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# Unpacking the effects of burdensome state actions on citizens' policy perceptions

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## Abstract

Administrative burdens appear to influence citizens' perceptions of welfare policies and attitudes toward beneficiaries. However, empirical evidence that has disentangled different state actions' effects on policy perceptions is scarce. We applied a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial survey experiment and manipulated the conceptually distinct state actions implemented in German unemployment benefits. We investigated whether and how exposure to learning demands, compliance demands, and sanctions affected citizens' prejudices against beneficiaries, policy support, and perceived legitimacy. The results from a sample of 1602 German citizens indicate that those confronted with program sanctions exhibit less policy support and expect higher policy spending. Similarly, sanctions decreased the Federal Employment Agency's perceived legitimacy. These results have implications for administrative burden and policy feedback research. Distinguishing different state actions provides nuances to assess policy feedback effects. Practitioners should consider whether program sanctions are necessary because they evoke unintended policy feedback effects.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Beneficiaries often face hurdles in accessing public programs (Madsen et al., 2022; Moynihan et al., 2015). Among these are administrative burdens, defined as an "... individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous"

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(Burden et al., 2012, p. 741). These often prove problematic for beneficiaries (Christensen et al., 2020; Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2022). Empirical research that addresses administrative burdens focuses primarily on beneficiaries' experiences of different costs, i.e., learning, compliance, and psychological (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Döring & Madsen, 2022; Madsen et al., 2022). Despite the explicit focus on administrative burdens as individual experiences (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Halling & Baekgaard, 2022), scholars have pointed to conceptual challenges. In particular, they suggested distinguishing the preceding "state actions," understood as "... what the state does [...], including laws, rules, requirements, and how such are implemented by public officials and streetlevel bureaucrats," from individual experiences of administrative burdens (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022, p. 17). The focus on state actions is particularly interesting because it helps examine administrative burdens' broader implications by allowing scholars to identify the way that policy design and implementation result in policy feedback effects (Davidson et al., 2020; Jacobs & Mettler, 2018; Keiser & Miller, 2020). This perspective is meaningful because state actions are salient on a broad societal level, for example, through public debates about policy design.

Previous research addresses perceptions of state actions primarily by applying the concept of burden tolerance, which reflects "... the willingness of policymakers and people more generally to passively allow or actively impose state actions that result in others experiencing administrative burdens" (Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021, p. 184). Following this conceptual view, some studies examined politicians' tolerance of administrative burdens (Aarøe et al., 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021). In addition, scholars addressed whether and why ordinary citizens tolerate these burdens (Halling et al., 2022; Johnson & Kroll, 2020). This research suggests the relevance of citizens' attitudes related primarily to state actions (c.f., Haeder et al., 2021). However, thus far, these studies did not specify how different state actions relate more broadly to citizens' policy perceptions. Thus, how salient state actions affect different policy perceptions remains a research gap (Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021; Keiser & Miller, 2020; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2021). We care about this topic because the public discourse indicates that welfare policy beneficiaries are labeled frequently as undeserving or unwilling to work (Gross et al., 2020). The policy program and state actions implemented often enforce a stereotypical picture of beneficiaries. Moreover, state actions that impose burdensome demands still constitute hurdles for these individuals. This combination explains in part why beneficiaries often perceive high administrative burdens (Baekgaard & Madsen, 2024; Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Christensen et al., 2020). Policies that impose extensive burdens through state actions are often subject to public debate and contestation (Burden et al., 2012). Addressing how state actions affect citizens' policy perceptions is meaningful because adverse side effects should be evaluated critically (Doughty & Baehler, 2020).

Policy feedback research (Béland & Schlager, 2019) suggests that policies are subject to societal evaluations (Fossati, 2018). As administrative hurdles send cues about acceptable behavior to the broader public (Jacobs & Mettler, 2018; Keiser & Miller, 2020), they should affect citizens' policy perceptions (Moynihan & Soss, 2014). State actions related to administrative burdens, primarily learning demands, compliance demands, and sanctions, can influence public opinion by providing "symbols of morality" (Keiser & Miller, 2020). This applies to programs, such as unemployment benefits that help impoverished people (Buss, 2019). We investigate whether information about state actions in the German program for long-term unemployment benefits influences citizens' policy perceptions. In particular, our study focuses on how information about state actions affects prejudices against beneficiaries (Gross et al., 2020), policy support (Keiser & Miller, 2020), and citizens' perceptions of the implementing organization's legitimacy (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019). Prejudices and policy support are studied commonly in policy feedback research (Béland et al., 2022). We included legitimacy perceptions deliberately (Suddaby et al., 2017) because public organizations can profit from high levels of legitimacy, while low legitimacy damages them (Wæraas, 2020), and may result in the withdrawal of support for the organization (Thaler et al., 2023; Wallner, 2008). Overall, we ask:

How do state actions (learning demands, compliance demands, and sanctions) influence citizens' attitudes toward beneficiaries, policy, and the implementing organization?

We applied a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial survey experiment with 1602 German citizens. Participants were assigned randomly to a combination of vignettes that reflect *learning demands*, *compliance demands*, and *program sanctions* in the German unemployment policy. The empirical analysis supports the expectations that state actions result in adverse policy feedback. Citizens confronted with program sanctions exhibit lower policy support and expect higher policy spending. Similarly, sanctions decrease the Federal Employment Agency's perceived legitimacy.

Our study provides several contributions to the literature. First, we disentangle the effects of state actions. We argue that separating different categories, analogous to the administrative burden cost categories, is necessary to understand how they affect policy feedback. For instance, compliance costs may be incurred in state attempts to manage program access. Similarly, learning costs can be triggered through extensive demands to acquire knowledge before applying (Barnes, 2021). Beneficiaries will likely face psychological costs because of program sanctions, which adds to their perceived loss of autonomy, stigma, and causes stress (Baekgaard & Madsen, 2024; Danneris, 2018). In this vein, state actions may induce cross-concept effects. For instance, extensive compliance demands may also be related to beneficiaries' increased psychological costs. The separation of state actions based upon conceptual differences proves meaningful to analyze such effects.

Second, our study contributes to policy feedback research (Béland & Schlager, 2019; Jacobs & Mettler, 2018) by testing these different state actions' effect on policy perceptions empirically. Our findings indicate that program sanctions largely determine the effects (Bhargava & Manoli, 2015). Unlike previous studies (e.g., Keiser & Miller, 2020), our results offer more nuanced implications. Citizens who encounter programs with different state actions alter their policy and legitimacy perceptions. However, they tend to do this only for certain state actions and not administrative burdens in general. Our results suggest that policy evaluations and regulatory impact assessments should focus on program sanctions.

Third, this study provides starting points for further research on the association between administrative burden research and organizational legitimacy (Suddaby et al., 2017). Our results indicate that program sanctions and compliance burdens affect citizens' legitimacy perceptions of the implementing organization adversely. Generally, such perceptions affect public organizations more than policy support and, thus, constitute a relevant management challenge (Dupuy & Defacqz, 2022; Sievert, 2023a).

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Administrative burden and social policies

Citizens' interactions with public administrations depend upon state actions, including formal and informal policy design, which precede the concept of administrative burdens (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Peeters, 2020). Generally, administrative burdens reflect individuals' experiences of "policy implementation as onerous" (Burden et al., 2012, p. 742). They constitute "... the costs that individuals experience in their interactions with the state" (Moynihan et al., 2015, p. 45). Following the conceptual developments within the administrative burden literature, these costs consist of three distinct categories (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Peeters, 2020). *Learning costs* occur when individuals must search for information and learn about public programs, their eligibility, or the application procedure. *Compliance costs* arise because of the requirement to follow administrative rules and regulations. Finally, *psychological costs* can emerge because applying for a public program bears a stigma or loss of financial autonomy to the state (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Herd & Moynihan, 2022).

It is important to note that scholars distinguish individual experiences of administrative burden from the state actions that cause them (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022). State actions can serve legitimate purposes, such as regulating access to restricted public services or determining eligibility in welfare programs (Doughty & Baehler, 2020; Keiser & Miller, 2020; Moynihan et al., 2015). Still, they often cause adverse experiences and lead to problems when individuals access social welfare programs (Herd & Moynihan, 2022) or interact with public organizations more broadly

(Sievert et al., 2022). We follow this distinction and focus primarily on the state actions that presumably cause the different types of administrative burden experiences. Moreover, Baekgaard and Tankink (2022) call for further development of the categorization of state actions. To address this, we examine learning demands, compliance demands, and program sanctions.

First, *learning demands* constitute state actions that contribute to the experiences of learning costs (Peeters & Campos, 2021). They include how information about a policy program is presented and the difficulty accessing it. For example, if relevant information about a policy program is dispersed across conflicting channels, such as different websites, experiences of learning costs increase. Similarly, documents that feature complex legal and bureaucratic language predominantly can also increase learning costs.

Second, *compliance demands* are state actions that are "... likely [to] impose compliance costs, that is, state-imposed demands that target groups will have to comply with in order to take up services and benefits" (Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, et al., 2021, p. 808). Typically, compliance demands include submitting required forms and providing evidence to support the individual claim (Barnes, 2021). Moreover, frequently, welfare programs expect beneficiaries to fulfill work requirements or, in the case of unemployment benefits, submit a specific number of job applications.

Third, we consider *program sanctions* a distinct category of state actions. Sanctions "... reflect the idea that the state has a legitimate interest in ensuring that socially marginal groups practice appropriate behaviors" (Schram et al., 2009, p. 398). These constitute different types of penalties associated with a policy program, for example, reducing the extent of benefits granted. In the political discourse, sanctions are justified often by the need to ensure that beneficiaries cooperate properly (McGann et al., 2020). Their application became more common following reforms that introduced more paternalistic approaches to welfare provision (Pedersen et al., 2018; Soss et al., 2011). Thus, the idea of welfare conditionality has emerged as a prominent component of reforms in recent decades, particularly in programs intended to bring people back into the workforce (Schram et al., 2009). While there is evidence that sanctions have a positive effect on the transition from welfare to work (e.g., Boockmann et al., 2014; van den Berg et al., 2004), they have considerable consequences for the persons affected, particularly by imposing material hardship (van den Berg et al., 2022). Sanctions' application relies often on street-level bureaucrats or caseworkers' discretion. McGann et al. (2020) demonstrated an increasing trend in caseworkers' negative attitudes toward unemployment benefits recipients over the past two decades. This shift in attitude is accompanied by a greater likelihood that caseworkers will report clients for noncompliance and sanctions. Moreover, often, sanctions are not applied solely as an impartial reaction to beneficiaries' noncompliance. Research indicates that in the United States, there is a higher probability that sanctions are imposed on individuals from black and Latina backgrounds who are stigmatized socially (Schram et al., 2009). Further, younger clients and beneficiaries with lower levels of human capital are more likely to face sanctions (Fording et al., 2011).

## 2.2 | Administrative burden and policy perceptions

Lately, scholars began to address how policymakers and citizens perceive and judge state actions, subsumed under the concept of "burden tolerance" (Moynihan, 2022). Initially, some studies examined politicians' tolerance for administrative burdens (Aarøe et al., 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021). In addition, a focus on citizens' burden tolerance emerges that addresses explicitly whether and why citizens tolerate such burdens (Halling et al., 2022; Johnson & Kroll, 2020). This research suggests that citizens' attitudes related primarily to state actions are relevant. However, thus far, these studies have not specified how different state actions affect citizens' policy perceptions more broadly. Applying the perspective of policy feedback research helps addressing this research gap (Béland et al., 2022; Keiser & Miller, 2020). Relatedly, scholars noted state actions' and resulting administrative burdens' potential effects in political discourse and democratic processes (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Dupuy & Defacqz, 2022): How does the broad population perceive policy implementations, associated state actions, and the burdens that derive from them? (Keiser & Miller, 2020; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2021).

We expect that compliance demands, learning demands, and program sanctions affect citizens' policy perceptions. Scholars of policy feedback have argued repeatedly for a relation between public programs' design and public opinion (Moynihan & Soss, 2014), for example, in the case of healthcare (Jacobs & Mettler, 2018) and tax benefits (Haselswerdt & Bartels, 2015). Policy feedback research postulates that policies themselves influence politics and the polity overall (Mettler & Soss, 2004; Moynihan & Soss, 2014). In this vein, policies convey civic lessons about what is appropriate for a citizen (Mettler & Soss, 2004), for example, by highlighting sanctions and pressure or stressing citizens' rights and benefits. Thus, the audience of such "... civic lessons includes not only the direct targets or beneficiaries of government programs but also the public as a whole" (Mettler & Soss, 2004, p. 61). Thereby, state actions can either be praised to ensure program integrity or framed as barriers (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Welfare policies that feature such compliance demands often struggle with the public's desire to categorize the beneficiaries according to their deservingness (Petersen et al., 2011). This classification depends upon whether the target group is considered responsible for its own situation or whether the beneficiaries are perceived as "... victims of circumstances beyond their control" (Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Keiser & Miller, 2020, p. 139). Moreover, state actions in policy programs reflect societal attitudes toward the target populations regularly (Keiser & Miller, 2020; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Based upon the policy feedback literature, we suggest that state actions likely affect citizens' perceptions of different policy spheres. In addition, we also include legitimacy perceptions related to the implementing organization (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019).

## 2.2.1 | Prejudices against beneficiaries

Following research on policy feedback theory (Pierson, 1993), awareness about state actions is expected to influence individual attitudes toward beneficiaries (Keiser & Miller, 2020). As noted, a policy's administrative regime sends signals about program integrity and eligibility to the public (Keiser & Miller, 2020; Mettler & Soss, 2004). These signals inform citizens when judging the group of beneficiaries. Generally, citizens hold stereotypes about minority groups, such as welfare recipients (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), often related to the social construction of their deservingness (Baekgaard et al., 2023). For instance, many citizens believe that unemployed individuals are unwilling to work (Gross et al., 2020). Social psychology suggests that such stereotypes translate to prejudices against the entire group (Devine, 1989; Paluck & Green, 2009). In particular, citizens tend to perceive that beneficiaries are undeserving (Petersen et al., 2011). However, social psychology suggests that individuals can control the activation of stereotypes (Devine, 1989) despite their deep-seated nature (Harrits, 2019). Specifically, previous research indicates that the provision of counter-stereotypical cues increases the deliberative reflection of stereotypes (Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019). For instance, counter-stereotypical information increases the support for welfare programs that benefit stereotyped groups (Peffley et al., 1997). We argue that state actions provide such counter-stereotypical information. Knowledge about the extensive hurdles and efforts required to gain access should counter the stereotypical perception that beneficiaries are undeserving. Such information bears the potential to deconstruct the myth that benefits are obtained easily, automatically, or illegitimately (Keiser & Miller, 2020). Thus, we expect that the different types of state actions reduce citizens' prejudices against the beneficiaries:

**Hypothesis 1.** The awareness of (a) learning demands, (b) compliance demands, and (c) sanctions reduces individual prejudices against beneficiaries.

## 2.2.2 | Policy support

State actions' salience is expected to influence policy support. Previous research indicates that a policy's "burdens and benefits" can affect ordinary citizens' policy support because of individual motivations (Jacobs & Mettler, 2018,

p. 350). Specifically, emphasizing that state actions impose burdens is expected to affect how the cost–benefit ratio related to the policy is interpreted. In this respect, extensive demands and sanctions that potential beneficiaries face suggest that a policy emphasizes its beneficiaries' deservingness (Buss, 2019) and ensures effective policy implementation. This argument relates to ordeal mechanisms that reflect the idea that bureaucratic hurdles deter those who do not need the benefits (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Heinrich, 2016). Thus, explicating state actions may affect attitudes toward the policy. Previous research indicates that citizens are concerned about policies that benefit undeserving individuals (Petersen et al., 2011; van Oorschot, 2006). Hence, stricter state actions, such as compliance demands, should signal a low likelihood of fraud and benefits given to those who are ineligible (Keiser & Miller, 2020). Consequently, citizens' perceptions of a policy program may change if state actions are disclosed (Soss & Schram, 2007). We argue that citizens will focus on the extensive vetting process in policy programs when confronted with state actions (Brodtkin & Majmundar, 2010). This makes them "... more likely to see the program as legitimate and its recipients as deserving" (Keiser & Miller, 2020, p. 139). Overall, we expect that policy support increases after state actions associated with the application process, and the benefits' receipt, are made salient:

**Hypothesis 2.** The awareness of (a) learning demands, (b) compliance demands, and (c) sanctions increases individual support for programs.

### 2.2.3 | Legitimacy perceptions

Finally, policy feedback includes public opinion about the organization implementing a policy program (Moynihan & Soss, 2014). In particular, policy design and state actions may affect citizens' perception of whether an implementing public organization is legitimate (Berg & Johansson, 2020; De Fine Licht et al., 2014). Indeed, as the legitimacy-as-perception literature indicates (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021), an organization's salient practices and policies play an essential role in the legitimacy it receives from its stakeholders (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby et al., 2017; Tost, 2011). This perspective is relevant when studying state actions' broad effects. Negative legitimacy perceptions may result in the withdrawal of support (Bitektine & Haack, 2015) and political pressure (Verhoest et al., 2007). Moreover, consolidated perceptions of illegitimacy can lead to active resistance against prevailing social and institutional conditions (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). We argue that state actions in a policy program may affect legitimacy judgments and perceptions. The state actions provide viable cues when citizens judge the implementing organization's legitimacy (Tost, 2011). In particular, citizens likely incorporate information about state actions because these reflect whether organizational activities align with social norms (Deephouse & Carter, 2005) and whether the policy design is justified. As public expectations are unclear, we leave the direction of the hypothesized effect undefined. Still, as state actions constitute crucial information when judging the public organization, incorporating them in legitimacy judgments is likely (Bitektine, 2011; Finch et al., 2015).

**Hypothesis 3.** The awareness of (a) learning demands, (b) compliance demands, and (c) sanctions affects citizens' perceived legitimacy of the implementing organization.

## 3 | DATA AND METHODS

### 3.1 | Experimental context—Unemployment benefits

Beginning in 2003, the German government designed a range of labor market reforms (Deter, 2021; Li & Walker, 2021) that primarily redesigned unemployment benefits (Jackson & Sorge, 2012). Most importantly, the reform initiative introduced the policy program, "Hartz IV."<sup>1</sup> This program reduces the entitlement duration for

unemployment benefits (Bradley & Kügler, 2019; Fervers, 2019) and includes conditional incomes and sanctions (Deter, 2021). The policy design includes state actions related to the three cost categories of administrative burden (compliance, learning, and psychological) that Moynihan et al. (2015) introduced.

First, the “Hartz IV” system's complexity and depth may be highly strenuous for some people with respect to learning demands related to the correct application procedure and the related responsibilities. For instance, complicated procedures such as the application require extensive knowledge (Fleckenstein, 2008). Moreover, although “Hartz IV” is a federal program, it is implemented primarily at the municipal level. Therefore, while the Federal Employment Agency runs an overarching informational website, there can be an additional website with local information for each county or city that applicants must consider and search through. Further, a digital application procedure was implemented recently that added new information to the process for applicants.

Second, compliance demands dominate in “Hartz IV.” In addition to the “main application,” the process requires three additional forms to demonstrate the income situation, existing assets, and housing situation. Thereby, official documents must substantiate every claim. Compliance demands are implemented during the receipt of benefits as well (Fleckenstein, 2008), as beneficiaries are obliged to apply for suitable jobs and participate in mandatory training measures, and are not allowed to leave their place of residence for more than 21 days annually (Buss, 2019).

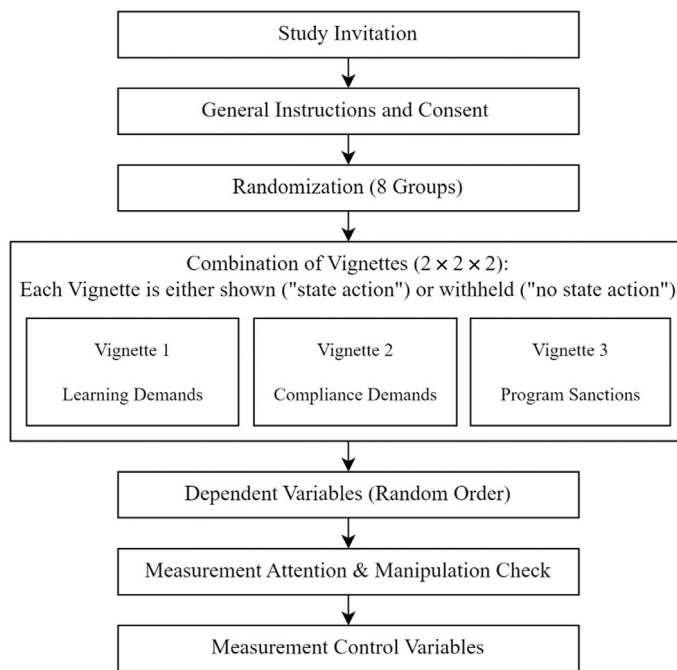
Third, “Hartz IV” introduced financial sanctions. If beneficiaries do not comply with their obligations, case managers can cut up to 100% of benefits for up to 3 months (Buss, 2019). In the political discourse on “Hartz IV,” sanctions are justified frequently to encourage beneficiaries to find work independently and not rely on the state to cover their cost of living. Moreover, perceptions of deprivation of personal autonomy and required obedience can be amplified when beneficiaries feel that they must alter their natural behavior (Moynihan et al., 2015) to avoid sanctions.

### 3.2 | Experimental design

After giving informed consent, participants received general information about “Hartz IV.” They learned about the program's goal, benefits, and eligibility criteria. The questionnaire included a short scenario in which the participants were asked to envision a friend facing unemployment. This friend then outlines how unemployment benefits in the policy program work. We chose this scenario to elicit responses to the policy and state actions without priming them to take the perspective of a (prospective) beneficiary. In particular, the scenario reflects the program's purpose, benefits, and eligibility criteria. [Supporting information Appendix A](#) shows the entire scenario's text. Then, we assigned participants randomly to one of eight treatment groups, each of which received a distinct combination of vignettes that represented “Hartz IV's” burdens. The vignettes imitated the program's original website to resemble the official information material.

Each category was represented through a separate vignette to reveal the three state action categories' nuanced effects on the dependent variables ([Supporting information Appendix A](#)). Each category may appear or remain unmentioned in each treatment group. Hence, the vignette for a given demand category was either shown (“demands”) or withheld (“no demands”). The first displayed *learning demands* by showing a download site for various supplementary forms and information material in the application that requires consideration before applying. The download links displayed a wide range of topics that may arise during an application. The second embodies *compliance demands*, that is, beneficiaries' core requirements. It outlines the need to prove individual income, assets, and living conditions. Moreover, successful applications result in an interview with a caseworker. The vignette explicates the requirement to accept any bearable job and the need to acquire permission when leaving the place of residence. The third vignette focused on potential sanctions in the case of misdemeanor and noncompliance to reflect *program sanctions*. A prominent info box signals that noncompliance can have serious consequences, such as reduced benefits.





**FIGURE 1** Research design.

Respondents had to rate the program's perceived intricacy. This information allowed us to test whether the experimental manipulation worked as intended. Subsequently, they were asked about their policy perceptions. We randomized the scales and the respective items' sequence within the item batteries. Participants answered control and sociodemographic questions. Figure 1 outlines the study design. The study was preregistered at the Open Science Framework. Data and study materials are available at the Harvard Dataverse.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.3 | Measures

Because our goal was to test state actions' effects across different levels of citizens' policy perceptions, the questionnaire contained separate measurement scales for the dependent variables. The items were derived from previous studies to ensure valid operationalizations. [Supporting information Appendix B](#), presents the exact wording for all measures.

First, to assess prejudices against beneficiaries, the questionnaire applied a validated measurement scale for prejudices against the unemployed (Gurr & Jungbauer-Gans, 2013). The claims presented include common stereotypes like unwillingness to work ("What do you guess, out of 100 recipients of Hartz IV, how many simply do not want to work?"). The initial scale's percentage approach allows a direct interpretation of the index values (Gross et al., 2020). For instance, the respondents believed, on average, that 29.2% of unemployed persons behave or think in a way inappropriate to their status, such as unwilling to work.

Second, two survey items derived from Keiser and Miller (2020) reflect policy support. The first asked for their general approval of the policy on a 7-point Likert scale ("Do you approve or disapprove of the Hartz IV program?"). The second assessed how participants evaluated the government's spending on the "Hartz IV" program on a 3-point scale ("Do you think that the federal government should spend more, less, or the same on the Hartz IV program?").

Third, to assess the Federal Employment Agency's organizational legitimacy, we applied the validated scale Alexiou and Wiggins (2019) developed. For example, one question focused on the appropriateness of the organization's actions: "I personally believe that the Federal Employment Agency strives to maintain acceptable standards of ethical behavior in its field." An exploratory factor analysis confirmed Haack and Sieweke's (2020) proposition to differentiate between first- and second-order judgments. Accordingly, the first factor reflects the assessment of society-level legitimacy, that is, what respondents think that most citizens believe (Haack & Sieweke, 2020). This factor was labeled "second-order legitimacy." The second factor contained the remaining items that reflect individual beliefs and was labeled "first-order legitimacy."

Finally, the questionnaire features several control variables. First, a left-right scale was used to measure political ideology (Kroh, 2007). Second, functional literacy accounts for differences in coping with bureaucratic language (Döring, 2021). Third, participants indicated their perceived job security, reflecting their perceived risk of unemployment (Buss, 2019). Fourth, we examined experience with the "Hartz IV" policy with two items. The first question assessed the individual's experience with the program ("Have you ever received Hartz IV yourself?"). The second question asked about friends and family's experiences ("Has anyone in your close family and circle of friends ever received Hartz IV?"). Fifth, we incorporated sociodemographic information: employment status; gender; age; formal education, and net income.

### 3.4 | Sample

The survey experiment was administered in November 2020 via a German nonprofit panel provider (SoSci Panel).<sup>3</sup> Scholars can run survey-based studies using their participant pool after going through a peer-review process for the research design successfully. The panel provider ensures that solely high-quality surveys are sent to the participant pool. The provider approved the survey experiment after we implemented several improvements following the comments of three reviewers from the field of public administration. The panel provider invited 6500 individuals for this study via e-mail. Overall, 1968 people responded, from which 220 respondents with incomplete surveys were excluded in the first step of data cleaning. In a second step, we incorporated attention checks and excluded another 146 respondents who failed one or both. In the third step, we excluded two persons of unrealistic ages. Thus, the final sample consists of  $n = 1602$  participants. The average age was 44.43 ( $SD = 14.9$ ), with 948 (59.0%) women. 821 (60.0%) respondents held a university degree, 755 (47.0%) of whom had a master's degree or higher. 290 (18.1%) persons stated that they are or have been recipients of "Hartz IV." The sample's mean political ideology was 4.02 ( $SD = 1.58$ ) on a left-right self-placement scale where 10 equals right. [Supporting information Appendix D](#) provides information about the sample characteristics.

## 4 | RESULTS

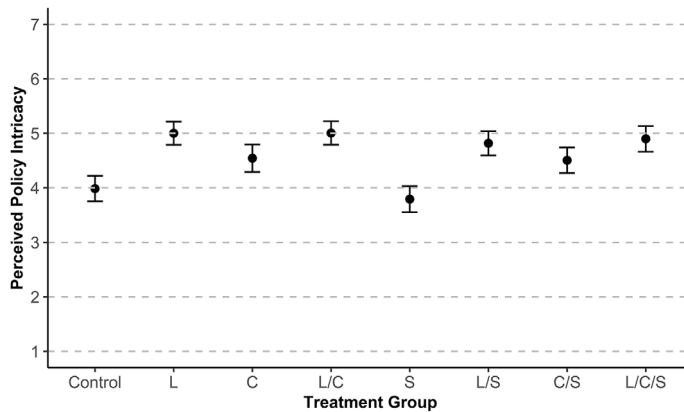
### 4.1 | Randomization and manipulation check

Before testing the hypotheses, we check for two essential requirements: (1) whether the treatment randomization across the eight groups was successful and (2) whether the treatments worked as intended. First, we assessed our randomization mechanism's success by testing whether the eight groups differed for several control variables. Table 1 outlines the statistical test statistics for gender, age, experience with the policy, and political ideology. The results indicate no statistically significant differences across the eight groups. Thus, the randomization mechanism was successful.

Second, we investigate the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation. An analysis of variance indicated that the experimental groups' perceptions differed significantly ( $F[1,1594] = 15.21, p < 0.001$ ). As expected,

TABLE 1 Randomization check.

Treatment	Total	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8	Test
Gender (1 = female)	1.42 (0.51)	1.36 (0.48)	1.39 (0.52)	1.42 (0.5)	1.5 (0.54)	1.47 (0.55)	1.4 (0.51)	1.39 (0.51)	1.4 (0.49)	$\chi^2(14) = 18.7, p = 0.176$
Age	44.43 (14.75)	44.51 (16.02)	44.13 (15.24)	44.56 (14.39)	45.2 (14.29)	43.57 (14.25)	44.31 (14.81)	44.13 (14.44)	45 (14.82)	$F(1,1600) = 0.00, p = 0.946$
Hartz IV	1.81 (0.42)	1.79 (0.45)	1.83 (0.37)	1.81 (0.39)	1.78 (0.45)	1.83 (0.38)	1.81 (0.46)	1.81 (0.46)	1.8 (0.4)	$\chi^2(14) = 10.5, p = 0.724$
Political ideology	4.02 (1.58)	3.96 (1.58)	4.06 (1.63)	4.04 (1.6)	3.94 (1.49)	4.1 (1.63)	4.11 (1.65)	3.86 (1.48)	4.12 (1.6)	$F(1,1591) = 0.13, p = 0.715$
n	1602	187	181	203	209	206	202	208	206	



**FIGURE 2** Results manipulation check.

the control group demonstrated a lower perceived program complexity ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than six of the seven treatment groups. The only exception was group five, which received information about sanctions and showed the lowest perceived program complexity ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ). Figure 2 displays the visual results. Indeed, the manipulation of sanctions did not increase perceived program intricacy. This observation likely stems from the unidimensional measurement. Even if participants received the manipulation and incorporated the information about potential sanctions, perceived program complexity likely remains unaffected. Instead, sanctions have implications for the perceived dysfunctionality of the program.

## 4.2 | Analysis of hypotheses

We now turn to the empirical analysis of the outlined hypotheses. We tested the hypotheses by applying multiple linear regression models with ordinary least squares (OLS). We calculated two regression models for each dependent variable. First, we use regression models without covariates to test the effect of experimental manipulations by applying treatment dummies for all three vignettes (Table 2). These average treatment effects (ATE) are also presented using a coefficient plot in Figure 3. Second, we provide full regression models, including interaction terms for the treatments and control variables (Supporting information Appendix C).

Table 2 provides the OLS regression models for all dependent variables. Each model contains an intercept (=all vignettes omitted) and three regression coefficients for the three state action categories (compliance demands, learning demands, and program sanctions). The regression coefficients from the dummy variables indicate whether the vignette was shown (=1) or withheld (=0). Thus, each coefficient indicates how the dependent variable changes if information about a demand category is available compared with its absence.

To start, no evidence was found to support Hypothesis 1. Neither learning demands ( $b = 0.742$ ,  $SE = 0.734$ ,  $p = 0.31$ ), nor compliance demands ( $b = 0.433$ ,  $SE = 0.734$ ,  $p = 0.56$ ), or sanctions ( $b = -1.068$ ,  $SE = 0.734$ ,  $p = 0.15$ ) exhibit significant effects on prejudices against unemployed people in model two. None of the interaction effects were significant either. This holds true for all three models that were conducted.

We now turn to the question of whether state actions increased policy support. As the two items that measured policy support could not be combined, we conducted separate OLS regression models for general policy support and support for spending (Supporting information Appendix E). First, sanctions showed a significant negative effect on policy support ( $b = -0.186$ ,  $SE = 0.081$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Also, we observed significant interaction effects of learning demands and sanctions ( $b = -0.375$ ,  $SE = 0.172$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and between all three categories ( $b = -0.856$ ,  $SE = 0.344$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

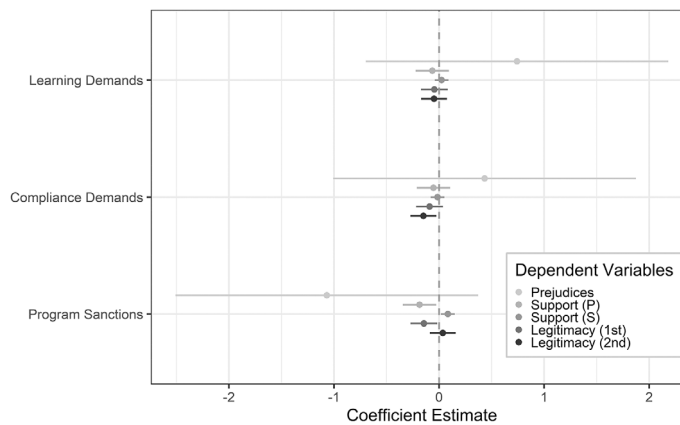
**TABLE 2** Regression analysis for treatment effects.

	Prejudices (1)	Support (P) (2)	Support (S) (3)	Legitimacy (1st) (4)	Legitimacy (2nd) (5)
Learning demands	0.742 (0.734)	−0.064 (0.081)	0.024 (0.033)	−0.044 (0.065)	−0.048 (0.063)
Compliance demands	0.433 (0.734)	−0.053 (0.081)	−0.015 (0.033)	−0.090 (0.065)	−0.150* (0.063)
Sanctions	−1.068 (0.734)	−0.186* (0.081)	0.084* (0.033)	−0.145* (0.065)	0.036 (0.063)
Constant	29.232*** (0.367)	3.967*** (0.040)	2.392*** (0.017)	3.915*** (0.032)	4.047*** (0.031)
Observations	1602	1601	1596	1602	1602
R <sup>2</sup>	0.002	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.0003	0.002	0.003	0.003	0.002
F statistic	1.184 (df = 3; 1598)	2.106 (df = 3; 1597)	2.361 (df = 3; 1592)	2.405 (df = 3; 1598)	2.234 (df = 3; 1598)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

Abbreviations: 1st, first-order legitimacy; 2nd, second-order legitimacy; P, policy; S, spending.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**FIGURE 3** Coefficient plot for average treatment effects.

Sanctions showed a significant positive effect on support for governmental spending ( $b = 0.084$ ,  $SE = 0.033$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The only significant interaction effect for learning and compliance demands was found in model two ( $b = 0.158$ ,  $SE = 0.071$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ). Altogether, we observed a negative effect of sanctions on general policy support combined with higher support for additional policy spending.

Finally, we found support for Hypothesis 3, addressing the effect of state actions on individual legitimacy judgments. Following the factor analysis and previous research, we analyzed first-order and second-order legitimacy judgments separately (Haack & Sieweke, 2020). First, compliance demands significantly negatively affected second-order legitimacy ( $b = -0.150$ ,  $SE = 0.063$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that citizens expected that other citizens would issue more negative legitimacy judgments about the organization. Second, sanctions decreased first-order legitimacy ( $b = -0.145$ ,  $SE = 0.065$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that citizens themselves judged the organization as less legitimate.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This study focused on determining whether state actions that are associated commonly with administrative burdens are relevant when citizens judge policies. We focused on specific state actions, that is, compliance demands, learning demands, and sanctions. We expected that these would reduce participants' prejudices against beneficiaries while increasing policy support. We argued further that they may deconstruct the myth of easily obtainable benefits and signal program integrity (Keiser & Miller, 2020). Finally, we expected that state actions would affect legitimacy perceptions. The empirical evidence contradicted certain of these expectations. State actions did not affect citizens' prejudices against program beneficiaries. While administrative hurdles appeared relevant to judge the effort that beneficiaries invest, they did not appear to eliminate prejudices rooted deeply in individuals' beliefs (Paluck & Green, 2009). However, program sanctions affected general policy support adversely, but increased support for policy spending. Finally, partial support was found for program sanctions' influence on citizens' legitimacy perceptions.

First, the lack of evidence of citizens' prejudices against the beneficiaries extends Keiser and Miller's (2020) findings. They found that the general view toward beneficiaries of Republicans in their sample became more favorable when confronted with burdensome state actions. However, our study suggests that information about state actions does not alter prejudices against beneficiaries significantly. While the scales apply different measures and also are not comparable in their focus, these insights remain relevant. The absence of treatment effects indicates that revealing state actions does not generally counter prejudices, at least in the context of unemployment benefits. Citizens appear to cling to preexisting stereotypes; thus, revealing state actions did not improve the public's image of beneficiaries. Despite empirical insights into stereotypes' changeability (Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, et al., 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021; Petersen et al., 2011), simply revealing burdensome state actions does not result in a generalized shift of prejudices in our study. We argue that providing only information about demands and sanctions is a comparatively weak indicator of how beneficiaries experience such procedures. However, the lack of statistically significant results does not mean that policy design is irrelevant to the public's image of beneficiaries. Instead, they indicate that the mechanisms that affect citizens' prejudices are less salient and likely to work through incremental processes (Paluck & Green, 2009) or affect those individuals who hold strong political beliefs primarily (Keiser & Miller, 2020). Similarly, we would expect a shift in prejudices that result from interventions that reflect the beneficiaries' experiences. For example, previous research shows that visiting a prison environment reduces prejudices against prisoners (Mae Boag & Wilson, 2014).

Second, the results on policy support show no significant influence of compliance and learning demands. These results are similar to those of Keiser and Miller (2020) who find little evidence of perceived administrative burdens' concise influential effect on policy support. However, our empirical results still contradict the findings that they presented. While their analysis indicates a positive effect on general policy support, our results show a negative effect attributable to program sanctions. We interpret the empirical findings as a consistent expression by the respondents. Our results indicate general discomfort with the policy related to program sanctions and the expectation that higher spending should improve the program design. This interpretation fits the narrative of "policymaking by other means" that Herd and Moynihan (2018) advocated. State actions that impose administrative burdens are used frequently as political vehicles, and citizens interpret them as political and partisan issues (Moynihan et al., 2016). Still, our results indicate that the present state actions do not signal program integrity. Citizens do not incorporate information about compliance and learning demands, presumably because they are unaware of their consequences (Mettler, 2019). Program sanctions outline the policy design's essential negative and comparatively tangible implications for beneficiaries. Consequently, they decrease policy support, indicating that citizens disapprove of the sanctions that beneficiaries face. Relatedly, citizens may support additional spending more if presented with program sanctions. This may be an intuitive reaction, where citizens expect that sanctions are intended to reduce the policy's costs. Citizens may believe that increasing policy spending could make sanctions obsolete. Still, future research should shed more light on this aspect, given the apparent difficulties in measuring citizens' spending priorities (e.g., Barnes et al., 2022). Citizens confronted with compliance and learning demands appear to consider these state actions consistent with

the policy and welfare regime. Hence, these policy design aspects do not lead to negative policy feedback. However, sanctions do not appear to be consistent with the policy goals, which triggers an adverse response to the policy. The conceptual differences across these state actions help explain these results. They all reflect different policy design aspects (Moynihan et al., 2015). For instance, compliance demands reflect attempts to manage program access. Similarly, learning demands have far-reaching consequences for program uptake, despite potential justifications (Barnes, 2021). In contrast, program sanctions do not serve the policy's explicit objectives (e.g., labor market reintegration) as clearly. Hence, citizens can justify the need to implement compliance and learning demands easily, while justifications for sanctions are not self-evident.

Third, the analysis of legitimacy perceptions yields two different insights. In addition to so-called first-order judgments, we extracted a factor that reflects second-order judgments (i.e., participants anticipate what other citizens think). First, program sanctions affected first-order and compliance costs on second-order legitimacy negatively. This leads to the interpretation that respondents confronted with "Hartz IV's" application and receipt requirements tended to think that the public disapproves of the Federal Employment Agency. One potential explanation for this finding could be that the agency, which is responsible for implementing "Hartz IV," receives extensive negative attention. This circumstance may lead citizens to conclude that the agency likely does not enjoy pronounced legitimacy among other citizens, and salient compliance demands serve to reinforce negative bureaucratic impressions of the public organization. Further, program sanctions decreased first-order legitimacy perceptions, consistent with our results for policy support. Respondents may have perceived that sanctions against program beneficiaries are a political issue and were generally uncomfortable with them (Buss, 2019). This, in turn, led to decreasing judgments of the Federal Employment Agency's legitimacy. The conceptual differences in the demand categories likely determine these results (Moynihan et al., 2015). Compliance and learning demands serve the policy's objectives by managing program access and ensuring eligibility (Keiser & Miller, 2020). Program sanctions do not serve these objectives (Bhargava & Manoli, 2015). Consequently, sanctions lead to negative impressions of the Federal Employment Agency, which appears to approve of them.

## 6 | LIMITATIONS

As with any research, this study's limitations require attention. The first results from the vignette design. While all of the requirements presented originate from official information, the vignettes did not provide participants with a complete picture of the state actions and burdens. The state actions chosen focused largely on written rules and regulations. Thus, the experimental vignettes cannot demonstrate street-level bureaucrats' decisions and behavior. Omitting such aspects constitutes a limitation because many state actions and administrative burdens are attributable to caseworkers' discretionary actions on the ground, not simply the policy design. Further, the vignette design was limited with respect to ecological validity primarily because participants could not interact with the website vignette. Future studies could present the vignettes within a website setting, where participants could, for example, download materials that constitute compliance demands. Such an elaborate design could show how citizens approach information about policy programs and state actions.

Second, generalization may be difficult. For example, most respondents held a university degree, and nearly 60% were women. Compared with general population statistics in Germany (see [Supporting information Appendix D](#)), our sample is skewed toward female respondents with, on average, higher educational backgrounds but lower income. The differences are not extensive, but constitute significant deviations from the underlying population. In addition, the sample appears to contain higher levels of experience with unemployment benefits, as the participants were more likely to be unemployed compared with the general population. These comparisons help contextualize our study's inferences. Still, given the application of a randomized survey experiment, they should not affect the interpretation of the ATE (Mullinix et al., 2015). The policy context poses another problem for external validity. Unemployment benefits are a specific type of public policy with pronounced public interest. State actions' effects may differ for other policy programs and may depend upon the cultural context.

Third, the sanctions vignette did not affect the manipulation check. Indeed, participants' perceptions of program intricacy did not change because of the manipulation, which suggests that program sanctions have no implications for such complexity. Thus, the manipulation check was ineffective for this treatment. In this respect, the empirical results indicate that program sanctions influence several dependent variables. Because of the successful randomization, we can be confident about an existing treatment effect and hence, a successful manipulation. In summary, the results of our manipulation check should be acknowledged. Still, we believe that the manipulation's effectiveness was not compromised.

Fourth, our research design includes several caveats related to measurement and operationalization. For example, we applied a measure of prejudices against the unemployed (Gurr & Jungbauer-Gans, 2013), which is inconsistent with previous studies (Keiser & Miller, 2020). Thus, this measurement approach exhibits limited comparability and limits the opportunities for future replications in different policy areas. This is because other policy areas feature different types of beneficiaries subjected to specific prejudices, for example, prisoners or refugees (Sievert, 2023b).

## 7 | CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite these limitations, the results and discussion provide several contributions. First, the findings contribute to a growing body of research on administrative burdens and their consequences. Our research design contributes to this literature by disentangling the effects of separate state actions that correspond to the administrative burden framework's cost categories (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Moynihan et al., 2015). The results suggest that program sanctions determine negative policy feedback. Presumably, compliance and learning demands constitute state actions that citizens may perceive as justified to ensure sound policy design. This is true although they increase the policy's perceived complexity. In contrast, citizens do not believe that program sanctions are justified. When considering policy design, avoiding state actions that lead to unnecessary psychological burdens seems promising to avoid negative policy feedback (Doughty & Baehler, 2020). Moreover, as program sanctions are linked to stigma, reducing them should affect beneficiaries positively. We encourage scholars to embrace the fine-grained differentiation of state actions (Petersen et al., 2024). Different aspects of policy design, such as learning demands, compliance demands, and program sanctions, have different implications. Consequently, citizens treat them differently.

Second, this study resumes recent debates about policy design and state actions' broad implications for policy feedback. Citizens confronted with information about state actions alter their policy perceptions and legitimacy judgments. Still, prejudices against beneficiaries do not appear to change, partly because they are rooted in dominant beliefs and values. These findings provide an interesting empirical puzzle. Our findings deviate from a recent study that examined similar relations in the context of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in the United States (Keiser & Miller, 2020). While our study supports state actions' importance in policy feedback, our findings indicate that program sanctions alone determine negative policy assessments. Thus, they suggest that policy evaluations and regulatory impact assessments necessitate focusing on those design aspects that impose psychological costs. Future research is necessary to explore the boundary conditions for this relation. We encourage researchers strongly to apply policy designs from different national contexts and policy sectors and vary the manipulations using replications as well (Sievert, 2021). In particular, the forms of psychological costs differ. For instance, while stigma constitutes a burden embedded within social structures and perceptions that beneficiaries are undeserving, other aspects are rooted deeply in the policy design. Various state actions, not simply program sanctions, can also cause or be related to them.

Third, this study provides starting points for further research on the association between state actions, administrative burdens, and organizational legitimacy. Our results indicate that program sanctions and compliance demands affect citizens' judgments of the responsible organization's legitimacy adversely. While the effects on policy support



and spending expectations show that state actions affect policy debates (Keiser & Miller, 2020), legitimacy perceptions also affect public organizations. Consequently, extensive state actions and resulting administrative burdens may damage an organization's public image (Mazepus & van Leeuwen, 2020). This eventuality is problematic because declining legitimacy indicates the possibility of adverse spillover effects on other policies that the organization implements. For instance, while "Hartz IV" is the Federal Employment Agency's most prominent policy program, it provides other programs such as vocational training services. However, if legitimacy perceptions decrease, such policy programs may become contested (Wallner, 2008).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/padm.12957>.

## OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned a Preregistered Research Designs badge for having a preregistered research design, available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/9DB2G>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/7P8AM> and at the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Q2WLFS>.

## INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Following a recent legislative change, the program was renamed "Bürgergeld."

<sup>2</sup> For the preregistration, see [10.17605/OSF.IO/9DB2G](https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/9DB2G). For the data and study materials, see [10.7910/DVN/Q2WLFS](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Q2WLFS).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.soscipanel.de>.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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