}p < .1$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Source: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.

TABLE A3 Correlations between variables.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Support for a legal right to WFH	1.00												
2. Experience WFH	.06***	1.00											
3. Gender	.12***	−.05***	1.00										
4. Age group	−.13***	−.07***	−.03**	1.00									
5. Income group (after imputation)	−.11***	.21***	−.36***	.1***	1.00								
6. Employment status	.04***	−.14***	.33***	.14***	−.31***	1.00							
7. Economic sector	.06***	.02	.24***	.07***	−.07***	.12***	1.00						
8. Education	−.01	.23***	−.04***	.02	.25***	−.06***	.10***	1.00					
9. Residency	−.03*	−.09***	−.00	.01	−.07***	−.05***	.00	−.02^{+}	1.00				
10. Health status	.01	−.05***	−.01	.17***	−.09***	.10***	.01	−.07***	−.00	1.00			
11. Children	.01	.06***	−.03**	−.17***	.07***	.00	.06***	.07***	.03***	−.07***	1.00		
12. Separate room for work at home	0	−.04***	−.03***	−.01	.05***	−.02*	−.07***	.04***	.01	−.03***	−.01	1.00	
13. Political self-placement	−.09***	−.09***	−.02*	−.05***	−.03**	−.05***	−.28***	−.12***	.01	−.00	−.06***	.06***	1.00

Note: $^{+}p < .1$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Source: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.

TABLE A4 Fixed-effects panel regression: Support for a legal right to WFH throughout January 2020–January 2022.

January 2020	Ref.	
July 2020	.030	(.019)
September 2021	−.013	(.017)
January 2022	.085***	(.017)
Full-time employment	Ref.	
Part-time/marginally employment	.016	(.035)
Not working	.050	(.041)
Constant	3.07***	(.014)
R^2 within	.008	
N Observations	8638	
N Individuals	2705	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, $^{+}p < .1$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Source: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.

TABLE A5 Random-effects panel regressions: Support for a legal right to WFH with group interactions.

	1	2	3	4
	WFH	**Gender**	**Age**	**Income**
January 2020	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
July 2020	.0478^{+}	.0179	.123*	.0641
	(.0278)	(.0290)	(.0552)	(.0453)
September 2021	−.0218	−.0484*	.0307	−.00484
	(.0220)	(.0228)	(.0450)	(.0372)
January 2022	.0874***	.0762***	.161***	.0727*
	(.0206)	(.0226)	(.0436)	(.0339)
Not WFH	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
WFH before and during pandemic	.221***	.189***	.189***	.189***
	(.0437)	(.0382)	(.0382)	(.0382)
WFH only during pandemic	.145***	.176***	.176***	.176***
	(.0439)	(.0351)	(.0351)	(.0351)
WFH only before pandemic	−.280*	−.333**	−.334**	−.332**
	(.131)	(.123)	(.123)	(.123)
July '20				
# Not WFH	Ref.			
# WFH before and during pandemic	−.00959			
	(.0477)			
# WFH only during pandemic	−.0176			
	(.0518)			
# WFH only before pandemic	−.114			
	(.144)			
September '21				
# Not WFH	Ref.			
# WFH before and during pandemic	−.0670			
	(.0429)			
# WFH only during pandemic	.0943*			
	(.0451)			
# WFH only before pandemic	−.0728			
	(.118)			
January '22				
# Not WFH	Ref.			
# WFH before and during pandemic	−.0536			
	(.0430)			
# WFH only during pandemic	.0345			
	(.0463)			
# WFH only before pandemic	−.0367			
	(.124)			
Male	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Female	.122***	.0927**	.122***	.122***
	(.0269)	(.0322)	(.0269)	(.0269)

(Continues)

TABLE A5 (Continued)

	1	2	3	4
	WFH	**Gender**	**Age**	**Income**
Up to 30 years	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
31–50 years	−.148***	−.148***	−.115*	−.148***
	(.0389)	(.0388)	(.0471)	(.0388)
51+ years	−.266***	−.266***	−.193***	−.266***
	(.0389)	(.0388)	(.0468)	(.0389)
Up to EUR 1500	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
EUR 1500–3000	−.0156	−.0149	−.0157	−.0158
	(.0303)	(.0302)	(.0302)	(.0372)
EUR 3000+	−.198***	−.197***	−.198***	−.169**
	(.0447)	(.0447)	(.0447)	(.0522)
Full-time employment	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Part-time/marginally employment	.0124	.0144	.0114	.0135
	(.0249)	(.0250)	(.0250)	(.0250)
Not working	.0462	.0496	.0546	.0506
	(.0347)	(.0344)	(.0346)	(.0344)
Industry	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Service	.0128	.0152	.0113	.0147
	(.0256)	(.0256)	(.0255)	(.0255)
Public/education	.0213	.0276	.0208	.0237
	(.0270)	(.0275)	(.0269)	(.0270)
Without professional degree	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
In training	−.132	−.130	−.128	−.130
	(.103)	(.103)	(.103)	(.103)
Apprenticeship	−.131*	−.130^{+}	−.132*	−.131*
	(.0668)	(.0668)	(.0667)	(.0668)
University degree	−.131^{+}	−.131^{+}	−.132^{+}	−.131^{+}
	(.0703)	(.0703)	(.0703)	(.0703)
Else	−.116	−.115	−.116	−.116
	(.107)	(.107)	(.107)	(.107)
West Germany	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
East Germany	−.0412	−.0406	−.0410	−.0408
	(.0358)	(.0358)	(.0358)	(.0358)
Self-rated health status (good-bad)	.0300^{+}	.0301^{+}	.0302^{+}	.0299^{+}
	(.0179)	(.0179)	(.0179)	(.0179)
No children	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Children	.0311	.0306	.0292	.0308
	(.0320)	(.0320)	(.0320)	(.0320)
No separate office	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Has separate office	.0408	.0401	.0408	.0405
	(.0301)	(.0301)	(.0301)	(.0301)

TABLE A5 (Continued)

	1	2	3	4
	WFH	**Gender**	**Age**	**Income**
Not indicated	.0286	.0283	.0288	.0284
	(.0283)	(.0283)	(.0283)	(.0283)
Political self-placement, left	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Centre	−.130***	−.130***	−.130***	−.130***
	(.0323)	(.0323)	(.0323)	(.0323)
Right	−.183***	−.182***	−.183***	−.182***
	(.0340)	(.0340)	(.0340)	(.0340)
Not indicated	−.112**	−.110**	−.112**	−.111**
	(.0354)	(.0354)	(.0353)	(.0354)
July '20				
# Male		Ref.		
# Female		.0529		
		(.0372)		
September '21				
# Male		Ref.		
# Female		.0610^{+}		
		(.0333)		
January '22				
# Male		Ref.		
# Female		.0118		
		(.0323)		
July '20				
# Up to 30 years			Ref.	
# 31–50 years			−.0609	
			(.0598)	
# 51+ years			−.125*	
			(.0595)	
September '21				
# Up to 30 years			Ref.	
# 31–50 years			−.0194	
			(.0518)	
# 51+ years			.0935^{+}	
			(.0510)	
January '22				
# Up to 30 years			Ref.	
# 31–50 years			−.0691	
			(.0501)	
# 51+ years			−.109*	
			(.0493)	
July '20				
# EUR up to 1500				Ref.

(Continues)

TABLE A5 (Continued)

	1 WFH	2 Gender	3 Age	4 Income
# EUR 1500–3000				−.0173
				(.0474)
# EUR 3000+				−.0565
				(.0577)
September '21				
# Up to EUR 1500				Ref.
# EUR 1500-3000				.00150
				(.0427)
# EUR 3000+				−.0706
				(.0517)
January '22				
# Up to EUR 1500				Ref.
# EUR 1500–3000				.0155
				(.0396)
# EUR 3000+				.000369
				(.0489)
Constant	3.294***	3.305***	3.250***	3.288***
	(.0881)	(.0888)	(.0902)	(.0890)
R^2 within	.010	.009	.009	.009
N Observations	8638	8638	8638	8638
N Individuals	2705	2705	2705	2705

Note: WFH = Working from Home; Standard errors in parentheses, $^{+}p < .1$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Source: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.

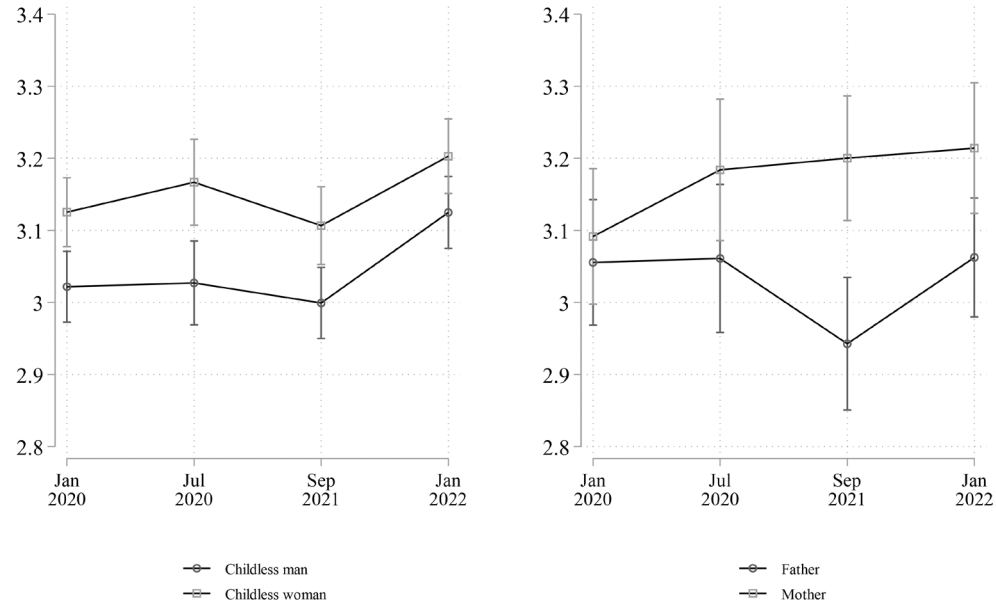

FIGURE A1 Predicted marginal effects for a legal right to WFH, childless women and men, mothers and fathers. Based on random-effect models with interaction effect for parental status + gender. Regression table is not displayed. *Source*: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.

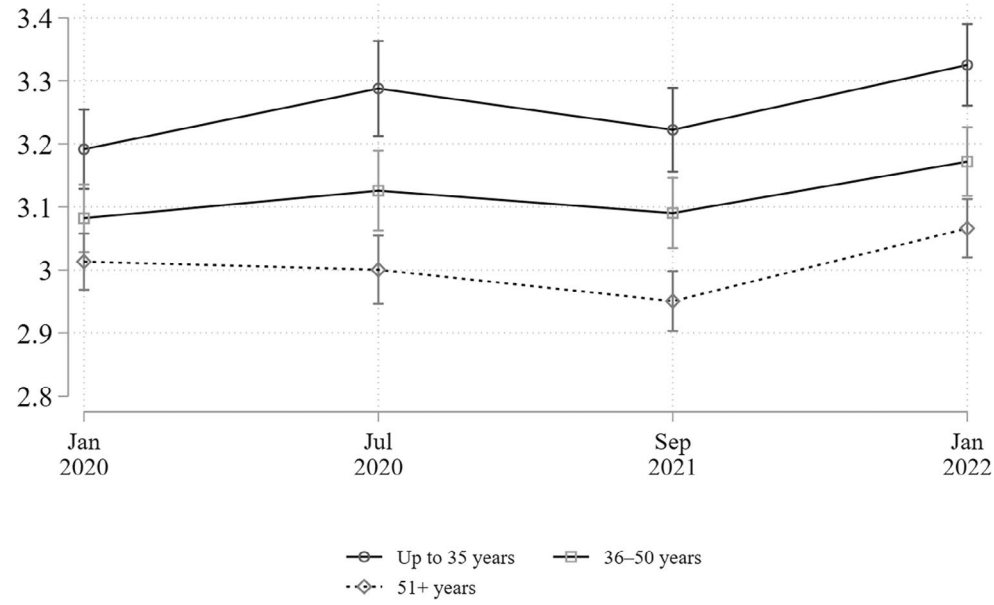

FIGURE A2 Predicted marginal effects for a legal right to WFH, alternative age groups. Based on random-effect models with interaction effect for alternative age groups. Regression table is not displayed. *Source*: GIP waves 43, 45, 55, and 57, MCS, own estimations.