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Constructing the Part-Time Burden
Economic Rationality, Responsibility, and Gender in Germany

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Abstract

This study examines how part-time work is discursively constructed and contested in the German political debate following the CDU's proposal to limit the right to part-time work in January 2026. Situated in the context of demographic change and labour shortages, the proposal frames part-time employment primarily as an economic burden – a framing that raises questions about how economic productivity, responsibility, and care work are negotiated in political discourse, and which perspectives are marginalised in the process. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which allows for the simultaneous examination of linguistic choices, discursive practices, and broader social structures, the study analyses the political debate at the institutional level.

The findings reveal three central dimensions. First, while the meaning of part-time work is intensely contested, the CDU's framing of part-time work as an economic burden remains hegemonic, as opposing parties do not fundamentally challenge the underlying assumption that increased working hours are necessary. Second, competing actors attribute responsibility differently – either to individual workers or to structural constraints – yet both sides remain within the same economic rationality. Third, although care work and gender are acknowledged, they are systematically backgrounded, and the part-time trap associated with female part-time employment remains largely invisible. Together, these findings illustrate how political discourse can obscure structural gender inequalities while simultaneously shaping the boundaries of what is politically questionable – with direct consequences for the millions of women whose working and living conditions are affected by part-time regulation in Germany.

Keywords: part-time employment, lifestyle part-time debate, German labour market, responsibility, economic productivity, social reproduction

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1. Introduction

Germany is undergoing a severe demographic change with increasing effects on the labour market. Due to declining birth rates and a steadily ageing population, one in two people in Germany is over the age of 45, while the number of young people continues to decrease (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a). These developments affect both the supply of and demand for labour. While the shrinking working-age population reduces the available labour supply, the ageing society increases the demand for health and care services (Fleischer & Vallizadeh, 2025, 5-6).

In light of these circumstances, the economic wing of the leading governmental party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), proposed a reform to limit the right to part-time work in Germany under the title “No Legal Right to Lifestyle Part-time” in January 2026. The proposal states that employees should only be allowed to work part-time if they can provide sufficient justification for reducing their working hours. Such reasons include childcare, elderly care, or further vocational training. However, the proposal does not specify which exact requirements need to be met. The CDU justifies their proposal by referring to the labour shortage caused by the demographic change and the fact that the rate of part-time employees in Germany has reached a historical high (CDU, 2026a).

The presentation of the proposal was followed by a lively debate among political parties, the media, and employees, who were highly critical of the “lifestyle part-time” narrative. Criticism also emerged from within the CDU itself, with some party members arguing that the proposal fails to reflect the everyday realities of working people, especially women¹ (Kohler et al., 2026; Bussmann, 2026).

This is because part-time work has historically, and up until now, been a highly gendered employment pattern. Research shows that women often choose part-time employment to reconcile paid work with family and other care responsibilities (Lyonette, 2015, 321). This is reflected in their high share of part-time workers: In 2022, nearly every second employed woman in Germany worked part-time (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b). Additionally, the Gender Care Gap demonstrates that women do the majority of unpaid care tasks, including

¹While this paper predominantly uses the categories “womenbecause” and “men” due to their prevalence in the empirical material and existing discourse, this study adopts a non-binary understanding of gender and acknowledges gender diversity beyond this binary framing.because

childcare, elderly care, household work, and voluntary activities. In 2022, women spend 44.3% more time on these tasks than men (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024a). Some feminist scholars introduced the broader term of social reproduction work, which includes all kinds of tasks needed to maintain life, including emotional labour apart from manifest care tasks (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, 382).

Yet, part-time work not only offers reconciliation opportunities but it also leads to lower wages, reduced career opportunities and job insecurity, causing long-term effects such as economic inequality and dependence (Bardasi & Gornick, 2008, 38). Thus, part-time work can enhance labour market participation, yet it is also linked to structural inequalities.

However, the CDU proposal seems to illustrate part-time employment solely as economic inefficiency in times of labour shortages, rather than including other perspectives on part-time, which appears to neglect the complexity of this working arrangement. Their framing raises broader questions about how part-time work is politically negotiated and justified in the following debate.

Additionally, analysing the discourse is highly relevant, as the CDU proposal could have significant implications for part-time rates in Germany and the overall labour supply. However, its consequences for work-family compatibility are not straightforward. Even though childcare and elderly care are recognised as justified reasons for reduced working hours, the proposal fails to address who holds the authority to decide whether a reason qualifies, reflects a limited understanding of care work that excludes broader care responsibilities, and leaves the structural conditions shaping part-time employment – such as insufficient childcare provision – entirely unchallenged (CDU, 2026a). This is highly relevant given the gendered dimension of part-time employment (Lyonette, 2015, 321).

The debate surrounding the CDU proposal, therefore, provides a valuable opportunity to analyse how tensions between labour market demands and social reproduction are articulated and negotiated in political discourse.

Hence, this paper asks:

How is part-time work discursively constructed in the political debate following the CDU's proposal to limit the right to part-time work, and what does this reveal about the contestation of economic productivity and work-care arrangements in the German part-time discourse?

This paper aims to critically analyse the political discourse around the part-time proposal, in order to understand how part-time work is negotiated, justified or problematised in the context of demographic change. More specifically, the analysis seeks to explain which perspectives on part-time work become dominant or are marginalised. By doing so, the study wants to contribute to a critical reflection on how political discourses reflect and/ or restructure the relationship between economic productivity and (un)paid care-work arrangements.

To answer this question, the reader first needs to understand the institutional, legal and cultural context in which part-time work in Germany is embedded – particularly the persistence of the one-and-a-half earner model and the norms and policies supporting it. Against this background, three perspectives from the literature are discussed, examining part-time work as both an opportunity and a trap for female employment, as an economic resource, and as a structural response to the tension between capitalist growth and social reproduction. These perspectives not only contribute to the analytical lens but also are part of the social context to which the discourse belongs. Given that the research interest lies in how meaning is constructed and contested in political language, as well as how the discourse is shaped by, and shapes society, Critical Discourse Analysis – and especially Fairclough's three-dimensional model – provides the most fitting theoretical framework and methodological approach. It allows for simultaneously analysing linguistic choices, discursive practices, and broader social structures in the German part-time debate. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the results and limitations.

2. Background

The debate surrounding the CDU proposal "lifestyle part-time" (CDU, 2026a) unfolds within a specific institutional and socio-economic context, which includes the historically shaped labour market participation in Germany. As this section will show, part-time employment, particularly among women, is not just the result of individual choices but is shaped by a mixture of legal regulations, welfare state arrangements and norms on the division of paid and unpaid labour. This chapter, therefore, outlines the legislative framework of part-time work, traces the development and persistence of the one-and-a-half earner model, and concludes by naming broader cultural and institutional structures. Thus, the background establishes the socio-cultural context in which the part-time debate emerges.

2.1 Definition of Part-Time Work

No universally fixed definition of part-time work applies across all countries. Hence, it is relevant to first lay out how this paper will define and apply the term *part-time work*, as it lies at the centre of this study. The OECD defines part-time work as employment of 30 hours or less per week in a person's main employment (OECD, 2024). However, as van Bastelaer et al. have highlighted, part-time work can only be understood in relation to how full-time work is defined, and because full-time working hours vary between countries, the scope of part-time work also differs accordingly (1997, 6).

The national definition in Germany aligns with this relational approach. Rather than defining part-time work through a fixed number of hours, German labour statistics view employment as part-time when the working hours are less than those in comparable full-time positions within the same profession or organisation. Consequently, the German Federal Statistical Office relies largely on respondents' self-assessment when collecting data on part-time employment (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.).

Therefore, this paper defines *part-time work* as any form of employment with fewer working hours than a comparable full-time position, based on the self-assessment of employees.

2.2 The Part-Time Law in Germany

As the CDU proposal aims to change the existing part-time legislation, this section outlines the concerned part-time law in Germany. The current legal framework was introduced in 2000 with the adoption of the *Teilzeit- und Befristungsgesetz* (TzBfG). The law aims to improve the working conditions of part-time employees and thus encourages part-time employment as a legitimate form of work. It establishes legal regulations for both fixed-term contracts and part-time work while also aiming to prevent discrimination (Gesetz über Teilzeitarbeit und befristete Arbeitsverträge und zur Änderung und Aufhebung arbeitsrechtlicher Bestimmungen, 2000).

The law was introduced in response to broader transformations of the labour market, including globalisation, technology, and increasing demands for flexibility (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2019). Additionally, family responsibilities are one of the key reasons for people to pursue part-time work alongside further education, health reasons, voluntary activities and having a transition phase into a pension (ibid., 2025, 7). In

this sense, the TzBfG not only enables flexible workforce arrangements for employers but also supports employees' balance between work and private life (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2019).

A central provision of the law is the right of employees to request a reduction of their working hours. Under §§8–9 TzBfG, employees are generally entitled to reduce their working hours without having to justify their request with specific personal reasons such as childcare or other caregiving responsibilities. In order to apply for part-time work, two main conditions must be fulfilled. First, the employee must have been employed at the company for at least six months (§8 (1)). Second, the company must employ more than fifteen employees (§8 (7)). Employers have the legal right to reject the request only if operational reasons prevent the reduction in working hours, for example, if it would significantly disrupt workflow or organisational processes (§8 (4)). In 2019, the law was further expanded through the introduction of a part-time bridge. This allows employees to temporarily (1-5 years) limit their working hours before returning to their previous working time arrangements (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2025, 8-10).

Taken together, the German part-time legislation institutionalises part-time work as a legitimised and protected form of employment. At the same time, the right to reduce working hours without justification is the targeted aspect by the CDU proposal, which therefore seeks to change the conditions under which part-time work should be granted in the future (CDU, 2026a).

2.3 One-and-a-Half Earner Model

To understand the current part-time employment arrangement, beyond its legal framework, it is important to consider the one-and-a-half earner model. In 2024, approximately 29% of all employees in Germany worked part-time. However, there is a significant gendered difference: While only 12% of men were employed part-time, the share among women reached 49% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b). As part-time and low-wage jobs often correlate, a higher percentage of women (19%) than men (14%) have a so-called low-wage job (ibid., 2024b).

Studies consistently show that women often choose part-time employment to combine paid work with family responsibilities (e.g., Lyonette, 2015, 321). This pattern is commonly described as the *one-and-a-half earner model*. The concept refers to household arrangements

in which one partner, typically the father, works full-time, while the other partner, most often the mother, works part-time (Hook, 2015). Comparative research highlights the prevalence of this constellation in Germany. A study by Hook, analysing work-family arrangements across 16 European countries, finds that Germany exhibits one of the highest shares of the one-and-a-half earner model (2015, 22). Hook interprets these numbers as an indicator of the degree of *familism*, describing the extent to which families are expected to provide welfare and care themselves rather than relying on state provision or market services (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 85).

2.4 Institutional and Cultural Factors

Cultural and structural factors are deeply intertwined in maintaining the one-and-a-half earner model. They are shaping work-family preferences and thus contribute to the high part-time percentage of women (Bünning & Hipp, 2021; Rüling & Kassner, 2007). Even with a changing family policy landscape, Germany is still frequently categorised as a prototypical conservative welfare state, and continuously characterised by the strong influence of Christian democracy and an emphasis on traditional family roles. Fleckenstein (2011) refers to these continuously traditional policies as the “legacy of the conservative welfare state of Germany”.

Even though the traditional male breadwinner ideology has gradually been declining in favour of the adult-worker model, more precisely the one-and-a-half earner model, the male breadwinner ideology continues to influence family and labour market structures (Oschmiansky et al., 2020). This is reflected in policies such as joint taxation and a low degree of defamilisation, framing women as primary caregivers within families (Fleckenstein, 2011, 547-548). Thus, inconsistencies between the officially promoted adult-worker model and certain policy instruments exist.

For instance, joint taxation is often criticised for creating disincentives for equal labour market participation of both partners (Fleckenstein, 2011, 547, 565), as this system leads to the so-called splitting advantage, which provides a tax benefit for married couples with unequal incomes compared to unmarried couples who are taxed individually (Becker, 2022, 5–7). Empirical studies suggest that replacing joint taxation with individual taxation could significantly increase women’s labour supply, with estimates indicating a potential increase of more than 500,000 full-time equivalents (Bachmann et al., 2021; Bach et al., 2011).

Another institutional structure influencing the high part-time employment rate among women is the insufficient availability of childcare and the relatively short opening hours of schools. Although plans to expand childcare provision exist, there are still approximately 300,000 missing childcare places for children under three in 2024 (Peer, 2025). Additionally, 56% of parents of school-aged children in Germany report difficulties in balancing family responsibilities with employment, as once children start school, full-time daycare arrangements often disappear, and the organisation of educational and leisure-time care becomes more demanding for parents. This shows that even though compatibility of family and work is often discussed primarily in relation to families with very young children, it remains challenging for families with older children as well (Heimer et al., 2011, 13).

This points to the fact that, while the traditional male breadwinner ideology has been declining in Germany, the conservative welfare state continues to shape existing institutional and legislative aspects. Thus, the persistence of the one-and-a-half earner model and the high part-time rate in Germany reflects not only the legislative framework for part-time work but also a broader constellation of institutional structures and cultural norms shaping the division of paid and unpaid labour within families.

3. Literature Review

While the previous chapter outlined the legislative, institutional and cultural foundations of part-time employment in Germany and its relationship to female employment, this chapter illustrates the academic debate surrounding gendered labour market structures, the relationship between part-time work and economic competitiveness and the tension between economic growth and social reproduction work. This section will show that part-time work and female employment are deeply intertwined, that part-time work is predominantly discussed as beneficial for economic productivity and that capitalist societies have an inherent tension with care responsibilities. Hence, those perspectives will facilitate contextualising the CDU's framing of part-time work and reveal which of these contributions have shaped the German debate and which have been marginalised. Lastly, the end of this chapter explains how this paper contributes to the academic literature.

3.1 Women's Part-Time Work and Labour Force Participation

As part-time work is a deeply gendered work arrangement, which this section will underline, it is crucial to understand the complex connections between part-time work and female employment when later turning to the part-time debate in Germany and analysing how the gender dimension is included.

Generally, part-time work has contrary effects on female labour market participation. Looking at the historical development of part-time employment, it becomes evident that part-time work contributed to a gradual shift from the exclusion of women from the labour market towards their increasing inclusion. Because even as women were integrated into societal production in pre-capitalist societies, they were widely excluded during the further development of capitalism. In this period, a clearer separation emerged between unpaid work in the private household and paid work in the public sphere (Pfau-Effinger, 2017, 2). Following the Second World War, the male breadwinner model, which was characterised by standard employment in the form of full-time and permanent jobs for men, dominated labour market arrangements in Western societies (ibid., 1993, 383). However, in the beginning of the 1970s and 1980s, women's employment rates started to increase across Western European societies (ibid., 2017, 3). One important factor in West Germany was a broader cultural shift towards more democratic and liberal values. The feminist movement played a central role in promoting narratives of gender equality and increasingly challenged the norm of the male breadwinner model. The housewife ideal was questioned, and women demanded opportunities to pursue paid employment (ibid., 2017, 8-9).

One central critique of the integration of women into the labour market in this phase has been brought forth by Nancy Fraser (2020). During the early post-war phase, feminists exposed the injustice of women performing the majority of unpaid care work and the resulting labour market segregation. Importantly, their goal was not full integration of women into paid employment, but rather a structural shift in society that would “decentre wage work and valorise unwaged activities” (ibid., 292). Over time, however, feminist critique became mostly disengaged from broader critiques of capitalism itself, facilitating neoliberal tendencies within the movement (Fraser, 2020, 286). This led to feminist demands adapting to the dual-earner model, which replaced previous calls such as the family wage. Fraser (2020, 299) argues that, although mainly unintended, this contributed to the rise of neoliberalist societal structures.

Nevertheless, part-time work played a crucial role in the decrease of the male breadwinner model and the expansion of female labour market participation (Pfau-Effinger, 2017, 9). As the increase in female employment led to a continuous decline of the standard employment model, with new forms of employment rising, part-time employment became a very popular option for women with children (ibid., 1993, 384). Important to note is that the rise of part-time employment was not a primary consequence of public policy strategies but rather the response to the lack of sufficient child care provision, and gained political support only later on (Visser, 2002, 26).

Hakim points out that, despite the expectation that rising female employment would support greater gender equality, the proportion of women working full-time has remained roughly half that of men over the past century (1996, 65). And even though her argument was made 30 years ago, recent data for Germany in 2024 indicate that women's full-time employment is still approximately 40% lower than that of men (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b). Beyond reduced income, part-time work often prevents women from achieving financial independence from their partners, as they typically function as secondary earners. Hakim calls this phenomenon the "post-war paradox" (1996, 79), as, simultaneously with women's increased labour market integration, there has been a growth of women employed in lower-paid sectors.

Lyonette further underlines part-time work's negative implications for women's careers and income by questioning whether women freely "choose" part-time work, as this leads to their "inability to compete with men on an equal footing in the labour market" (2015, 321). This is revealed in several aspects: Part-time employment is associated with career penalties, including lower pay, fewer development opportunities, a lack of status, and persistent inequalities in unpaid care work, with long-term consequences for savings and pensions (ibid., 322).

Another critique is focusing on policy making: A gap exists between the governmental assumption of the adult-worker model with two fully individualised earners and the reality in most Western countries of the one-and-a-half earner model. Policies that are based on this idealised assumption risk overlooking the complex realities of women's employment. Welfare policies, which are grounded in the adult-worker model, inadequately formulate policies targeting unpaid care work and fail to support workers in low-paid sectors, which disproportionately include women in the care industry. These policies aren't given enough

attention in comparison to policies which simply promote paid employment (Lewis, 2001, 155, 166).

Solely increasing female employment to achieve economic competitiveness and to meet gender equality targets leads to women often taking on flexible, lower-paid jobs, rather than delivering equal, well-compensated opportunities for all employees (Lewis & Giullari, 2005, 82). As Rubery et al. (1998) point out again, those flexible, part-time jobs, often linked with precarious working conditions, can paradoxically both facilitate women's labour market participation and complicate their path to full-time work and thus create a 'trap', as part-time work limits their prospects for career advancement.

To summarise: The effects of part-time work for women are contested, as it has both great potential, especially historically, in facilitating women's employment (Pfau-Effinger, 1993; 2017), but also has inherent risks, as it leads to serious wage penalties and other career implications (Lewis, 2001; Lyonette, 2015).

3.2 Part-Time Work and Economic Competitiveness

The proposal to limit the right to part-time work is primarily motivated by concerns about labour shortages, as the current rate of part-time employment is seen as negatively affecting the German economy (CDU, 2026a). However, as this section shows, the dominant share of academic literature points to the positive effects of part-time work for economic productivity. Thus, reviewing this literature is essential to understand how the CDU's economic framing reflects, simplifies or changes these existing findings.

Part-time work is one form of flexible work arrangements (FWA), which counts as non-standard employment, and has long been negotiated in response to changing labour market demands. In a time of economic transformation, flexibility and technology, FWAs are often promoted as resources to maintain competitiveness and support economic growth (Kahne, 1994, 217–218). *Flexibility* is defined as the capacity of organisations to respond quickly to changes in demand by adjusting resources and production (Wright & Snell, 1998). As globalisation intensifies competition, FWAs are seen as a way to secure organisational sustainability (Stavrou, 2005, 923–930). Stavrou differentiates between different FWA bundles and emphasises that not all forms are universally appropriate for every organisation (2005, 926). Her study, however, indicates that flexible work bundles, including part-time

employment as part of the “non-standard employment” category, generally support economic competitiveness, particularly by reducing employee turnover (ibid., 936).

Reducing unemployment remains a central goal of the European Employment Strategy, and the promotion of part-time work and increased flexibility has been identified as a key instrument for achieving higher employment levels since the influential *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment* (Visser, 2002, 24–25; International Labour Office, 1994, 120–121).

One prominent example revealing the positive effects of part-time work on economic competitiveness is the Netherlands, which is frequently referred to as the first “part-time economy” (Visser, 2002). Their part-time employment rate is twice the European average. Despite experiencing high unemployment during recessions in the 1980s and 1990s, overall employment rates increased significantly, illustrating a so-called “employment miracle.” A high prevalence of part-time work contributed to these low unemployment rates without negatively affecting economic productivity (ibid., 24-25).

However, the relationship between flexible employment and economic productivity is not only straightforward and beneficial. Rubery et al. (1998) argue that political debates often overestimate the assumed benefits of flexibility. For instance, the UK employment “miracle” cannot be solely attributed to an increase in flexible jobs, as demographic growth also played a role. Moreover, flexibility does not automatically increase tax revenues. Low-paid, insecure jobs can lead to additional welfare dependencies, which in turn increase state expenditure. From an organisational perspective, the benefits of standard employment, such as employee commitment and motivation, are sometimes backgrounded when flexibility is emphasised as the primary tool to secure competitiveness.

This critique, however, does not imply that part-time work is automatically contradictory to productivity. Kahne argued that flexibility must be paired with adequate technical training to ensure employees meet the necessary skill levels. When part-time work is implemented in this way, it can help a flexible distribution of working hours without disadvantaging the part-time workers, while also supporting their motivation (1994, 432).

Overall, part-time work is thus predominantly viewed as enhancing flexibility and mostly benefiting economic productivity.

3.3 Social Reproduction Responsibilities and Capitalism

While the previous two sections have discussed part-time work from the perspective of female employment and economic competitiveness, both perspectives largely treat paid work as the primary reference point, without actually addressing the unpaid care work that makes labour market participation possible in the first place. This section, therefore, turns to social reproduction theory, which provides a broader analytical lens for understanding the structural tension between economic productivity and social reproduction in capitalist societies, with part-time work as a response to this tension. As the CDU proposal situates part-time work in an economic context, this section provides an academic background for subsequently analysing how this tension is accounted for or marginalised in the overall discourse.

Fraser and Vogel emphasise that social reproduction is the foundation of any capitalist organisation. Without it, no cultural, political, or economic system could function (2017, 21). It ranges from childbirth or care work in all kinds of social relationships to the production of essential goods, such as clothing. Hence, it encompasses all activities necessary for maintaining life (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, 382).

Fraser argues that contemporary capitalism “cannibalises social reproduction” (2022, 53). While capitalist societies significantly rely on social reproduction, they simultaneously value and compensate for it inadequately. More concretely, capitalist societies depend on individuals, predominantly women and mothers, to perform unpaid social reproduction tasks that sustain both the current and the future generation of labour participants. This contradiction often remains invisible, as societies demand the provision of these essential tasks without adequately recognising or monetising them. The tension becomes evident, however, when capitalist structures prioritise economic growth and profit expansion over investments in social reproduction. This prioritisation undermines the capacities needed to sustain care and household functions, ultimately risking sustainable labour arrangements (Fraser & Vogel, 2017, 24). This creates an inherent contradiction, which Fraser and Vogel describe as a “built-in tendency to self-destabilisation” (2017, 22).

In the context of current, globalised capitalist societies, reducing investments in welfare state structures alongside increasing policies to promote female labour market participation has led to a dualised arrangement of social reproduction. Care work is either commodified and outsourced for families who can, or conducted privately within households for those who

cannot afford it (Fraser & Vogel, 2017, 32). This dualisation reinforces structural inequalities, placing disproportionate burdens on certain social groups while maintaining the labour force necessary for economic competitiveness.

Thus, part-time work can also be understood as a structural response to the unequal distribution of social reproduction responsibilities and trying to balance the tension between paid employment and care work. This perspective is especially relevant for analysing the political discourse on part-time work in Germany, as it reveals how economic framings may hide structural relationships between labour market participation and social reproduction.

3.4 Research Gap and Contributions

As the literature review has shown, existing research has provided important insights into the structural causes and consequences of part-time employment. While some scholars examine the role of part-time work in facilitating women's labour market participation, others point to the persistent gender inequalities associated with it, including wage penalties, limited career opportunities, and economic dependency on their partners (Lewis, 2001; Lyonette, 2015; Pfau-Effinger, 2017). Another part of research focuses on the relationship between non-standard employment arrangements and economic competitiveness, analysing how part-time work can support labour market flexibility and performance in times of globalisation and modern technologies (Kahne, 1994; Rubery et al., 1998; Stavrou, 2005). Additionally, social reproduction theory has developed a broader analytical perspective for understanding the structural tension between capitalist economies' growth tendencies and the care work necessary to maintain those (Fraser & Vogel, 2017; Fraser, 2022).

While these perspectives offer important explanations about the development and effects of part-time employment, they mostly focus on structural and economic aspects, and the theoretical tension between social reproduction and capitalism. Less knowledge exists on which of these understandings about part-time work are present in the public debate. This is particularly relevant in the German context, where political debates about labour market reform have intensified in response to demographic change, yet the discursive dimension of these debates remains largely unexamined. The debate surrounding the CDU proposal provides a timely and particularly interesting case to address this gap. As a recent and publicly contested debate, it has not yet been subject to a discourse analysis, while at the same time offering a good opportunity to examine how competing perspectives on economic

productivity, care responsibilities and gender are negotiated and which are ultimately marginalised at a moment when the outcome may directly shape future legislation affecting millions of workers in Germany.

This paper contributes to the literature in a threefold way. First, it shifts the analytical focus from structural explanations and consequences of part-time employment to the discursive negotiation and framing of part-time work, thereby revealing how political language constructs and legitimises particular understandings of employment arrangements. Second, it links debates on labour market supply and demographic change with perspectives from social reproduction theory, illustrating how economic discourses can structurally marginalise feminist perspectives – and how this may affect policy making. Third, by analysing the debate around the CDU proposal as a concrete empirical case, the study demonstrates how political discourse can shape perspectives on part-time work in Germany. This is particularly relevant given that millions of women in Germany are directly affected by how part-time work is politically framed and problematised – as the boundaries of such debates influence not only legislation, but the everyday working and living conditions.

4. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Framework

Analysing the political discourse surrounding the CDU proposal requires a theoretical framework that can both examine language use, the production and circulation of political statements, and the broader social structures in which these are embedded. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is particularly suited for this purpose, as it treats discourse not merely as a reflection of social reality but as actively constituting it – shaping identities, power relations, and ideological assumptions (Fairclough, 2013, 11). This is especially relevant for the present study, as the debate around part-time work is not a technical policy discussion, but an instance where competing understandings of economic productivity, responsibility, and care work are constructed and contested. A mainly linguistic or content-based analysis would examine what is said, but not how meaning is produced, which perspectives are naturalised, and which structural inequalities are reproduced or challenged through language. CDA, by integrating linguistic analysis with social and ideological critique, allows for exactly this kind of multi-layered analysis.

Central to this analytical framework is the concept of discourse itself. Hence, it is necessary to first explain how this paper defines it. Building on this, key concepts such as

intertextuality, interdiscursivity, ideology and hegemony are introduced – concepts that are particularly relevant for analysing how political actors draw on, combine and contest different discourses around part-time work, and how certain framings come to dominate while others are marginalised. These concepts are then integrated into Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which provides the concrete analytical structure for the subsequent analysis.

4.1 What is Discourse?

Wodak (2011, 51) has highlighted that various academic schools use the term *discourse* quite differently. As the subsequent analysis follows Fairclough's model, this study aligns with his conceptualisation of discourse.

Fairclough views discourse as a way of applying and performing language, while going beyond individual behaviour, but rather viewing discourse as a social practice (1992, 62-63). Central is its relationship with the social world: He describes it as 'dialectic' (Fairclough, 1992, 64). Dialectic means that discourse and the social world influence one another. On the one hand, social structures, such as institutional aspects or class constellations, influence and constrain discourse. On the other hand, discourse constitutes the social world as well, by shaping the social structures and limitations, which again limit the discourse. So, discourse not only reflects the world, but shapes it at the same time. Discourse influences social structures in three different ways: It constructs social identities (1), the relationship among people (2) and influences norms, beliefs, and knowledge systems (3). Therefore, discourse fulfils three functions. Identity, relational and ideational function (Fairclough, 1992, 64).

This study, therefore, understands discourse as both language use and social practice, which reflects, but at the same time shapes, social structures in Germany. More concretely, the discourse on part-time work reflects and shapes the identity of part-time workers, the belief system surrounding part-time work, and structural work-family arrangements.

4.2 Key Concepts in Fairclough's Framework

Communicative Event and Order of Discourse

The *communicative event* refers to instances of language use and consists of three dimensions discussed in the next chapter. A communicative event can be an interview, a speech given by

a governmental representative or a media article. By contrast, the *order of discourse* is the sum of discourses occurring in a specific social field (Jørgensen, 2002). Wodak (2011, 58) describes the order of discourse in Fairclough's framework as "conventions underlying discursive events". The communicative event and the order of discourse have a dialectic relationship. As shown above, a communicative event can reflect, reinforce or alter existing orders of discourse (Jørgensen, 2002).

Ideology and Hegemony

Ideology occurs quite materially in the embedded ways of institutions, in the construction of social identities and so-called ideological state apparatuses, e.g., schools or media, where class struggles are negotiated (Fairclough, 1992, 87). Ideology is a "naturalised orientation" (ibid., 89), which is reflected in norms and belief systems. Fairclough views discourse as having different levels of ideological intensity. The more ideological they are, the more they transform or reinforce power relations (Jørgensen, 2002). *Hegemony* is both leadership and domination in various social fields, such as political or ideological aspects of social life. It means to "have power over the society as a whole" (ibid., 92).

4.3 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

Based on the conceptualisation of discourse and key concepts, Fairclough has designed his influential framework: The Three-Dimensional Approach. As Jørgensen has pointed out, this framework is "an explosion of concepts" (2002). It is important to note that, therefore, only the relevant aspects for this study are outlined.

For Fairclough, it is crucial that textual analysis by itself cannot provide an in-depth understanding of how society and language are connected. This is why he adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines linguistic analysis with micro- and macro-social analysis and incorporates those into three dimensions of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 72). The three dimensions are the text level, discursive practices, and social practices. All of these levels are needed to analyse the communicative event (Jørgensen, 2002). In this study, these three levels are used as an analytical framework for examining the political discourse on part-time work. Thus, the analysis does not solely focus on how part-time work is constructed textually or how certain perspectives are linguistically prioritised or marginalised. Instead, it connects a linguistic analysis with a broader analysis of discursive and social practices shaping the discourse.

The three dimensions and their relationship are visualised in Figure 1, which illustrates how text, discursive practice, and social practice are connected – with each level simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the others.

Figure 1: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

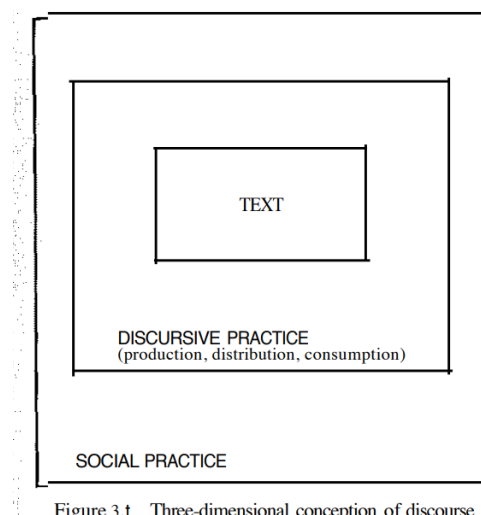


Figure 3.t Three-dimensional conception of discourse

(Fairclough, 1992, 73)

As the model shows, the text level forms the innermost dimension, embedded within discursive and social practices. Each dimension is discussed in turn below.

4.3.1 Text level

Separating the text level from discursive practices is not always straightforward, as these two dimensions relate to and influence each other (Fairclough, 1992, 74). However, for analytical purposes, these two levels are treated as distinct spheres. Most generally, analysing the text level focuses on formal aspects through which “discourses and genres are realised linguistically” (Jørgensen, 2002).

More concretely, researchers may examine vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, ethos and text structure - those are, according to Fairclough (1992, 75), the key features on this level. While cohesion (i.e., grammatical and lexical devices linking sentences) is a recognised aspect of textual analysis in CDA, it is not the primary focus of this study. Instead, this paper focuses more on textual meaning, specifically how arguments for or against part-time work are structured, problems are prioritised, whether women and mothers are focused or hidden as agents, and how part-time workers are framed. Hence, grammar, wording, textual structures

and ethos are more relevant. Analysing the *grammar* means analysing the clause, which always includes different functions such as “ideation, interpersonal and textual meanings” (Fairclough, 1992, 76). This relates to examining how the political actors choose to portray the economic situation, how they construct relationships and norms of care and employment arrangements and how the text is organised, e.g., in an argumentative flow. *Ethos* analyses how political actors portray themselves and how this relates to their construction of part-time workers. *Vocabulary* focuses specifically on the wording, e.g., whether something is reworded or what types of metaphors are used. *Text structure* refers to the arrangement of arguments about part-time work (ibid., 76-78).

4.3.2 Discursive Practice

Generally, discursive practices refer to how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. In political contexts, such as the discourse on part-time work, these processes are shaped by institutional factors and the roles of those involved in producing these texts, which influence how political statements are formulated, consumed, and interpreted (Fairclough, 1992, 78-79).

Quite central to this study on the level of discursive practices are *intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity*. As Foucault put it: “there can be no statement that in one way or another does not actualise others” (1972, 98). Fairclough’s approach aligns with the statement and views each language use as part of a “chain of speech communication” (1992, 102), and therefore, texts are always intertextual. *Intertextuality* is found when communicative events relate to preceding events and can be both manifest or constitutive. Manifest intertextuality means that the analysed texts include direct quotes or other forms of explicit references to different texts (Fairclough, 1992, 104). While intertextuality is more general, *interdiscursivity* means more specifically that other discourses and genres are deployed. This inclusion of various discourses changes the limitations in the order of discourse. So-called “interdiscursive mixes” (Jørgensen, 2002), which are a sign of creative discursive practices, are an indicator and a starting point for societal change. On the contrary, discursive practices that involve a more traditional mixing of discourse uphold the order of discourse and thus stand for societal stability. In this instance, the concept of hegemony is crucial, as the chances for change, e.g., for how texts can shape preceding texts, are not endless, as there are underlying power dimensions, limiting actors' ability to access other discourses (ibid., 2002).

In this study, these concepts are especially relevant as the discourse on part-time work is shaped by interaction between economic, gendered and welfare structure-related discourses. The analysis, therefore, focuses on how these different discourses are combined and reorganised within political statements, and how this interdiscursive mixing contributes to the construction of part-time work and shapes German society. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how the different actors include or reorganise framings of other parts of the debate.

4.3.3 Social Practice

Texts influence and are influenced by social practices, however, their connection is designed through discursive practices. A pure discourse analysis reaches its limits when it comes to analysing this level, as social practices also include non-discursive elements. Hence, additional social or cultural theory is needed to examine the social practices extensively (Jørgensen, 2002). Ideology and Hegemony play a significant role in the analysis of social practices as well. As already shown above, *ideology* occurs in different ways in social practices, e.g., in ideological state apparatuses or how identities are constructed and can be found in language use, such as word meanings, metaphors, presuppositions and coherence (Fairclough, 1992, 87-89). Hegemony links social practices with discursive practices and facilitates the understanding of the connection between those two dimensions. Hegemony helps to understand the social practices and their inherent power relations in which the discourse takes place, as well as facilitates the analysis of discursive practices “as a mode of hegemonic struggle” (ibid., 95).

The social practices of the part-time discourse are illustrated in the broader political and societal context in which the CDU proposal and the debate take place. This includes, for example, the part-time legislation, family policies, and the conservative assumptions about care responsibilities, which all shape how part-time work is discussed.

4.4 Theoretical Lens

As the literature review has shown, there are three dominant, partly contradictory perspectives on part-time work: the view on part-time work as either an opportunity or a trap for female employment (1); part-time as an economic resource (2); and the tension between capitalist growth tendencies and the valuing of social reproduction work (3). These perspectives constitute the analytical background from which the discourse on part-time work in Germany can be understood and interpreted. However, they are not a fixed explanatory

framework, but perspectives that political actors may draw upon or marginalise, while at the same time being influenced by those perspectives – as the relationship between discourse and the social world is dialectic (Fairclough, 1992, 64).

Fairclough's three-dimensional model provides the analytical structure through which these perspectives become empirically traceable. At the textual level, the language choices of political actors reveal which of these perspectives are foregrounded or backgrounded – for instance, how part-time work is framed as an economic problem and how responsibility is attributed. At the level of discursive practices, the focus shifts to how different discourses – economic, feminist, welfare-related – are combined, contested or silenced across the political debate, and whether this reflects a creative or traditional interdiscursive mix. At the level of social practices, the analysis situates the discourse within the broader structural context of Germany's conservative welfare state, gendered care arrangements and labour market pressures – examining whether the discourse reproduces or challenges existing power relations. Together, these three levels allow for a multi-layered analysis of how part-time work is politically constructed and which perspectives ultimately shape the boundaries of the debate.

5. Research Design

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is both the theoretical framework and methodological approach in this study. As no fixed methodological approach to conducting a CDA exists, flexibility is required. Researchers are encouraged to proceed differently and adjust the concrete research process to their case (Fairclough, 1992, 225). Building on Fairclough's model, this chapter outlines the concrete research design of the study and outlines how the three-dimensional framework is utilised and operationalised for the subsequent analysis.

Generally, the research process in CDA has several stages, including problem definition, developing the research question(s), data collection, transcription, analysis, and the formulation of results (Jørgensen, 2002). As the research problem and question have already been dealt with in earlier chapters, this section focuses mainly on the selection and transcription of the data. Before that, the ontological and epistemological worldview of this paper is explained. Then, the operationalisation of the three-dimensional model takes place, and the analytical process is outlined. The chapter ends with a reflection to ensure the quality criteria for social scientific research are met.

5.1 Ontology and Epistemological Worldview

The ontological worldview of this paper follows a critical discourse analyst's understanding of reality and their conceptualisation of the relationship between discourse and society. As Fairclough (1992) put it, CDA aligns with the interpretivist view on the world that “members of social communities produce their orderly or accountable worlds” (72). However, he adds that through “producing their world, members’ practices are shaped in ways of which they are usually unaware” (ibid., 72). Thus, social phenomena, such as labour market arrangements or the view on part-time employment, are not treated as fixed or given structures but as socially constructed by discourse, while at the same time shaping the discursive practices as well.

Epistemologically, the study adopts this interpretivist approach. Knowledge about the social world is generated through the interpretation of meaning in language and discourses. Accordingly, the study examines how meanings of part-time work are constructed in political discourse and how these interpretations shape the relationship between economic productivity and social reproduction.

5.2 Case Selection

The debate surrounding the “lifestyle part-time” reform proposal by the economic wing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) provides a suitable case for analysing how political actors discursively construct part-time work in Germany, which perspectives dominate or are marginalised and how those instances are used as a justification for policy reforms. Due to the framing of part-time work as a lifestyle choice, the proposal has been controversially and publicly debated. Still, this study focuses on the official political level of the debate to analyse the construction and negotiation of part-time work within institutional political discourse. This makes it a particularly suitable case for analysing ideological struggles and competing narratives, as a range of different positions from varying political parties are articulated and contested in the public sphere.

From a methodological perspective, the case of the CDU proposal is highly significant for two reasons. First, as the leading governmental party and the party of the current Chancellor, the CDU occupies a hegemonic position within the German political landscape – meaning that its discursive framings have institutional authority and a realistic potential to shape future

policy making. This distinguishes the present case from a theoretical policy debate and underlines its direct societal relevance for the millions of employees, and disproportionately women, affected by part-time framing and regulation in Germany. Second, the proposal reflects a critical moment in political discourse where struggles over established relations between economic productivity, social reproduction and female labour arrangements become particularly visible. The demographic change and with it the increasing labour shortages place a growing pressure on the labour supply in Germany (Fleischer & Vallizadeh, 2025, 5-6), exposing underlying structural tensions. This aligns with Fraser & Vogel's (2017) argument that the tension between economic growth and social reproduction becomes especially visible when capitalist societies prioritise economic growth while undermining investments into social reproduction.

5.3 Data Collection and Transcription

The analysis focuses on the discourse at the official political level, as the “nature of data will vary according to the project” (Fairclough, 1992, 226), the core data selection is limited to documents in which political actors explicitly debate the “lifestyle part-time” proposal. These include parliamentary debates, official statements, speeches, and interviews involving at least one politician. While the proposal has led to a lively debate, including podcasts, statements from civil actors, etc., which discuss the topic, those are not the primary focus of this study. The dataset is exhaustive within these boundaries, as all available texts that meet the selection criteria - the reform proposals as well as debates among politicians on the topic of the part-time proposal - are included in the analysis. A Google and YouTube search, following a systematic keyword search, has been conducted using keywords such as “debate part-time”, “parliament part-time”, “lifestyle part-time”, and “Merz part-time”.

Yet, as researchers can enlarge their data set through including additional data, such as judgements formulated in e.g. an interview on aspects of the main data set (Fairclough, 1992, 227), the dataset is separated into core and supplementary material. The core data set (s. Table 1) will therefore be examined intensively according to the three-dimensional approach by Fairclough. An additional, smaller, supplementary sample (s. Table 2) will only be analysed broadly to provide more context for the social practice, as well as to examine their critical perspectives on relevant aspects of the discursive samples.

Table 1: Core Material

Nr.	Date	Text	Content
A1a	09.01.2026	“lifestyle part-time” proposal by CDU	The proposal from the economic wing of the CDU about limiting the right to part-time work.
A1b	21.02.2026	New Version of the “lifestyle part-time” proposal by CDU called “Streamlining Part-Time Work Entitlements - Strengthening Employment”	Due to massive criticism, the CDU published a new proposal about limiting the right to part-time work, with an emphasis on the need to enhance the provision for childcare institutions.
A2	26.01.2026	Interview with SPD politician on German television	Critical stance regarding the proposal, highlighting different incentives the German state could implement to increase the employment rate.
A3	29.01.2026	Parliamentary Debate on part-time reform/ rights of labour participants	Competing perspectives on the proposal to limit part-time work, mostly critical from all parties apart from the CDU itself.
A4	29.01.2026	Television debate between two politicians (CDU, Left Party) on part-time proposal	Lively debate on the proposal and its narrative.

Table 2: Supplementary Material

Nr.	Date	Text	Content
B1	14.01.2026	Speech by Friedrich Merz on work-life balance	Germany needs higher employment rates to secure prosperity & economic productivity. Chancellor Merz criticises the focus on work-life balance and the idea of the 4 - day work week.
B2	29.01.2026	Speech by Friedrich Merz on “Economy Warning Day”	Chancellor Merz warns about the changing labour market and the risks for the German economy.
B3	02.02.2026	Television debate on part-time work and work-life balance among CDU politicians and civil actors	Debate between politicians and civilians, e.g., working in the care sector, criticising the framing of lifestyle choices, as for many employees in the care sector, it is a matter of mental health due to challenging working conditions (e.g. labour shortages in childcare institutions).

Transcription

As the chosen material includes mainly speeches and interviews, they first need to be transcribed before they can be analysed. However, researchers need to be aware that transcription can already involve interpretations of the spoken language use (Fairclough, 1992, 229).

As a first transcription, the audio material was transcribed using the audio input tool provided by Google Docs. In the second step, the automated transcription was personally reviewed and adapted to correct any mistakes. It is also important to add that, although the collected material is in German and the analysis process was working with the original German texts, for readability, only the translated quotes are included in the analysis section. As a translation tool, DeepL was utilised.

5.4 Operationalisation of the Three-Dimensional Model

5.4.1 Text Level

Analysing the text level facilitates understanding how “discourses are activated textually” (Jørgensen, 2002). Fairclough (1992) depicts five main tools for text analysis. As already mentioned in the theoretical framework, not all of these tools are relevant for the subsequent analysis. The analysis will focus mainly on grammar, wording, text structure and ethos.

Grammar

Transitivity, which is central to the subsequent analysis, examines the connection between processes and participants, focusing on whether the speaker highlights subjects or objects, and if they use an active or passive voice. These choices reveal whether actions are attributed to individual actors (e.g. employees or employers) or presented more abstractly. A key element of transitivity is nominalisation: By turning processes into nouns, such as “the reduction of working hours”, the actors are not clarified. Thus, the analysis of transitivity uncovers which actors are framed as active or passive and whose agencies are prioritised or marginalised. *The theme* uncovers how sentences are structured and which topics are emphasised across the discursive samples. *Modality* is the degree of certainty and commitment a speaker expresses, visible in words like “must”, “need to” versus “might”, “could”. For example, truth is a very strong form of modality (Fairclough, 1992, 235 & 236; Jørgensen, 2002). In this study, analysing grammar focuses particularly on how part-time

work per se is constructed and how political actors construct responsibility in relation to part-time and care work, e.g., both through attributing agency to individuals or to structural factors and through different degrees of modality when referring to economic or gender arguments.

Table 3: Operationalising Grammar

Guiding Questions
• How is agency distributed between employees and state actors? • What passive constructions and nominalisations are used, and which social actors or processes are thereby marginalised or erased? • How certain are claims made about the economic effects of part-time employment or structural limitations? • How is the necessity to increase working hours constructed in the discursive sample? • Are there different degrees of modality between economic and social reproduction arguments?

Wording

Keywords and repeated phrases (intertextual wording) can reveal underlying assumptions and inherent ideological implications. For example, terms like “flexible work”, “burden on the social system” or “justified reasons” carry different cultural and political meanings and lead to different interpretations of part-time employment. Similarly, *metaphors* such as “balancing act” for care responsibilities highlight how political actors normalise or dramatise certain issues. All these aspects are relevant due to their inherent cultural and ideological implications and their effects on the interpretation of the discursive samples (Fairclough, 1992, 237). This comparison of word choices and metaphors across texts can show whether certain arguments or actors are foregrounded and how economic, gender and care issues are framed. Additionally, the wording reveals how part-time work is described and thus which interpretations are supported by the choice of words.

Table 4: Operationalising Wording

Guiding Questions
• What keywords and metaphors are used when referring to part-time work and employees? What is their cultural connotation? • What kind of (new or repeating) words are used across the discursive samples, and how does this relate to the framing of economic and care issues?

Text Structure

The focus is on what kind of “rhetorical mode” (Fairclough, 1992, 235) is utilised by the speaker, therefore, the analysis highlights how arguments are organised, themes and rhetorical modes, e.g. argumentative or narrative.

Table 5: Operationalising Text Structure

Guiding Question
• Which rhetorical mode do politicians choose when discussing part-time employment? • How are the arguments organised to justify the framing of part-time work as a burden or necessity?

Ethos

The question is whether the political actors portray themselves as rational, authoritative or emphatic actors, which closely relates to how their speeches and texts are interpreted by the audience and also how other social groups are represented, contrasting or aligning with their self-representation (Fairclough, 1992, 235).

Table 6: Operationalising Ethos

Guiding Question
• How do the political actors portray themselves? • How does their self-representation link to their construction of employees?

5.4.2 Discursive Practices

At the discursive level, this analysis examines how the discourse around the “lifestyle part-time” proposal is produced, circulated and interpreted within the political spectrum. Following Fairclough (1992, 232), five aspects are particularly relevant, while interdiscursivity and (manifest) intertextuality are prioritised.

Interdiscursivity

This study captures how political statements about part-time work draw on other discourses related to economic productivity, social reproduction, work and female employment. This allows for an assessment of which perspectives are prioritised, combined or marginalised and whether the discourse reflects a traditional or creative mix of discourses (Fairclough, 1992, 233).

Table 7: Operationalising Interdiscursivity

Guiding Questions
• How does the discursive sample refer to and include other discourses on economic productivity, social reproduction and female employment? What does the selection imply? • What discourses dominate and are negotiated in the different discursive samples? Are some prioritised or marginalised? • What conclusions can be drawn from the interdiscursive mix? • How does the interdiscursive mix influence the order of discourse around part-time employment, and does the discursive sample aim at changing the discourse on part-time employment?

Intertextual Chains

Intertextual chains trace how the political statements relate and build upon each other across the various communicative events, such as speeches or interviews (Fairclough, 1992, 233).

Table 8: Operationalising Intertextual Chains

Guiding Questions
• Are arguments repeated or contested across the different contexts, displaying a more stable or contested intertextual chain?

Manifest Intertextuality

Manifest intertextuality reveals direct or indirect references to competing political positions. Special attention is given to presuppositions, such as implicit assumptions about care responsibilities or economic necessity embedded in these references (ibid., 234).

Table 9: Operationalising Manifest Intertextuality

Guiding Questions
• Are other texts and discourses referred to directly or indirectly, and which aspects are included (direct quotes or just the overall meaning)? • How are presuppositions embedded in the references?

Coherence

Coherence focuses on how arguments on part-time work are structured and framed, shaping how the audience will likely interpret the discursive samples (Fairclough, 1992, 233).

Table 10: Operationalising Coherence

Guiding Questions
• Do the arguments on limiting part-time employment appear as common sense? What arguments are presented as obvious and unquestionable? • What (hidden) assumptions about part-time employment are necessary for the argument to make sense to the audience?

5.4.3 Social Practices

At this level, one examines how the discourse is shaped by existing social structures, such as gendered divisions of labour, welfare state arrangements, and labour market dynamics, while also assessing how the discourse contributes to reproducing or transforming these structures. In the case of the “lifestyle part-time” debate, particular attention is paid to how the discourse reflects and potentially reorganises hegemonic understandings of economic productivity, care responsibilities, and female labour arrangements. Drawing on theories of social reproduction, the analysis further explores how tensions between capitalist labour demands and care structures are articulated or obscured.

Table 11: Operationalising Social Practices

Guiding Questions
• How is the discourse on part-time employment embedded in broader social structures, such as labour shortages, gendered care arrangements, low-paid part-time jobs and welfare state institutions? Does it reproduce or challenge these structures? • How are social relations (family-work arrangements) and social identities (caregivers, workers) constructed or transformed through the discourse? • How are tensions between economic productivity and social reproduction articulated, justified, or obscured?

5.5 Analytical Procedure

Wodak (2011) calls for an abductive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, in which theory and data continuously inform one another. Thus, this analysis does not begin with fixed assumptions for the data. Instead, it constantly reflects upon the analysis categories while working with the material. By doing so, the analysis remains open to unexpected patterns or interpretations emerging from the part-time discourse. This enables a nuanced understanding

of the debate by examining which perspectives dominate or are backgrounded, while also remaining aware of perspectives or interpretations which were not previously considered.

First, before engaging with the collected data set, discursive samples have to be identified. Fairclough (1992, 230) warns researchers not to code the complete collected data set, but to only analyse a relevant number of samples. He suggests focusing on so-called “moments of crisis” (ibid., 230), which can be a misunderstanding between the different speakers, hesitations or repetitions, as well as an abrupt change in the speaking style.

After selecting the discursive samples, the analysis is conducted. In a *first observation*, the material is examined without any form of analysis categories, analysing each text individually. This aims for a close, text-oriented understanding of how part-time work is discursively constructed and which perspectives emerge. Then, the theoretical lens and perspectives are revisited and related to the results from the first observation. This step allows for a refinement of initial ideas and interpretations, as well as the development of a preliminary set of analysis categories. Finally, the *in-depth analysis* is carried out, analysing the material extensively, while continuously adjusting the analysis categories. The guiding questions (Table 3-11) hereby underlie each analytical dimension. At the end, a refined set of analytical categories and corresponding *findings* is established. The analysis concludes with a critical *discussion* of these findings.

5.6 Ensuring Validity and Reliability

The research design chapter ends with a reflection on the quality criteria of the subsequent analysis. Fairclough does not provide a fixed set of quality criteria for the Three-Dimensional Approach, but Mayring (2015) emphasises two main quality criteria for general social scientific methods: Validity and Reliability. Validity refers to whether the study actually measures what it's supposed to measure, and reliability ensures whether the analysis and measurement are exact and constant (ibid., 123). And even though his operationalisation of validity and reliability for a qualitative content analysis cannot be transferred one-to-one to CDA, scholars such as Fairclough (1992) and Wodak (2011) highlight a reliable and valid research process as well.

Validity in this study is ensured through theoretically grounded interpretations that are for one clearly linked to Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, and second, supported through the perspectives on part-time work. In addition, interpretations are reasoned through explicit

references to the discursive samples, supporting the clear connection between analytical claims and empirical material. Validity is thus also supported through a clear connection between interpretations, theoretical background and empirical material.

Reliability is addressed through transparency and consistency in the analytical process. The guiding questions and the theoretical lens are thus made transparent, for readers to trace back the interpretations. Overall, the detailed description of the research design in this chapter contributes to the reliability of the subsequent analysis.

6. Analysis of the Part-Time Discourse

As outlined in the analytical procedure, the analysis begins with a general observation of the material, revealing first patterns and boundaries of the debate, before the in-depth findings are described and discussed. The analysis follows three interconnected objectives. First, to examine how part-time work is discursively constructed across the political debate. Second, to identify which perspectives on economic productivity, gendered employment patterns, and social reproduction tasks are prioritised or marginalised. Third, to situate these discursive patterns within the broader social and institutional context of Germany's labour market and gender arrangements.

6.1 First Observations

Both reform proposals, the initial draft which started the debate and the revised version published after the CDU party conference (CDU, 2026a+b), reveal several discursive similarities and differences. In both versions, part-time work is significantly framed as an economic burden in the context of demographic change and labour shortages. While the second version acknowledges that increasing the full-time rate requires expanding childcare facilities, these additions seem somewhat secondary and take on a “yes, but” character. Overall, both proposals clearly situate part-time work within an economic discourse. Although care-related considerations are mentioned as “special reasons” (ibid., 2026a+b), which justify working part-time, they are portrayed as mainly subordinate in times of economic challenges in Germany.

This framing is contested in the other discursive samples from the opposing parties, however, mainly through emphasising the necessity of the part-time right due to health reasons and

structural limitations, such as the lack of childcare and joint taxation (Tagesschau, 2026a). They largely criticise the CDU proposal and moralise the debate through talking about justice and empathy. Generally, the debate seems to have an inherent ideological and hegemonic struggle over who is responsible for increasing economic productivity and whether part-time work is legitimate or illegitimate. While the CDU continuously frames the high part-time rate as having negative implications for labour shortages, the other parties try to shift the focus to structural constraints, as well as address the government as the responsible actor in increasing economic productivity. And while here and there health and care discourses are mentioned, it still seems that the economic discourse remains the focal point.

Overall, the discourse is not mainly structured around questioning the essence of part-time work as either “good” or “bad”. Instead, the central negotiation deals with the reasons behind Germany’s high part-time rate and the question of responsibility for labour shortages and economic productivity. While the CDU predominantly frames high part-time employment as problematic due to its implications for labour shortages in times of demographic change, the other parties mainly contest the causes for the high part-time rate and who is seen as responsible, rather than essentially rejecting the underlying economic problem framing itself. Additionally, broader discussions about gendered inequalities or alternative work arrangements remain relatively marginal within the analysed debate. This sets the boundaries of which perspectives on part-time work are discussed at all and which remain unquestioned in the analysed material. Overall, those patterns structure the preliminary analytical dimensions developed in the next section.

6.2 Analytical Findings

The analysis shows that the discourse following the part-time reform proposal by the CDU is influenced by various framing and visibility contestations. Situated in the context of demographic change, with an ageing population and thus a reduction in labour supply (s. Fleischer & Vallizadeh, 2025, 5-6), the discourse following the proposal reflects these pressures on the German labour market.

Against this background, and following the approach outlined in Chapter 5.4.2, three main discursive dimensions become apparent across the material, which structure the subsequent analysis section: First, the *discursive construction of the meaning of part-time* work reveals a fundamental tension between framing part-time work as an economic burden, as it

contributes to labour shortages or presenting it as a social opportunity. The second dimension, *Attributing Responsibility: Individual Agency vs Structural Limitations*, shifts the focus from how part-time work is constructed towards the question of responsibility, thus analysing whether responsibility is attributed to the individual workers or structural conditions shaping the labour supply. Lastly, *Perspectives on Gender and Care* highlights how gender and care are somewhat acknowledged but not positioned as an explicit argument, functioning as an underlying framework of part-time work arrangements.

6.2.1 Discursive Construction of the Meaning of Part-Time Work

A lively discussion over the meaning of part-time work can be found in the discourse following the CDU's proposal. Generally, two competing constructions are visible. The CDU constructs part-time work as an economic burden. This is achieved through three patterns: delegitimising part-time work, clearly linking part-time work to labour shortages, and thus recontextualising part-time work not as beneficial but as a challenge for economic productivity. In contrast, the other parties attempt to shift the CDU's focus by including new perspectives and discourses on part-time work, such as increasing health, compatibility between family and work, and balancing hard working conditions, while simultaneously forefronting the individual workers and thus portraying part-time work not as an abstract but a personal level. However, their contestation does not essentially challenge the economic rationality of the CDU. These negotiations reveal a significant discursive struggle over part-time frames in German society.

Delegitimising and Problematising Part-Time Work in the Context of Labour Shortages

First, a central discursive pattern is that the CDU, as the leading governmental party, seeks to delegitimise part-time work in the reform proposals. Thus, their publications have significant political authority, which facilitates their influence on the boundaries of the debate.

In the reform proposals, legitimate part-time work is consistently framed with wordings such as “special reasons” and framed as legitimate only in “justified exceptional cases” (CDU, 2026a+b). By positioning part-time work as an exception, full-time employment is implicitly constructed as the normative standard. This framing is further reinforced through terms such as “lifestyle part-time” and references to choosing part-time employment in order to enhance their “work-life balance” (CDU, 2026a). Although the proposal briefly acknowledges childcare as a relevant factor and ensuring that part-time work remains possible in those

instances, this is immediately followed by the claim that with “25%, a significant share of part-time work” (ibid., 2026a) serves the expansion of work-life balance. This text structure constructs part-time work as primarily an excessive or voluntary choice, thereby marginalising its structural necessity. The CDU’s demand that special security benefits should generally be tied to “full-time requirement” (ibid., 2026a) further highlights the construction of full-time work as the norm, while presenting part-time work as an implicitly undesirable alternative.

Second, in addition to questioning the overall legitimacy of part-time work, the CDU presents part-time work as a severe economic problem, with negative implications for labour shortages in Germany. This is achieved through various strategies, one being the marginalisation of lived realities and personal agency regarding part-time work. While the second proposal at least briefly references the citizens as actors (CDU, 2026b), the first proposal marginalises the agency of part-time workers through the dominant use of nominalisations such as “part-time work”, “consciously reduced employment”, “individual choices for working-time reduction”, and “the part-time quote” (CDU, 2026a). The high degree of nominalisation is evident again in the following parliamentary debate, where Carstensen refers to “Germany [...] facing huge economic challenges”, “the total working hours”, “to work more means for many cases full-time work”, and “the part-time quote” (Carstensen, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). As a result, part-time workers themselves rarely appear as concrete social actors in CDU texts. Instead, part-time work is mainly discussed at an abstract, de-personalised level, which contributes to the silencing of lived experiences and individual circumstances within the CDU discourse. This facilitates problematising and delegitimising part-time work and portraying it as an economic burden.

This framing of part-time work as a main economic burden is further achieved through portraying the connection between part-time work and negative implications for the economy as self-evident. Statements such as “lifestyle part-time is an increasing problem that burdens our economy” and “we must adapt part-time regulations to economic reality” (CDU, 2026a) exhibit a high degree of modality (“must”), thereby reinforcing the construction of part-time work as a key economic burden.

This line of argumentation is found as well by Sandra Carstensen (CDU) in the parliamentary speech. Through describing the German economy with metaphors such as “Germany being the tail lights regarding economic growth” and asking other parties to “bear in mind the huge

economic challenges” (Carstensen, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), she constructs a sense of urgency. This is directly linked with labour shortages: “At the same time, companies report a historical labour shortage” (ibid., 2026). She also refers to the demographic change discourse and includes external studies, showing that “in Germany several hundred thousand workers are missing” (ibid., 2026). Through high-modality statements such as “that is a fact” and “the evidence is clear. And this doesn’t work anymore” (Carstensen, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), while the proposed solution is illustrated as common sense as well: “We must work harder from today onwards” (ibid., 2026) and “prosperity does not arise from redistribution, but from work, productivity and performance” (ibid., 2026). The problematisation of part-time work is thus framed as objective and uncontested, while the need for increased labour participation is constructed as self-evident.

A similar pattern of high modality and common-sense reasoning is evident in the later television debate, where another CDU politician argues:

“Because the point is, of course, that we do have a problem with the fact that, overall – and this isn’t about blaming individuals – our economy, given the situation it finds itself in, faces the challenge that we won’t be able to afford everything in this welfare state if we work less. Surely that must be absolutely clear!” (Amthor, Tagesschau, 2026b).

Such wordings (“of course”) contribute to the naturalisation of the linkage and present increased working hours as the obvious solution.

The construction of part-time work as an economic burden due to its negative implications for labour shortages is further illustrated in the dominance of the labour shortages theme throughout the reform proposals and other CDU texts. Through often repeating the keyword “labour shortage” (CDU, 2026a+b) within the relatively short texts, the proposals stabilise the assumption that part-time work and labour shortages are two connected phenomena, thus part-time work is presented as a significant cause of labour shortages.

Supplementary material reinforces the construction of insufficient labour and part-time work as a central societal and economic problem. In a speech by Friedrich Merz, the issue is framed even more explicitly and polemically: “the overall labour performance of our economy is not high enough” and “with work-life balance and a four-day week, the level of prosperity we currently have cannot be maintained in the future. And that’s why we have to

work more” (AFP, 2026). Merz uses dramatic language in stating that Germany’s economy “is on the brink” (Merz, 2025). Overall, labour shortages are portrayed as a significant problem, with decreased working hours further contributing to it, while continuously naturalising the expectation that thus increased working hours are the solution.

This leads to the third crucial finding: Linking part-time work to labour shortages and thus portraying them as an economic burden reflects a recontextualisation of part-time work. Whereas part-time employment has historically also been framed as an economic opportunity (see literature review), it is here predominantly constructed as a challenge for economic growth and productivity. The recontextualising of part-time work presents a key moment in the discourse. It is for one reflected in the above examples of how part-time work is self-evidently connected to labour shortages and is further found when examining more broadly which other discourses are referred to. The interdiscursivity reveals that mainly relevant discourses for underlining the argument of part-time work as an economic burden are included. Alternative perspectives on part-time work, such as the discourse of part-time work enhancing female employment or increasing economic competitiveness, are not included in the reform proposals. Instead, they refer to the demography discourse:

“In particular, given the labour and skills shortages caused by demographic factors, the existing workforce must be utilised as effectively as possible.”, and the economic discourse: “Given the shortage of skilled workers, this lifestyle-driven part-time work is becoming an increasing problem that is weighing on our economy. We must therefore adapt part-time working arrangements to economic realities.” (CDU, 2026a+b).

In doing so, the reframing of part-time work as an economic burden is further reinforced, while other perspectives are silenced.

By portraying part-time work as mainly illegitimate, except for a few justified reasons, and presenting it as a severe economic burden, deepening existing labour shortages, a recontextualisation of part-time work is taking place. It is no longer framed as beneficial for economic productivity but as a challenge that needs to be dealt with.

Constructing Part-Time Work as Opportunity and Necessity

In contrast to the CDU texts, the other, mainly left-leaning parties, predominantly construct part-time work as a legitimate response to structural conditions and, in some cases, as a social

and economic opportunity. However, the more general notion that part-time work impacts economic productivity negatively is not challenged.

The first finding is that through a high degree of interdiscursivity and intertextuality, actors both implicitly and explicitly engage with and challenge the CDU's framing of illegitimate part-time work. One aspect is the explicit contestation of the wording of "lifestyle part-time" (CDU, 2026a) as a misleading and morally problematic framing. For example, Gregor Gysi explicitly references and directly contests this framing by stating that the CDU is "[...] trying to suggest that it's just a sign of abundance, and I think that's completely wrong." (Gysi, Tagesschau, 2026b). The use of personal modality ("I think") introduces a more subjective and emphatic stance, which contrasts with the impersonal style observed in the CDU's discursive samples.

Moreover, these parties broaden the discursive frame by incorporating perspectives and discourses beyond the economic one. In contrast, they draw on social policy and care-related discourses, particularly emphasising the role of childcare infrastructure. For instance, the need for improved childcare provision is explicitly linked "to increase working time potentials" (Klose, Tagesschau, 2026a). This perspective is reinforced through statements such as:

"And as long as there aren't enough affordable daycare spots available everywhere—with reliable hours, staff-to-child ratios that meet actual needs, and good working conditions—you should be ashamed to criticise the high rate of part-time work." (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026).

Through this interdiscursive connection, part-time work is reframed as a structural necessity arising from insufficient public infrastructure, rather than as an individual lifestyle choice. This construction of necessity is further supported in the supplementary material, where part-time work is also associated with demanding working conditions and the risk of burnout, especially in the care sector (Tagesschau, 2026c). Here, reduced working hours are positioned as necessary in response to mentally and physically intense professions, rather than as a burden for the economy.

Second, the discursive samples by the competing parties are characterised by a more personalised representation of social actors. Instead of drawing on primarily abstract categories and nominalisations, speakers frequently refer to the working people and provide a

concrete occupational list, such as “healthcare workers, teachers and social workers, bus drivers and administrative staff (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). Additionally, by arguing that the CDU’s “proposals are directed against families, against single parents, and against workers.” (Khan, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), they shift the debate towards a more personal and affective level. This foregrounding of lived realities and social groups contrasts with the more abstract and de-personalised transitivity observed in CDU texts and supports the contestation of framing part-time work as an abstract and illegitimate concept.

Lastly, even though opposing parties try to shift the focus and portray part-time work as a necessity instead of focusing on the economic dimension, they do not substantially challenge the notion made by the CDU that part-time work impacts economic outcomes negatively. Hence, the underlying assumption of part-time work as economically unproductive remains throughout the discourse, which points towards a hegemonic problem framing by the CDU, which will be discussed later on.

Thus, though incorporating new perspectives on part-time work and portraying it on a more personalised level, the opposing parties try to change the focus away from negative and abstract aspects of part-time work, while not contesting the overarching economic rationality.

6.2.2 Attributing Responsibility: Individual Agency vs Structural Limitations

These different constructions of part-time work are represented in the different attributions of responsibility as well. While the CDU presents part-time workers as responsible for increasing their working hours and questioning their work ethic, the other parties directly challenge this narrative. Therefore, the first subcategory outlines the discursive struggle between the different political parties over portraying individuals as responsible. On the one hand, the CDU politicians frame part-time workers as lazy and responsible for supporting economic productivity through increasing their working hours. On the other hand, several other politicians, even from within the CDU, quite directly challenge the framing of laziness and question the empirical truth of the lack of work ethic. Additionally to challenging the framing of workers as responsible, the second subcategory shows how the opposing parties present first structural limitations and second governmental actors as responsible for the high part-time rate.

Discursive Struggle over the Individualising of Responsibility

Across the discursive samples, a struggle over the construction of the employee's identities becomes visible. Competing political actors negotiate and contest frames of laziness, work ethic, and responsibility.

First, parts of the CDU construct part-time workers as implicitly or explicitly lazy, framing reduced working hours as the result of preferences for “work-life balance” and “lifestyle” reasons (CDU, 2026a). With the first proposal even having the headline “No Rights for Lifestyle Part-Time”, the presentation of part-time workers as choosing this working arrangement not out of necessity but lifestyle reasons, the CDU foregrounds their connotation of laziness. In this process, the discourse of work-life balance is recontextualised and assigned a negative connotation, particularly through its association with so-called *Aufstockern* - individuals portrayed as voluntarily reducing their working hours, while supplementing their income through social benefits. This framing is deepened through wordings such as “full-time requirements” for social benefits and the need to decrease disincentives and strengthen “the principle of performance and reciprocity” (CDU, 2026a+b). Such language use constructs part-time workers as underperforming and as potentially exploiting the welfare state. This constructs a sense of distrust and scepticism regarding part-time workers, and the seemingly necessity to keep them in check due to their bad work ethic.

This laziness framing, alongside the negative recontextualisation of work-life balance, is further highlighted in Chancellor Friedrich Merz's speeches on Germany's economic situation. He directly connects the economic underperformance to the behaviour of employees, stating:

“To put it even more plainly: work-life balance and a four-day workweek will not be enough to sustain the prosperity our country enjoys today into the future. And that is why we need to work more.” (AFP, 2026).

While Sandra Carstensen (CDU) does not directly address employees as lazy, she implicitly constructs them as responsible through nominalised formulations such as “economic output” in the following statement: “While other economies have long since returned to growth, our economic output remains stagnant. At the same time, companies are reporting a historic labour shortage.” (Carstensen, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). By linking labour shortages with

economic stagnation, this argument establishes a causal relationship that places responsibility on the individual workers, even though it implicitly marginalises the agency of the social actors.

However, the second finding reveals that this narrative is actively contested by several political actors, which illustrates a high level of interdiscursivity and intertextuality (intertextual chains) in this regard. Even within the CDU itself, there are attempts to soften the highly accusative narrative. For example, Phillip Amthor acknowledges that the term “lifestyle part-time won’t find its way into a handbook on truly effective political communication,” and that “we shouldn’t, so to speak, turn it around and blame the individual for it.” (Amthor, Tagesschau, 2026b). However, this moment of reflexivity is downplayed later on, as he reaffirms the content of the reform proposal. This introduces a tension between partly rejecting individualised blame and continuously reproducing the framing which attributes responsibility to the workers.

Opposition parties more explicitly challenge the laziness framing. Left party member Zerr directly addresses this in saying:

“The people in this country aren’t lazy, quite the contrary! In 2024, the total number of hours worked reached an all-time high. And it is these workers who keep society running in the first place.” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026).

In doing so, she not only contests the CDU’s framing but also repositions workers as central contributors to economic and societal productivity. Moreover, Zerr shifts the focus of responsibility from the workers to the government, arguing:

“And if you were genuinely concerned about increasing labour force participation among people who can work, then surely you would be considering how to create the right conditions for that. [...] And so far in this parliamentary term, you have taken absolutely no meaningful measures to finally make work and family life more compatible.” (ibid., 2026).

In this statement, she recontextualises the CDU’s wording of “full-time requirement” (CDU, 2026a) made in the reform proposals and refers to this as “full-time compulsion” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), thereby assessing it as coercive and assigning a negative connotation. A similar shift in responsibility is articulated by Green politician Misbah Khan, who calls out the government as they “have decided [...] to declare the workers as the

problem” (Khan, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026) and characterises their policy making as a "reinterpretation of responsibility” (ibid., 2026). She concludes by demanding that the government “instead of blaming this country and the people who live here, please take political responsibility” (ibid., 2026).

Further, illustrating an intertextual chain, the SPD rejects the claim that the work ethic in Germany has declined, describing this as empirically incorrect: “This is completely wrong! The people in Germany are working more than ever before. The labour productivity has risen” (Dieren, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). Beyond presenting counter-evidence, Dieren also introduces a moral dimension to the debate, saying:

“Instead of the respect they deserve, what they have heard time and again [...] is that it is their fault the economy isn’t doing so well at the moment [...] because they are too lazy” (Dieren, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026).

By referring to respect and highlighting the unfairness of such claims, he adopts a more personalised and moralising mode of argumentation and further underlines the evaluative stance that the CDU’s framing of the German employees is not only empirically wrong but also normatively problematic.

Overall, the debate reveals an intense discursive struggle over the work ethic of part-time workers. While CDU politicians frame part-time workers as lacking in their work ethic and thus individualise responsibility, the opposing parties actively dispute this framing by clearly rejecting the “laziness” narrative.

Structuralising Responsibility

Adding to the contestation of portraying employees and, in particular, part-time workers as lacking in work ethic, the other parties introduce a different attribution of responsibility: structural limitations hindering people from working full-time, and governmental actors as responsible for implementing new policies to tackle these structural disincentives.

First, without explicitly addressing the government, the dominant part of the opposing parties talks more generally about the structural limitations hindering an increasing labour supply. Hence, they shift the focus from employees toward structural disincentives and constraints that shape people’s employment choices. This becomes particularly visible in Gregor Gysi’s questioning of the feasibility of single mothers moving from part-time to full-time

employment. He portrays this assumption as nearly irrational, saying: “You go and find a new job as a single mother of three children - that is written in the stars.” (Gysi, Tagesschau, 2026b). The metaphor (“written in the stars”) underlines his focus on the structural limitations a society can pose for finding full-time employment. Through a narrative style and highlighting the subject, he shifts the focus from abstract economic problems to individual life situations. And in arguing that “there must exist legal rights” for part-time work, he further highlights the necessity for a legal framework with high modality (ibid., 2026b). His structuring of arguments thus directly connects structural limitations with the need for part-time legislation, reframing the problem focus.

Another discursive practice redirecting responsibility is including additional discourses and empirical evidence. By referencing a study, the argument that structural limitations contribute to the high part-time rate is strengthened, as “only 27% of all part-time workers choose this out of their own wish.” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). This study is directly followed by a list of structural barriers, such as the lack of childcare provision, hard working conditions in the care sector, as well as tax disincentives like the income splitting for married couples. As long as these disincentives aren’t tackled, the CDU “should feel ashamed to criticise the high rate of part-time work” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). This accusation moralises and emotionalises the debate, thereby delegitimising the demand for increased working hours due to these structural limitations.

In a separate SPD interview, the reattribution is articulated less confrontationally, but still follows the same logic. Structural disincentives are identified as the primary issue by Klose, stating that “First, we have disincentives in the system [...] which definitely hinders people from working more” (Klose, Tagesschau, 2026a). By emphasising that these disincentives come “first”, Klose highlights structural barriers as the focus of future policy making instead of targeting individual behaviour. Supplementary statements made by civil actors reinforce the shift in focus by calling to tackle

“the roots of why workers want to work less and need shorter working hours. We need to focus on improving the work environment and increasing take-home pay, not on creating yet another rule that we all have to follow” (Tagesschau, 2026c).

On top of emphasising structural disincentives, the CDU is partially directly presented as a responsible actor. Green politician Misbah Khan further contests the CDU’s focus on

employees. By directly accusing the CDU of blaming the (part-time) workers as the problem, Khan shifts the discursive attention:

“You have made your decision: [...] the employees are to be blamed. Not your policies, not your failure to invest, nor your lack of ideas. It is the people who are to blame” (Khan, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026).

Through listing governmental neglect, the argument reorganises the problem focus, emphasising structural limitations and policy failures. This shifting is further deepened through her direct address (“you”), which positions the CDU as the responsible actor. In demanding the CDU to “make the right adjustments and get the economy moving” (ibid., 2026), she portrays her framing of the “real” problem and solutions as common sense (“right adjustments”), while further relocating responsibility from the individual workers to political actors.

By changing the discursive mix that dominates the work ethic-focused debate from the CDU side, other challenges are voiced. In doing so, the assumption of part-time workers as lazy and responsible for improving the economic situation in Germany is further questioned. Instead, the opposing parties address the need to improve underlying structural aspects before demanding higher labour participation is emphasised. Yet, this underlines the finding from the previous category about how opposing parties are not challenging the notion that part-time work generally is a burden for the economy, by further not challenging the overarching goal of increased working hours.

6.2.3 Perspectives on Gender and Care Responsibilities

This section examines how gender and care responsibilities are framed and discussed within the German discourse on part-time work. Two main patterns are apparent in the debate: First, references to part-time workers are often general, which hides women's and mothers' roles in part-time employment. Second, even when care work is included as relevant regarding part-time work, it is seemingly framed as secondary, instead of as an underlying structure, while at the same time, the part-time trap is backgrounded. These patterns underline the seemingly ongoing finding that the economic perspective tends to dominate the discourse, while other perspectives receive a more supplementary standing.

Generalising the Gendered Dimension of Part-Time Work

Despite extensive research (s. literature review) demonstrating that part-time employment is highly gendered, explicit references to this demographic remain relatively absent in the discursive samples. Instead, the discourse is characterised by a high degree of abstract language use and generalisation, which tends to marginalise the gendered nature of part-time employment.

At the textual level, the generalisation is primarily realised through nominalisations. Particularly within CDU texts, as shown above, central arguments of the proposal and speeches are made, while hiding the agency and concrete social actors. Examples include problematising part-time work, while consistently referring to “part-time work”, “consciously reduced employment”, “the enhancement of work-life balance”, “exceptional cases” and “available workforce” (CDU, 2026a). Amthor further silences the agency in formulations such as: “considering all possible exceptions” (Amthor, Tagesschau, 2026b). References to “economic output” and talking about where “Germany” (Carstensen, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026) is lagging behind, continuously reinforce the abstraction of employment arrangements. In these constructions, the social actors and thus the 49% of women working part-time compared to 12% of men (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b), disappear from the sentence structure, thus part-time work is presented as a degendered concept.

In addition to nominalisations, which hide the agency completely, the discursive samples rely significantly on generalising and collective categories when referring to more concrete social actors. The CDU proposals talk about “*Aufstocker*” and “part-time workers” (CDU, 2026a+b). However, those generalisations are not limited to CDU contributions. Across all parties, the speakers predominantly refer to “the workers”, “the people”, “the employees”, “those able to work”, “both spouses”, “social workers, bus drivers and administrative staff”, “sick people” and “families” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). By continuously prioritising generalised agents throughout the discourse, the limited explicit mentioning of women and mothers reinforces the CDU’s framing of part-time work as legitimate due to “exceptional cases” (CDU, 2026a+b), related to child and elderly care. As a result, women appear not as structurally intertwined with part-time employment, but rather as exceptional agents whose part-time work is framed as being an exception.

However, there are a few times when women or mothers are explicitly mentioned, yet this is mostly done briefly, further portraying them as secondary actors in the part-time discourse.

For example, Gregor Gysi is one of the only speakers talking explicitly about a “woman with two or three children” (Gysi, Tagesschau, 2026b), who becomes a single mother after divorce and how this instance is affecting her employment chances. Phillip Amthor acknowledges the problematic situations for single mothers, but at the same time argues that this is not the core of the debate initiated by the CDU, saying “what about part-time work for a single mother? No one in the CDU has said that this isn’t supposed to be possible” (Amthor, Tagesschau, 2026b). Amthor refers to the statement in the proposal acknowledging that childcare is a “justified reason” (CDU, 2026a) for working part-time.

Still, this structuring of arguments is especially revealing for how gender inequalities are not completely ignored, but how they are systematically marginalised and positioned as secondary to the central debate about part-time work initiated by the CDU proposal. Gender, therefore, exists in the discourse primarily through exceptional or generalised references, rather than being framed as a core structural dimension of part-time work arrangements. Even though the supplementary material includes additional explicit references, such as “mothers caring for children” and “50% of women working part-time in Germany” (Tagesschau, 2026c), these references remain supplementary to the broader arguments made and topics discussed and thus are not integrated into the core argument.

These generalisations do not only occur when debating the concrete agencies but also when referring to structural limitations contributing to part-time work. For instance, in the SPD-Interview, Klose mentions the income-splitting, known to decrease women’s labour market participation (s. Bachmann et al., 2021), but she refers broadly to how this tax is “definitely hindering people from working more” and that it is important to clarify where “one can improve potentials” (Klose, Tagesschau, 2026a). While such formulations appear inclusive and may aim to be, they still hide inherent gender inequalities. Consequently, even counter-arguments that challenge the CDU’s framing of part-time workers as responsible reproduce a similarly de-gendered language use.

This high level of nominalising part-time work and generalising the social actors has important discursive effects. It limits the visibility of structural gender inequalities and prevents a more exhaustive discussion on how part-time work is a highly gendered topic, affecting mostly women and mothers.

Backgrounding Social Reproduction and Structural Risks

Generalising the actors connects closely to a broader background of social reproduction and structural risks affecting (mostly) women associated with part-time work. Across the analysed material, social reproduction tasks are not absent. Yet again, even when care responsibilities are acknowledged, they remain deprioritised. This creates a way of mainly symbolically recognising care-work, which, as a result, undermines its structural significance regarding part-time work arrangements as well as the challenges the tension between care responsibility and paid employment poses.

A first practice is deprioritising care work: The first reform proposal describes care-related aspects as being “in the foreground” (CDU, 2026a) when debating the reasons for part-time employment. However, this seemingly prioritisation is quickly relativised through the following emphasis on other reasons, such as “work-life balance enhancement” (ibid., 2026a), which apparently make up 25% of part-time workers. This argumentative structure suggests rushing through the topic of care responsibilities and leads to the impression of the CDU not wanting to initiate a debate on the connection between part-time work and care tasks. Thus, they shift the attention away from care responsibilities and position them as subsidiaries. A similar discursive pattern can be found in the adjusted proposal. While it first acknowledges the “necessity for a structured part-time legislation” (CDU, 2026b) to support care tasks, it directly refers to those again as “special reasons” (ibid., 2026b), and even as “exceptional cases” (ibid. 2026b). Such wording has implicit connotations, which again position care-work as not the primary focus but an exception from the norm. Additionally, though briefly acknowledging care work as a justified reason for working part-time, they portray part-time work and care work as unquestionably interrelated, while at the same time deprioritising this linkage and thus leaving no room to question this care-work arrangement.

Moreover, the sphere of social reproduction is narrowed as care tasks are reduced to child and elderly care, while broader forms of care, such as voluntary engagement, emotional labour, maintaining social relationships and household management are predominantly unacknowledged. However, the left party is one of the few actors to broaden the concept of social reproduction, arguing that reducing part-time work would affect “the neighbour, who wants to train the football team, or the mechanic wanting to teach German to refugees” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). However, this argumentation is not taken up elsewhere in the debate, revealing how a significant share of politicians maintain a more narrow view of care

work. As a result, social reproduction is not only deprioritised but also not exhaustively included in the discourse, which limits its visibility as a foundational backbone of society and economic productivity.

Another revealing factor is which alternative discourses, apart from the economic framing, are included and referred to. While the other parties expand the topics, they fail to put gendered employment patterns at the centre of their interdiscursive references, again de-prioritising gendered care responsibilities. This is particularly evident in the discursive samples of the left party. They situate their arguments in a broader social policy discourse, referring to “retirement age, the Working Hours Act, continued pay during sick leave” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). Zerr also points towards hard-working professions, the lack of adequate childcare provision and the income splitting. However, while some of these references implicitly point towards gendered inequalities, they are not consistently and explicitly articulated through a gender perspective. Instead, implicit structural gender inequities appear as one factor among many, contributing to the high part-time rate, rather than as an underlying structure shaping these conditions.

A similar deprioritisation can be observed among other actors as well. The SPD and the Greens emphasise challenging working conditions, stress, and health, counter-arguing the CDU’s framing of part-time workers as lazy and a burden for the economy. Sporadic references to families and single-parent families are not integrated into an in-depth gendered argumentation (Deutscher Bundestag, 2026; Tagesschau, 2026a). Even in the supplementary debate, involving civil actors, the proposal is mostly criticised, including discourses on “burnouts in the care sector”, and the requirement for people to “have the freedom to choose” which working arrangements work best for them (Tagesschau, 2026c). Hence, although opposing actors expand their argumentation beyond economic considerations, they fail to recenter gender as the key structuring dimension for part-time employment. This limits the extent to which part-time work is critically observed from a gendered perspective, especially in light of the tension between paid working arrangements and care responsibilities.

This becomes even more visible in the background of problematising part-time work, not due to being an economic burden, but due to its negative consequences for the part-time workers, mostly women, often referred to as the part-time trap. Zerr briefly mentions “the part-time trap” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), yet this concept is not developed into a central line of her argumentation but remains as a seemingly subtopic, despite its well-researched

relevance (s. Lyonette, 2015, 322). A second mention occurs in the supplementary material; however, also in this TV debate, the gendered problematisation of part-time work does not seem to get a lot of resonance from the other debate partners (Tagesschau, 2026c). Apart from these instances, part-time work is either framed as a burden for the economy or a chance and necessity for families, health, and to balance hard-working conditions. Consequently, the structural risks for women associated with part-time work, such as reduced income and savings, pension gaps and economic dependency on their partners, remain largely invisible within the analysed material. The marginalisation of the part-time trap thus further reinforces the pattern examined in the discourse: the systematic backgrounding of gender as the central analytical perspective underlying part-time work arrangements in light of the dominant economic framing of the part-time discourse.

6.3 Discussion of Findings

The analysis points to three findings alongside the central analysis categories: A significant contestation over how part-time work is framed either as a burden or a necessity takes place between the CDU and the opposing parties - while the CDU has a hegemonic position in setting the boundaries of the debate (1), responsibility and agency are either attributed towards individuals or to structural constraints and governmental actors (2), and lastly, part-time work is largely debated as a de-gendered work arrangement (3). All these findings suggest that although various negotiations over the meaning of part-time, responsibility and partially the visibility of care work and gender have occurred, the opposing parties neglect to challenge the broader economic rationality: Part-time work as a burden for the economy and longer working hours is a desirable goal for future policy making.

The following section discusses these central findings in light of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Theory, and takes a look at how the different perspectives on part-time work discussed in the literature review are included or marginalised.

6.3.1 Part-Time as a Contested Concept: Between Economic Burden and Social Necessity

Part-Time work is discursively contested; however, the dominant economic rationality remains the underlying assumption throughout the discourse, as part-time work as a burden for economic productivity is not essentially challenged. Hence, other perspectives on

part-time work, which view it as a social opportunity and necessity, don't challenge the core of the CDU part-time framing and remain within the economic rationality. This portrays a recontextualisation of the connection between part-time work and the economy, which has been predominantly viewed as an opportunity for economic productivity, with even the German Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs connecting the part-time law to the need for flexibility to ensure economic competitiveness (Kahne, 1994; Visser, 2002; Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2025).

As shown above, the CDU is framing part-time work as an economic burden, by making explicit links between part-time work, the difficult economic situation and the need to work more, portraying a significant interdiscursive shift, e.g. by arguing that “lifestyle part-time is an increasing problem that burdens our economy” (CDU, 2026a). By doing so, they reconstruct part-time work not as beneficial for the economy due to its flexibility and enhancing women's employment, as a significant share of academic literature has done (s. Kahne, 1994; Pfau-Effinger, 2017), but as a concept that needs to be overcome. This leads to the interpretation that the CDU aims to change German society, its framing of part-time work, and to decrease the part-time rate. As Jørgensen (2002) points out, discursive practices which leave the more traditional connection of a discourse beyond aim for societal change.

In this instance, the dialectic relationship between the German discourse and society becomes apparent. On the one side, the discourse on part-time work is heavily influenced by the demographic change and the inherent labour shortages, which is visible as the CDU refer to the labour shortages on multiple occasions, e.g.: “Given the shortage of labour and skilled workers, which is largely due to demographic factors, the existing workforce must be utilised as effectively as possible.” (CDU, 2026a+b). On the other side, they restructure the discourse around part-time work, and aim for a shift in German society, their views on part-time work as well as the high part-time rate itself, visible in statements like: “we must adapt part-time regulations to economic reality” (CDU, 2026a).

The power to restructure a discourse is heavily connected and influenced by the amount of power and hegemony the relevant actors occupy (Jørgensen, 2002; Fairclough, 1992, 84). As noted above, the notion made by the CDU that part-time work is an economic burden is not challenged at its core by the other parties, as the argument that part-time work has benefits for economic productivity does not occur in the discursive samples, nor is the idea that part-time work can be a trap for gender equality. Instead, the other parties argue that part-time

work is necessary for families, or for several professions, as well as try to point to the factually increased labour supply in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag, 2026; Tagesschau, 2026a-c). This illustrates the CDU's hegemonic position as the main governmental party, and thus, its ability to dominate the framing that part-time work is an economic burden.

By framing part-time work as a social necessity, the dialectical relationship between German society and the discourse on part-time work becomes particularly visible again regarding the implicit assumption of the one-and-a-half-earner model (Hook, 2015). Although rarely addressed explicitly, this model underlies the discourse and shapes the boundaries of what is considered questionable. For instance, while the CDU proposal aims to reduce part-time work, it states that with "justified reasons" (CDU, 2026a+b), such as childcare, part-time employment should remain possible. In doing so, part-time work for parents/mothers is not fundamentally questioned, but rather unchallenged as an acceptable family-work arrangement, and thus, through the hegemonial position structuring the discourse and the extent of what is questioned in the following debate. However, as the literature has shown, part-time work is both an opportunity, especially for mothers, when dealing with the tension between work and family responsibilities, but it poses serious career implications as well (Lyonette, 2015, 322). By not questioning part-time work for families and mothers in the proposal, alongside the dominant part of the discourse emphasising part-time work as an opportunity for society, the discourse neglects to bring in different facets of part-time work. However, this aspect will be discussed in detail in the third category.

This underlying societal organisation is further visible in the argumentation of opposing parties, which frames part-time work as a social necessity by pointing to structural limitations such as insufficient childcare provision (Tagesschau, 2026a; Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026) and by emphasising the negative impact of the proposal on families (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). As a result, part-time work emerges not only as a contested issue but also as a socially embedded and largely taken-for-granted aspect of women's employment. This reveals how the one-and-a-half earner model continuously shapes German work-family arrangements and, in particular, influences women's employment choices (s. Hook, 2015, 22).

6.3.2 From Individual Misconduct to Structural Constraints: Differing Views on Responsibility

The discourse reveals a significant tension between who is framed as responsible for the economic situation and the high part-time rate in Germany. Different actors either construct part-time work as a result of individual choice and target part-time workers as the responsible actors, while others view part-time work as a consequence of structural limitations and failure in the system. Thus, the struggle reflects competing ideological understandings of responsibility within the German labour market.

One central aspect of this struggle is the high degree of ideological intensity among nearly all political actors, revealing attempts by both the CDU and the opposing parties to transform power relations (Jørgensen, 2002). According to Fairclough, ideology can be understood as norms and belief systems that become visible in both institutional structures as well as in the construction of social identities (Fairclough, 1992, 89). Both ideological dimensions are found in the analysed discourse.

First, regarding the construction of social identities: The CDU's framing of part-time workers as one central problem for the German economy and its repetitive focus on individual behaviour go beyond mere description. Rather, they actively construct part-time workers as responsible agents whose individual choices negatively impact economic productivity. This is evident in examples such as: "Given the shortage of skilled workers, this lifestyle-driven part-time work is becoming an increasing problem that is weighing on our economy." (CDU, 2026a+b), as well as the repeated requests for people to increase their working hours (Amthor, Tagesschau, 2026b; Carstensen, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). Such constructions can be interpreted as underlying ideological assumptions about a declining work ethos in Germany, while at the same time implicitly presenting part-time workers as responsible for ensuring economic productivity.

Second, regarding the institutional structures: The opposing parties challenge the presentation of individual workers as primarily responsible by emphasising structural aspects and limitations. References to "disincentives in the system" (Klose, Tagesschau, 2026a), the lack of childcare provision (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), and the need to improve "the work environment and increasing take-home pay" (Tagesschau, 2026c) shift the focus away from individual responsibility towards institutional conditions. By including those institutional

structures, the underlying societal norms which are shaping those structures are revealed. As Fleckenstein (2011) notes, Germany is still influenced by a "legacy of the conservative welfare state," which continuously reinforces traditional gender roles and family models. These references to institutional limitations illustrate how deeply embedded ideological assumptions not only about part-time workers, but also about family roles and labour continue to shape the discourse, even when they are not explicitly addressed.

These underlying conservative norms, which shape institutional structures in Germany, become further visible in Zerr's questioning of the obscured motives of the CDU proposal and reveal their so far neglect to improve work-family arrangements:

“And if you would genuinely be concerned about increasing labour force participation among people who are able to work, then surely you would be considering how to create the right conditions for that. [...] And so far in this parliamentary term, you have taken absolutely no meaningful measures to finally make work and family life more compatible.” (Zerr, Deutscher Bundestag, 2026).

In doing so, she implies that more effective measures to improve work-family compatibility exist, as they are not pursued by the CDU, she implicitly reveals their conservative assumptions influencing those policy choices.

Finally, it is important to highlight again that although opposing actors contest the framing of part-time workers as responsible, their arguments largely remain within the economic rationality, which emphasises the need for increased labour supply. While they challenge the “how” to reach an increase in working hours, they don't challenge the overarching economic framing of part-time work as a burden. This underlines the argument that the CDU occupies a hegemonic position in shaping the boundaries of the discourse, within which alternative perspectives are partially marginalised.

6.3.3 The De-Gendering of Part-time Work and the Marginalisation of Social Reproduction

Although part-time work is a highly gendered work arrangement closely related to social reproduction responsibilities and gender inequalities (s. literature review), these dimensions are somewhat acknowledged but overall remain mostly silenced and marginalised in the German debate. This backgrounding reveals how underlying gender inequalities are

insufficiently challenged, while the fundamental tension between paid work and unpaid care work is not appropriately articulated as a central issue within employment patterns in the German labour market. This illustrates how discourse is shaped by society while at the same time deepening the ideological assumptions of work-family arrangements.

Even though part-time work is historically and culturally deeply intertwined with female employment, gender is addressed only to a limited extent in the examined debate. Empirically, almost half of all women in Germany are working part-time, which results in Germany having a prevalence of the one-and-a-half-earner model in families (Hook, 2015, 22; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b). Against this background, the use of generalising categories among all parties silences the fact that part-time work was and is, until today, a highly gendered work arrangement. References to “the employees” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2026), “the workforce” (CDU, 2026a), next to rarely naming mothers and women, with only broad references to structural limitations, such as the income splitting having consequences for “people” (Klose, Tagesschau, 2026a) reveals how gender is strategically placed as secondary rather than as constitutive factor, when discussing part-time work.

Additionally, the CDU reinforces this partial de-gendering by emphasising a high share of people working part-time due to “lifestyle” reasons (CDU, 2026a), which portrays the gender dimension and part-time work not as deeply intertwined as empirically proven. This has two important consequences: First, the dominance of economic rationality is further stabilised, framing it as a primarily economic problem rather than as a gendered employment pattern. Second, although the proposal acknowledges the importance of part-time work for families, the structural inequalities that part-time work poses for women and mothers remain inadequately problematised and unquestioned in the proposal. As the CDU has a hegemonic position due to being the governmental party, they hereby set the boundaries of the debate, and thus limit the extent to which the gendered dimension of part-time work is problematised in the discourse, while at the same time shifting the focus towards the economic challenges. This further reflects how the part-time discourse contributes to reinforcing ideological assumptions about women’s responsibility for care work (Fairclough, 2013, 11).

This neglect becomes further visible in the limited references to the part-time trap. As shown in the analysis, the part-time trap is briefly mentioned by Zerr (Deutscher Bundestag, 2026) and appears somewhat more detailed in the supplementary material (Tagesschau, 2026c), yet it is never developed into an extensive argumentation. This marginalisation is especially

revealing given the extensive literature on the negative consequences of part-time work for women and mothers. The literature points out that while part-time work has contributed to increasing female employment, it also leads to decreasing women's career opportunities, income and pensions, as well as decreases their independence from their partners (Lyonette, 2015, 321).

In this context, Lewis (2001) emphasises that policy making which assumes an adult-worker model and simply aims to increase labour participation, without adequately addressing unpaid care work, is highly problematic (*ibid.*, 155, 166). This tendency is clearly visible in the first CDU proposal, which requests an increase in labour supply, while largely silencing the unequal distribution of care work (CDU, 2026a). Although the adjusted proposal briefly acknowledges the need to examine disincentivising aspects in existing policies, it simultaneously questions their existence (CDU, 2026b).

Taken together, the debate does not completely ignore the gendered dimension of part-time work, but prevents it from becoming the overarching framework from which part-time employment is discussed and interpreted. Gendered inequalities are mostly acknowledged in generalised, abstract or fragmented sections. As a result, these structural constraints remain secondary to the dominant economic rationality.

From a broader perspective, this reflects what Fraser calls the 'cannibal capitalism' (2022). Capitalist society relies on unpaid social reproduction, which is still disproportionately done by women and mothers, while at the same time not valuing and adequately compensating this form of labour (*ibid.*, 53). Fraser and Vogel (2017) argue that this contradiction becomes especially visible when society prioritises economic growth over social and monetary investments into social reproduction (*ibid.*, 24). The German debate on part-time work demonstrates this tension. Although care responsibilities are acknowledged as factors shaping part-time employment patterns (e.g. CDU, 2026a+b), the tension between employment and care is not constructed as a central political problem in light of demographic change and the challenges this poses for the economic situation in Germany. Instead, economic competitiveness is the dominant perspective on part-time work, structuring the whole discourse. This also connects to Fraser's (2020) argument that the feminist movement became increasingly detached from structural critiques of capitalism, which helps explain why even opposing parties fail to question the economic rationality structuring the debate, rather than centring care work as a structural foundation. Lastly, given the growing demand for health

and care needs in times of an ageing society, valuing (un)paid care work should be a prerequisite for policy responses to a shifting labour market (Fleischer & Vallizadeh, 2025, 5-6).

Thus, through deprioritising care work, neglecting to centre the part-time debate in a gendered framework and backgrounding the part-time trap, the discourse does not adequately address the gendered dimension of part-time work, and further deepens ideological assumptions about women's care responsibility, while simultaneously remaining in the overarching economic rationality.

6.3.4 Summarising the Analysis

These three dimensions discussed above are not isolated findings but together reveal a broader discursive pattern which connects them. As shown throughout the analysis, the CDU's framing of part-time work as an economic burden establishes the hegemonic framework within which the debate takes place, thereby defining which perspectives count as legitimate or are backgrounded. This shapes the struggle over responsibility as well: by constructing part-time work mainly as an economic problem, the question of who is accountable, individual workers or structural limitations, becomes central. Yet, both the CDU and the opposing parties remain within the same economic rationality, mostly discussing the 'how' rather than the 'whether' of increasing working hours. This shared economic framework explains the third finding. Gender and social reproduction are not completely absent from the discourse, but they mainly appear as secondary or exceptions, because the discourse has already defined the problem in a way that structurally backgrounds them. The de-gendering of part-time work is therefore not simply an oversight. Rather, it is the consequence of a discourse in which economic productivity functions as the uncontested frame.

7. Conclusion

This thesis analysed the German discourse following the CDU's proposal, published in January 2026, to reform and limit the existing part-time legislation in the context of the ageing population in Germany, and to ensure economic productivity further on. The analysis has shown that the main discursive struggle between the different parties revolved around the construction of part-time work, and the framings were unequally powerful. While the CDU's

argumentations were challenged by the opposing parties, the overall debate remained linked to economic rationalities and concerns about labour supply, the core of the proposal remained unchallenged.

Three central findings lead to this overall conclusion: First, part-time work is hegemonially framed as an economic burden contributing largely to the existing labour shortages and thus affecting Germany's economic productivity in a negative way. This portrays a major reframing of part-time work away from having a positive effect on economic competitiveness. While the other parties challenge this negative connotation of part-time work, trying to shift the focus to it being an opportunity and necessity, they only partly succeed in challenging the assumption that part-time work is a burden. Second, the discourse illustrates a struggle over responsibility. Overall, CDU actors individualise responsibility and present the part-time workers as responsible for solving the labour shortages by increasing their working hours. Other politicians again challenge this narrative, and emphasise structural limitations, such as the lack of sufficient childcare provision or challenging working conditions, leading to the high part-time rates. Nevertheless, even this counter-argumentation and shifting responsibility implicitly remains within the CDU's framework that a general increase in labour supply and working hours is necessary, yet their approach to reach this differs. Third, even though they are acknowledged and partly mentioned, care responsibilities are not treated as a central structuring dimension underlying part-time work. Similarly, the part-time trap associated with female part-time employment, as well as the tension between paid employment and social reproduction tasks, are rarely problematised explicitly, indicating that the perspective of part-time employment as an opportunity for society and women dominates.

Returning to the research question, the analysis reveals that the German part-time discourse is structured by a fundamental asymmetry: while economic productivity and labour shortages function as the uncontested hegemonic framework, responsibility and care work remain contested but ultimately subordinate dimensions. This asymmetry is not accidental – it reflects the CDU's institutional authority as the leading governmental party, which enables it to set the boundaries of what is debatable and what remains unquestioned. The result is a discourse in which the structural tension between paid work and unpaid care responsibilities is acknowledged but never adequately problematised, in which the gendered nature of part-time employment is systematically backgrounded and part-time work is not problematised from an equality perspective. In this sense, the discourse does not simply

reflect Germany's labour market challenges and gender roles in family-work arrangements, but it actively shapes how those challenges are understood, who is held responsible, and which solutions are considered thinkable.

This analysis faced various limitations, which may be addressed by further research. The material selection focused largely on the political dimension of the debate and only included civil actors as supplementary material. This choice is due to the limited scope of the thesis, yet including these perspectives more exhaustively could provide a broader picture of how part-time work is negotiated in German society. Additionally, the study only conducted a CDA of the written and spoken content of the material. Since several sources were video material, it could have been a valuable addition to conduct a multi-modal analysis as well, examining the more visual elements of the speeches. Another limitation is that, as the study has an interpretivist and critical-discourse-analytical approach, the transcription and the findings are shaped by interpretation. As such, the results do not claim objectivity, but rather offer a theoretically grounded and transparent analytical perspective.

Additionally, the thesis did not address all marginalised perspectives. For example, degrowth as a way to deal with demographic change or labour migration as another strategy to increase future labour supply, unfortunately, were not discussed in this paper. This could therefore be an interesting topic for future research.

This study has shown that political discourse does not neutrally describe labour market realities – it constructs them. By framing part-time work primarily as an economic burden while obscuring its gendered and care-related dimensions, the German political debate risks further reinforcing unequal work-family arrangements and ideological assumptions about gendered roles, while also producing policy responses that increase labour supply without adequately addressing the structural conditions that make full-time employment impossible for many. For the millions of women whose working and living conditions are directly shaped by the part-time regulation, this is not an abstract question of framing – it has concrete consequences for income, pensions, and economic independence. Future policy making would benefit from discourses that move beyond economic rationality alone and highlight care work as a structural foundation of both society and economic productivity, rather than as an exceptional justification for reduced working hours.

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