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Gender equality or employment promotion? The politicization of parental leave policy in Finland

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Abstract

In 2022, a new parental leave system with equal leave rights for parents saw daylight in Finland. The road towards this reform was not entirely uncontroversial, and one stumble stone was different interpretations of the meaning of gender equality. This article contributes to the literature by analysing how seven political parties in Finland politicized the idea of gender equality and leave quotas during the 2010s. We argue that ideological factors delayed a reform of the leave system in a more gender-equal way, since left-wing parties did not only put more emphasis on gender equality and state-regulated leave quotas for fathers than conservatives, they also did so for somewhat other reasons connected with the Social Investment paradigm. Moreover, although the conservatives did warm up to the idea of gender equality on a general level during this period, and some of them started to support the use of leave quotas, providing some of the consensus needed for the 2021 reform, this did not alter their traditional views on the family and gender roles. Instead, the policy idea of leave quotas was reframed as an instrumental tool to achieve higher (maternal) employment, and only secondary as a tool for gender equality.

Key words: gender equality, parental leave policy, leave quotas, political partisanship, ideas, Finland

Introduction

The idea of gender equality is deeply embedded in the Nordic welfare state. Not only do Nordic countries provide a wide array of welfare services facilitating female labour participation, but they also conduct leave policies that entitle parents to paid leave when their children are young (Leira 2006). Since the 1970s, these parental leave policies have become increasingly characterized by an ambition to increase fathers' leave up-take rates by using ear-marked leaves, so-called daddy quotas (Eydal et al. 2018). In Finland, paternity leave was introduced in 1978, and a rudimentary version of a father's quota was introduced in 1991. However, even if leave rights for fathers were extended several times over the following decades, fuelled by a growing political debate about how to increase gender equality in parental leave policy, it was not until 2013 that fathers received a truly individual and reserved quota. Furthermore, it was not until 2022, under influence from the European Commission (Eduskunta, 2021, EU, 2021) that the leave quotas for parents in Finland were harmonised – almost 20 years after neighbouring Sweden (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2022, Nygård and Duvander 2021).

Previous research has associated the slow development towards more gender-equal parental leaves in Finland with rigid institutions or discord between social partners (Elomäki et al. 2020, Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 2014, Lammi-Taskula and Takala 2009), diverging political partisan positions and gender ideologies (Ylöstalo 2022, Nygård and Duvander 2021, Kantola and Lombardo 2019, Nyby et al. 2017, Nyby 2020), or a strong adherence to traditional family values among Finnish parents (Weckström 2014, Ylikäännö et al. 2016, Hiilamo and Kangas 2009). What is understudied, however, is the ideological factors shaping leave policy, or obstructing it, notably the ways that the idea of gender equality, and the use of quotas to make parental leave uptake more equal, were constructed and framed by parties until the

abovementioned 2021–2022 leave reform. To study such phenomena not only increases our understanding of how the idea of gender equality matters in policymaking, but it also sheds light on a hitherto understudied area of Finnish parental leave policy.

This article investigates the politicization of parental leave policy among seven leading political parties in Finland during the 2010s by focusing especially on the ways they constructed the idea of gender equality, as well as the use of legislated leave quotas within parental leave policy. Politicization refers to the positions parties take on a certain issue, and how such positions, or changes therein, are legitimized discursively (Nyby 2020). We analysed election manifestos and other party programs published between 2010 and 2019 by using qualitative content analysis. First, we mapped partisan positions over time on the abovementioned issues. Second, we analysed arguments and discourses used for legitimizing such positions, or for changing them. Due to share volume, we focus solely on political parties and their programs as they can help us to answer these kinds of questions.

The article contributes to the literature on political partisanship (e.g. Korpi and Palme 2003, Huber and Stephens 2001), feminist theory (e.g. Kantola and Lombardo 2017, Lovenduski and Norris 1993), and theories on the role of ideas in social policy (e.g. Béland 2019, 2010). We argue that ideological factors played an obstructing role in the reforming of the Finnish leave system, due to the diverging views left-wing parties and conservatives had on gender equality as well as the use of leave quotas (for fathers). However, during the 2010s, some conservatives became more positive to these ideas, especially the idea of leave quotas, providing a modicum of political consensus needed for the 2021–2022 reform, but this did not alter their traditional views on the family and gender roles. Instead, the policy idea of using leave quotas was reframed and constructed as an instrumental tool to achieve higher (maternal) employment, rather than a tool for gender equality.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Next, we discuss the role of gender equality in the history of Finnish parental leave policy. Then, we discuss how such ideas relate to theories on political partisanship, gender and ideas. In the fourth section, the data and analytical design is discussed. In the penultimate section, we present our findings, and in the final section, we sum up and discuss our findings.

Gender equality and Finnish parental leave policy

Gender equality is today a widely shared idea that is ‘not only a fundamental right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world’ (United Nations 2021, no page number). In parental leave policy, gender equality usually refers to an ambition to increase mothers’ participation in the labour market, while simultaneously enhancing fathers’ engagement in domestic childcare (Auth and Martinek 2017). It became a central objective in the Nordic countries during the 1970s, not least as a result of the women’s movement, leading to major investments in welfare services and parental leave rights for both parents (Leira 2006). In the 1990s, reserved leave quotas for fathers, were introduced in many of these countries as a way of enhancing fathers’ engagement in their young children and thereby increasing also gender equality in family and working life. Not only were fathers encouraged economically by income-related parental allowances with relatively high replacement rates, but also since refraining from using the leave quotas would shorten the total parental leave period for the family. Norway was the first country to introduce daddy quotas in 1993, but soon also other countries followed (Eydal et al. 2018), except Denmark, who only recently introduced a daddy quota (DME, 2022).

In Finland, a two-week paid paternity leave was introduced in 1978, but a genuinely individual and non-transferable daddy quota was not due until 2013, when fathers received a 58-day quota, of which 18 days could be used simultaneously as the mother. Previously, they

had access to a ‘leave bonus’ topping up the paternity leave in case they used the two last weeks of the shareable parental leave period, and did this with the mother’s consent (Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 2014). In 2011, a government committee proposed equally long (3 months) leaves for parents as a way to strengthen fathers’ leave rights and achieve higher gender equality (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2011). However, they did so in a time when the Finnish economy fell due to the financial crisis, and neoliberal ideas including a more austere view on public expenditures grew stronger (Ylöstalo 2022, Nygård et al. 2019). Hence, the father’s quota introduced in 2013 by PM Katainen’s Right-Left coalition represents a less far-reaching and less expensive solution than what some of the members in the committee would have wanted (Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 2014).

Meanwhile, the discussion on how to equalise parental leave uptake behaviour and how to make the Finnish parental leave system more gender-equal continued (Nygård and Duvander 2021, Elomäki et al. 2020). Allegedly, a more gender-equal system would not only increase fathers’ engagement in their young children, but also increase maternal employment and strengthen work-life balance (European Union, 2021). Sweden was often portrayed as a good model in this respect, since the Swedish Social-Democratic government did a further extension of leave rights for parents in 2016 (Nygård and Duvander, 2021).

In 2017–2018, PM Sipilä’s Centre-Right government made an attempt to answer to these claims by setting up a committee to prepare a reform of the leave system, but the reform work was interrupted in early 2018 due to internal discord and strategic reasons (Elomäki et al. 2020). However, the topic was placed back on the agenda by the new Left-Centre government of PM Rinne in 2019, after the parliamentary election, and in December 2021, the parliament passed a law on a new parental leave system that entitled the birth mother to a 40-day birth leave, and each parent to a 160-day reserved leave quota with a transferable period of 0–63 days to take effect in August 2022 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2022).

This reform can be seen as ground-breaking. Not only were the length of leave periods for parents harmonised and extended (to 14 months, in total), but it also introduced a more gender-neutral vocabulary by substituting terms such as ‘mother’s leave’ or ‘father’s leave’ with ‘parental leave’. However, the preparation of the reform was not devoid of political discord. For example, conservative parties as well as employers were worried this would lead to higher expenditures (Parliament of Finland 2021).

Interestingly, the 2021–2022 reform did not alter the existing the child home care leave, which parents can use after the parental leave period ends (after the 2022 reform: when the child is 14 months). This enables parents (and mostly mothers) to care for their children at home until the child turns three, whilst receiving a flat-rate state benefit (home care allowance), which is lower than the minimum parental leave benefit (see Kela, 2023). Also, it remains to be seen to what extent this reform actually increases fathers’ leave uptake rate. During the 2010s, the share of fathers that use parental leave has been lower in Finland than in other Nordic countries (Eydal et al. 2018). For instance, in 2016, Swedish fathers used 28.2% of the available parental leave, while Finnish fathers used only 10.5% (NOSOSCO 2017).

Thus, while the idea of gender equality became a central principle of Finnish parental leave policy in the 2010s, the road towards the 2021–2022 reform was not straightforward (Nygård and Duvander 2021, Kantola and Lombardo 2021). One such issue of controversy was gender equality and (equal) leave quotas. Consequently, it begs the question as to how such ideas were constructed by different political parties, and to what extent there was an ideological convergence over time resulting in some kind of reform consensus. In the next section, we discuss this question more in detail by turning to theories on political partisanship, gender and influential ideas.

Political partisanship, gender and ideas within parental leave policy

According to the literature on political partisanship and social policy, political parties take different ideological positions on the size, outlook and generosity of the welfare state (e.g. Korpi and Palme 2003, Huber and Stephens 2001, Budge and McDonald 2006). Basically, left-wing parties advocate bigger welfare states, more market regulation and higher economic equality than right-wing ones. Such differences can also be found in relation to the politicization of gender and the idea of gender equality – political cleavage that has become increasingly important in the politics of Western democracies (Lovenduski and Norris 1993) as well as social policy, both on a national level and a European level (Moss et al. 2019, Kantola and Lombardo 2017, Leira 2006). Put simply, left-wing parties tend to be more positive towards such issues and ideas than right-wing and conservative parties (Kantola and Lombardo 2021, 2019, Nygård and Duvander 2021, Lombardo, Meier and Merloo 2010).

One way of understanding this cleavage, is to use the so-called GAL-TAN spectrum (Hooghe, Marks and, Wilson 2002) making a distinction between more progressive GAL values ('Green, Alternative, Libertarian) and more reactionary TAN values ('Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist'). In such as spectrum, left-wing parties and green parties generally rank higher on GAL, while conservative parties rank higher on TAN. As pointed out by feminist scholars (e.g. Lombardo et al. 2010, Kantola and Lombardo 2021), the meanings of gender equality not only vary, but they are also torn between hegemonic discourses and taboos. Nevertheless, one common denominator here seems to be the overcoming of patriarchal structures, that is, to change society in a more gender equal way, which would intrinsically make such issues more salient to left-wing and green parties than right-wing ones (Freeden 1996). Hence, they are not only more prone to support the idea of gender equality, but also to advocate policies that promote this idea, whereas conservative parties take a more negative position in such matters (Ylöstalo 2022, Kantola and Lombardo 2021, 2019, Nygård and Duvander 2021).

Moreover, they use values and discourses to underpin their positions. While left-wing consider state interventions in the family sphere to be legitimate in order to change (patriarchal) structures, conservative parties associate the family institution with a certain modicum of stability and ‘negative freedom’ from state intervention, which means that parents’ decisions regarding the internal work distribution should be guided by freedom of choice rather than state-regulated decrees (Kantola and Lombardo 2021, 2019, Nygård and Duvander 2021, Nyby 2020). As shown in previous research on Finnish parties (e.g. Nygård and Duvander 2021, Nyby et al. 2017, Autto 2016, Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 2014, Hiilamo and Kangas 2009), such an ideological divide can be found in many family policy debates, for example when it comes to the extent to which parents should be allowed to choose between public and domestic childcare or decide which parent participates in the labour market, and which stays home with young children.

Since the 1990s, the research interest in ideas has grown, since they do not only help policymakers to make sense of social problems, but also present solutions to such problems (Béland 2019, 2010, Blyth 2013) According to Schmidt, ideas generally take three main forms: specific policy ideas, general ideas, and ‘world views’ (Schmidt 2008). While policy ideas offer solutions to a certain problem, general ideas and ‘world views’ represent wider and more abstract constructions. As to gender equality, the notion that women and men are equal and should be treated equally can be seen as a ‘worldview’ applicable on almost all areas of politics (UN 2021). Correspondingly, ideas that have bearing for a certain area of society, such as parental leave policy, can be seen as general ideas, since they narrow down the scope of meaning and policy implication. Finally, ideas relating to specific policy tools, such as leave quotas, can be said to constitute specific policy ideas (Nygård and Nyby 2022, Nygård et al. 2019, cf. Schmidt 2008).

Furthermore, ideas can have different policy implications, or aspirations. For instance, the policy idea of ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ leave quotas reflects an ambition to obtain higher gender equality in terms of *outcome*, that is, to influence parental (notably paternal) behaviour (Nygård, and Nyby 2022). However, it also reflects a certain amount of gender equality in terms of *opportunity*, since rather than forcing fathers to do this, it instead seeks to ‘punish’ the family in terms of a shorter total leave if they choose not to divide it equally. Another important question in this respect is whether such leave quotas should be equally long and equally generous in terms of replacement rates, and whether such leave rights should also be available for others than nuclear families (Nygård and Duvander 2021, Koslowski 2021). In Finland, this was not always the case: until 2022, the mother’s leave quota was 105 days compared to the father’s 58 days (between 2013 and 2022), and even if adoptive, transgender and other categories of parents became increasingly eligible for leave rights during the 2000s, the 2021–2022 reform made such rights equal to those of a nuclear family (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2022, Nygård and Duvander 2021).

One reason why gender equality became influential in parental leave policy is that it aligned with the so-called Social Investment Paradigm in the 1990s, advocated by supranational actors, such as the European Union or the OCED. This paradigm did not only view gender equality as a right, but also as a ‘new social risk’, emanating from work-family imbalances or gender inequalities. Allegedly, social policy needed to shift attention to such risks in order to create a more activating, just and financially sustainable welfare state (Hemerijck 2013, Morel, Palier, and Palme 2012, Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). Due to increasing internationalization and policy transfer mechanisms, such as the EU soft governance (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, Hulme 2005, Dolowitz, and Marsh 2000), such ideas spread across Europe and also influenced other Nordic countries, even though these countries already had a legacy of ‘socially-investing’ policies stretching all the way back to the 1970s (Nygård et al. 2019, Häusermann 2018,).

European Social Democracy became central for advocating such policies, not least since they could increase its voter support among female voters, but also since they were intimately connected to the ‘Third Way’ (e.g. Kuisma and Ryner 2012). One central policy idea in this paradigm was activating policies, that is, policies conditioning social rights, that required something in return for a social benefit, for example investments in childcare and parental leave policy that activate mothers and increase their employment rate (Auth and Martinek 2017). Even if the paradigm has sometimes been criticized for being a form of neoliberal or ‘workfare’ ideology in disguise, due to the strong elements of activation and employability (Hemerijck 2013), and it lost some of its momentum as to the promotion of gender equality in the wake the 2008–2009 financial crunch and the following shift towards a more neoliberal policy discourse (Ylöstalo 2022, Kantola, and Lombardo 2017), there is little doubt that it influenced the ways that gender equality was framed in parental leave policy, including Finland (Eydal et al. 2018). Furthermore, it also consists of several ideational threads, which makes it difficult to discern a delineated ideational, or ideological, objective.

We can sum up the discussion thus far by saying that political parties from different ideological camps tend to politicize gender and to view gender equality differently. However, this depends on what type of idea we are discussing. Whereas ‘worldview’ ideas on gender equality might be more univocally accepted, general ideas, and notably specific policy ideas, relating to gender tend to be more controversial. Based on this, we expect to find an ideological divide in the politicization of Finnish parental leave policy during the 2010s, with left-wing parties being more supportive, and conservative parties more negative, to ideas on gender equality and leave quotas. However, we also expect to find ideological convergence over time due to the influence from the Social Investment paradigm.

Data and methods

To investigate these questions, we analysed election manifestos and various other programs published by seven of the largest parties in Finland during the period 2010–2019. In total, 33 programs were analysed in search on how the ideas of gender equality, reserved leave quotas for fathers were politicized and constructed (see Appendix). Readings of political programs, such as election manifestos and special programs on social policy, reveal not only core political values of a party, they also provide cognitive frames for understanding the world and define what needs to be changed (Freeden 1996, Budge and McDonald 2006). But they can also be seen as a form of ‘discursive politics’, or ‘political acts’ in themselves (Lombardo et al. 2010, Fisher 2003).

The analysed time period is of special interest since parental leave and the idea of making the leave system more gender-equal was actively debated (Elomäki et al. 2020, Nyby 2020). Moreover, this period provides a variation in political constellations, which shifted from broad Centre-Right coalitions (2010-2015), via a narrower Centre-Right coalition (2015–2019) to the current Left-Centre coalition (from 2019). The analysed parties constituted seven of the largest parties in Finland as to their average voter share during the 2010s (Statistics Finland 2019, Mickelsson 2021). From left to right, this group included the Left Alliance, the Greens, the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party, and the Christian Democrats.ⁱ Even if trade unions and employers play an important role in the tripartite negotiation process concerning parental leave policy in Finland (e.g. Lammi-Taskula and Takala 2009), we chose not include them in the analysis due to sheer volume.

We used qualitative content analysis with a mix of a ‘conventional’ and ‘directed’ approach to analyse the data (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Initially, we conducted general readings of the documents in order to get a sense of the whole and to inductively locate text passages (e.g. paragraphs or sentences) relating to parental leave rights, and notably mentions on using leave quotas for enhancing gender equality between spouses. These mentions were then coded

deductively according to whether they expressed a positive, negative, or neutral position regarding this topic. General mentions on parental leave policy without an explicit reference to leave quotas or gender equality were not coded. In the third step, we again used an inductive approach by scrutinizing the arguments underpinning the partisan standpoints.

This analytical approach is a rather straightforward, and effective for analysing patterns in partisan politicization of parental leave policy over time. It allows interpretation, coding and qualitative analysis of political language in search patterns and changes (Boréus and Bergström 2017). However, the method also has limitations. One is the well-known problem of imperative modality meaning that that programs are often very laconic and use an imperative mode that not necessarily include textual elucidations such as motivations or arguments behind standpoints. In some cases, the studied topic was not even mentioned at all, such as in some of the election manifestos by the Finns Party. To rectify this problem, we used matching documents, such as socio-political programs or family policy programs, from approximately the same years as the manifestos lacking data. Another limitation is that the approach focuses solely on the ‘input phase’ of policymaking (Nyby 2020), i.e., what parties want to achieve, without saying anything about the actual policymaking process or the political outcomes.

In the following section, we present our results by using text excerpts (translated from Finnish or Swedish by the authors) for substantiating our interpretations. The sources of these excerpts are available in the Appendix.

Results

The idea of using parental leave policy and leave quotas to enhance equality in the division of paid and unpaid work between spouses became increasingly visible in the election manifestos and other programs by Finnish parties during the 2010s. On a general level, the idea of a more equal role sharing between parents were seen in a positive light by all parties, but as expected,

the question as to whether such divisions should be shaped by state-regulated leave quotas or decided by parents themselves, created an ideological divide between left-wing and green parties being more in favour of such policies, and conservative parties being more ambivalent, or openly negative. Interestingly, we also found ideological change over time since conservative parties, except the Christian Democrats, became more positive towards the idea of using leave quotas over time. Table 1 presents an overview of the parties' positions in this matter.

[Table 1 near here]

Among the left-wing parties, the Left Alliance and the Greens took a clearer position for equal parental leave quotas than the Social Democrats. The first two parties also remained more stable in their positions than the third during the analysed time period. The introduction of equal leave quotas for parents were raised by the Left Alliance in its 2011 election manifesto as well as the Greens in their 2010 child policy program, and their 2011 election manifesto. Both parties proposed a total parental leave period of 18 months with a six-month leave quota for each parent accompanied by a six-month shareable leave period. To the Left Alliance, such quotas were seen as a matter of right, that is, the right of children and parents to share time together.

Children and parents have a right to spend time together. The possibility to use parental leave must be guaranteed for every parent, and economic factors cannot be allowed to interfere with this (Left Alliance, Election manifesto 2011, no page number).

Another main argument, most thoroughly elaborated by the Greens, was that this would give fathers incentives to take up parental leave, which would curb problems of gender inequalities in both family life and in the labour market, and distribute costs more equitable between female-dominated and male-dominated working places. It would also increase the wellbeing of the

family, strengthen the rights of children and fathers, and increase flexibility in leave uptake. Experiences from Sweden were seen as evidence for the effectivity of such policies.

The objective of the Greens' parental leave model is to increase family wellbeing and gender equality. We believe that a more equal sharing of care responsibilities will give us happier families with more endurance in relation to the everyday life /.../ The Greens support part-time use of parental leave, in more phases (such in Sweden) and during a longer time within a three-year period (Greens, Child policy program 2010, 2).

In the programs of the Social Democrats, gender equality was framed as something positive, but the party did not explicitly mention the use of leave quotas until its 2014 special program on family policy. In its election manifesto from 2011, there was only an indirect mention of the need to strengthen work-family balance, but no mention of specific reform needs in this area. However, in its 2014 special program on family policy and equality, the Social Democrats took a more similar position as the Left Alliance and the Greens by viewing parental leave quotas as an effective tool for increasing gender equality, and for spreading the costs more evenly between different employers. A similar leave model as the one suggested by the Left Alliance and the Greens was proposed, but with shorter quotas (a three-month leave quota for each parent, a one-month birth leave for the mother, and a nine-month shareable leave period). Also here, experiences from abroad were used as arguments for the efficiency of leave quotas in the pursuit of gender equality.

International comparisons, for example experiences from Sweden and Iceland, show that reserved leave quotas for fathers increase their care responsibilities. A considerable share of parental leave should be reserved for fathers (Social Democrats, Family policy program 2014, 10).

However, in 2019, the Social Democrats proposed a modified version of this model that would not only increase flexibility and make leave uptake more equal among parents, but that would

also make leave rights more available to other family constellations and remove the current child home care leave system. It suggested that the 3-month leave quotas for each parents and the benefit for the birth parent would remain the same, but that the shareable leave period would become shorter (6 instead of 9 months) and topped up by a one-year leave period, during which a flat-rate parental allowance would be paid and that would substitute the existing child home-care allowance (Social Democrats, Election manifesto 2019, 95–96). To change the child home care leave in this way, would have been concordant with the strong emphasis of public childcare services in Social-Democratic ideology, and to remove elements that might impede the promotion of gender equality and (maternal) employment according to a Social Investment logic (Nygård et al. 2019).

We can sum up the results so far by saying that the idea of gender equality as well as the idea of using legislated leave quotas to achieve higher equality in outcome between parents, played a visible role in the programs of the three left-wing parties. They all took positive positions on these matters, and their discourses were rather similar and remained relatively stable during the studied period, especially when it comes to the Left Alliance and the Greens. To a certain extent, all three parties drew on ideas from the Social Investment Paradigm by seeing state intervention as inevitable to create higher equality in leave uptake between parents, and to create a more equitable financing of parental leaves, even if this would increase state expenditures. However, mothers' employment was not framed as the most important objective, even if the Social Democrats put somewhat more emphasis on relieving mothers' struggles of work/family reconciliation than the two others. Instead, equal leave quotas were primarily framed as a matter of social justice and a securing of parents' and children's rights, not only for nuclear families, but also for other family constellations.

If we turn our attention to the right-wing parties, we can see that the National Coalition Party, the Centre Party, and the Finns Party constitute a rather ambivalent group of parties,

when it comes to increasing gender equality in parental leave policy. The National Coalition Party did not explicitly address the quota issue until 2017. It said nothing about the matter in its 2011 election program, or the 2015 strategic government program. Instead, it merely hinted that a reform of the leave system is needed for distributing the costs of parenthood more evenly, strengthening gender-equal parenthood and increase the employment among parents of small children. However, in its two family-related programs from 2017 and 2018, the party shifted position by proposing a three-month leave quota for each parent followed by a six-month shareable leave period. While the former was seen as crucial for higher gender equality as well as higher maternal employment, the latter safeguards flexibility and freedom of choice of parents.

[A] reserved quota is needed for increasing the parental leave uptake rate by fathers /.../ It also wants more freedom of choice into the leave system. Therefore, alongside quotas, parents can share the additional six parental leave months in a flexible way that they see best /.../ (The National Coalition Party, Families and working life program, 2017, 3).

This citation shows a combination of the idea of higher gender equality and traditional family values, but in the 2018 program (female) employment was framed as the main motive for such a reform: ‘Finland needs an ambitious reform /.../ that especially promotes female employment’ (Family policy program 2018, no page number). This suggests that the party became ideologically torn between traditional family values and ideas on gender equality, creating an internal division between more traditional and liberal groups within (Ylöstalo 2022). The most likely explanation behind this ideological shift is that the party started to consider leave quotas as a way to increase employment rates, but also to balance public budget deficits, and in the longer run, to save the welfare state. It also coincided with a wider political discussion launched by the Sipilä Centre-Right coalition that started in early 2016 between trade unions, employers and right-wing parties on how to safeguard the financial sustainability of the Finnish welfare

state. Allegedly, a reform of the leave system was needed to increase the employment rate and increase the financial sustainability of the Finnish welfare state (Elomäki et al. 2020). The existing child home care allowance was seen as an obstructing element in this respect. Therefore, in 2017, the party suggested a substitution of existing child home-care leave for a new and shorter 6-month care allowance that could be divided into halves and shared between parents for a year. This was seen as a way to promote mothers' re-entry into paid work after the insurance-based leave period.

Also, the Centre Party constructed gender equality as something positive on a general level, but initially, it took a vehemently negative position on the use of leave quotas. Historically, it had advocated reforms that extended the paternity leave, such as the reforms made under PM Vanhanen's and PM Kiviniemi's reign (2007–2011), but it did not support leave quotas or policies that might restrict parents' freedom of choice or curb the child home care allowance (Nyby 2020, Nyby et al. 2017). Consequently, in its 2011 election manifesto, there was a general acceptance the idea of a more equal sharing of caring duties between parents, but instead of supporting leave quotas, it saw the child home care allowance as a better way of achieving this objective by allowing parents to decide who cares for their small children. To legitimize this position, it drew on traditional family values, such as viewing the family as a sanctum freed from state involvement, and by defending parents' freedom of choice. As similar position was visible also in the 2015 election manifesto, as well as its family policy program from the same year.

Parental leaves and the home care of small children should facilitate child-caring solutions that are compatible with the values and choices of parents /.../ Because of this, the Centre Party /.../ opposes strict parental leave quotas for mothers and fathers (Centre Party, Family policy program 2015, no page number).

In its family program from 2016, the party suggests an extension of the existing fathers' quota from 2013 (58 days) and the shareable leave period, on the condition that the cost effects are carefully investigated. However, it also strongly emphasized that the system needs to become more flexible and less complicated, while simultaneously safeguarding parents' freedom of choice and the needs of different kinds of families (pp. 2–4). This indicates that the Centre Party shifted to a lukewarm position on the idea of leave quotas, but it did not support equal leave quotas for parents, and the discursive framing of these standpoints were still very much characterized by a traditional view on the family and gender roles. It also suggests that ideas on gender equality were ideologically challenging for the party and hard to reconcile with its traditional values, which also caused some internal divisions within the party (Ylöstalo 2022, Elomäki et al. 2020). However, since the party held the prime minister post of the Sipilä government, it could not refrain from giving some input to the discussion on the roles of quotas in the quest for higher employment that flared up 2016. In 2017, a working group was even launched to prepare for such a reform, but the work was cancelled in early 2018 (Elomäki et al. 2020).

Also in the programs by the nationalist-populist Finns Party, there was a similar change over time in the position on leave quotas. Similar to the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party started endorsing the idea of equal leave quotas, and the reason for this was probably identical as in the case of the National Coalition Party and the Centre Party. For the Finns Party, such an ideological concession was probably even more necessary, but also risky, since it did not want to jeopardize its (first-time) government position or to be seen as a party evading financial responsibility in a time of financial crisis (Kantola and Lombardo 2019).

However, if we look at its programs from the early-2010s, it was openly critical towards all kinds of state interventions in the family sphere, but did not explicitly mention parental leave quotas. For instance, in its 2015 family policy program, it used traditional family values to

implicitly question longer, or equal leave quotas, by supporting '[A] system that supports flexibility and freedom of choice for families instead of regulations and coercions from above' (p. 19). This supports previous research suggesting that nationalist-populist parties generally oppose ideas of gender equality and use different discursive techniques to oppose them (Kantola and Lombardo 2021, 2019). Moreover, together with the Centre Party and Christian Democrats, the Finns Party also vehemently defended the child home care allowance and opposed a reform of the system as proposed by the Katainen Right-Left coalition in 2014 (see Nyby 2020) .

[F]amilies with children are competent to make independent decisions. The compulsory division of the child home-care allowance is simply an unsustainable thought. We think that families know what the best way for them to organize childcare is (The Finns Party, Social and Health care program 2015, 19).

However, in 2017, the Finns Party changed position by proposing a 3-month quota for each parent with a 9-month shareable period. As mentioned above, this shift was probably conditioned by the political context, and the discussion about reforming the leave system that flared up in 2016. The use of equal quotas was legitimized implicitly as a way of creating a more equal work distribution between parents, but also as a way to increase maternal employment and to give children more time with their fathers (Family Policy Program 2017, 5). Yet there is a strong accentuation of flexibility in leave use and a condemning of 'rules that punish fathers that don't use their leave' (p. 5). And while the party declares to be supportive of gender equality, it still clings on to traditional views of the family as well as gender roles. For instance, it states that 'the family is the most important unit' (p. 3), 'that society cannot dictate choices of parents' (p. 3), and that 'gender equality cannot be promoted by depreciating the fact that the roles of the mother and the father are different, not least due to biology' (p. 4). Similarly, its support for the child home care allowance remained fast.

The only one of the seven studied parties that remained consistently negative to (equal) leave quotas was the Christian Democrats. In its elections manifestos from 2011 and 2015, it strongly defended traditional family values, flexibility in leave arrangements as well as the right for parents to decide over matters that concern the division of paid and unpaid work. Although they did not oppose the idea of gender equality or the idea of a more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work between parents per se, they saw (equal) leave quotas as an infringement upon the rights of parents, their (traditional) family roles, and their freedom to choose in matters of childcare. Like the Centre Party and the Finns Party, they also supported the child home care allowance, which they saw as an important tool for implementing this freedom in practice.

The Christian Democrats do not support leave quotas between parents, since this would infringe upon the freedom of choice and lead to unnecessary regulation (Christian Democrats, Family policy program 2018, 20)

As to the extent of ideational influence from the Social Investment on the conservative parties, such an influence was difficult to find, if there was even an influence to begin with. It is true that some of the conservative parties used a discourse legitimizing the use of (equal) leave quotas as a way to increase maternal employment. However, this seems to be more of a reflection of neoliberal or neo-conservative, ‘workfare’-inspired ideas emanating from the Sipilä-government’s strong focus on employment and employability as tools to balance public finances (cf. Ylöstalo 2022, Nygård et al. 2019).

Discussion

The article set out to analyse the politicization of parental leave policy and notably the idea of gender equality and leave quotas, among Finnish parties during the 2010s – a period that was characterised by a lively debate and some reform attempts to increase gender equality in the

work division between and leave uptake rate of parents. Based on our findings, the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, as expected, we found an ideological divide among parties as to the question of using parental leave quotas as a way for strengthening gender equality in working and family life. While the Left Alliance, the Greens, and the Social Democrats were the foremost advocates of using equal leave quotas for fathers as a way of increasing their leave uptake behaviour, conservative parties were reluctant in this respect, especially when it comes to the Christian Democrats, but also to some extent the Centre Party. In the case of the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party, the position towards using quotas was negative to begin with, but changed towards a more accepting position in the end of the studied period. Moreover, the idea of gender equality hold a stronger position in the programs of the left-wing parties than among the right-wing parties. In a way, it would be fair to say that the left-wing parties advocate an idea of gender equality that aligns with the notion of ‘equality in outcome’, in this case in terms of a more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work among parents. By contrast the right-wing parties under study can be said to support an idea of gender equality that is more in line with the principle of ‘equality in opportunity’ (Nygård and Nyby 2022)

This supports the political partisanship theory (e.g. Korpi and Palme 2003, Huber and Stephens 2001), even if the ideological divide corresponded more to a GAL-TAN spectrum than a classical left-right continuum (Hooghe et al. 2002). It also aligns with feminist literature showing that gender and gender equality are (still) contested ideas in social policymaking (e.g. Lombardo et al. 2010) as well as the ‘new politics’ and the literature on ideas by showing that parties started to acknowledge ‘new’ social risks’ and saw a reform of the leave system as a way to regulate such risks (Abou-Chadi and Immergut 2018, Häusermann 2018, Béland 2019).

Second, even if there were some similarities in how parties argued and legitimized their positions on gender equality and (equal) leave quotas, we found some traces of an ideational

influence from the Social Investment paradigm in the discourses used by left-wing parties and the Greens, whereas, such as framing the use of equal leave quotas as an investment in (future) parental and child wellbeing, rights, and work/family balance. We also found some references to the employment imperative inherent in the Social Investment paradigm in some of the programs of the Social Democrats. On the other hand, references to ‘best practices’ abroad, notably Sweden, were used by both left-wing and right-wing parties.

Among the conservative parties, on the other hand, the positions against (equal) leave quotas were mainly legitimized by using ideas relating to the family as a sanctum, principles of negative freedom, as well as parents’ rights to decide in matters concerning childcare and work division between parents. This does not of course mean that the principle of ‘freedom from state interference’ should be interpreted as the same as support for traditional values in every situation, since they constitute two separate principles and since they often are advocated both by conservative and liberal parties (e.g. Freeden 1996, Budge and McDonald 2006). These results corroborate findings from earlier research (e.g. Nyby et al. 2017, Hiilamo and Kangas 2009). By contrast, we found no explicit references to a Social Investment logic in these party programs, which of course does not mean that such influences did not exist. As noted in data and methods section, the data at hand was not the best for tracing such influences. Instead, we found that there was another ideational, or ideological, influence at play here and that influence related more to a neo-liberal/neo-conservative discourse on employment rates, public finances and the saving of the Finnish welfare state (cf. Ylösmäki 2022, Nygård et al. 2019). To what extent this discourse emanated from abroad, for instance the European Union or the OECD, or from the ideological outlook of the Sipilä government, is difficult to say, but the evidence shows that, from 2016 on, the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party, and also to some extent the Centre Party became more positive to using (equal) leave quotas in parental leave policy, since

these were viewed and beneficial for mothers' employment and therefore for the future sustainability of the welfare state. This brings us to the next conclusion.

Third, we see that partisan gender ideologies do not exist in a vacuum, or are devoid of change, since the conservative parties became more positive to gender equality, to leave quotas, or even to the idea of granting equal leave rights for parents, during the studied period. This ideological shift was not only related and conditioned to the political discussion going on around 2016 as well as the government constellation, but it also included a reframing of the policy idea of leave quotas, so it would fit in to the otherwise traditional gender ideologies and family values of these parties. The strained financial situation of the state, and the neoliberal/neoconservative political discourse on workfare and austerity policies that emerged in Finland around 2016 (Ylösmäki 2022, Nygård et al. 2019), created a momentum for these parties, and especially the Finns Party, to reframe the idea of (equal) leave quotas for strategic reasons, so that it became a solution to the financial problems of the state and low employment rates, and could be reconciled with the otherwise traditional views on families and gender in these parties. In other words, (equal) leave quotas were reframed primarily as a tool for increasing employment levels, and only indirectly, or even imaginatively, as a tool for enhancing gender equality (cf. Ylöstalo 2022, Kantola and Lombard 2021, 2019). Also the Social Democrats viewed (maternal) employment as important for the balancing of state finances, but it did not draw on this kind of neoliberal/neoconservative discourse, instead it saw employment more as a right, as a way to achieve higher wellbeing and as a way to reconcile work/family life in accordance with a Social Investment discourse on gender equality (Hemerijck 2013).

The observed ideological convergence between Left and Right, has probably been important for reaching the political consensus needed for the preparation of the 2021–2022 parental leave reform (Ylösmäki 2022, Nygård and Duvander 2021, Elomäki et al. 2020), even

if the reform also bear witness of a political compromise and ideological clashes between the two left-wing parties and the Centre Party. One evidence of such compromise is that the child home care allowance and leave system remained intact.

Appendix. Analysed documents

Suomi johon voit luottaa. Kristillisdemokraattien vaaliohjelma 2019.

Lapsiystävällinen Suomi. Kristillisdemokraattinen ohjelma lasten, nuorten ja perheiden hyvinvoinnin lisäämiseksi, 2018.

Kristdemokraternas riksdagsvalsprogram 2015.

Koti, uskonto, isänmaa. Tästä on kyse. Kristillisdemokraattien vaaliohjelma 2011-2015.

Vi tror på Finland. Samlingspartiets riksdagsvalprogram 2019.

Suomesta maailman paras maa lapsille ja perheille. Kokoomuksen Lapset ja Perheet-ohjelma 2018.

Kokoomuksen Perheet ja työelämä–asiakirja 2017.

Jos vanha tapa ei toimi, tarvitaan korjausliike. Kokoomuksen strateginen hallitusohjelma 2015.

Matkaopas hyvinvointivaltiota paremminvointivaltioon. Kokoomuksen eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2011.

Äänestä Suomi takaisin. Perussuomalaisten eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2019.

Perussuomalainen perhepolitiikka - suuntaviivoja ja uusia avauksia 2017.

Perussuomalaisten Sosiaali- ja terveystoimen ohjelma 2015.

Perussuomalaisten eduskuntavaaliohjelma. Pääteemat, 2015.

Suomalaiselle sopivin. Perussuomalaisten eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2011.

Suomen arvoisia tekoja. Keskustan vaaliohjelma 2019.

Keskustan perhepaketti. Keskustan tavoitteet perhevapaajärjestelmän uudistamiseksi 2016.

Perheiden pärjäämisestä kasvaa onnellinen Suomi. Keskustan linjaus lasten, nuorten ja perheiden hyvinvoinnista 2015.

Keskustan vaaliohjelma 2015.

Koko Suomi, kaikki suomalaiset. Keskustan vaaliohjelma 2011.

Inhimillinen, tasa-arvoinen ja reilu Suomi. SDP:n vaaliohjelma 2019.

Tulevaisuuslinja – SDP:n vaalitavoitteita ja muutoksen suunta 2030, 2019.

Riktning för Finland. Arbete, jämlikhet och trygghet. SDP:s valprogram 2015.

Tasa-arvo, vapaus ja solidaarisuus. Tasa-arvo sosialidemokratian kulmakivenä. SDP:n tasa-arvo-ohjelma 2014.

SDP:n perhepoliittinen tulevaisuusohjelma. Kasvu alkaa perheestä - lapsi- ja perheystävälliseen yhteiskuntaan, 2014.

Työ & oikeudenmukaisuus. SDP:n vaalijulistus 2011.

Millaisen huomisen haluat rakentaa? Näytä luontosi ja äänestä! Vihreiden eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2019.

Äänelläsi rakennetaan parempi huominen. Vaaliohjelma, eduskuntavaalit 2015.

Tasa-arvo ei ole valmis. Vihreiden tasa-arvopoliittinen linjapaperi, 21.9.2014

Uusi Suomi. Vihreät 2011.

Vihreitä lapsipoliittisia linjauksia, 2010.

Oikeudenmukainen suomi kaikille, ei harvoille. Vasemmistoliiton vaaliohjelma eduskuntavaaleissa 2019.

Vi återuppbygger välfärdsstaten. Vänsterns valprogram 2015.

Vasemmistoliiton eduskuntavaalien 2011 vaaliohjelma.

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Table 1

Table 1. Overview of party positions on the use of reserved leave quotas for fathers in Finland during the 2010s			
Party	2010-14	2015-18	2019-
Left Alliance	+	+	+
Greens	+	+	+
Social Democratic Party	+	+	+
Centre Party	(–)	(+)	(+)
National Coalition Party	N/A	+	(+)
Finns Party	(–)	+	(+)
Christian Democrats	–	–	–
Note: ‘+’ denotes a <i>positive</i> and ‘–’ a <i>negative</i> position on reserved leave quotas for fathers. Parentheses are used for denoting an indirect or implicit position.			

Although the liberal Swedish People's Party has received a somewhat higher average voter support than Christian

Democrats, we omitted it from the analysis due to its character as a primarily ethno-linguistic/cultural party advocating mainly language rights for the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (Mickelsson 2021).