



Perspective

Heating up the headlines: How tabloid framing reshaped Germany's Buildings Energy Act

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ABSTRACT

Media has become a decisive force in shaping climate and energy policy, influencing not only which issues gain attention but also how they are framed and contested. This paper examines how BILD, Germany's largest tabloid, transformed the 2023 reform of the Buildings Energy Act (GEG) into one of the most polarizing political controversies in recent German history. Analyzing a corpus of 333 BILD articles from January 2023 to March 2024, we identify three dominant rhetorical strategies – personalisation, economic alarmism, and ideological framing – epitomised by the term “Heizungshammer”, which appeared over 250 times in BILD alone and spread to more than 1100 articles across the broader press. These narratives produced concrete policy outcomes: the progressive dilution and eventual abandonment of the 65% renewable energy obligation, the cancellation of planned building efficiency standards, and a reversal of Germany's position in EU negotiations on the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive. The case demonstrates that tabloid framing can migrate directly into legislative outcomes, with measurable consequences for climate governance ambition, highlighting the fragility of climate legislation in an age of digital populism.

1. Introduction

Among the various factors shaping climate and energy policy, media has emerged as a powerful and complex force. It not only determines which policy issues receive public and political attention but also influences how these issues are framed, which stakeholders are portrayed as legitimate, and which policy solutions are perceived as feasible or controversial [1–4]. With the rise of online platforms and algorithmic amplification, misinformation, selective framing, and emotional appeals have become pervasive features of energy discourse [5,6].

This media landscape has profound implications for public trust, policy design, and the political feasibility of climate legislation. Disinformation campaigns and populist (understood here as a discursive style and interpretive logic that constructs politics as an unjust conflict between a virtuous, homogeneous “people” and a corrupt or detached “elite”, often combined with simplified problem attributions and strong evaluative language) narratives (recurrent, context-dependent patterns that link actors, events and consequences into a coherent claim across texts) can derail progressive reforms by sowing doubt, exaggerating economic burdens, or personalizing blame [7,8]. Yet, empirical research

linking media representations to energy policy outcomes remains limited—particularly at the micro-level [9–11]. Bridging this gap is vital to understanding the socio-political drivers of the energy transition and the obstacles to policy acceptance in democratic societies.

One policy area that has recently been subjected to an increasingly polarized media debate is the transition away from fossil fuels for heating buildings. Various countries in Europe including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands and Slovenia have attempted – and in some cases succeeded – to implement phase-out regulations regarding the installation of fossil fuel heating systems [12].

Probably the most prominent recent example of these dynamics is the public and political debate around Germany's reform of the Buildings Energy Act (GEG)—commonly referred to as the *Heizungsgesetz* (Heating Law). Intended to advance decarbonization in the building sector, the GEG proposed that all new heating systems installed from 2024 onward should be powered by at least 65% renewable energy. As buildings account for a substantial share of Germany's greenhouse gas emissions, the law was seen by policymakers as a cornerstone of the national climate strategy.

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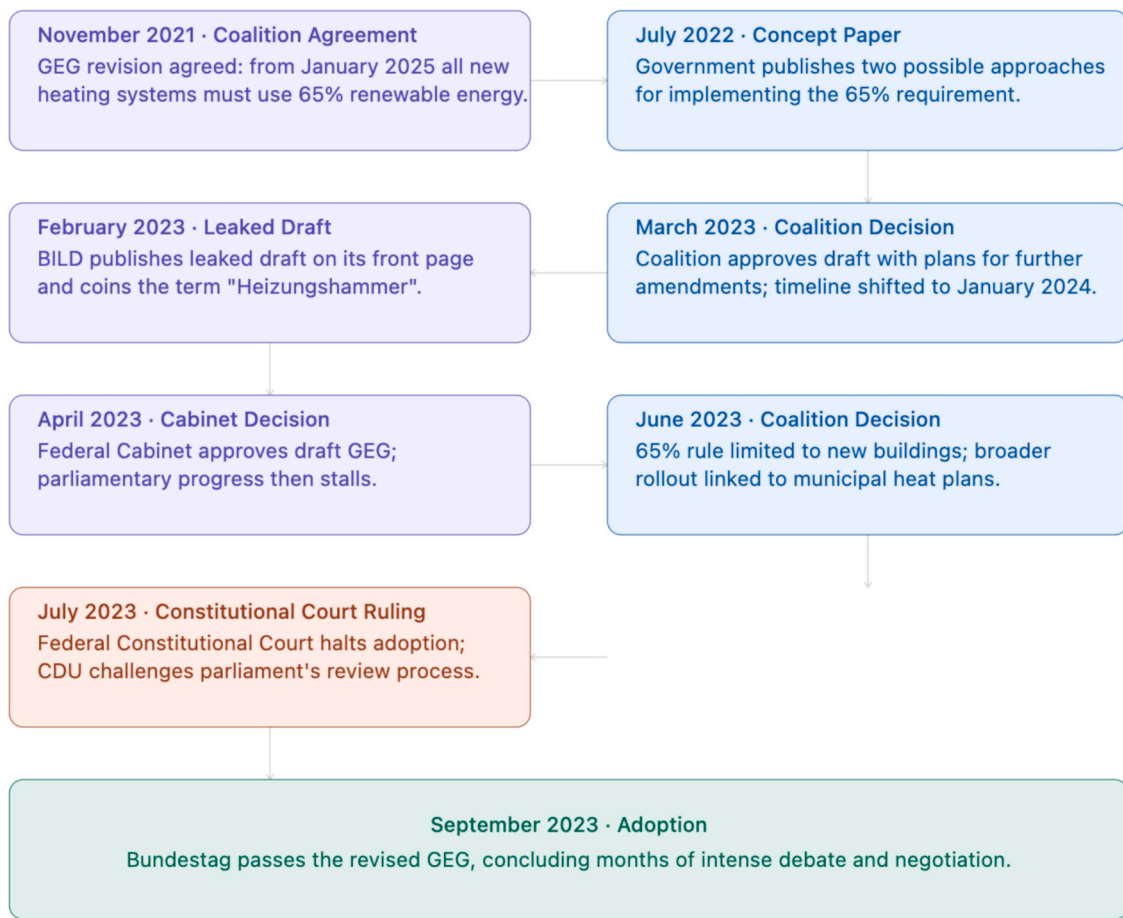


Fig. 1. Timeline of German heating law (GEG).

However, rather than being received as a technical or procedural update, the GEG reform became the epicentre of one of the most emotionally charged and polarizing political debates of 2023 [13–15]. The proposal was met with fierce opposition in parts of the press and on social media, where it was frequently framed as coercive, economically burdensome, and ideologically driven. Terms such as “*Heizungshammer*” (“heating hammer”) dominated tabloid headlines, and misleading claims about forced retrofits and total boiler bans spread widely, often distorting the actual content of the draft legislation.

In this climate of sensationalism and politicization, one outlet played a particularly influential and outsized role: *BILD*, Germany’s largest-circulation newspaper, known for its populist tone and agenda-setting influence. Through its sustained and emotionally charged coverage, *BILD* helped shape not only public perception but arguably also the rhetorical positioning and negotiation strategy of policymakers, turning the GEG into a contested symbol of state overreach and climate elitism.

Against this backdrop, this article examines how the GEG was constructed in *BILD*’s media discourse and considers how these representations may have shaped the broader policy trajectory. Our argument is twofold. First, we use computational text analysis to identify dominant patterns in *BILD*’s coverage that shaped public understanding of the policy debate. Second, we argue that these narratives were not merely reflective, but became embedded in political dynamics, contributing to shifts in both the timing and substance of the reform.

The relevance of this case has only increased in light of recent political developments. The German government has since announced plans to roll back the central 65% renewable energy requirement for new heating systems—effectively dismantling a key pillar of the original reform. This policy reversal underscores the extent to which contested media narratives can translate into tangible political outcomes, raising

broader questions about the resilience of climate policy in highly mediatized and polarized environments.

While this analysis focuses on a single country and a single media outlet, the prominence of the case warrants broader reflection. It illustrates how media dynamics can amplify political contestation, shape policy feasibility, and ultimately alter the direction of climate governance. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the role of media in environmental policymaking and highlights the fragility of ambitious climate measures in the face of sustained public contestation.

2. Background

This section describes the important steps of the revision of the German Buildings Energy Act, starting from the first announcement of the renewable energy obligation until its adoption.

Importantly and contrary to common perception, the GEG was not a new law but has already been in force since 2020. The original GEG was designed by the 2018–2021 government coalition consisting of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). It included, however, relatively weak requirements for existing heating systems other than the need to replace heating systems more than 30 years old.

After taking office in 2021, Germany’s “traffic light coalition” (SPD, Greens, Free Democratic Party, FDP) committed to revising the Buildings Energy Act so that from January 2025, new heating systems would use 65% renewable energy [16]. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the deadline was moved up to January 2024 to reduce reliance on Russian gas. A concept paper from the relevant ministries proposed two compliance models—either a flexible choice of renewable options or a staged approach prioritizing certain technologies [17]. Ultimately,

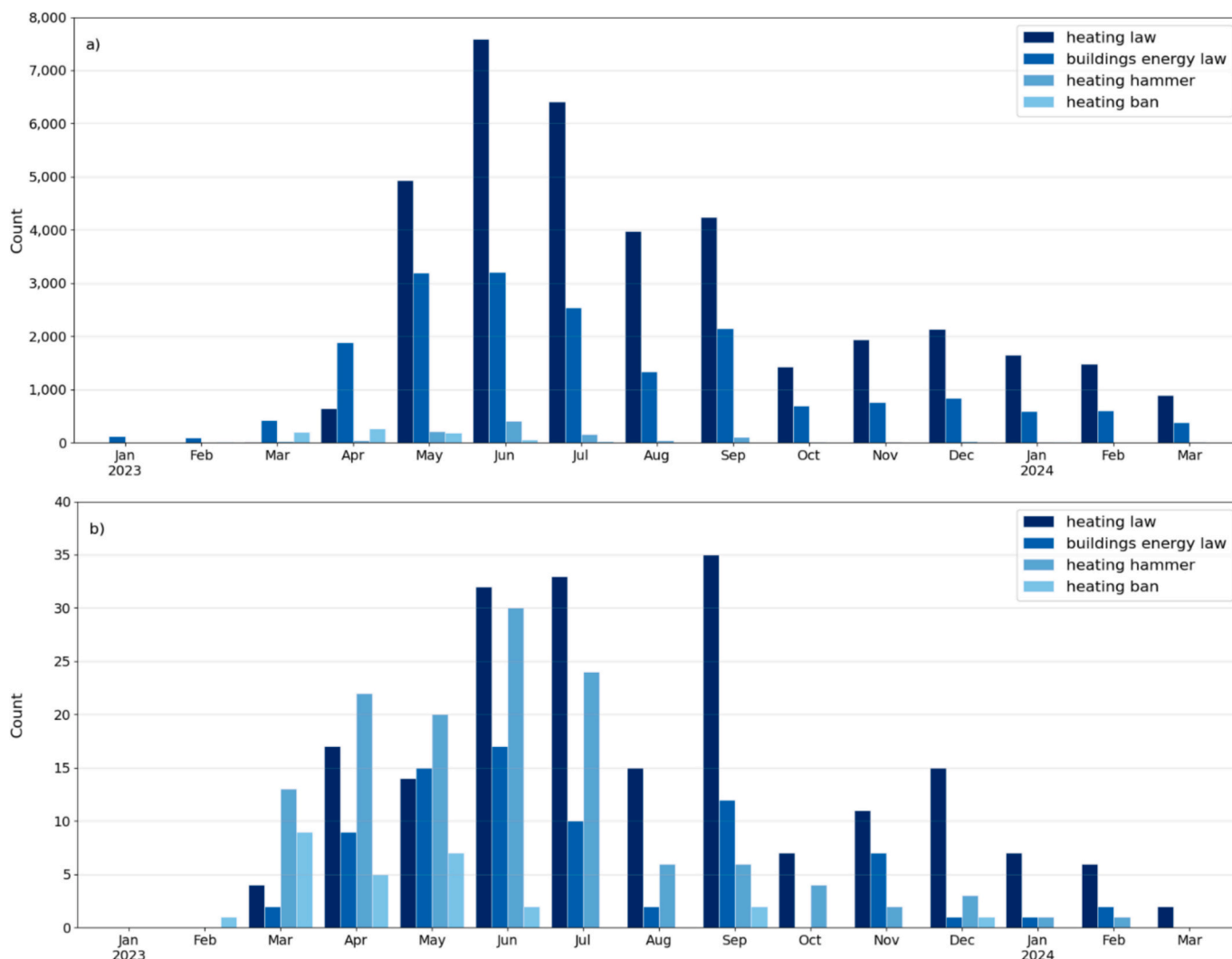


Fig. 2. Number of monthly articles in a) the wiso database (German based press articles) and b) BILD database mentioning the German “heating law” using different related terms in various notations at the article level (≥ 1 occurrence). Not mutually exclusive: articles can contribute to multiple term counts.

the first approach, allowing for a flexible choice of renewable options, was further considered in the decision-making process.

In February 2023, a leaked draft law published by BILD sparked public backlash, branding the law the “heating hammer.” This led to intense political negotiations. Despite earlier support, the FDP stalled the law’s progress for weeks. In March, the coalition committee approved the draft with plans for further amendments [18]. By June, coalition parties agreed to limit the 65% renewable requirement to new buildings in development areas, with broader implementation linked to municipal heating plans due in 2026 and 2028.

In July, the Federal Constitutional Court halted adoption after a CDU MP argued parliament lacked time to review final changes [19]. In September 2023, after the summer recess, the Bundestag passed the revised law, concluding months of debate.

Fig. 1 summarizes the timeline until the adoption of the revised law.

3. Methodological approach

This study examines how media coverage influenced the policy-making process surrounding Germany’s heating law by analyzing both the evolution of public discourse and the legislative changes that occurred over time. The analysis focuses on BILD, Germany’s highest-circulation daily newspaper, known for its populist tone, broad readership, and strong agenda-setting role in political debates. BILD was

chosen not only because of its reach and influence, but also due to its particularly vocal and sustained coverage of the GEG, which played a central role in shaping public narratives and political reactions.

To enable systematic analysis, the collected corpus of BILD articles related to the GEG was first transformed into a machine-readable format. This allowed for computational text analysis using Python-based libraries such as NLTK, spaCy, and pandas. A word frequency analysis was conducted across the full corpus, with stop words removed and names normalized to capture broader thematic trends. The results revealed the most frequently mentioned actors, institutions, and topics, which served as an entry point for identifying recurring narratives and rhetorical patterns in the coverage. This quantitative approach provided an overview of dominant terms and their distribution, allowing us to map the discursive landscape of BILD’s reporting.

The media corpus analyzed in this study consists of 333 articles published by BILD between January 2023 and March 2024, during the peak period of public and political debate around the German heating law (Gebäudeenergiegesetz, GEG). Articles were collected using keyword filters that captured a range of relevant terms and framings, including Heizungsgesetz (heating law), Heizungshammer (heating hammer), Heizungsverbot (heating ban), and Gebäudeenergiegesetz (building energy act), accounting for variations in spelling and phrasing. This filtering ensured the inclusion of both direct references to the legislation and the symbolic language that became central to its media representation. The

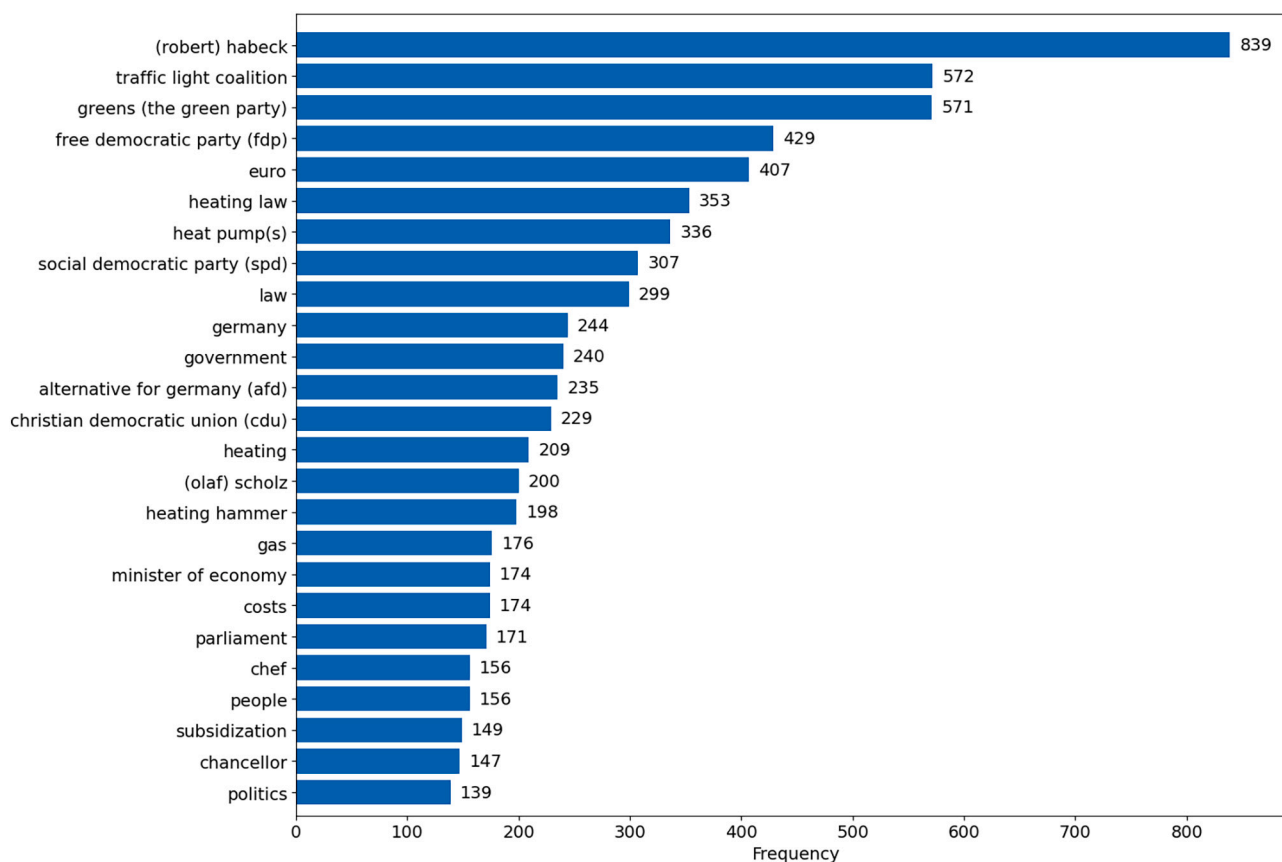


Fig. 3. Overview of top 25 words (translated, normalized names and plurals; removed stop words) in BILD corpus (n = 333 articles), see Annex I for original version.

resulting corpus reflects the intensity and scope of *BILD*'s reporting on the topic and forms the basis for both the quantitative and qualitative analyses undertaken in this study.

In addition to the media analysis, the study investigates the policy development process by systematically reviewing legislative amendments to the GEG as well as related energy policy measures in the building sector. This includes a comparison of official draft versions and final texts from government and parliamentary sources, enabling the identification of significant changes in policy content. By tracing how the law and accompanying measures evolved over time, the analysis explores the extent to which these developments coincide with concerns that were prominently articulated in media coverage and political debate.

4. Results

4.1. Media coverage and narrative patterns

Media attention around the heating law surged following *BILD*'s initial coverage, quickly turning it into a prominent topic across Germany's news landscape. As illustrated in Fig. 2, which tracks article counts from a) the wiso database [20] (covering roughly 200 newspapers) and b) the *BILD* database, media coverage steadily intensified between March and June—coinciding with the expected legislative adoption, which was ultimately postponed due to a Constitutional Court ruling. A second spike occurred in September, reflecting renewed attention during the Bundestag's final approval of the law.

Key elements of narratives associated with *BILD*'s coverage—such as the controversial term “heating hammer”—gained widespread traction across the German media. In our analyzed *BILD* corpus containing 333 relevant articles the word hammer was used more than 250 times, in different writings for “heating hammer” (228 times) but also in

variations such as “energy hammer” or “housing hammer”. The name Habeck is mentioned 44 times as a direct prefix. Between January 2023 and March 2024, 1100 articles outside of *BILD* used the term (here, all results matching the query “Heizungshammer” OR “Heizhammer” OR “Heiz-Hammer” OR “Heizungs-Hammer”). Similarly, “Heizungsverbot” (heating ban) appeared in 800 articles, reinforcing a narrative of restriction. The framing of the law as driven by “ideology” featured in 660 articles (matching the query Gebäudeenergiegesetz AND (Ideologie OR ideologisch)), while references of public “uncertainty” (“Verunsicherung”) linked to the heating law surfaced in over 2500 articles, underscoring the broader societal unease surrounding the policy debate. Only a limited number of media outlets delved into the specifics of the rather moderate provisions in the law and explicitly covered the campaign opposing the legislation, notably niche media such as “Klimareporter.de” [21] and the fact checker “Volksverpetzer.de” [22].

Natural language processing of *BILD* articles reveals which key terms dominated coverage of the heating law (see Fig. 3). The 25 most frequent words—excluding stop words and with names and plurals normalized—highlight a strong focus on political actors and parties. Robert Habeck, then Vice-Chancellor and Minister of Economic Affairs, stands out with the highest number of mentions—appearing on average more than twice per article—closely followed by references to the traffic light coalition and the Green Party. Another frequently mentioned figure is chancellor Olaf Scholz, alongside party names such as FDP, SPD, CDU, and AfD (Alternative für Deutschland, commonly rendered in English as Alternative for Germany). Terms like “euro” and “costs” also appear prominently, indicating that economic concerns were a recurring element in the debate.

5. Impact on broader energy and climate policy

The political and media backlash to the Buildings Energy Act (GEG)

Table 1
Changes in the different versions of the Heating Law (GEG).

	GEG 2020	Proposed GEG 2023	Adopted GEG 2023
New heating systems installations	Requirement for 15% of heating and cooling energy demand in new buildings to come from renewable sources Requirement for new oil boilers to be combined with renewable energy from 01 January 2026	New installations in both new and existing buildings from 2024 must use at least 65% renewable energy from 01 January 2024	Installations in new buildings in new developments from 2024 must use at least 65% renewable energy For existing buildings requirement for 65% renewable energy remains, with exemptions for certain building types and for buildings connected to district heating
Oil and gas boilers	Allowed without specific renewable energy quotas	Ban on new oil and gas boilers starting 2024, except for hybrid systems meeting 65% renewable energy quota	Ban on new oil and gas boilers starting 2026/2028 except for hybrid systems meeting 65% renewable energy quota
Old heating systems	Mandatory replacement of gas and oil heating systems that are more than 30 years old (with ample exemptions)	Same as GEG 2020 but requirement of replacement system to comply with 65% renewable energy requirement starting in 2024 Existing heating systems are allowed to use fossil fuels until 31 December 2044	Same as GEG 2020 but requirement of replacement system to comply with 65% renewable energy requirement starting in 2026/2028 (depending on deadline for heat planning) Existing heating systems are allowed to use fossil fuels until 31 December 2044
Financial support (separate from GEG)	Limited subsidies for renewable heating systems	Enhanced subsidies for renewable heating systems	Further increased financial support, particularly for lower-income households
Transition periods	Requirement for new oil boilers to be combined with renewable energy from 01 January 2026	None	Gradual implementation with regional flexibility until 01/7/2028 at the latest depending on size of municipality
Municipal heat planning (separate from GEG)	Voluntary Municipal heat planning	N/a	Heat planning mandatory, with extended deadlines for smaller municipalities
Exemptions	Few exemptions for heating systems as very limited requirements	Possible exemptions for technical or economic reasons	Broader exemptions and transitional regulations for certain buildings and regions

had substantial ripple effects on Germany's wider climate and energy policy agenda. These effects are not confined to the act itself but extend to the pace and ambition of adjacent legislative measures at both national and European levels. Three primary areas of impact can be identified: (1) dilution of the renewable energy obligation, (2) weakening of complementary domestic policy measures, and (3) a strategic shift in Germany's stance in EU climate policy negotiations.

5.1. Dilution - and finally abolishment - of the renewable energy obligation

One of the most consequential changes to the GEG was the postponement of its applicability through its coupling with municipal heat planning. The revised law now links compliance timelines to local heating infrastructure development, ostensibly to provide households with clarity about potential future access to district heating or hydrogen networks. While this might be meaningful in certain urban districts, for the vast majority of municipalities—especially rural or remote areas where neither district heating nor hydrogen infrastructure is likely to be deployed in the coming decades—this mechanism simply delays climate action. Despite the theoretical option for municipalities to expedite designation of heating zones, it remains doubtful whether this option will be broadly used in practice.

Furthermore, biomass heating systems, originally restricted in early drafts due to concerns over resource constraints and environmental health, are now broadly permitted. Provisions that would have required buffer storage tanks, solar thermal augmentation, and emission controls were removed from the final law. This shift undermines both climate and public health objectives, especially in urban areas, as biomass combustion contributes to particulate matter pollution and competes for scarce renewable resources.

In Table 1, we summarise the changes in the different versions of the Heating Law from the adopted law in 2020 to the proposed law in 2023 and the finally adopted law.

More recently, in spring 2026, the current federal government announced plans to abandon the central 65% renewable energy requirement for new heating systems altogether. This marks a significant departure from the original ambition of the reform and underscores the extent to which the policy has been incrementally weakened over the course of the political process.

5.2. Retrenchment in domestic energy efficiency policy

The political fallout from the GEG also triggered a broader retrenchment in Germany's energy efficiency policy. In September 2023, during a so-called “building summit” (*Baugipfel*), the federal government officially cancelled the planned tightening of efficiency standards for new buildings, which had been scheduled for January 2025 as per the coalition agreement. Similarly, proposals to strengthen requirements for existing buildings appear to have been quietly shelved.

These rollbacks reflect a significant policy recalibration. The government's decision to deprioritize building efficiency—long considered a cornerstone of its climate strategy—demonstrates the chilling effect of the GEG debate on legislative ambition. It also suggests that political cost sensitivity now trumps environmental planning, particularly in the context of media-amplified public resistance.

5.3. Shift in Germany's EU-level climate policy position

The GEG debate had further-reaching consequences at the European level. During negotiations on the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), the German government reversed its longstanding support for the introduction of Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) for residential buildings. In March 2023, the Federal Ministry for Housing publicly rejected MEPS, with BILD prominently reporting that Germany would not accept any form of “forced renovation” (*Sanierungszwang*) [23]. This reversal not only weakened the directive's climate ambition but also signalled a normative shift in Germany's role within EU climate governance—from a climate policy leader to a more defensive and domestically cautious actor.

Additionally, Germany opposed the European Commission's proposal to tighten ecodesign requirements for heating systems under the RePowerEU framework and the Save Energy Communication [24]. The proposal, which sought to phase out stand-alone fossil fuel boilers by

2029, was framed by BILD and other national media as a “European heating hammer” even more draconian than the GEG. The backlash led the European Commission to issue clarifying statements on social media, indicating that media distortion of EU policy had tangible effects on public perception and member state behaviour (see <https://twitter.com/EUinDE/status/1666402134286270465>).

6. Discussion and conclusions

The case of the Buildings Energy Act (GEG) illustrates how climate policy can become highly contested in public debate, with technical measures increasingly accompanied by broader narratives about control, fairness, and social impact. In the media discourse—particularly in tabloid coverage—the GEG was frequently framed in ways that extended beyond its technical content, at times emphasizing questions of government overreach and the role of political elites. Prominent labels such as “Heizungshammer” and “Sanierungszwang,” as well as a focus on individual political actors, including Robert Habeck, contributed to a strongly polarized tone of the debate. This pattern of coverage appears to have shifted attention, at least in part, away from the institutional and procedural context in which the law was developed.

These discursive dynamics were not confined to the media. They were actively mirrored and amplified by political actors across the spectrum. Notably, the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) adopted the term “*Heizungshammer*” in its messaging and launched a dedicated campaign website to “stop the heating hammer,” (see <https://www.afd.de/heizhammer-stoppen/>) framing the law as both economically ruinous and ideologically driven. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) initiated a parallel campaign in May 2023, echoing the same rhetoric and emphasizing the cost burden for citizens. The fact that such language was employed across both extremist and mainstream

opposition parties illustrates how populist narratives have migrated into the political mainstream, further destabilizing the conditions for constructive climate legislation.

The debate surrounding the GEG offers a revealing case study of how climate policy can be transformed into a site of symbolic contestation, where the framing of actors and consequences becomes more influential than the actual policy design. This mirrors findings from recent studies, such as Fawzi [25], which show that media framing and the perceptions of political actors can significantly shape the policy process, influencing not just the public's perception but also the trajectory of the policy itself.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carmen Loschke: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sibylle Braungardt:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Friedhelm Keimeyer:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Jan Rosenow:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

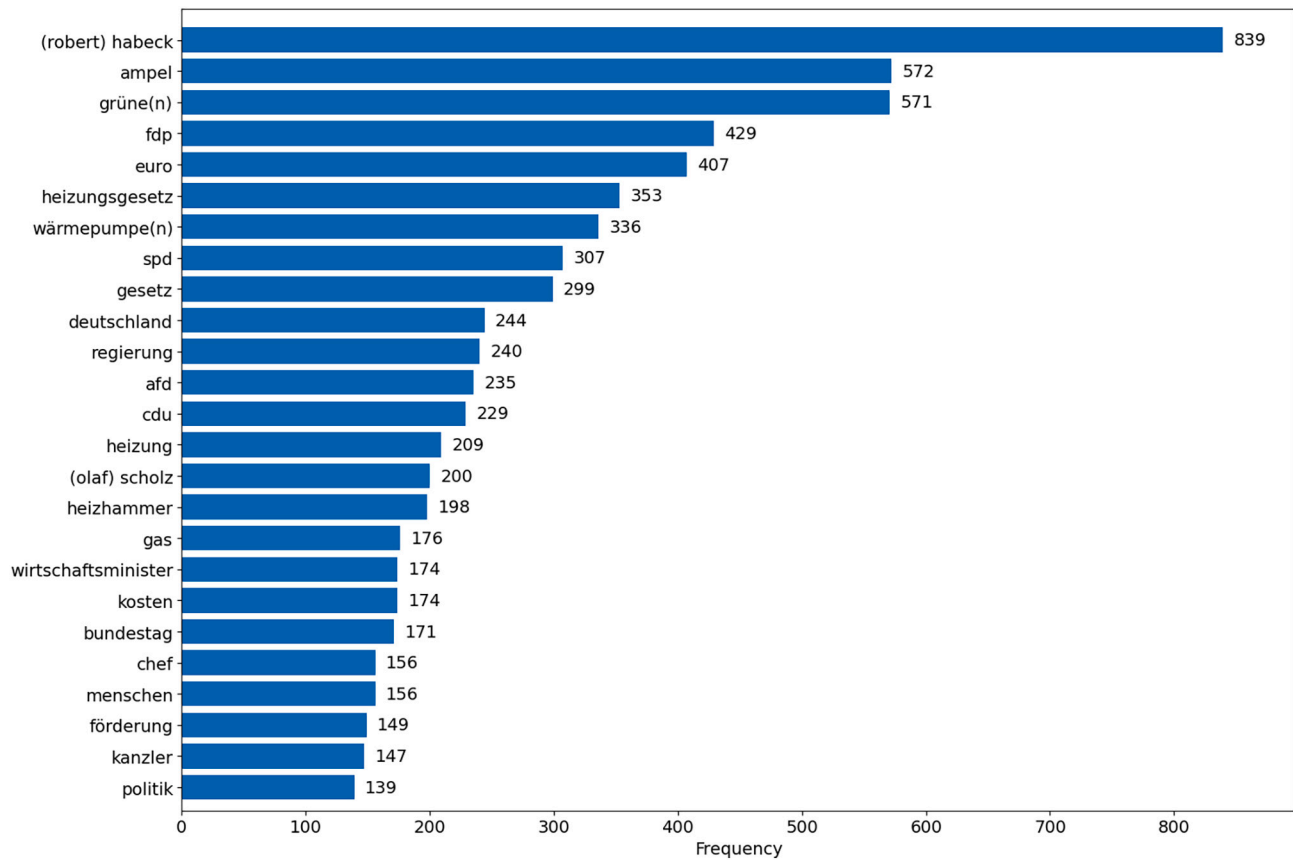
Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Appendix I. Fig. 3 – Original German version



Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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