RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is Abortion Dividing Society?
Differentiated attitudes and contextual factors. A quantitative vignette study

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Abstract

We investigated in our quantitative study, based on a factorial survey, whether and how people change their skeptical attitude towards abortions when they are given a vignette and, thus, confronted with further information about the life situation of a person who has an unplanned pregnancy. Our target group was men over 41 years of age living in Western Germany, as this population group is the most critical of abortions, according to the ALLBUS, the German General Social Survey. A computer-assisted telephonic interview survey was conducted with 302 people from the target group. After general questions, such as whether abortion should remain a criminal offense under § 218 of the German Criminal Code and only be exempt from punishment under certain conditions, the participants were randomly assigned to three thematic vignettes: financial burden, eugenics or intimate partner violence. Our results show that, even in the target group, only 24.9% of respondents agree that abortion should remain criminalized. In the face of new information, comprehensibility of the decision to have an abortion increased in all three vignettes.

Introduction

A lot has been happening legally and politically in Germany in recent years regarding the issue of abortions: the so-called "advertising paragraph", § 219a of the German Criminal Code (StGB), which prohibited doctors from publishing information about abortions, was repealed in 2021 and now greater freedom of information for both doctors and patients is facilitated. The German government's "Commission on Reproductive Self-determination and Reproductive Medicine" published its results in April 2024 and is recommending a legal reform of abortion (Kommission zur reproduktiven Selbstbestimmung und Fortpflanzungsmedizin, 2024). In addition, a cross-party initiative aimed to remove abortion from the criminal code (§ 218 StGB) and instead regulate it in the Pregnancy Conflict Act

(SchKG). A possible revision of abortion laws has been discussed in the Bundestag in the winter of 2024 but has not been accepted.[1]

Germany has a regulation regarding deadlines and counseling, therefore, the procedure is unlawful but without penalty if the abortion is performed by a physician and carried out in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. In addition, the pregnant person must comply with the counseling requirement and a reflection period of three days. Otherwise, they face imprisonment for up to three years or a fine (Section 218a par. (1) StGB). In addition, there are the so-called medical and criminological indications as exceptions, each requiring a medical diagnosis. In the former case, an abortion is permitted "to avert a danger to the life of or the danger of grave impairment to the pregnant woman's physical or mental health" (Section 218a, par. (2) StGB), and the latter refers to pregnancies resulting from rape (Section 218a, par. (3) StGB).

In Germany, there is often talk of a "split in society" (Deutschlandfunk.de, 2024; Phoenix vor ort, 2024) regarding the debate on abortion. The controversial debate is about fundamental and human rights, world views and religious beliefs, medical and ethical issues. Whether liberalizing or even abolishing Section 218 of the StGB would really contribute to that alleged split in society seems arguable. If the legal situation were to change, a broad consensus would be welcome in view of the often emotionally charged and moralizing debate (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth – *Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend* (BMFSFJ), 2024).

In social sciences, a split in society is assumed when it falls into different groups "that have irreconcilable attitudes and values and also have different material circumstances and interests and, finally, have hardly any points of contact in their everyday lives and experiences" (Task Force FGZ-Datenzentrum, 2022, own translation). We focus on irreconcilable differences in our considerations. Does this apply to opponents and supporters of abortion, or are there situations in which attitudes and opinions change, i.e. positions converge?

In response to the notion, partially fueled by the media, that German society is divided on the issue of abortion, we explore whether people who, statistically speaking, have a particularly restrictive attitude towards the issue change their minds when confronted with a specific (fictional) scenario. Our hypothesis is that the widely assumed split in society on the issue of abortion does not exist. To be more specific, we assume that even those people who are most likely to take a restrictive view can, under certain conditions, understand the decision to have an abortion and, thus, do not take a hard-line approach toward the more liberal sections of the population.

The results of our vignette study suggest that this assumption is true. The results clearly indicate that people change their attitudes towards abortion depending on the situation and that additional information about the circumstances or reasons for a decision to terminate a pregnancy increases the comprehensibility of this decision.

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[1] This debate happened between the collapse of the German federal government, consisting of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green Party (Grüne) and the Free Democratic Party (FPD) in November 2024, and the early election in February 2025. The election winner is the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). As of now (June 2025) the CDU, their Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU) as well as the SPD have successfully negotiated a coalition agreement and formed a new government under chancellor Friedrich Merz. The coalition agreement includes a short section on abortion expressing the intent to improve the access to abortion and to extend the possibilities of cost coverage for abortions while pledging to support women who have an unwanted pregnancy in order to "protect the unborn life as best possible" (CDU et al., 2025, p. 102, own translation). Since CDU and CSU are against a decriminalisation of abortion, it is not to be expected that there will be a change in legislation for years to come (for more information see Ehl, 2024; Kinkartz, 2025; Zeier & Grün, 2025).

In line with psychological research, we use a broad rather than a more specified concept of attitude in our paper, as defined by Adewuyi:

> Attitude refers to feelings, beliefs, and reactions of an individual towards an event, phenomenon, objects or person. Attitudes are not innate attributes of mankind. They are learnt, relatively stable but can be modified. Attitudes could be implicit or explicit, conscious or unconscious, rational or irrational; extraversion or introversion. Attitudes are evaluations people make about objects, ideas, events or other people. Attitudes can be positive or negative (Adewuyi, 2012, p. 61).

Previous research on the change of attitudes on abortion suggests that empathy (together with additional information about reasons for abortion) could be a crucial factor (see Cheng et al., 2024). We therefore address empathy as a possible reason for an attitude change in the discussion of our results.

We conducted a computer-assisted telephonic interview (CATI) survey of 302 people from the population group that, purely statistically, most frequently speaks out in favor of a ban on abortion. To determine this group, a secondary analysis of the 2021 General Social Survey (ALLBUS) was conducted. The ALLBUS is a series of studies in which "random samples of the German population have been surveyed on attitudes and behavior every two years since 1980 using a partly constant, partly variable survey program" (GESIS, n. d.).

This secondary analysis in order to determine our target group shows that the population group in Germany with the most restrictive attitudes towards abortion, statistically speaking, consists of men aged 41 and older in western Germany. These are purely sociostructural characteristics and not attitudinal clusters. Regarding the German population as a whole the following results can be shown: According to the ALLBUS 2021,[2] 23% of the German population supports a general ban on abortions, while 77% oppose such a ban (GESIS, 2023).[3] There has been a significant liberalization of attitudes compared to previous surveys: in 1990, 46% were in favor of a ban, in 2000, the figure was 36%. This change is also evident across different age groups and points to a general change in values (GESIS, 2021).

Following the explanation of the data and methodology, the results of our study are presented. The discussion of the results and a conclusion complete the paper. In the discussion we interpret our results in light of previous research on attitudes on abortion. We forego, however, the framing of our study in a literature review because to our knowledge there are no other studies that are similar enough to this specific study design to gain sufficient knowledge. Table 1 gives an overview of the study design. The survey is displayed at the end of the manuscript.

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[2] The following statements are based on our own calculations using the cumulated data from the ALLBUS 1980–2018 (GESIS, 2021) and ALLBUS 2021 (GESIS, 2023). These results refer to weighted analyses (personal east-west weighting) due to the disproportionate stratification of individuals from East Germany in the ALLBUS survey.

[3] The wording of the item in question is as follows: "If it were up to you, should these actions be legally prohibited or should they not be legally prohibited? A woman has an abortion because she does not want to have children." (own translation).

Table 1. Infobox on the study design.

Main research question:	To what extent is the opinion formation regarding abortion influenced by specific situative knowledge?
Target group:	People who are statistically most likely to oppose abortion, i.e. men above the age of 41 in Western Germany.
Hypotheses:	Even persons who generally oppose abortion can comprehend the decision to abort in certain circumstances. Specifically: By a majority they … • can comprehend the decision to abort if they know more about the specific individual case. • can comprehend the decision to abort even if they generally support the criminalization of abortion.
Order of survey questions:	• Sociopolitical questions • Attitudinal questions • Vignette questions • Sociodemographic questions

Basis of Data
Method

The CATI survey was designed along the lines of both a factorial survey and a framing experiment. In a factorial survey, "the advantages of survey research are combined with those of experimental designs" (Auspurg et al., 2009, p. 59, own translation).[4] The total sample was divided into three subsamples (questionnaire versions). Hypothetical subject descriptions were evaluated instead of individual items. By varying the individual characteristics of the vignettes, "their influence on the judgments or decisions can be determined exactly and thus the weight of factors can be isolated that are often confounded in reality" (Auspurg et al., 2009, p. 59, own translation).

Reasons for the decision to abort were gradually presented in each vignette. The advantage of presenting only one vignette to each respondent is that learning effects and effects of social desirability can be reduced (Auspurg et al., 2009). Limiting the vignettes to the baseline scenario and two further questions helps to avoid learning and fatigue effects as well as carry-over effects, which are frequently mentioned in the criticism of the method of factorial surveys (Auspurg et al., 2009).

We selected the vignettes after preliminary theoretical considerations on the topics of "completed family planning and financial situation", "disability and medical indication" and "involvement of the partner and intimate partner violence". The first two vignettes refer to questions from the ALLBUS on abortion, while the last vignette was designed to supplement the aspect of intimate partner violence, which does not play a role in the ALLBUS.[5] Figure 1 visualizes the vignette design.

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[4] For more information on the differences between traditional and vignette surveys and the various forms of vignette studies, see Atzmüller & Steiner (2010).

[5] Although the ALLBUS asks about attitudes toward marital rape, it does not take intimate partner violence into account. For information on abortions in the context of intimate partner violence, see the ELSA Study (2024); Jung et al. (2023).

Figure 1. Visualization of the vignette design.
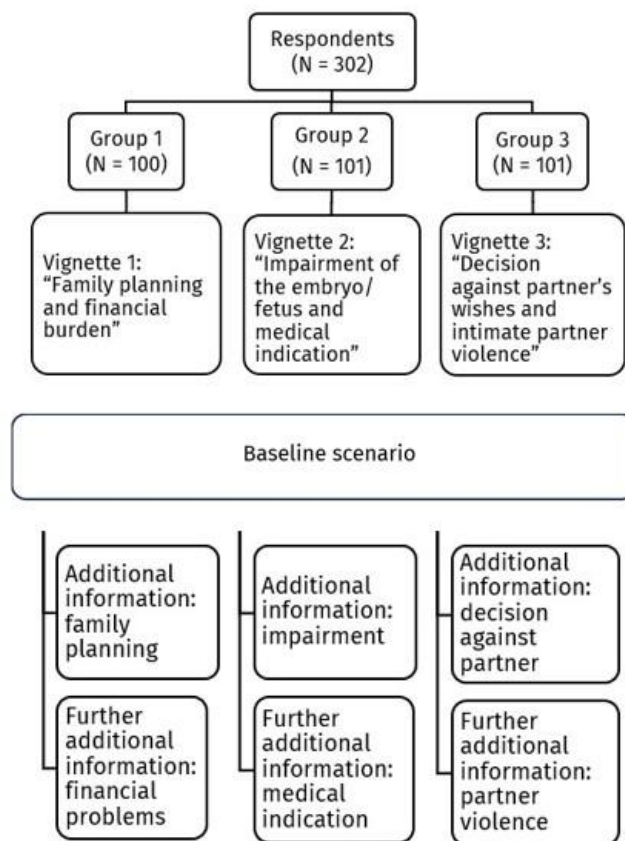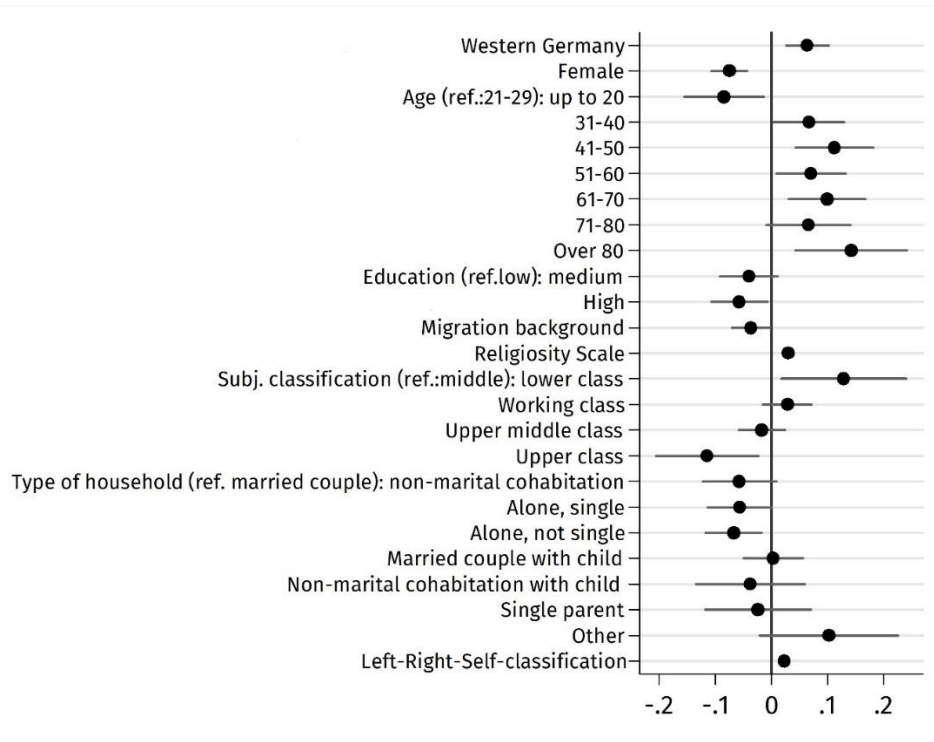

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Sample

As mentioned above, the CATI survey was preceded by a secondary analysis of the ALLBUS to identify the groups that are particularly critical of abortion. The regression graph (Figure 2) shows the independent influences of the factors analyzed regarding the attitude toward the ban on abortion, with all other observable variables held constant. The regression results show that female individuals are more likely to reject a general ban on abortion than male individuals (the probability is 7 percentage points lower on average in the sample). Based on the regression graph, the following key results can also be derived: It becomes clear that the region in which the respondents live is crucial to their attitudes toward abortion bans. People living in western Germany, for example, are an average of 6 percentage points more likely to support the ban than people from eastern Germany.[6] Furthermore, those over 40 years of age favor a ban on abortion (around 8 percentage points more in the sample). By contrast, higher education, a migration background and self-identification with the upper class rather than the middle class tend to be associated with a rejection of the ban. It also shows that people living alone are more likely to hold such an attitude than married people. On the other hand, self-identification with the lower class,

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[6] The legal regulations regarding abortion were different in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) between 1972 and 1990. In the GDR, abortions were legal during the first three months of pregnancy without giving reasons (Busch, 2022). The legal tradition, which was significantly more liberal than in the FRG, presumably led to a correspondingly liberal socialization regarding the topic, which continues to have an effect today (Banaszak, 1998).

religiosity and a subjective classification on the right-wing side of the political spectrum promote support for the ban.

Figure 2. Results of logistic regression analyses on the approval of a ban on abortion (marginal effects) of the secondary analysis of the 2021 General Social Survey (ALLBUS).

(GESIS, 2023). Own calculations.
Note: Pseudo R²: 0.1074; N = 2891. Marginal effects. Weighted results.
Source: authors' own elaboration.

We limited ourselves to the three characteristics of age, gender and place of residence in western Germany in order to keep the screening for inclusion criteria manageable. The sample for the CATI survey was a stratified systematic random sample. The sampling was based on randomly selected western German landline numbers (excluding Berlin) from a public telephone directory, with screening for gender and age taking place before the first substantive question.

Structure of the survey

The CATI survey was conducted by telephone by the aproxima Gesellschaft für Markt- und Sozialforschung Weimar mbh. A total of 302 male individuals were interviewed.[7] The first two questions focused on the respondents' sociopolitical views, followed by questions regarding their attitudes on abortion. This was followed by the baseline scenario, in which Eva Schmidt was introduced as a fictitious person who had become unintentionally pregnant. Without giving any further reasons, it was reported that she wanted an abortion and the participants were asked about the comprehensibility of the decision. After this question, the respondents were divided into three groups (1: N = 100, 2: N = 101, 3: N = 101). Each group was assigned a vignette.[8] Vignette 1 gave additional reasons of having completed family planning

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[7] This corresponds to 7.7% (N = 302) of the adjusted sample. The survey itself took place from 21 November to 8 December 2023.
[8] "Vignette" refers to the specific description of the situation while "group" refers to the group of respondents who is faced with one of the three vignettes.

and a difficult financial situation, while Vignette 2 assumed that the child had multiple disabilities and that Eva Schmidt was, therefore, concerned that her mental health would be affected. In Vignette 3, Eva Schmidt decided on an abortion against the wishes of the biological father; it was only afterwards that the respondents learned that this partner had been violent towards her. Similar to the previous questions, the vignettes use a scale from 1 to 5 to determine the comprehensibility. These five gradations were summarized into three options in the evaluation in order to achieve clearer values. Here, the possible answers 1 and 2 as well as 4 and 5 were summarized, while the possible answer 3 remained unchanged. After the last part of the vignette, questions were asked about previous experiences in the form of personal participation in the decision-making of a pregnant person, marital status, religious community and religiosity. The whole survey in an English translation can be found at the end of the paper at hand.

## Results
Preliminary remarks

Below we are presenting the results of our vignette study. We first look at the distribution of characteristics across our three groups and the total sample to highlight the comparability of the different groups. After that, we describe the levels of support for abortion being a criminal offense and the approval of the existing regulations for the total sample as well as for the different groups. This section refers to the attitudinal questions that were asked before the vignette questions in our survey. Then, we discuss the effects of each of our vignette questions, separately. Finally, we go into a deeper analysis of the results of Vignette 3.

We were interested to know in how far criteria such as age, religious affiliation or personal experiences with a decision about abortion might correlate with the answers given by the respondents. Therefore, we tested for statistical associations between variables (using Chi-square tests as well as Pearson's chi-square tests) and for statistical differences between subgroups of respondents (using the Kruskal-Wallis-Test and the Mann-Whitney U Test). Since our sample is rather small (N = 302) and the data was not distributed normally, in order to get statistically sound results we needed to perform non-parametric tests which make fewer assumptions than linear tests (for more information see Bortz & Schuster, 2010; Kruskal & Wallis, 1952; Mann & Whitney, 1947).

Sociodemographic aspects: Total sample and groups of respondents

First, we take a look at the sociodemographic aspects of our sample for the vignette study. The respondents were between 41 and 98 years old, with a mean age of 64.78 years. The age distribution in the sample corresponds to the distribution in society as a whole. Figure 3 shows a histogram of the age distribution of the total sample.

Figure 3. Histogram of the age distribution in the total sample.
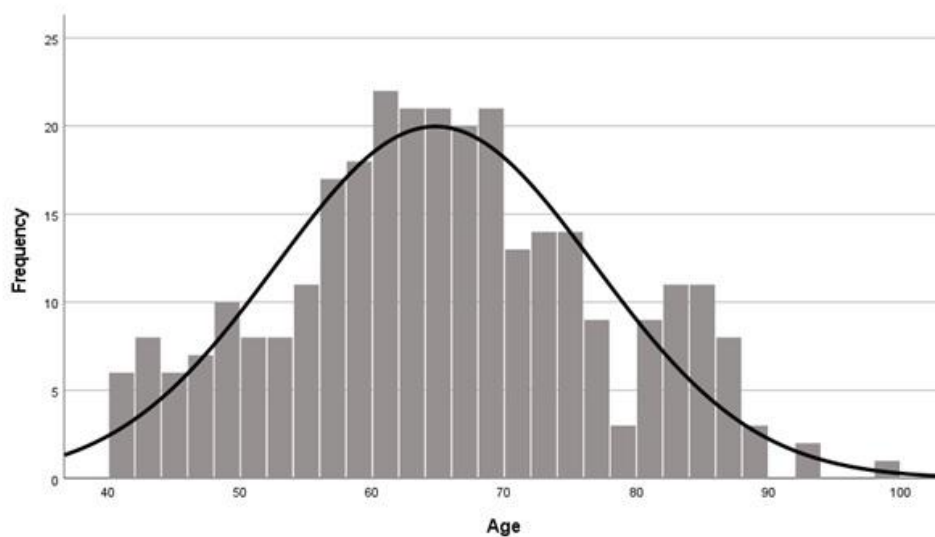
Source: authors' own elaboration.

The distribution of respondents across the federal states was not representative, but is strongly based on the population figures of the respective states.

Furthermore, there were no statistically significant differences[9] between the three groups of respondents at a significance level of 0.05 regarding

- age,
- religious affiliation,
- religiosity,
- marital status in the sense of being in a relationship or not,
- following the debate on abortion,
- the approval that abortion should remain a criminal offense and
- approval of the current regulations.

However, a statistically significant difference between the three groups could be observed regarding their own involvement in the decision to terminate the pregnancy.[10] However, the correlation between group membership and personal participation was only weak at 0.213 according to Cramer's V.

Criminal offense and regulation: Total sample and groups of respondents

What percentage of the respondents of our vignette study (in the total sample as well as in the three groups) are in favor of the criminalization of abortion and are in support if the current legislation? A total of 24.9% of respondents agree or strongly agree that abortion should remain a criminal offense, 12.6% partially agree, while 62.5% do not agree or strongly disagree. A similar picture emerges in the individual respondent groups (Groups 1-3) (see Figure 4).

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[9] Checked with Kruskal-Wallis tests, p > 0.05 (age, following the debate on abortion, agreeing that abortion should remain a criminal offense, agreeing with the current regulation) and Chi-square tests, p > 0.05 (religious affiliation, religiosity, marital status).

[10] Verification using a Pearson's chi-square test, $\chi^2(2) = 13.558$; p = 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.213; no cell frequencies < 5 expected.

Figure 4. Agreement that abortion should remain a criminal offense for the whole sample and the individual respondent groups.
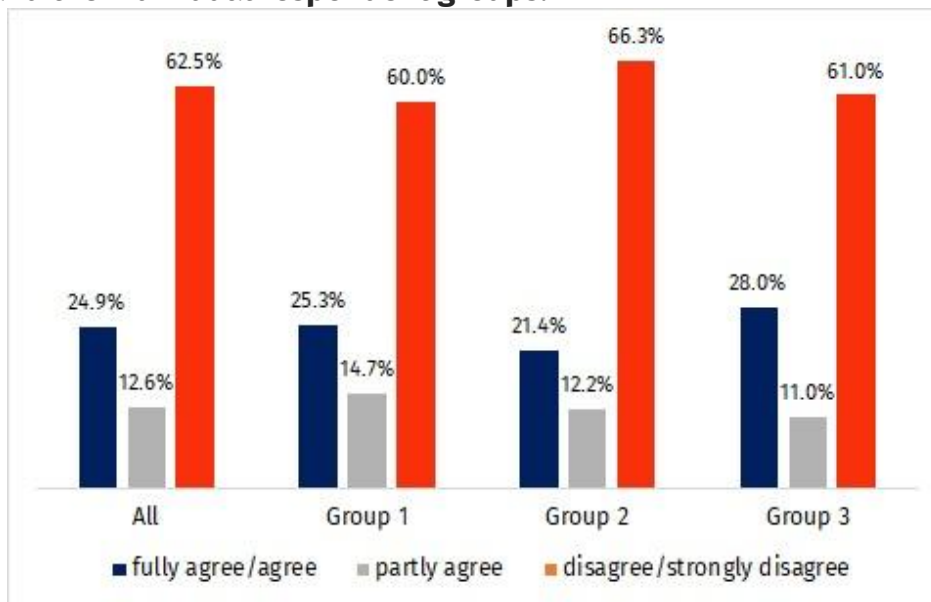
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Sixty-seven percent of the total sample favor maintaining the existing law regarding deadlines and counseling. In Groups 1 and 2, 73.2 and 70%, respectively, agree/strongly agree that the law should be maintained (see Figure 5). Agreement is lower (58%) in Group 3. However, this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 5. Approval of the retention of existing legal regulations for the whole sample and the individual respondent groups.
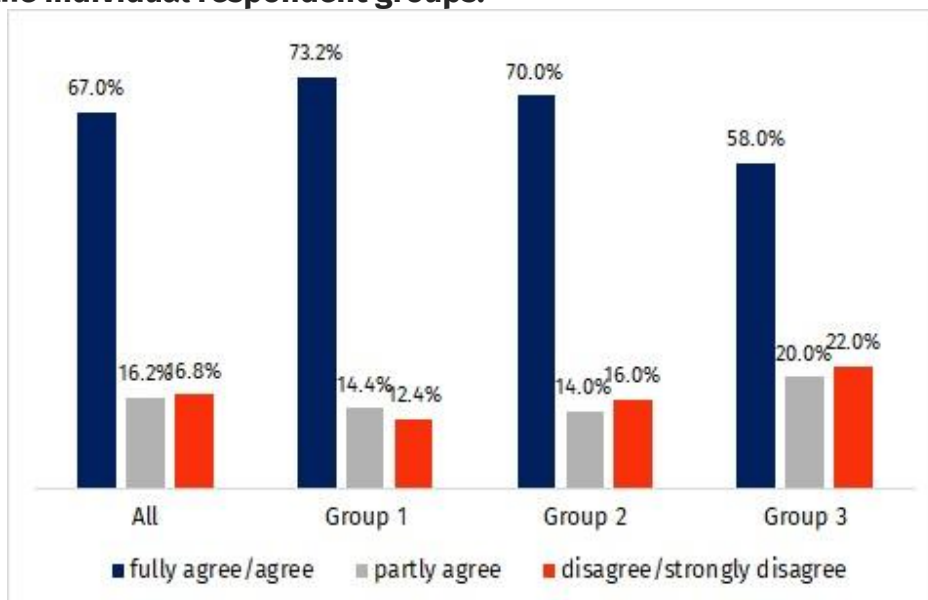
Source: authors' own elaboration.

We were interested to know whether or not there is a statistical link between the variables *agreement with the criminalization of abortion* and *approval of the retention of the existing regulation*. Those who agree that abortion should remain a criminal offense are also more likely to favor keeping the existing regulations. Spearman's correlation reveals a statistically significant positive, albeit weak, correlation between the two variables (r = 0.209).

We also wanted to know whether we could show a correlation with age, own experiences with a decision about abortion, marital status and religious affiliation. There is a weak, statistically significant negative correlation between the age of the respondents and their agreement with maintaining the current legal regulation (r = -0.144): Younger respondents are more likely to support this regulation. However, a significant correlation between age and agreement that abortion should remain a criminal offense could not be established.

Furthermore, there was no significant difference in the total sample between respondents who had already been confronted with a decision about abortion in their own life (e.g. regarding the pregnancy of a partner or daughter)[11] and those who had not been regarding their agreement with the criminal offense (Mann-Whitney U Test, U = 7509.000; z = -0.966; p = 0.334) or to maintain the current regulation (U = 7813.000; z = -0.825; p = 0.409). There was also no significant difference between couples and single people regarding their agreement with the offense (U = 7151.500; z = 0.682; p = 0.495) or with the retention of the regulation (U = 7814.500; z = 1.198; p = 0.231).

In addition, although there are statistically significant differences within the overall sample regarding religious affiliation (Kruskal-Wallis test, p = < 0.006) and religiosity (p = < 0.001) concerning agreement that abortion should remain a criminal offense, there were no significant differences between religious affiliation (p = 0.375) and religiosity (p = 0.119) regarding agreement with the retention of the current regulations.

Baseline Scenario: Total sample and groups of respondents

In the following sections we take a look at the results regarding the vignette survey, beginning with the baseline scenario which was the same for all groups.[12] In any case we are interested in the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision. The results for the total sample show that 49.1% of respondents can comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision to have an abortion, even without knowing the reasons; 23.4% can partially comprehend the decision, while 27.5% cannot comprehend, or do not comprehend it at all. Broken down by the individual groups, 44.3% in group 1, 44.4% in group 2 and as many as 58.6% in group 3 can comprehend, or fully comprehend the decision (see Figure 6).

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[11] The question was: "Have you ever been involved in the decision-making process of whether to carry a pregnancy to term or terminate it, for example, with a partner, friend, sister or daughter?".
[12] See all questions in the Annex.

Figure 6. Comprehensibility of the decision to terminate the pregnancy (baseline scenario) for the whole sample and the individual respondent groups.
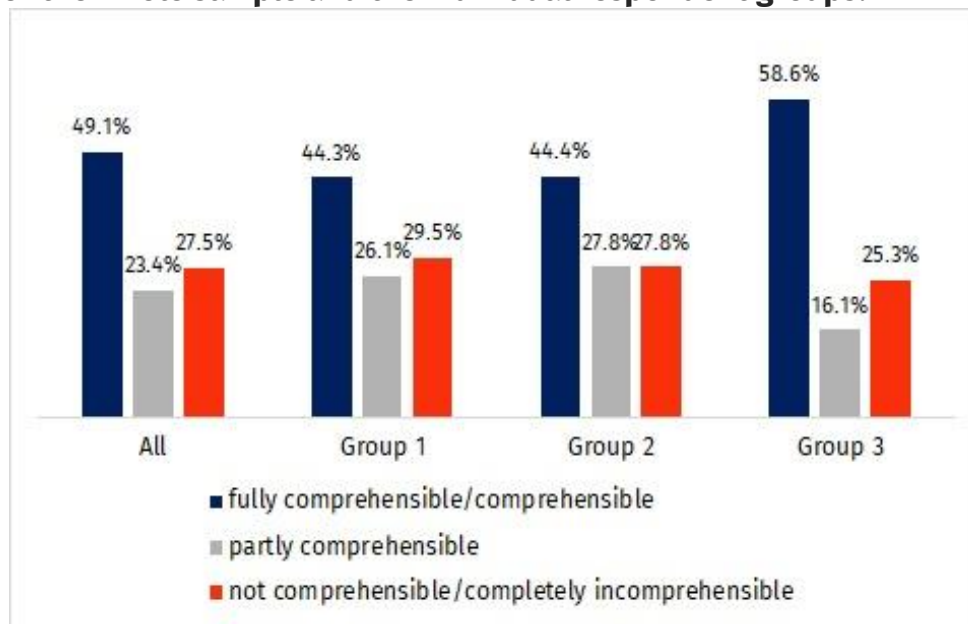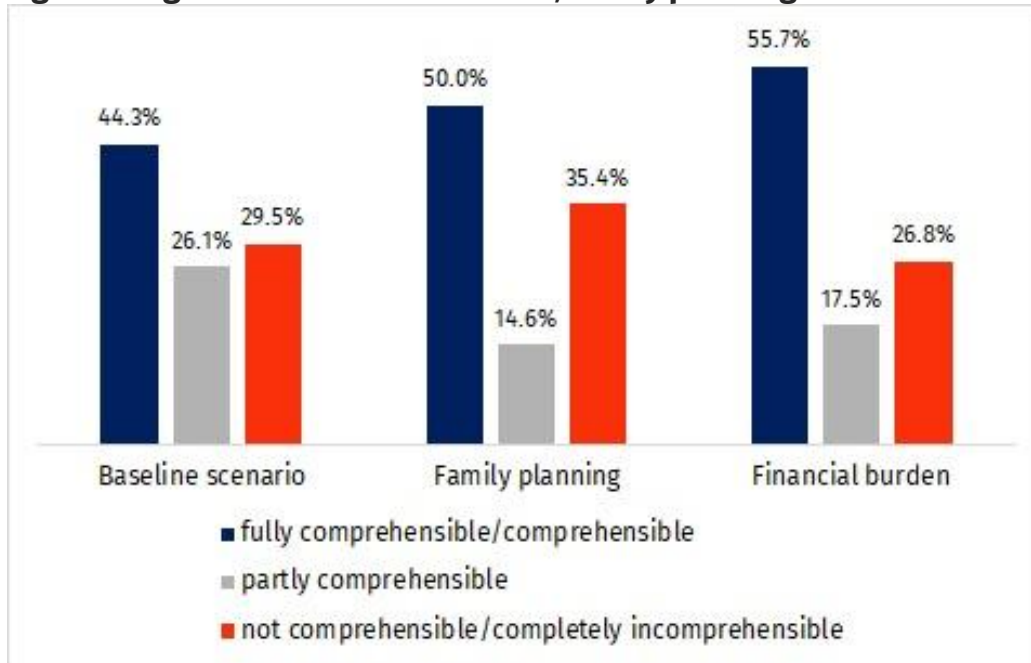

Source: authors' own elaboration.

We had the hypothesis that the personal experience with a decision about abortion could make a difference and, therefore, checked for a correlation between the variables *comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision* and *own involvement*. A Pearson's chi-square test was carried out for the total sample between the group of respondents who had already been involved in a decision about an abortion and the group who had not, and the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision in the initial scenario. There is no statistically significant correlation between the participants' own involvement and the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision ($\chi^2(2) = 0.13$; $p = 0.994$; no expected cell frequencies < 5). This result also applies to the three groups.

Vignette 1: Family planning and financial burden
After having shown the results for the baseline scenario for the total sample and all three groups, we now concentrate on Vignette 1. Below, we show to what extent the respondents of group 1 comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision in the second and third level of the vignette. According to the baseline scenario, 44.3% of respondents in group 1 could either completely or largely comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision, while 29.5% could not comprehend it or did not comprehend it at all. The additional information that Eva Schmidt already has three children and that her family planning is complete increased the level of agreement to 50%. At the same time, however, the proportion of those who could not comprehend her decision or did not comprehend it at all rose to 35.4%. The information that another child would cause financial difficulties for the family increases the level of comprehension to 55.7%, while the group that cannot comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision shrinks to 26.8%. Figure 7 shows a comparison of the three levels. It can be seen that the comprehensibility increases linearly, while partial comprehensibility and non-comprehensibility show a slightly U-shaped trend.

Figure 7. Vignette 1: Baseline scenario, family planning and financial burden.
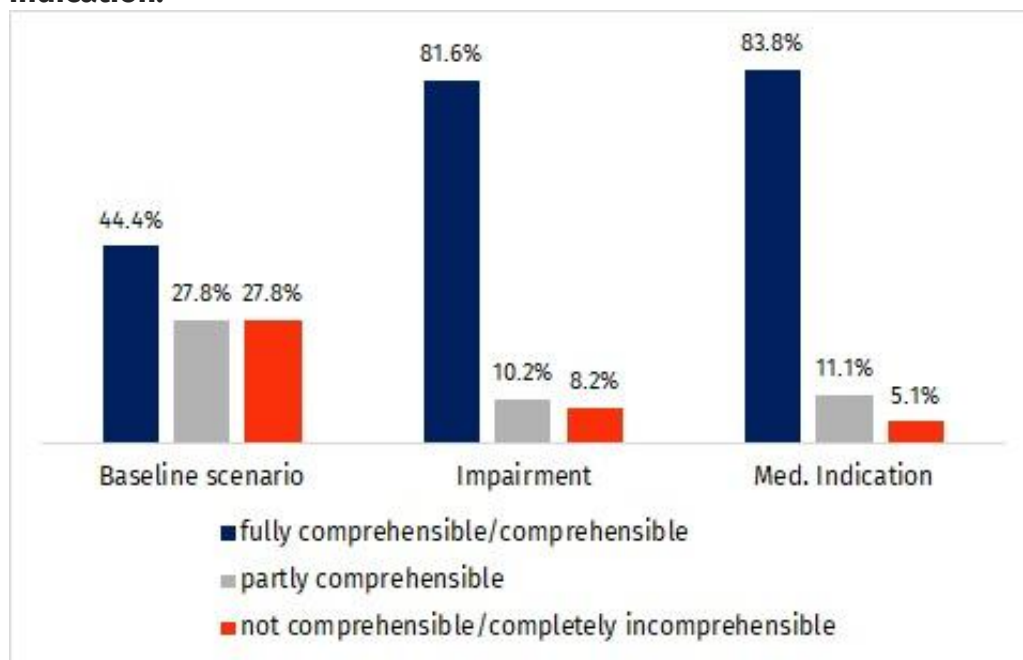

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Mann-Whitney U tests were used to determine whether there was a correlation between the respondents' answers and their involvement in a decision to terminate a pregnancy. No significant differences were found between the groups at a significance level of 0.05 in any of the three scenarios (base scenario, additional information on family planning, additional information on financial burden).

Vignette 2: Impairment of the embryo/fetus and medical indication

The responses on comprehensibility also changed regarding Vignette 2. While 44.4% of group 2 could fully or partly comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision without any need to give reasons, 27.8% could only partly comprehend it, while the remaining 27.8% could not comprehend it (or not at all). The first additional piece of information is that Eva Schmidt can assume from a prenatal examination that the child will be born with multiple disabilities. This reason for the decision to terminate the pregnancy increases the rate of those who would approve of the decision to 81.6%. This changes only slightly (to 83.8%) after the second piece of information is given, stating that Eva Schmidt would like to have an abortion after 16 weeks of pregnancy under the so-called medical indication. The third stage of the vignette explains that the legal situation in Germany stipulates that a pregnancy can be terminated up to the 22nd week of pregnancy without any legal consequences, if the pregnant person has reason to fear serious damage to her physical or mental health. It is stated that Eva Schmidt fears this and, therefore, decides to have an abortion in the 16th week (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Vignette 2: Baseline scenario, impairment of the embryo/fetus, medical indication.
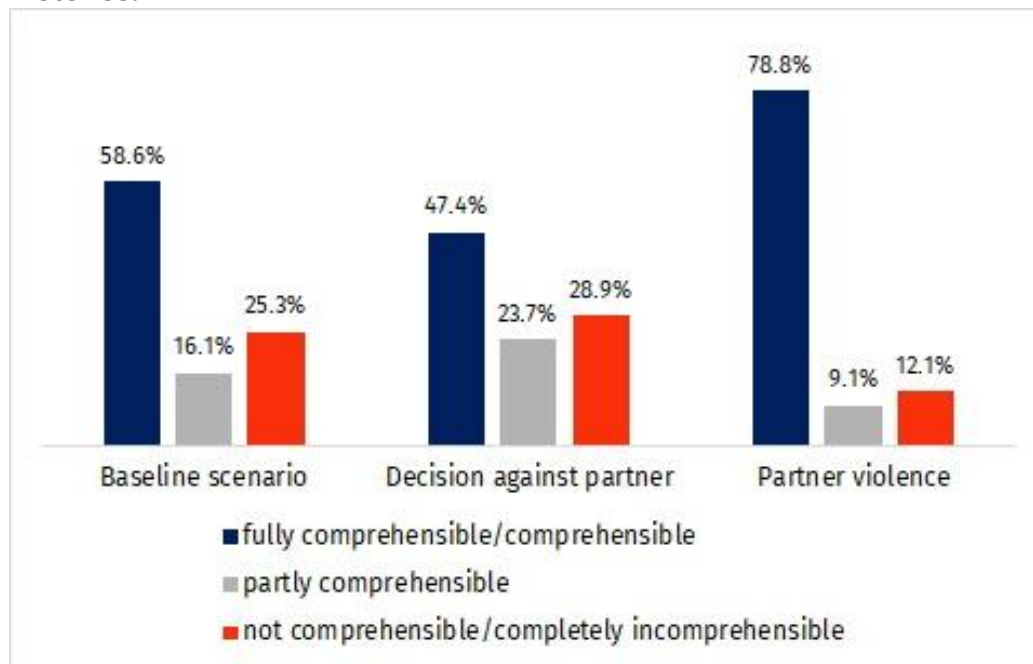

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Mann-Whitney U tests were used to determine whether there was a correlation between the respondents' answers and their involvement in a decision to terminate a pregnancy. No significant differences were found between the groups at a significance level of 0.05 in any of the three scenarios.

Vignette 3: Decision against partner's wishes and intimate partner violence
Group 3 has the highest rate of comprehensibility in the baseline scenario, at 58.6%. The information that Eva Schmidt wants to have an abortion performed against the wishes of her partner Klaus, who is also the biological father, leads to a decrease in comprehensibility to 47.4%. Once the second piece of information is added, indicating that the partner is violent toward her and that this is the reason for her decision to terminate the relationship, the comprehensibility increases to 78.8%, thus, exceeding the already quite high comprehensibility rate of the initial scenario. After the second piece of information was added, both the lack of comprehensibility (28.9%) and the partial comprehensibility (23.7%) increased. The additional information about the partner's violence then led to a significant decrease in both values to 12.1 and 9.1%, respectively (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Vignette 3: Baseline scenario, decision against partner's wishes, intimate partner violence.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Similar to the other two vignettes, there is no significant correlation between the respondents' answers and their own participation.

A deeper analysis of Vignette 3: Correlation between attitudes towards abortion and comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision

We will now take a closer look at the results for Vignette 3 (N = 101) as an example, since the development of comprehensibility is particularly clear here. Just a reminder: It can be seen in all groups that the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision to have an abortion is greatest in the last stage of the vignette. It increases by 11.4% in group 1, 39.4% in group 2 and 20.2% in group 3. We will show in the sections below that even respondents who previously supported the view that abortion should remain a criminal offense are able to comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision, at least in the third stage of the vignette.

Correlation between attitudes towards abortion and comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision in the baseline scenario of Vignette 3

Out of the respondents in group 3, 85.1% answered both the question about the criminality of abortions and that regarding the comprehensibility of the baseline scenario (see Figure 10). A total of 29.1% agreed that the act should be punishable, although a third of them (32%) could still comprehend the decision to have an abortion in the initial scenario. Around half of this group (52%) could not comprehend the decision.

The majority (78.4%) of those who completely rejected the criminality of abortions (59.3%) could comprehend the decision, while a small minority (7.8%) could not comprehend it. The middle category was not included in the description in order to maintain clarity.

Figure 10. Illustration of the relation between attitudes towards abortion as a criminal offense and comprehensibility of the decision in the baseline scenario of Vignette 3.
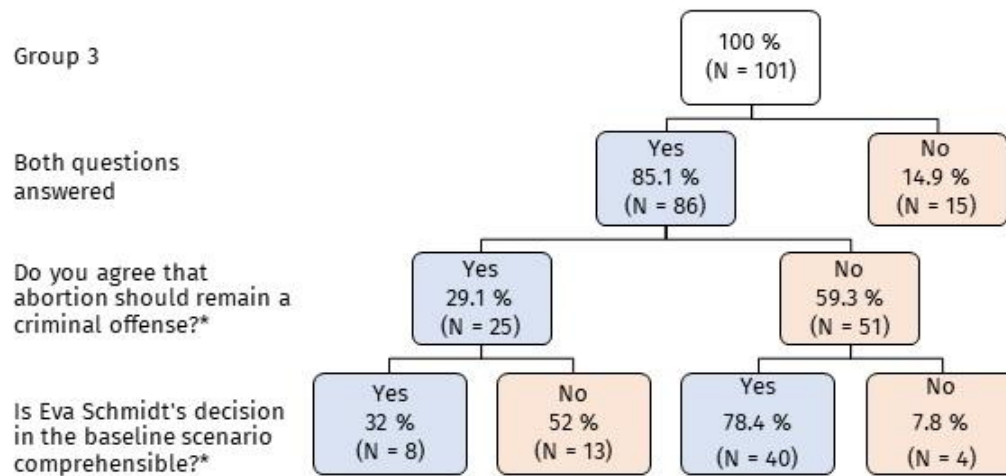
* The wording has been simplified for reasons of clarity: "Yes" here corresponds to "agree/fully agree" and "No" corresponds to "disagree/do not agree at all." The middle category of the three-point scale has been omitted from the presentation.
*Source: authors' own elaboration.*

Changes in the second and third stages of Vignette 3

Ninety-five percent of the respondents in group 3 answered both the question regarding the criminality of abortions and that regarding the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision in the second stage of the vignette. A total of 28% agreed that abortion should be made a criminal offense, although 29.6% could still comprehend the decision to have an abortion. By contrast, 44.4% of this group could not comprehend the decision.

A total of 62.5% completely rejected the criminality of abortions. Of these, 60% could comprehend the decision, while 15% could not comprehend it. The middle category was not included in the description in order to maintain clarity.

Figures 11 and 12 show the changes described above in the second and third stages, respectively. Figure 13 shows an overview of the described changes in Vignette 3.

Figure 11. Illustration of the relation between attitudes towards abortion as a criminal offense and the comprehensibility of a decision against the wishes of a partner in Vignette 3.
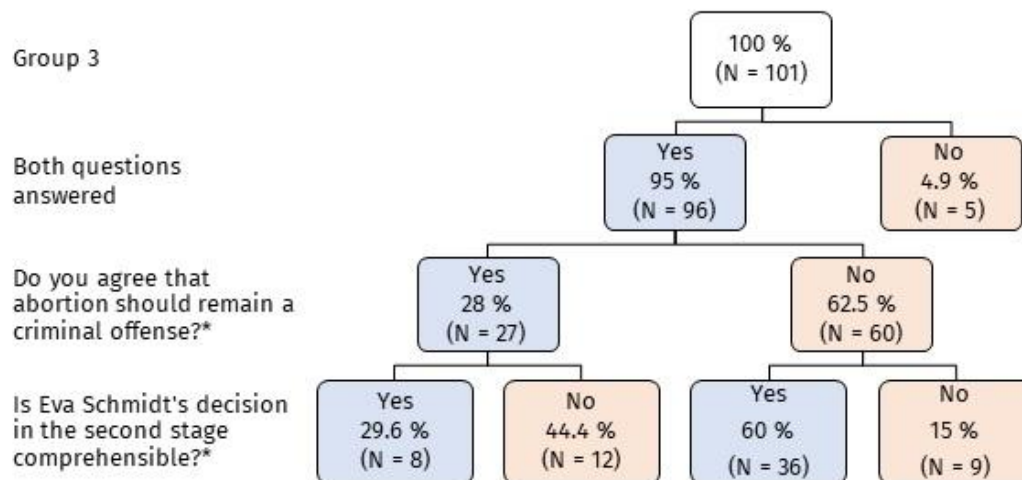
* The wording has been simplified for reasons of clarity: "Yes" here corresponds to "agree/fully agree" and "No" corresponds to "disagree/do not agree at all." The middle category of the three-point scale has been omitted from the presentation.
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Figure 12. Illustration of the relation between attitudes towards abortion as a criminal offense and the comprehensibility of the decision in the case of intimate partner violence in Vignette 3.
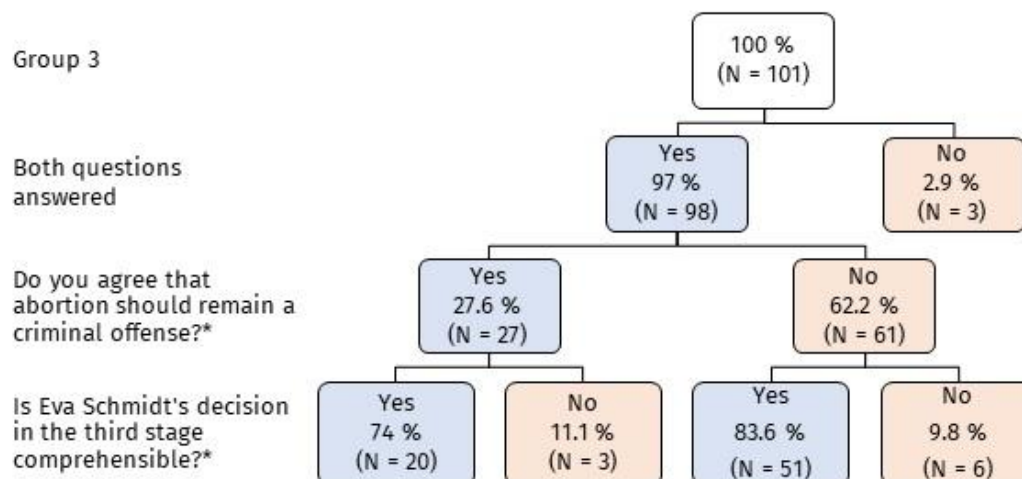
* The wording has been simplified for reasons of clarity: "Yes" here corresponds to "agree/fully agree" and "No" corresponds to "disagree/do not agree at all." The middle category of the three-point scale has been omitted from the presentation.
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Comparing the two figures shows that the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision increases regardless of whether the criminal offense is approved or not. In the third stage of Vignette 3, 74% agree that abortion should remain a criminal offense and still find Eva

Schmidt's decision comprehensible. Thus, taking abortion for a criminal offense is not a hindrance to being able to comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision in consideration of her specific circumstances.

It is important to be aware that the question regarding abortion as a criminal offense has only been asked once, i.e. we did not ask this question again after the vignette questions. The monitored change in attitudes refers only to the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision and does not imply that the more abstract evaluation of abortion as a criminal offense changed.

Figure 13. Overview of the settings for the criminalization of abortion and the comprehensibility of the decision at the various stages of Vignette 3.
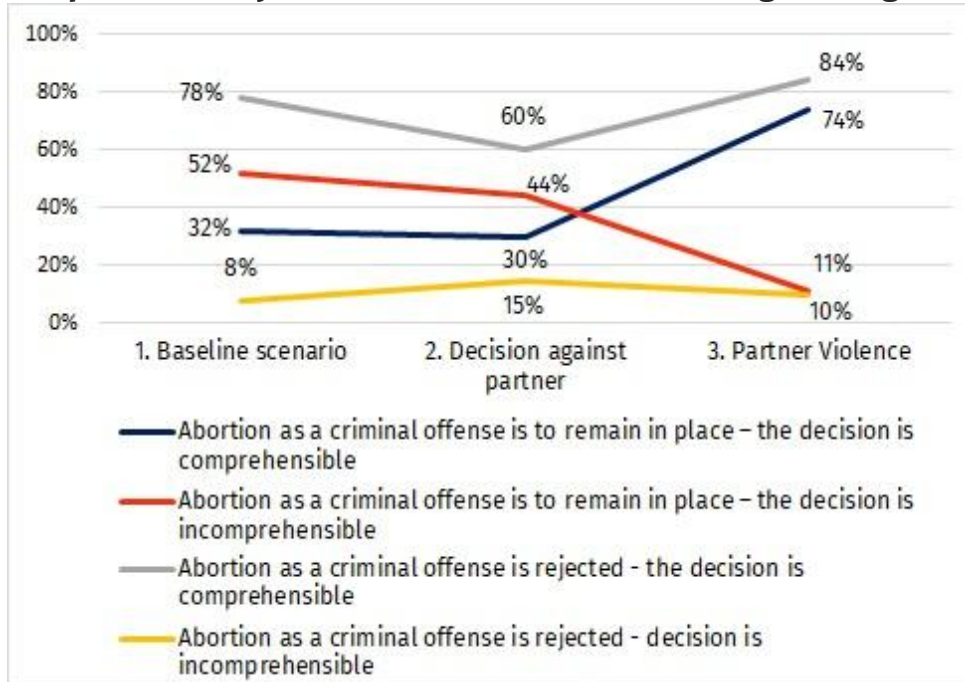

Figure 13 is a condensed version of the descriptions in the section "Correlation between attitudes towards abortion and comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision in the baseline scenario of Vignette 3" and figures 10-12 respectively. It shows the trend over all three stages of the vignette.
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Discussion
Interpreting the results

The interpretation of these results is challenging. While agreement with the criminalization of abortions relatively clearly signals moral and legal disapproval, the evaluation of the existing legal regulations is less clear. Rejection can indicate that a regulation is perceived as either too liberal or too restrictive. Individual aspects, such as the twelve-week deadline or the counseling requirement, could also be criticized, although it is not clear in which direction. Furthermore, it is questionable whether all respondents fully understood the legal regulations and their practical consequences, despite this being mentioned in the question. This makes it difficult to interpret the correlation observed between the two attitudinal questions.

Regarding the results for Vignette 1 (see Figure 7), completed family planning seems to be a reason for abortion that is relatively difficult to understand. As a reminder, the information that Eva Schmidt already has three children leads to an increase in the level of comprehension from 44.3 to 50%, while the additional information about the impending financial difficulties leads to a further increase to 55.7%. At the same time, however, the

group of those who cannot comprehend the decision/do not comprehend the decision at all increases from 29.5% in the initial scenario to 35.4%, and shrinks again to 26.8% after the additional information about the financial burden on the family. It is possible that the burden on the pregnant person and the family from having another child is considered to be rather low.

The results regarding Vignette 2 (see Figure 8) raise the question of whether and to what extent the respondents perceived a difference between the two pieces of additional information. The question, which is admittedly quite complex, also leads to the difficulty that it is unclear whether the respondents primarily evaluated the legal provision regarding medical indication or Eva Schmidt's decision to have an abortion after 16 weeks, or a combination of both. Further research is needed here. Qualitative research, such as an interview or focus group study, could help to refine the questions for a quantitative vignette study, among other things.

It is hardly surprising, but worthy of discussion, that the possibility of a disability in Vignette 2 was apparently considered a more legitimate reason for abortion than the facts given in the second and third stages of the other two vignettes. This finding is thought-provoking in light of the social discourse on prenatal diagnostics – in particular on the noninvasive prenatal diagnostics that have been covered by health insurance in Germany since 2022 and are used to screen for the chromosome anomalies trisomy 13, 18 and 21, on the one hand, and the discourse on inclusion, on the other. Further quantitative and especially qualitative research is needed here to explore, among other things, the reasons for the respondents' attitudes and what could lead to a possible change in attitude.

The fact that Vignette 3 shows the clearest result is not surprising in view of the topic of intimate partner violence, because this is where the respondents are most likely to show empathy for Eva Schmidt. Bueno et al. (2023) cite empathy for pregnant people as an important reason for adopting a more liberal attitude. Cheng et al. (2024) also emphasize empathy as a reason for advocating abortion. However, it should be noted that when respondents in our study think of their own partnership, for example, they assume the role of a potential perpetrator in the scenario. Therefore, empathy cannot necessarily be assumed. The question of social desirability also comes into play. Auspurg et al. (2009) point out that vignette surveys are generally less distorted by social desirability bias than other attitudinal surveys, but this cannot be ruled out entirely.

Even though hardly any generalizable conclusions can be drawn from the small sample, the increase from the initial scenario (32%) to the third stage (74%) in Vignette 3 in the number of people who support abortion as a criminal offence and yet still understand or fully understand Eva Schmidt's decision to terminate the pregnancy clearly indicates that people change their attitudes depending on the situation and context.

It is striking that 9.8% of respondents (N = 6) in Vignette 3 could not comprehend Eva Schmidt's decision in the case of intimate partner violence, despite their liberal attitude towards abortions. This could indicate that a decision against the wishes of a partner is unacceptable to these individuals in principle. However, only 33.3% of those surveyed (2 of the 6 respondents) had already been involved in such decision-making. It was not possible to establish a statistical correlation between comprehensibility and personal involvement.

Categorization in the research context
The results of the study highlight two key aspects: Firstly, even within the generally skeptical target group of men aged 41 an older from Western Germany, only a minority support the criminalization of abortion. Secondly, additional information about the circumstances or reasons for a decision to terminate a pregnancy increases the comprehensibility of this decision, even among people who are generally in favor of

maintaining criminal liability. The results suggest that the sweeping assumption of a split in society on the issue of abortion is not applicable to Germany. While the debate in public and political discourse often appears emotionalized and polarized, a more differentiated picture emerges among the target group surveyed. The vast majority reject the criminalization of abortions, and even among those in favor of criminalization, additional information leads to an increased comprehensibility of individual decisions. This suggests that attitudes are not absolute or irreconcilable but, at least in part, open to contextual information and situational differentiation.

The relevance of situational information for attitude change is also emphasized in the international research literature. Jozkowski et al. (2018) found in a study among students in conservative US states that respondents' positions are often complex and context-dependent. Although only about half of the respondents identified as "pro-choice", the majority supported access to abortions under certain conditions. This result underlines that dealing with specific case contexts can lead to differentiated assessments.

Kim and Steinberg (2023) add that contact with people who have had an abortion increases the likelihood of developing a positive attitude toward abortions. They refer to Gordon W. Allport (1979), whose theory suggests that direct interaction can reduce prejudice. This can be linked to our results: Respondents who receive situational knowledge about the reasons for an abortion could react with more empathy and adopt less negative attitudes.

Osborne et al. (2022) also show that the acceptance of abortions depends heavily on the perceived reason for the procedure. While traumatic abortions (e.g. as a result of rape or risk of death) are often accepted, elective abortions[13] meet with more resistance. This finding can also be applied to our vignettes, although when comparing different categorizations of abortion across countries we need to make concessions for the fact that these categorizations do not fully align (for a comparison across countries see Ertan & Yaman, 2025). Traumatic abortions can be understood as a collective term which includes both the medical as well as the criminal indication for abortion in German law (see page 2). Consequently, Vignette 2 can be categorized as a "traumatic abortion," while Vignettes 1 and 3 are considered "elective abortions".[14] The higher level of comprehensibility in Vignette 2 reflects Osborne and colleagues' results.

Cheng et al. (2024) emphasize the influence of empathy: While empathy with the pregnant person correlates with a higher acceptance of abortions, empathy with the embryo or fetus shows an opposite effect. This correlation illustrates why situational information and the associated focus on the perspective of the pregnant person can be crucial.

The integration of the mentioned studies shows that the differentiation of attitudes towards abortion is influenced by contextual information, personal experiences and empathy. Our results support these findings and underscore that nuanced communication could play a key role in fostering societal consensus. This provides a basis for conducting the debate in Germany in a more objective and less polarized manner.

The question arises as to why people in our vignette study reacted differently to general attitude questions compared to specific case studies. Empathy could also play a crucial role here: Particularly people with little prior knowledge of the topic may only develop the ability to react empathetically through situational information about the specific case. Our study suggests that contradictory answers to attitude questions and concrete vignettes can

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[13] The term "elective abortion" is controversial (see Watson, 2018).
[14] The termination of a pregnancy resulting from rape falls within the category of the criminal indication (in German law) and, thus, within the category of a traumatic abortion. However, partner violence as a reason for an abortion is neither covered by the medical nor by the criminal indication. Therefore, such an abortion would need to be categorized as an elective abortion.

perhaps be explained by empathy and ambivalence. Craig et al. (2002) show that ambivalence often arises in situations that touch on contradictory core values. In their study from Florida, USA, "pro-life" individuals were more ambivalent about elective abortions, while "pro-choice" individuals showed greater uncertainties about traumatic abortions. This finding emphasizes the importance of context and internal value conflicts for opinion formation (see also Pullan & Trail, 2025).

Conclusion

The study is characterized by the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, it is the only vignette survey on the topic of abortion in the German-speaking area. However, it also has some limitations. First of all, the small sample size of only 302 respondents in total should be mentioned here. It should also be mentioned that the federal state of Berlin was excluded to simplify the inclusion criteria for the screening, and the distribution of respondents across the remaining western German federal states is not representative. The lack of further control variables, such as income, level of education, urban/rural residence and occupational class, can be cited as a further limitation. The decision to include solely landline telephone numbers excludes people who only use cell phones or internet telephony, although this is less of an issue for our target group of people aged 41 and older. Finally, there is the bias that – as in all survey studies – presumably only people who have a personal interest in participating in opinion polls will take part in the survey. In our study, however, it was not stated at the beginning that it was about attitudes toward abortion; instead, these were introduced after the first two questions as an example of the family and sociopolitical policies of the current federal government. In this way, we were able to at least prevent the bias that only people who are particularly interested in this topic participated.

The name "Eva Schmidt" could be varied in a follow-up study to see whether the answers change when a name with a possible migrant background is chosen. The section on attitudinal and demographic questions could be expanded to include party preferences and a self-assessment on the political spectrum ("left/right"). In addition, it would be useful to ask about parental status as well, since this is considered to be a factor influencing attitudes toward abortions (Clarke et al., 2023; Osborne et al., 2022). Religiosity and religious affiliation played hardly any role in our study, while Osborne et al. (2022) emphasize them as relevant factors. Those results, however, relate to the USA and New Zealand, could be culturally conditioned and are not necessarily transferable to Germany. Nevertheless, a follow-up study with a larger, more diverse sample could provide new insights into the influence of religiosity in a German context. Furthermore, such a follow-up study could explore the role of empathy more by either asking questions about the reasons of a change in the comprehensibility of Eva Schmidt's decision after asking the vignette questions or by combining the quantitative survey with a qualitative interview or focus group study in which empathy is addressed.

Our study provides evidence that differentiated communication, which takes into account individual circumstances and reasons for decision-making, can potentially help to promote a rapprochement between different positions. This could be particularly relevant if political changes, such as the liberalization or abolition of § 218 StGB, are sought. A step of this kind, which aims to achieve broad acceptance, requires an objective and fact-oriented debate that goes beyond simplistic narratives and focuses on the complexity of the issue. In addition, our study emphasizes that the frequently asserted split in society on the issue of abortion should be considered in a differentiated way. While the public debate often appears polarized, our results show that even people with more restrictive attitudes can,

under certain circumstances, show some comprehension of individual decision-making. This suggests that attitudes are less irreconcilable than is often assumed.

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Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence
Generative AI tools (Linguee: https://www.linguee.com, 11/2024, and DeepL Pro: https://www.deepl.com, 11/2024) have been used to enhance the quality and readability of the article.

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ANNEX
CATI-Survey
Sociopolitical questions

1. How intensively would you say you're following the family policy and sociopolitical work of the current federal government? *Can you rate your following from 1 =not at all to 5 = very intensely? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity.*

2. How satisfied are you with the family policy and sociopolitical work of the current federal government? *Can you rate your following from 1 = not at all to 5 = very intensely? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity.*

Attitudinal questions

3. Thank you for your earlier assessments. Representative for family- and sociopolitical topics we would like to discuss abortion today. Let's start with a general question: How intensively would you say you're following the debate around the topic abortion, e.g. the discussion around §218 of the German Criminal Code? *Can you rate your following of the topic from 1 = not at all to 5 = very intensely? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity.*

4. Abortion is currently regulated in the Criminal Code and constitutes a crime. However, if certain conditions are met, this crime remains unpunished. *To what extent do you agree with the statement that abortion should continue to be a crime? 1 = not at all to 5 = absolutely. You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity.*

5. Abortion is currently not punishable by law if the four following criteria are met: 1. the pregnant person has to attend a mandatory consultation with an approved provider, 2. following the consultation, three days of a mandatory waiting period have to be observed, 3. the abortion has to be performed by a doctor and 4. the abortion has to take place within 12 weeks of conception. *To what extent do you agree with the statement that these criteria should remain in place? 1 = not at all to 5 = absolutely. You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity.*

Vignette questions

Independent of the previous questions, I will now read you a case study. More and more details will emerge and I will ask you in total three times how you assess these. We are always thinking about the same pregnant person called Eva Schmidt.

Baseline scenario:

6. Eva Schmidt is pregnant and decides to terminate the pregnancy. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5 = not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

Vignette 1: Family planning and financial Situation)

7. Eva Schmidt is the mother of three children. Her family is complete, which is why she decides to terminate the pregnancy. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5 = not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

8. Family Schmidt cannot financially afford another child and would be in dire financial straits, which is a further reason for the decision to terminate the pregnancy. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5 = not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

Vignette 2: Impairment of the embryo/fetus and medical indication

7. A prenatal test has shown that Eva Schmidt's child would have multiple impairments from birth. This informs her decision to terminate the pregnancy. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5 = not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in be-tween to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

8. The legal framework in Germany allows for an abortion until week 22 if the pregnant person fears severe detriment to their bodily or mental health. Eva Schmidt is concerned for her mental health due to the prospect of having a child with multiple impairments and therefore decides to terminate the pregnancy in week 16. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5 = not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

Vignette 3: Decision against partner's wishes and intimate partner violence

7. Eva Schmidt decides to terminate the pregnancy against the wishes of her partner Klaus who is also the father. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5 = not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

8. Eva Schmidt's partner Klaus is violent towards her, which is why she wants to terminate the pregnancy against his wishes. *Is this decision comprehensible to you from 1 = completely comprehensible to 5=not comprehensible at all? You can use the figures in between to qualify the intensity of your understanding.*

That was the last question of our example Eva Schmidt.
To conclude, we'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself.

Demographic questions

9. Have you ever been involved in the decision-making process about whether or not a pregnancy is carried out or terminated? For example, with a partner, friend, sibling, or child/daughter?
   Yes
   No

10. What is your civil status?
    Married and living with spouse
    Married, separated
    Widowed
    Divorced
    Civil partnership and co-habiting
    Civil partnership, separated
    Civil partnership, partner has died

Civil partnership, dissolved
Unmarried and single
Unmarried and partnered

11. Which religious community do you feel associated with?
    Protestant church (without free churches)
    A protestant free church
    Roman-catholic church
    Another Christian religious community
    Muslim religious community
    Jewish religious community
    Another non-Christian religious community
    No religious community

12. Altogether: How religious would you say you are? Please use one of the following options:
    Not religious at all
    A little religious
    A medium level of religiousness
    Pretty religious
    Very religious