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The costs of childcare for single parents:
Structural or political?

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Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) has expanded rapidly in Europe the last decades. Yet, huge cross-national variation exists in terms of availability, affordability and quality. Previous studies have emphasised the role of the political economy behind the cross-national variation, often using indicators as public expenditure and enrolment rates. However, using any of these indicators does not show how expensive childcare is for the user in the end. Other studies highlight structural forces, such as changing normative beliefs or declining fertility rates, to be driving forces behind policy change. Against this background, this thesis aims to account for cross-national variation in childcare fees, using The Net Childcare Costs dataset (OECD, 2021b) for the dependent variable. It includes the actual costs for childcare users, after tax deductions and benefits. Using a mix of cross-sectional and longitudinal data, it tests a series of hypotheses on the determinants behind the development of this policy. Its main conclusion is that left-parties in parliament before the 2000s are associated with lower childcare costs and that female employment is associated with lower childcare costs for the years 2004-2018.

Keywords: childcare, family policy, structural forces, political economy, ECEC

Introduction

Over the last two decades there has been a great increase in spending on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in European, OECD and Latin American countries (Arza, 2018; León et al., 2014). Child-centred social policies are seen as crucial for reducing inequalities over the life-course; especially for disadvantaged children, who benefit significantly when enrolled in childcare settings of high quality (Esping-Andersen et al., 2012; García et al., 2019). Also, available and affordable Early Childhood Education and Care is one of the most important policies to increase female labour force participation (Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017). However, using public spending on ECEC as indicator has its limitations, since it does not show how expensive childcare turns out to be for the user in the end.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, a beacon of twenty principles for a strong social Europe that is 'fair, inclusive and full of opportunity', declares that 'children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality'. Also, the European Commission has adopted a recommendation on five quality dimensions in childcare including governance, access, staff, educational guidelines, together with evaluation and monitoring (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Similar goals have been set by the OECD (OECD, 2018). About half of the member states now guarantee a place from age 3 and the numbers keep growing. Also, more and more countries make the last year of ECEC compulsory (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Such policy changes seem to have effect on participation rate – universal or near-universal participation is now the norm for 3-5-year-olds in the OECD and EU countries. Between 2005 and 2016 the average enrolment rate increased from 75% to 85%, approaching one of the education targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (OECD, 2018). Still, the development of ECEC varies across countries and often result in a trade-off between participation, affordability and quality (Arza, 2018; León et al., 2014). Across the EU, variation in childcare policy is huge and many countries are by far not near the policies that ensures high-quality childcare settings (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Only seven EU member states guarantee a publicly funded place in Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter *ECEC*)¹ from early age (6-18 months).

ECEC of high quality, with highly qualified staff and uniform policies, is mostly available in the Nordic, Baltic and Balkan regions. In these regions ECEC services are integrated,

¹ I use the term *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)* since it captures education and care in a broad sense. There are countries where the distinction between the two are sharp, but it may be more fuzzy in other countries where an overlap between preschool and day-care services exist (Ludovica et al., 2014).

whereas childcare and pre-primary education in many countries is separated until around age 3. Although, this line is blurring since many countries introduce educational guidelines or curricula for children under 3 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

By contrast, ECEC in English-speaking countries has historically not been widely available, with little public resources spent on childcare (O'Connor et al., 1999). Despite common goals for ECEC not all EU member states follow, since EU lack competence in this area – meaning the EU can only support, coordinate or complement member countries, it has no power to pass laws and may not interfere in the area of education. To overcome this, the European Parliament called on the European Commission and the European Union Member States in 2015 to introduce a child guarantee including free healthcare, free education, free childcare, adequate housing and nutrition with the aim to reduce child poverty (Frazer et al., 2020). Why then, are some countries closer to the goals set by the European Commission than others?

Previous studies have highlighted structural forces, such as changes in normative beliefs or declining birth rates, as driving forces behind cross-national variation in family policy. Such forces put pressure on policy-makers to implement ‘progressive’ work-family reforms (see for example: Blome (2006)). Other studies have emphasised the role of political economy, pointing out that political determinants, such as women’s representation and left-party in parliament, are important for expansion of ECEC (see for example: Bonoli & Reber, 2010)). Often times, such studies use public spending and enrolment rates indicators. However, these indicators are determined by policy design (availability and affordability) and by factors that affect the demand for ECEC, such as parental leave length and business cycles. What rights people have and the intention of the policies seems to be a more relevant indicator than the common used enrolment rates (Sirén et al., 2020). It could be that childcare is not affordable for all household groups or income-levels within a country. Using any of these indicators is especially a disadvantage if risk groups are in focus, since they are less likely to use childcare when it is costly or unavailable (Van Lancker, 2014).

This study proposes another comparison, using The Net Childcare Costs dataset provided by the OECD Benefit and Wages (OECD, 2021b). This data have, to my knowledge, not been used in any similar study. What makes it beneficial is that it includes the actual costs for childcare users, after tax deductions and benefits. It also indicates how user-fees differ between groups within *and* across countries. This indicator specifies one or more ideal-typical families (e.g., a single parent with two children aged two and three, working full-time for 67% of the national average wage). Such an indicator is preferred for comparative policy analysis (Clasen

& Siegel, 2007), since it allows the definition of the model households to stay constant in cross-national comparisons.

The thesis begins with a background on the importance with ECEC, followed by a discussion on the precarity of single-parents. Then a theoretical discussion follows with hypotheses formulated, which are used for my analyses. Then I explain the data and my regression models, together with my dependent and independent variables. Individual childcare costs are the main unit of analysis, in 30 European countries. After a review of the results from the models, a discussion is followed about its relevance.

Purpose and research questions

This study aims to test hypotheses about cross-national variation in childcare user-fees. Conducting a study like this one would provide us with better understanding on the variation in fees across countries and between groups within and across countries. These variations are important since, as I have argued, they affect participation rates and matter for reducing inequality.

To what extent do childcare costs for low-income parents vary between countries and how did they change between 2004 and 2018?

To what extent can political determinants and structural forces explain differences in childcare costs?

In the next section I give an historical background on the development of the welfare-state, with an emphasis on ECEC and its importance. I also take into account how ECEC matters for single-parents' households, to demonstrate the relevance of low costs.

Background

Historical development of the welfare-state

Most comparative welfare state research divides the history of the welfare state in two phases: an initial phase of construction and expansion between 1945 and 1970; and a second one between the mid 1970s upon the early twenty-first century, characterised by consolidation and retrenchment (Pierson, 2002). The 'big five' forms of social transfers in industrialised countries: sickness, work accident, old-age pensions, maternity and unemployment benefits, developed prior or during World War II (Wennemo, 1994). After World War II Social

democratic parties were willing to expand universal family policies, but down-prioritised in favour for core social insurance programs which by the time targeted male workers (Ohlander, 1991). In Social-democratic countries the dominant male-breadwinner model was eventually overtaken by the dual-earner model. To boost economic growth, maintain adequate fertility rates and ensure equal rights, major childcare and parental leave reforms were implemented during the 1970s (Hemerijck, 2012). In the 1990s many of the OECD countries ‘caught up’ and since has ECEC rapidly expanded in the OECD area (Bonoli & Reber, 2010). Today welfare states in the Western Hemisphere face great challenges, such as aging populations, low fertility rates and high unemployment rates (Birnbaum et al., 2017). ECEC is seen as an important factor to tackle these challenges and at the same time increase human capital (Ludovica et al., 2014). In the next section I discuss the benefits of ECEC from a social-right perspective.

The roles of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Early childhood education and care is one of the most important policy to overcome poverty and inequality. Material deprivation has a large impact on children: growing up in poverty hinders children’s development and limits their life outcomes (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Cognitive and non-cognitive development is boosted when enrolled in high-quality childcare (Van Lancker, 2018) and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly helped (García et al., 2019): the negative consequences of growing up in a poor or disadvantaged household are reduced (Leseman & Slot, 2014). These positive effects of ECEC are achieved when availability, affordability and high qualitative is upheld (Sirén et al., 2020). Also, it enhances gender-equality by enabling more women to participate in the labour market (Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017) and work longer hours (Andringa et al., 2015) in higher-paid occupations (Korpi et al., 2013).

No matter the intention behind a policy design, it many times leads to inequality in usage; government spending on social policy disproportionally accrue to middle- and upper-class relative to other social groups, a so called “Matthew effect” (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). This is also true in the ECEC context: children under age 3 are more likely to be enrolled in ECEC when coming from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, or when having a mother who has completed tertiary education. Thus, those who are most in need of childcare are least likely to use it. Women with tertiary education are more likely to be on the labour market and having a higher income than women without tertiary education, and therefore more likely to afford the childcare user-fees. In an OECD average 28% of children in the lowest

income tertial households are enrolled in ECEC, while over 44% in the top income tertial (OECD, 2018).

If the childcare user-fees are too high, low-income parents will not be able to use it. This means disadvantaged children are less likely to be enrolled in ECEC compared to their more advantaged peers (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). Single-parents tend to get higher benefits and pay lower childcare fees compared to couples with children. Still, single-parents often times pay more, sometimes substantially more, of their disposable income on childcare (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2020). When there is stratification in place, where higher income groups obtain higher quality childcare (in terms of hours, conditions etc), it can lead to reproduction of socio-economic inequalities (Arza, 2018). To achieve equity in childcare use, childcare places must then be expanded across the income distribution (Van Lancker, 2018).

In coordinated market economies, with high minimum wages and lower income inequality, some type of subsidy must be in place to make childcare affordable. In contrast to liberal market economies, where flexible wages have allowed the market to meet the demand (Bonoli & Reber, 2010). This subsidy can either be paid directly to the childcare provider (supply) or to the user (demand). ECEC enrolment was found less stratified in countries with (1) subsidised or public services, (2) where children were guaranteed a place in an ECEC centre, (3) where the user-fees were kept low, and (4) in countries where the quality of ECEC was viewed as high (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016).

Work-family and welfare policies can thus be motivated from a social rights perspective, since they provide better education outcomes for children in single-parent families (Hampden-Thompson & Pong, 2005) along with higher employability for parents. Rather than *repair* social investment seeks to *prepare* (Morel et al., 2011).

The precarity of single parents

Single parenthood in the EU area has increased from 12% to 14% between 2009 and 2019 and is more commonly headed by women (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Since the mid-1980s poverty rates have risen in many wealthy countries, especially for single-parent families, and most of the poverty increase has hit single parents (Alm et al., 2020). Single parents face a *triple bind* in terms of inadequate resources, employment and policy. Firstly, a single parent lacks additional resources provided by a second household earner, which “limits care, income, time and flexibility” (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018, pp. 7). Secondly, due to gendered inequality and increasingly precarious labour markets, where employment is insecure, is higher insecurity

in single-partner households a reality. Thirdly, social policies are not always adequate, although they often benefit the welfare of single parents (ibid).

Theory

Cross-national variation in social policy has been a lively topic for several decades. Most social scientific analyses involve some kind of comparison, although ‘comparative’ is typically reserved for studies of macro-units, often in the form of countries (Ragin, 2014). Comparisons between countries and over time gives us the possibility to study the causality of social change. This approach has a longstanding history within sociological research. A number of the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology used comparative research in their analyses of social change. Marx (1964) compared different societies to map the stages in the development of the relations of production and class struggle. Weber (1968) compared the economic ethnics of the five world religions to argue how and why rational economic ethic of capitalism advanced. Durkheim (1982) defined sociology as a comparative science - the existing experimental scientific method lacked appliance to whole societies, whereupon Durkheim developed a comparative method to explain social phenomena.

Comparative research can provide us with insight of how institutional development and institutions affect living conditions and a longitudinal approach can enrich such an analysis. The possibility to explain institutional variation and change within social settings and over time is a great strength of comparative research. A study limited to cross-sectional data for a single country makes it difficult to measure the relationships between institutions and outcomes, since temporal variation in single-country institutions and state-legislated social policy over time is limited (Ferrarini, 2003, p. 9). Analysing fields such as ECEC does not only describe the differences between countries, but aim to test why these differences exist.

Variation in policy can be tested by identifying potential underlying causes, so called driving forces – factors that causes something to happen. Goodin (1996) laid out three ways in which social institutions develop. First, institutions may develop without any larger causal mechanisms as driving force. Second, they may evolve and become the best fit in their particular social environment after a given time. Third, institutional change may be driven by agents - individuals or organized groups. Goodin (1996) points out that social or institutional change almost always include parts of all three. Rarely do theories on the development of the welfare state argue that social policy institutions came to be without any driving forces.

Several theories aim to explain change in social policy: Functionalists explain social and economic circumstances as driving forces to changes in welfare state policy (Bonoli, 2007). Historical institutionalism emphasises the role of institutional constraints (veto points) along with policy legacies (path dependency), which claims that a certain policy direction is harder to reverse or change when it has been taken, because such a swift will be more costly. In this context less efficient outcomes can persist, because of the imminent cost of changing paths. This concept was transformed to the political science field by Paul Pierson (Pierson, 2000). In sociology the so-called ‘power resource approach’ (Korpi, 2006) see welfare state institutions as products of a class-struggle.

While these are useful explanations in analysing policy reforms in various social policy areas, they struggle to account for variation in work-family policy reforms in many European countries. Therefore, Blome (2016) argues that these explanations for policy change have important implications, but they are unable to explain more recent examples when countries with similar traits develop differently. Instead, she proposes two recent theories in welfare state theory: the impact of normative beliefs and the dynamics of party competition. These theories, together with the Power-resource approach, will be further developed in the next sections. The different theory sections also interweave plausible hypotheses for empirical testing in my analysis section.

The Power-Resource Approach

Korpi (1974) laid out the theoretical background to what later became ‘the power-resources approach’. Power resources are defined by Korpi as “characteristics which provide actors – individuals or collectivities – with the ability to punish or reward other actors” (Korpi, 2006, p. 77). The resources can be described in a variety of dimensions: power resources can vary in different domains, meaning the number of people who are amenable to rewards and penalties; they can differ in range – situations where they can be in use; and also, differ in the degree of scarcity of a particular power resource. Moreover, they can be more or less important to people in their everyday life. They also differ in terms of how easily they can be converted into other resources and making it ready to use. They do not need to be activated to have effect.

Pluralists on the other hand advocate for a variety of economic and ideological groups, rather than a single influential group. There are two types of power resources relevant for the disagreement between pluralists and Marxist social scientists. The first type is capital and control of the means of production. The latter type is ‘human capital’ which can be labour power, education and occupational skills. From a pluralist approach, a person with control over

capital and means of production does not have substantially greater power resources than persons with only human capital. Korpi (2006) argues that capital and control of the means of production are arguably different from human capital, why parity in-between is extremely problematic. In contrast to capital and means of production human capital is limited. In order to be effective human capital must be co-ordinated on a broad basis, which requires organisations where collective action can be executed. Alongside capital and means of production, unions and political parties, function as organizations where wage-earners' actions are co-ordinated – these constitutes strategically important power resources in capitalist economies (Korpi, 2006, p. 77).

Differences in socioeconomic class is due to the power resources the people control, along with life-course risks for individuals differently positioned on socioeconomic level, Korpi (2006) writes. Welfare state development is then likely to be determined by “class-related distributive conflict and partisan politics” (Korpi, 2005, p. 168). The people with higher life-course risks tend to have lower individual resources to tackle risks, which legitimates the existence of class-related collective action. Political parties with their base in the working class are expected to be in favour of a welfare state development with a market higher controlled.

This approach was developed throughout the 70s and 80s, followed by the works of John Stephens and Gøsta Esping-Andersen, and has since been prominent in social policy research. In short, countries with strong trade unions and strong left-winged parties tend to develop larger welfare programs. Initially it focused on traditional post-war welfare states, where protection of the income of wage-earners and their protection thorough healthcare, parental leave and other programmes were in focus. Massively famous is Esping-Andersen's book *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), containing a model with three types of welfare regimes: a liberal, a social-democratic and a conservative type. His work has been highly influential in the field but has also been subject to criticism. Korpi & Palme (1998) argue Esping-Andersen's typology is useful for descriptive purposes, but less so with explanatory studies. Esping-Andersen was primarily interested in describing the relationships among states, labour markets and families. Because of that, both outcomes and institutions are part of his typology. For analytical purposes Korpi & Palme instead propose a use of purely institutional indicators of central domains of social insurance systems in their typology. The institutional factors can then be explained by political factors and casually explained by certain outcomes such as income inequalities (Korpi & Palme, 1998).

One attempt to use the power-resource approach (hereafter *PRA*) on the cross-national variation of childcare has been made by Bonoli & Reber (2010). They argue a strong left and

women's political influence are associated with higher levels of childcare supply. By looking at the representation in labour movements, political parties, parliaments and governments this can be tested. Women in parliaments are expected to be in favour of promoting family policy from a strict rational choice perspective, given mothers are key beneficiaries of childcare. Theoretically, the Social-democrats have reasons to be both for and against childcare expansion: expanded childcare services with its increasing supply of workers could lead to downward pressure on wages, which would not be in the interest of the traditionally voter's base of industrial workers. However, over time the traditional voter's base has shrunk due to deindustrialisation. In order to attract more voters, Social-democratic parties are forced to make party policies more attractive to women. It is only in the context of shrinking worker's base and an orientation towards female voters such a hypothesis is valid, Bonoli & Reber (2010) argue. Derived from this theory discussion two hypotheses for my analysis can be formulated:

Higher shares of left parties in parliament are associated with lower individual net childcare user-fees.

Higher shares of women in parliament are associated with lower individual net childcare user-fees.

Korpi's Family Policy Typology

Mainstream analyses of inequality and welfare states have also been criticised by feminist scholars for their unilateral focus on class and lack of gender aspects. Yet, few argued class to be replaced by gender. Rather gender was seen as one of the important factors in the analyses of inequality and welfare states. Lewis' (1992) concept of male breadwinner regimes recognize how social policy to some degree is directed to families with a housewife and a full-time male earner, but at the same time acknowledge women as workers. To make Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology more gender-sensitive, Siaroff (1994) mixes family policy institutions and labour market inequalities. The male breadwinner regime concept was pointed out as one-dimensional by Sainsbury (1996), incapable of explaining variation between welfare states. Instead, she proposes a model based on a number of dimensions of social policy, with a distinction between a male breadwinner model and an individual model. The many attempts to develop a gender sensitive typology had their shortcomings (Ferrarini, 2003). A clear advance from these attempts were Korpi's (2000) gender-sensitive family policy typology, where class and gender were integrated into a macro-level analysis of different dimensions of inequality.

The model is explicitly two-dimensional, separated in either support for a traditional family or support for a dual-earner family. Family policy institutions are arranged in two categories, either supporting a breadwinner family or a dual-earner family. The two types are expected to structure the agency of parents differently. The first support a male-breadwinner model, with the man active on the labour market and the women assigned to care work outside the labour market. Whereas the dual-earner model seeks to extend the mother's capabilities to participate on the labour market and encourage fathers to take larger responsibility of the care work. The conditions for single-parents differs depending on the model. In the breadwinner model single-parents are not expected to work and is thereby given sufficient means in terms of benefits and allowances to support their household. In a dual-earner model single-parents are expected to work and are sometimes given benefits to cover the higher living costs a single-earner household faces (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

Korpi's typology reflects strengths of different political ideologies. To make impact on policy, not only the relative strength is of importance, also a party needs to be in government position for a relatively long time, Korpi argues. To understand the influence of a political tendency one can look at the average of political strength over time (Korpi, 2000). Welfare states characterized by a dual-earner model were dominated by left parties in the post-war period. Confessional parties have tended to advocate for social norms, values and policies supporting the traditional family type and general family support. Conservative and/or centrist parties on the other hand, often favoured noninterventionism and market-oriented solutions. Derived from this theory I hypothesise:

Higher shares of confessional parties in parliament are associated with higher individual net childcare user-fees.

Structural pressures and policy responsiveness

Blome (2016) analyses work-family policy reforms in Germany and Italy and offers another explanation behind why welfare states reform and what drives social policy change. The two countries have a longstanding tradition of the male-breadwinner model and are now facing similar pressures from low fertility rates and low female labour force participation rates, together with aging populations. Such pressures forces parties to take action, Blome argues. In the beginning of the 2000s, Germany implemented family policy reforms, such as expanded public childcare and a reformed parental scheme, whereas only minor changes were implemented in Italy.

Social Democratic parties have traditionally tended to favour gender equality and promote equal opportunities on the labour market, whereas Christian Democratic parties tend to be against an expansion of work-family policies. This however does not explain why the family policy reforms were implemented at that specific time: The Social Democratic Party (SPD) had been in office for seven years before most of the work-family policies were implemented. Also, the work-family policy reforms were led by the Christian-Democratic Party (CDU) Minister for Family Affairs. Blome argues that partisan and power-resource approach still are relevant, but claim they are unable to fully explain the different policy outcomes in Italy and Germany. One limitation to the power resource approach is that it implies stable electoral patterns and stable beliefs of the parties' voters. Instead, Blome builds upon recently developed concept in welfare state theory: 'Normative Beliefs, Parties and Policy responsiveness'.

Blome argues that Germany saw a shift in normative beliefs from the 1990s, where the dominated 'care ideal' associated with staying-home mothers was replaced by the dual-earner model, which putted stress on the political parties. The SPD and CDU continued to hold support from their core voters, both sharing a more traditional view on mothers' employment. These groups did, however, diminish in size, forcing the parties to apply to other groups of voters. The SPD initiated several family policy reforms and was able to attract more progressive voters (many of them women). In order for the CDU to compete in the context of an increasing demand for more progressive work-family policies, the CDU launched two major reforms. Thus, to compete for (progressive) voters and increase female labour force employment, political parties implement reforms such as cheaper and more available childcare. When childcare is publicly available and affordable, more mothers can enter the labour market. Therefore, I expect that:

Higher shares of women in employment are associated with lower individual net childcare user-fees.

This study will use the power-resource approach, since it is applicable to female agency and gender dimensions, particularly the relation between organised women's interests and family policy legislation outcome (Ferrarini, 2003). It can be used to explain different gender outcomes, such as cross-national variation in ECEC user-fees. I also take in the work of Blome (2016) to explain how structural forces may play a part in changes in ECEC policy in Europe.

Data and methods

Target population

This study includes 30 European countries: the twenty-seven EU countriesⁱ, as well as Norway, Iceland and the United Kingdom. My focus on European countries makes it possible to conduct longitudinal analyses, since data on childcare costs is available over a considerably long period of time.

Dependent variable

To examine cross-national variation in user-fee costs for childcare services, the ‘OECD Net childcare cost for parents using childcare’ (2021b) was chosen. This indicator measures the net costs of full-time centre-based childcare, after benefits reducing the gross childcare fees have been accounted for, including childcare allowances, tax concessions, fee rebates or increased benefits of other kinds. Data are available for five years between 2004 and 2020 for thirty-eight OECD countries, together with six additional non-OECD economies (OECD, 2021b). This indicator provides us with a measure of the costs after any benefits designed to reduce gross childcare fees for parents using full-time centre-based childcare. The costs can be expressed in purchasing-power parity (PPP) adjusted US dollars, as percentage of the national average wage, or as a percentage of the family net disposable income. The model family approach is based on simulations of different family types, both couples and lone parents assumed having two children aged 2 and 3. It is simple and reflects common family types in post-industrial countries, making it a great indicator to ensure comparability. Given my focus on single mothers the dependent variable is limited to a single-parent household with 2 children. The wage indicator is set to 67% of the national average wage, to best capture how expensive childcare user-fees is for low-income single-parent households. The user-fee cost is operationalised as percentage of net household income.

In many European countries, low-income families receive additional public childcare support, resulting in lower net costs. In some countries additional support for single parents is in place (OECD, 2021b). In these countries low-income single parents often spend less on childcare in absolute terms, but more of their disposable income compared to dual-earner couples (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Therefore, I test if there is any targeted policy in place, by also running analyses with a dual-earner household on national average wage as dependent variable. It is not possible to distinguish between gender in the dataset, which means it is not possible to specify the indicator as single mother. I still see the indicator as plausible for my analysis, since the vast majority of single parents in the EU are women: 11% of the EU

households with children are headed by women and 3% by men (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). In addition, the purpose of model household types is not to get to the details of living conditions but compare policy indicators.

Independent variables

My independent variables can be sorted into two categories: political variables and women's representation. To test my four hypotheses I include the 'Quality of Government Standard Dataset' (Teorell et al., 2020) and the 'LFS – Sex and Age Indicators' dataset (OECD, 2021a). The two datasets include parliament representation and female labour force participation rate. From the Quality of Government Standard Dataset, I choose variables for religious, right, conservative, left-socialist, and social-democratic parties, together with share of women in parliament.

The indicators from the Quality of Government Standard Dataset date back as far as to the 1960s for some countries, up until 2018. The LFS dataset have data from 2000 to 2019. Female labour force participation rate is limited to age 15-64, which is a commonly used group in studies like mine. I use a variable indicating strength of left parties: this measures the representation in parliament of both social democratic and socialist parties. The use of parliament representation over cabinet share is a discussion without a definite answer. Bonoli & Reber (2010) prefer parliamentary representation for three reasons. They argue that cabinet shares underestimate the influence of strong opposition parties; that cabinet shares in countries with majoritarian institutions overestimate 'the extent of variation in the political influence of the relevant actors'; and that multiparty systems can result in a strong opposition where policies are veto'd. Following that logic, I also chose parliament representation.

As control variable I add the GDP per capita, PPP2017 (constant international \$) indicator from the World Bank (2021), available for the years 1990 to 2019. This indicator provides per capita values for gross domestic product (GDP), expressed in current international dollars and adjusted for purchase power parity (PPP). GDP is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources. GDP per capita is an important indicator of economic performance and useful for cross-country policy comparisons, because it can affect the generosity of social insurances.

Countries and years

With all datasets combined, I am left with 30 European countries over 14 years (2004-2018), with observations for the years 2004, 2008, 2012, 2015 and 2018. Cyprus was excluded due to missing data. A few countries miss data for a certain year, which leaves the historical model with 22 observations and the country-fixed models with 140 observations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and sources

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Source
Net Childcare Costs	200	10.2	9.791	0	51	OECD (2021b)
Female employment rate	170	67.93	7.962	40.4	85.4	OECD (2021a)
Religious parties	140	11.13	15.04	0	50.7	Teorell et al., (2020)
Women in parliament	200	27.88	10.065	8.7	47.3	Teorell et al., (2020)
Left parties	140	35.77	16.519	2	103	Teorell et al., (2020)
GDP per capita (PPP)	200	44340.54	18187.64	17774	114323	World Bank (2021)

Analysis procedure

The analysis part contains a country-fixed model and a historical model. Net childcare costs indicator as used here is time-series cross-section data (Beck, 2001), with repeated observations for the same fixed units (here, 30 European countries). Time-series cross-sectional analysis is used to simultaneously analysing time-series of repeated observations in more than one country (Kittel 1999:247). Another possibility is to use a random-effects model, which arguably is the better choice in most research scenarios (Bell et al., 2019). However, to forego fixed effects estimation exposes me to potential omitted variable bias instead. Therefore, I see a fixed-effects model better suited for my study, since it fits well in an analysis of political determinants of net childcare costs across time and space.

Relative strength is an important factor when analysing causality in policy change. Another one is cumulative strength over time. Korpi (2000) argues that parties need to be represented over a relatively long time to make impact on policy. Therefore, I include a historical model, which measure historical influence of political determinants and structural forces over time. The independent variables are calculated as mean of the years 1992 to 2003, and the dependent

variable fixed at year 2004. The female labour force participation rate is only available from year 2000 and the mean is therefore calculated from 2000 to 2003. Ideally, I would go even further back in time, following the logic of the length of party-representation, as put forward by Korpi (2000). Having said that, several of the countries in my sample did not exist prior to the 1990s and the authors of the QoG dataset have decided not to include data that was available for a country before that country became independent (Teorell et al., 2020). One strategy here would simply be to exclude the ‘newer’ countries, which is common practice in many studies. Nonetheless, I argue it is time to include all European countries in studies like mine.

Ethical considerations

The data and generated indicators will not include any sensitive data; the data is public and cannot identify any person. I will use syntax in the R software, which will increase reproducibility of the study.

Analyses

Figure 1. Net childcare costs for single parents (67% of AW), 30 countries, 2004-2020.

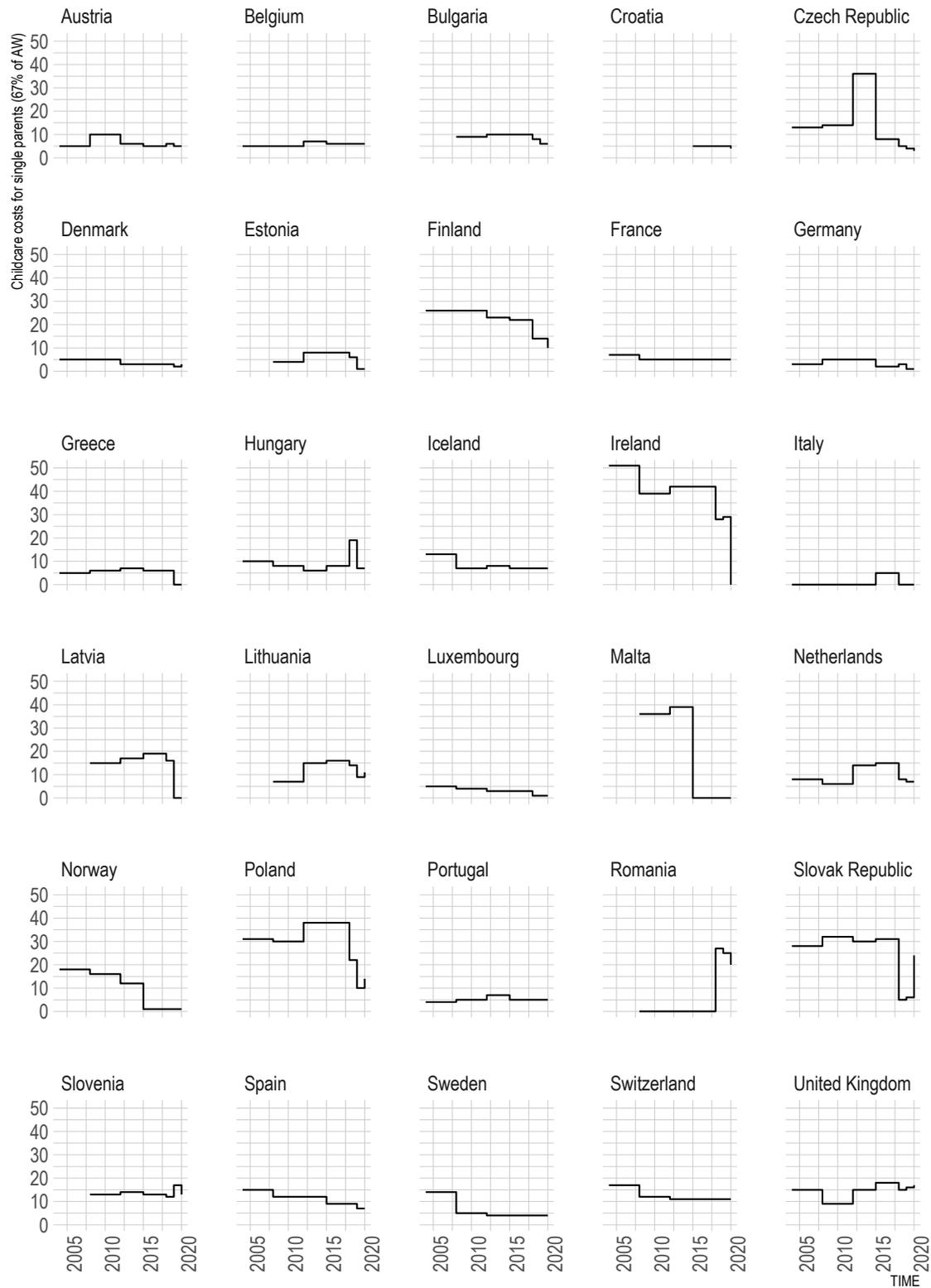


Figure 1 displays the ECEC user-fees for a single-parent (67% of average wage) for the years 2004 to 2020, showing a clear downturn in user-fees for most countries. However, the results are a little scattered: while most countries have lowered their user-fees over time, some countries have had years where the user-fees have increased quite significantly, namely in Czech Republic or Slovak Republic. Some countries have very low or even zero user-fees, such as Malta and Italy. While that is so, it does not say anything about enrolment rates nor quality of the childcare settings. In other words, free childcare could potentially be available for limited hours and only to a fraction of the eligible population.

Figure 2. Association between parliament representation of left-parties and ECEC user-fees for single parents (67% of AW), 2004-2018.

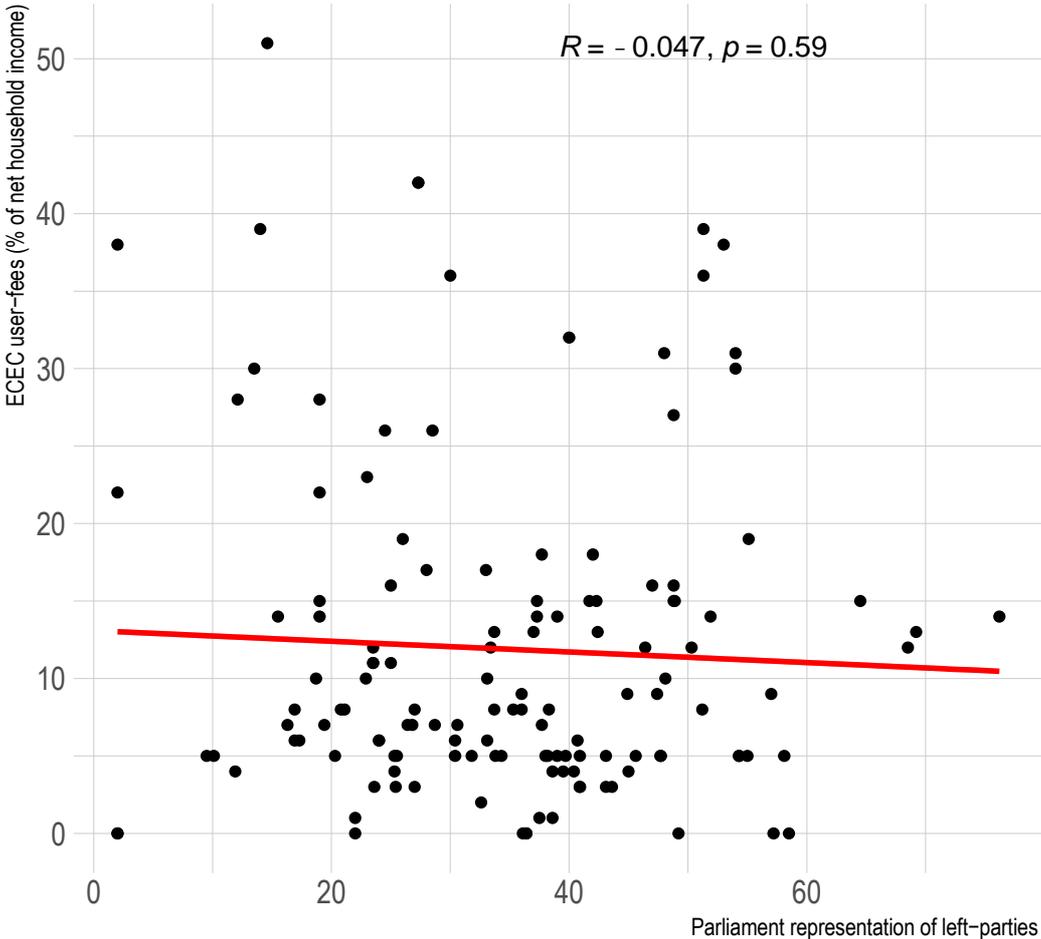


Figure 2 shows the association between representation of left-parties in parliament and net childcare costs for a low-income single-parent household. Greece is omitted, since according

to the data, left-parties in 2015 and 2018 held more than 100 percent of the seats. The results are not significant.

Figure 3. Association between women in employment and ECEC user-fees for single-parents (67% of AW), 2004-2018.

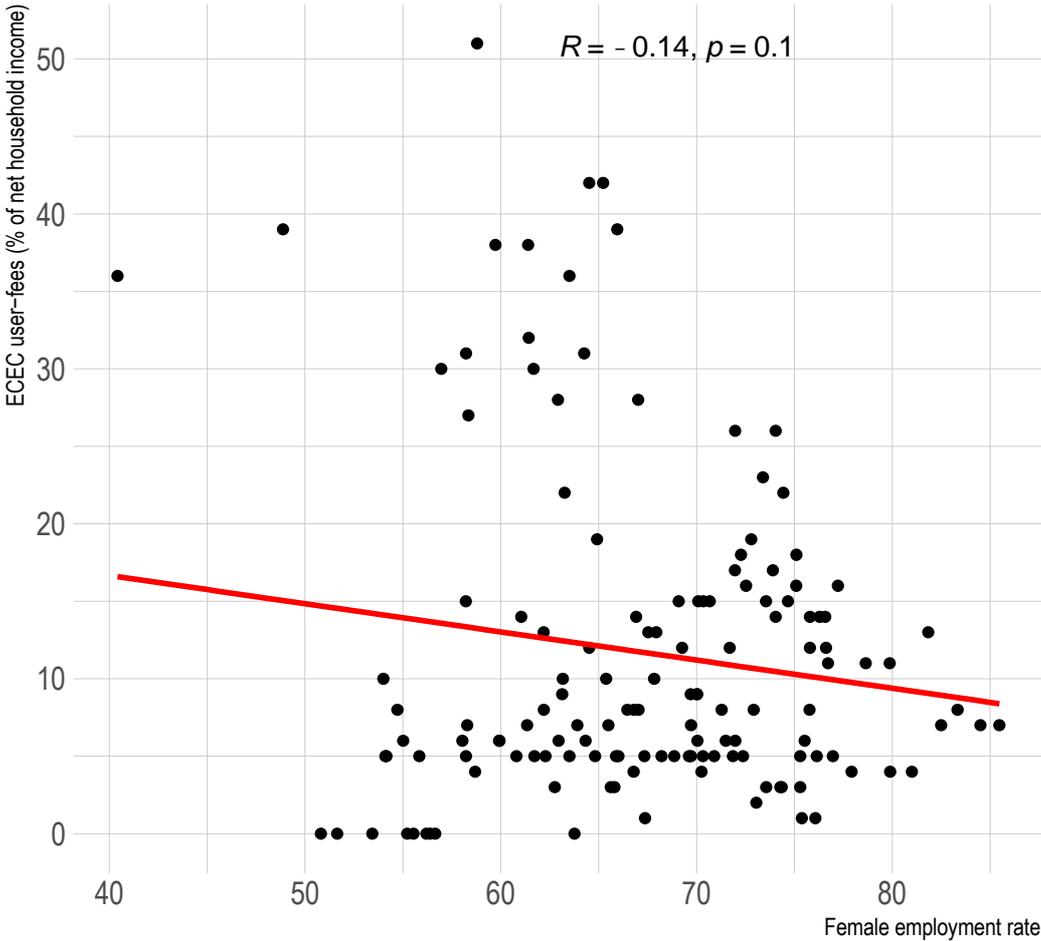


Figure 3 shows the association between the rate of women employed and net childcare costs for a low-income single-parent household. The result indicates a negative correlation between female employment rate (high) and childcare costs (low).

Historical model

Table 2. Net childcare costs (single parent, 67AW) regressed on structural and political determinants. 22 countries, 2004.²

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	<i>Net Childcare Costs, single-parent, 67AW, 2004</i>					
	costs					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Left-parties	-0.422*					-0.456*
	(0.215)					(0.249)
Female employment		0.140				0.382
		(0.275)				(0.429)
Religious-parties			0.011			0.079
			(0.207)			(0.260)
Women in parliament				-0.069		-0.117
				(0.252)		(0.399)
GDP per capita (PPP)					-0.0002	-0.0003
					(0.0002)	(0.0002)
Constant	29.428***	4.637	13.406***	15.066**	20.998***	17.823
	(8.447)	(17.731)	(3.737)	(6.138)	(6.796)	(26.604)
Observations	22	22	22	22	22	22
R ²	0.161	0.013	0.0001	0.004	0.065	0.303
Adjusted R ²	0.119	-0.037	-0.050	-0.046	0.018	0.085
Residual Std. Error	11.116 (df = 20)	12.058 (df = 20)	12.135 (df = 20)	12.113 (df = 20)	11.734 (df = 20)	11.329 (df = 16)
F Statistic	3.837* (df = 1; 20)	0.258 (df = 1; 20)	0.003 (df = 1; 20)	0.075 (df = 1; 20)	1.391 (df = 1; 20)	1.390 (df = 5; 16)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1 shows how the dependent variable ‘Net Childcare Costs’ for a single-parent earning 67% of an average wage in year 2004 is associated with average calculated independent variables between the years 1992 and 2003. The results corroborate the hypothesis that left-parties in parliament are associated with lower ECEC user-fees. Representation of left-parties in parliament over a longer period seems to be an important factor for policy change, in line with Korpi’s (2000) reasoning. Bonoli & Reber (2010) together with Blome (2006) argue that Social democratic parties have been forced to make policies attractive to women, since their traditional voter’s base has shrunk - lower ECEC user-fees is one example of that, since such

² This model was also run with Greece omitted and the results are substantially the same.

benefits are expected to benefit women foremost (Bonoli & Reber, 2010). Given I had included data from pre-1990s this association could potentially be less strong, since family policies had not been developed on a large scale at the time - it is only until the recent decades there has been a large expansion in the family policy field over whole Europe (Bonoli & Reber, 2010). Only the social-democratic countries had large work-life policies implemented pre-1990s (Wennemo, 1994). While left-party representation is associated with lower fees, religious party representation is not significant, which does not confirm my hypotheses. Also, neither women in parliament nor female employment is significant.

Country-fixed effects

Table 3. Net childcare costs (single parent, 67AW) regressed on structural and political determinants. 28 countries, 2004-2018.³

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> <i>Net Childcare Costs, single-parent, 67AW, 2004-2018</i>					
	costs					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Left-parties	0.100** (0.047)					0.075 (0.045)
Female employment		-0.673*** (0.177)				-0.526** (0.227)
Religious-parties			0.247* (0.130)			0.119 (0.125)
Women in parliament				-0.101 (0.134)		0.138 (0.139)
GDP per capita (PPP)					-0.001*** (0.0001)	-0.0002 (0.0002)
Constant	3.067 (3.194)	52.719*** (12.504)	-1.439 (4.973)	9.626* (5.131)	32.929*** (7.996)	45.104*** (14.294)
Observations	140	140	140	140	140	140
R ²	0.727	0.748	0.724	0.717	0.744	0.767
Adjusted R ²	0.651	0.679	0.649	0.639	0.674	0.691
Residual Std. Error	6.224 (df = 109)	5.970 (df = 109)	6.249 (df = 109)	6.335 (df = 109)	6.018 (df = 109)	5.860 (df = 105)
F Statistic	9.656*** (df = 30; 109)	10.810*** (df = 30; 109)	9.552*** (df = 30; 109)	9.193*** (df = 30; 109)	10.580*** (df = 30; 109)	10.139*** (df = 34; 105)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
All models use country-fixed effects

Table 2 shows how the dependent variable ‘Net Childcare Costs’, for a single-parent earning 67% of an average wage for the years 2004-2018 is associated with independent variables in a country-fixed effects model. Left parties are significant together with female employment. In contrast to table 1 the left parties variable is not associated with lower ECEC user-fees. This is somewhat contra-intuitive, but not all that surprising since party-labels does not have the same meaning in all countries and over time (Mudge, 2018). This could possibly also be explained

³ This model was also run with Greece omitted and the results are substantially the same.

by the very functioning of the fixed effect-model, where change over time in a given country is measured. In Romania the Social-democratic party have the largest share of seats over the 2000s and has been in office from 2012 to 2019. Still, the ECEC user-fees increased significantly in 2016, reaching 30 percent of a single-parent's disposable income. In countries where user-fees already are low, there will not be such a strong effect.

The female employment rate shows a strong negative correlation, which confirms my hypothesis that women in employment is associated with lower ECEC user-fees. In table 1 the historical levels are measured, which indicate left party representation between 1992 and 2003 has had great impact on lowering ECEC user-fees. In this model the driving force behind lower ECEC user-fees rather seem to derive from an increase in female labour force participation rate. Blome (2006) argues structural forces, such as normative change and increasing female employment, put stress on policy-makers. This together with shrinking traditional voters base force political parties to implement work-life policy, in order to attract more progressive voters, which can be an explanation behind these results.

Women in parliament does not support the hypothesis, which contradicts the belief of Bonoli & Reber (2010) that women in parliament is the most important factor for emerging family policy, since women are key beneficiaries of childcare. Religious party representation is significant in model 3, but not in the full model (model 5).

Among the countries with strong left party support around the time of 2004, it seems lowering the ECEC user-fees was a priority. Between 2004 and 2018, parties no matter the label, lowered the ECEC user-fees. This is notable in various countries such Norway, Ireland and Malta. This can likely be explained by various structural forces that putting pressures on the policy-makers. Even though some of the countries with strong left party representation still have significantly higher user-fees than others, it is nowhere close to the levels in countries with a long tradition of strong conservative or religious support. In Ireland the user-fees in 2004 were close to 50% of the disposable income, in Malta, Poland and Slovak Republic more than 30%.

Country-fixed effects

Table 4. Net childcare costs (single parent, 67AW) regressed on structural and political determinants. 28 countries, 2004-2018.⁴

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> <i>Net Childcare Costs, dual-earner couple, AW (2004-2018)</i>					
	costs					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Left-parties	0.058** (0.028)					0.053* (0.028)
Female employment		-0.210* (0.109)				-0.189 (0.140)
Religious-parties			-0.046 (0.077)			-0.102 (0.077)
Women in parliament				-0.016 (0.079)		0.083 (0.086)
GDP per capita (PPP)					-0.0002** (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)
Constant	3.058 (1.879)	19.483** (7.694)	6.453** (2.968)	5.521* (3.025)	15.196*** (4.854)	23.400*** (8.817)
Observations	140	140	140	140	140	140
R ²	0.819	0.818	0.812	0.812	0.820	0.830
Adjusted R ²	0.769	0.768	0.761	0.760	0.770	0.775
Residual Std. Error	3.662 (df = 109)	3.674 (df = 109)	3.730 (df = 109)	3.735 (df = 109)	3.653 (df = 109)	3.615 (df = 105)
F Statistic	16.450*** (df = 30; 109)	16.323*** (df = 30; 109)	15.727*** (df = 30; 109)	15.673*** (df = 30; 109)	16.546*** (df = 30; 109)	15.099*** (df = 34; 105)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
All models use country-fixed effect

Table 3 shows how a dual-earner couple, both earning a national average wage, for the years 2004-2018 is associated with independent variables in a country-fixed effects model. The results are coherent with the results in table 2. Female employment shows a negative correlation, but not as much as in table 2. This can potentially be explained by policy targeted towards low-income earners and single-parents in many European countries (OECD, 2021b).

⁴ This model was also run with Greece omitted and the results are substantially the same.

Left-parties show a slight positive correlation. The religious independent variable is significant in model 3, but not when controlled for in the full model (model 5).

Discussion

There is a trend in Europe where more and more countries expand childcare and lower the user-fees. This trend is the result of several driving forces, both political and structural. In this study I have tested hypotheses behind cross-national variation in childcare user-fees. The purpose of the study was twofold: to display to what extent childcare costs for low-income parents vary between countries and how they have changed between 2004 and 2018; and to what extent these variations can be explained by structural forces and political determinants.

The results from the historical model indicate that cumulative left party representation during the 1990s was important for lower user-fees, which confirms my hypothesis of left-party representation as driving force. The continuous trend of lower user-fees is however not driven by left parties, religious parties nor women's presence in parliament. Thus, there is no obvious political determinant behind why certain countries lower their fees over the period of my data. Other political determinants, not included in this study, may play a role in explaining the cross-national variation in childcare cost.

This contradicts the main findings in Bonoli & Reber (2010), who identified female representation as the main driving force behind public spending on childcare. It is important to note that my study have a different timeline than Bonoli & Reber: given my data only covers the years after the transformation of Social Democratic policies into a more market-oriented, neoliberal, one can expect ideology to matter less. With other words, party labels do not have the same meaning across times and places (Mudge, 2018). Due to de-industrialisation Social Democratic parties have lost their traditional voting base, due to secularisation confessional parties cannot longer rely on religious voters and put in front of the dilemma of having to choose between traditional gender roles or introduce work-family policies. The parties themselves may have their own objectives and move in the direction where they can claim the most votes. This was particularly the case in Germany, where the Christian Democratic party (CDU) introduced large-scale family-policy reforms in early 2000s (Blome, 2016).

Rather, my findings are more in line with Blome (2016), who analyses how changes in women's preferences in Germany lead to work-family reforms. When the dominant norm of traditional families changed into a dual-earner norm, it put pressure on policy-makers, Blome argues. The political parties, on the other hand, faced shrinking voting bases and needed to compete over the progressive voters to win the election. According to my results, increasing

rate of women in employment seems to be the single most important driving force behind lower ECEC user-fees in Europe over the last two decades. The fixed-effects model suggests this effect exists both across space and time. However, it is important to note that this effect be a matter of reverse causality, which therefore leads us to the ever-lasting question of what comes first: the demand for childcare, or the expansion of childcare? This study adds a comparative perspective and acknowledge structural forces, such as female employment, to be an important driving force behind family policy change not only in Germany. This, together with the diminishing importance of political determinants, will be my main contribution to literature.

Today, work-family and welfare policies are mostly seen as investment in the productivity of the population (Morel et al., 2012), motivated from a social rights perspective. Several goals to increase the participation rates have been set up by institutions such as the European Commission and the OECD. My results indicate that the user-fees are lowered and the female employment rate increases even in countries where a more traditional view on family is present. In Hungary for example, where a conservative party holds the majority of votes, female labour force participation rate has increased with 10 percentage points since 2010. A similar trend is taking place in Malta, where the female employment rate has gone up with 20 percentage points since 2010, and the ECEC user-fees are now close to zero. This indicates that political parties do not invest in family policy out of goodwill, but rather due to pressure from structural forces. The last decades of declining birth rates in Europe is an example of that. Conservative or confessional parties are forced to choose between keeping a traditional family model or expand childcare settings to increase female employment, in order to maintain an adequate level of births.

Lastly, there are some limitations to this study that must be highlighted. Using an ideal-type household is one: in this study I limited my scope to a low-income single-parent household. Many European countries give additional public childcare support to low-income families and some countries give additional support for single parents. In these countries low-income single parents often spend less on childcare in absolute terms compared to dual-earner couples (OECD, 2021b), but a higher share of their disposable income (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Further studies would ideally compare other households, such as a low-income dual-earner household, to see if the results are coherent to mine. With that said, it is important to remember that affordability is one of the three aspects important for childcare, quality and availability being the other two. The development of ECEC often result in a trade-off between the three (Sirén et al., 2020). For example, the user-fees in Italy are zero, but publicly provided childcare for children under three are only at around 10 percent (Blome, 2016). My study does

not take availability and quality into account, which would be of interest for the discussion of the political economy of childcare. Such an approach would, however, require a much larger study. A study like that would possibly give more insight in whether or not the same political determinants and structural forces matter for expansion of childcare and quality improvement.

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ⁱ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden