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# Gender cleavage and political parties in 19 welfare states, 1900–1975

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## ABSTRACT

Cleavage theory posits that political parties have been a key channel for representing political interests, formulated by cleavage structures. Existing literature argues that gender differences are not strong enough to constitute a cleavage, as evidenced by early voting behaviour among women. This article contends that the paradox of the traditional gender gap may arise from our lack of understanding about supply-side explanations, namely political parties' positions on gender policies in early history. In the early and mid-twentieth centuries, women's political interests stemmed from their role as homemakers and workers, advocating for family allowance and paid maternity leave. Using a novel historical database, I test whether parties' positions aligned with women's political interests in 19 welfare states between 1900 and 1975. My findings show that Christian democratic parties advocated for gender policies, *albeit* selectively, depending on the types of gender issues, while social democratic parties did not exhibit stronger support for gender policies more than other parties. This helps us understand why women did not predominantly vote for leftist parties. Instead, female representatives in parliaments across party affiliations functioned as agents of women's interests and promoted welfare policies that supported the different roles of women.

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## Introduction

Political parties have been one of the most important channels for representing political interests. According to the original formulation of cleavage theory (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), political parties translate conflicts within existing social and cultural structures into political demands and integrate contrasting interests to enhance the effectiveness of political pressure. Lipset

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and Rokkan (1967) emphasise that cleavages and political parties should be examined from a historical perspective, because parties 'do not simply present themselves *de novo* to the citizen of each election; they each have a history and so have the constellations of alternatives they present to the electorate' (p. 2). Existing research on gender cleavage in early history has primarily focused on women's voting behaviour, finding that the gender difference in voting tends to be less distinctive than other cleavages (e.g., Duverger, 1955). Moreover, female voters were more likely to support Christian democratic or conservative parties, typically known for their 'women unfriendliness' (Emmenegger & Manow, 2014, p. 172). Scholars emphasise women's tendency to vote according to their husbands' preferences (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2000) or their high religiosity (Emmenegger & Manow, 2014; Morgan, 2013), thus treating women as *irrational* voters who chose their religious preference over economic interests or did not have distinctive interests. The emerging studies in historical political economy, however, contest such arguments and call for a careful re-evaluation of women's political behaviour in early history with new methodological tools and empirical evidence (Corder & Wolbrecht, 2016; Morgan-Collins, 2024; Skorge, 2023; Teele, 2018, 2024). In addressing this challenge, I argue that the paradox of the traditional gender gap stems from our limited understanding of the gender cleavage that shaped women's interests as well as of political parties' stances on gender policies that reflected those interests in early history.

The relationship between political parties and gender policies has largely been explored in a contemporary context, particularly in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism, when women's economic roles in the workforce were established. Scholars find that leftist parties tend to advocate for 'women-friendly' policies such as social services and work-family policies supporting working mothers after the 1970s (Esping-Andersen, 2003; Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015; Fleckenstein & Lee, 2014; Huber & Stephens, 2000). The contemporary empirical evidence shaped the conventional wisdom that leftist parties represent women's interest. However, cleavages are not static and have evolved over time (Flora *et al.*, 1999): both women-friendly policies, aligned with women's interests, and political parties' positions on them have experienced considerable shifts throughout history (Bock & Thane, 1991; Koven & Michel, 1993; Wikander *et al.*, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Yet, no study has systematically and historically examined gender cleavage and political parties.

This paper aims to enhance our understandings of gender cleavage by empirically testing whether political parties reacted to women's economic interests or whether their stances coincided with women's economic interests, thus becoming an important political channel for women. Using a novel historical database, I examine the stances of political parties on

family allowance and maternity leave—central demands of the first-wave women’s movements to economically recognise women’s productive and reproductive labour (Bock & Thane, 1991)—in 19 welfare states from 1900 until 1975. It is important to consider more than one policy to apply cleavage theory, given that one of the key functions of political parties is to integrate diverse interests within cleavages to enhance the effectiveness of representation. Furthermore, parties are identified by ‘packages’ (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967, p. 2) of policy programmes. Paid maternity leave and family allowance reflects the complexities of gender cleavage within the party system, as they intersect with different sets of cleavages. Paid maternity leave is often viewed as a class-based policy, while family allowance tends to reflect doctrinal concerns, which may lead to varying party positions on each gender issue. I also propose an alternative explanation, namely that gender constituted a cleavage of its own instead of relying on a specific political party, examining whether female members of parliament (MPs) integrated to pursue women’s political interests regardless of their party affiliations.

My findings reveal that gender cleavage was not translated into a clear opposition between political parties: no party consistently advocated for or opposed women’s interests. While Christian democratic parties extended family allowances to reinforce the traditional male-breadwinner model and to react to population concerns, social democratic parties did not exhibit stronger support for neither maternity leave nor family allowances than other parties. However, the findings show that the strength of female MP representation has been a crucial factor in the expansion of welfare policies that support the different roles of women.

This paper contributes to the literature in several ways. While existing research mostly examines the *de novo* partisan effect on gender policies in the contemporary era, this paper focuses on shortly before and after the extension of female suffrage, a crucial precondition for the translation of cleavages into political party systems. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue that the extension of suffrage restructured the party system along emerging cleavage lines, given that political parties had to react to the influx of new electorates (p. 46). In addition, this paper examines more than one welfare policy that supported the different roles of women, both as mothers and workers, thereby representing the diverse interests of women. Some studies examine partisan effects on public policies that advanced women’s interest in the early twentieth century (Misra, 2003; Morgan, 2006; Obinger & Schmitt, 2024; Skocpol, 1992; Teele, 2018). However, all of them focus on a single policy, which is insufficient for understanding how political parties represent cleavage structures. Most importantly, this paper expands cleavage theory to offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender politics, a subject that has only recently begun to receive attention (see Sass & Kuhnle, 2022 for a detailed conceptualisation of gender cleavage). Traditional

gender gap theory applies cleavage theory too narrowly, overlooking women's interests shaped by gender cleavage. Cleavage theory, however, provides a broader framework, starting with the question of how citizens' political interests are formulated by cleavages and advancing to the question of whether these cleavage structures are translated in partisan politics. In line with cleavage theory, this paper departs from the question of what women wanted by defining gender cleavage. My findings indicate that women may have consciously chosen to support Christian democratic parties, whose policies overlapped with women's economic concerns, rather than merely following social or familial influences.

In the next section, I briefly summarise the state of the art concerning the partisan effects on gender policy making in the early twentieth century and introduce cleavage theory as a useful theoretical framework. Drawing on a literature review, I introduce several hypotheses to examine gender cleavage throughout party systems. I then present the results from my empirical analyses, which examine the effect of social democratic and Christian democratic parties on the generosity of paid maternity leave and family allowance in 19 countries from 1900 to 1975. The analyses also test the impact of the proportion of female parliamentary representation. Finally, I discuss the implication of my findings and suggest future research avenues.

### **Literature review: gender, political parties, and cleavage theory**

For a long time, it has been assumed that leftist parties<sup>2</sup> would advance women's interests. Leftist parties have provided opportunity structures or institutional bases for women to represent their political interests as marginalised actors in parliaments. When women's movements build alliances with parties, the alliances have been predominantly with leftist parties (Beckwith, 2000). In particular, women's movements in the early twentieth century pushed for the adoption or extension of welfare policies for women through leftist parties, as they lacked access to political resources (e.g., voting rights) (Beckwith, 1985; Hobson, 1993; Jenson & Mahon, 1993; Misra, 2003). For instance, social democratic women's conferences proposed several reforms to enhance women's social and economic rights, which were sometimes forwarded to parliaments through leftist politicians (Ohlander, 1991). Social democratic women, such as Alva Myrdal, leveraged their family and marriage ties to shape the key aspects of social policies for women (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997; Ohlander, 1991; Peterson, 2018). Not surprisingly, leftist parties have had a higher proportion of female representation than other parties, providing important grounds for adopting policies for women's rights (Kittilson, 2001). Scholars also argue that the ideologies and constituent elements of leftist parties, aimed at pursuing social equality, tend to be more receptive to gender equality than other parties. For

example, the expansion of women's participation was part of the utopian hopes of socialist and communist parties in the early twentieth century Europe (Gruber & Graves, 1998).

In contrast, rightist parties have been known for their women-unfriendliness, pursuing policies that suppress women's rights. Religious ideologies (of rightist parties) had an explicit doctrine and codified tradition about the role and status of women. Churches were strongly committed to the preservation of familyhood with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker and upheld the subordination of women to her husband. The emphasis on the traditional family model often served as grounds for rightist parties' opposition to women's civic and economic rights, such as public childcare provision, since the late nineteenth century (Morgan, 2006). Furthermore, they attempted to control women's behaviour using welfare systems in the early twentieth century by including the virtue of female beneficiaries as welfare entitlement criteria or by punishing single mothers through exclusion from the maternity insurance system (Kulawik, 1999; Lake, 1993, p. 380; Peterson, 2018).

However, cleavage theory offers a more nuanced framework for understanding the partisan effects on gender policy making (Sass & Kuhnle, 2022). Cleavages, defined as longstanding and strong conflicts rooted in the social structure, formulate citizens' political interests (Flora *et al.*, 1999, p. 35). Yet, not all cleavages translate into political party structures, and certainly not in such dichotomous manner. Instead, cleavages can intersect, generating internal conflicts, or coincide, thereby reinforcing one another.

Gender cleavage, in particular, intersects with class-based and religious cleavages. As a result, leftist women often faced tensions between class and gender cleavages rather than experiencing the integration of women's diverging interests through party systems. In countries such as France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden, social democratic or communist women often felt compelled to distance themselves from middle-class feminists when gender issues conflicted with class-based concerns (Koven & Michel, 1993; Quataert, 1979). Conversely, the intersectionality of gender cleavage led political parties to support gender policies, often without the intention of advancing women's rights. Patriarchal states, such as Bismarckian Germany and France, were the pioneers of work-family policies (Koven & Michel, 1990; Morgan, 2003; Son, 2024). The paradox can be partly explained by the fact that these policies, such as family allowance and maternity leave, were primarily driven by a 'natalist' intention, stemming from (de)population concerns in a context of interstate competition shortly before and after both world wars (Gauthier, 1996; Jenson, 1986; Obinger & Schmitt, 2024; Pedersen, 1993b). Furthermore, the state-church cleavage shaped the early development of childcare provisions, as exemplified by the French case (Morgan, 2006).

Another critical aspect of cleavage theory is the hierarchy of cleavages within partisan politics, with the timing of their emergence playing a significant role (Flora *et al.*, 1999). Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue that earlier cleavages—such as rural–urban, state–church, and center–periphery—shaped the foundational differences in party systems across Europe prior to the entry of working-class parties after the Industrial Revolution. Gender cleavage emerged even later, toward the end of the nineteenth century, when women’s movements launched campaigns to challenge women’s subordination in the social, political, and economic sphere. This is also when the term ‘feminism’ was coined to articulate women’s interests vis-à-vis men (Offen, 2000).

Given its relatively late emergence, gender had not been a major concern or priority for political parties in their early histories (Sass & Kuhnle, 2022). Feminist scholars argue that leftist parties were, at most, an unreliable ally, although they were more likely than their rivals to exert organised political pressure on women’s behalf (Elman, 1993; Thane, 1991). Leftist parties represented the class-based interests of (male) workers, which may or may not have coincided with women’s interests. In the early years of industrial capitalism, male workers opposed women’s labour to protect their wages and job positions from employers’ attempts to lower labour costs (Rose, 1988). This stance was reflected in the actions of trade unions and leftist parties, which often advocated for protective legislation or the ban on women’s labour (Wikander *et al.*, 1995), particularly during the Great Depression when jobs were scarce (Klein, 1984) or shortly after the world wars when they reclaimed their jobs from women (Pedersen, 1993b).

### Theory and hypotheses: gender cleavage in welfare states

Paid maternity leave and family allowances are ideal policies to illustrate gender cleavages in early history. Cleavages should encompass three dimensions: social/economic constituency, cultural/ideological distinctiveness, and organisational network (Bartolini, 2000; Sass & Kuhnle, 2022). Paid maternity leave and family allowances reflected women’s interests, rooted in their both productive and reproductive role within societal and economic structures. Moreover, the political advocacy for these policies placed maternalism<sup>3</sup> at its core—a distinctive ideology that significantly shaped women’s political interests around the time of the extension of female suffrage (Koven & Michel, 1990).

Lastly, paid maternity leave emerged as a key policy agenda, supported by a wide range of women’s movements and later by female MPs during the early and mid-twentieth century (Allen, 2005; Bock & Thane, 1991; Koven & Michel, 1993; Lovenduski, 1986; Son, 2024). As a protective legislation, it prohibits pregnant women from working before and after childbirth while

ensuring job security for women workers after the confinement period, thereby integrating the diverse political interests of women, such as special protection or equal treatment (Boris, 2019; Whitworth, 1994). Family allowance was widely accepted by women's movements as a form of mothers' endowment or mother's wage to provide economic autonomy to large female populations, especially in the context of the low labour participation rate of married women in the early and mid-twentieth century (Bock & Thane, 1991; Gauthier, 1996; Koven & Michel, 1993; Misra, 2003; Pedersen, 1993b). Given that maternalist feminists constituted the majority of women's movements at that time, family allowance was widely supported by women's movements. For instance, examining the political interests and ideologies of the six largest women's movements in England shortly after the extension of female suffrage, Beaumont (2000) finds that mainstream women's movements pursued citizenship for women based on their roles as homemakers and were engaged with campaigns for family allowances alongside the right of unwaged homemakers to be entitled to the National Health Insurance System.

Then, have political parties functioned as agents of women's interests or as an instrument of integrating women's diverse interests? To examine this question, I focus on social democratic and Christian democratic parties, given that these two parties have been the most prominent actors in welfare provision and thus the 'most likely' proponents of welfare policies for women.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Christian democratic parties have a history of supporting welfare policies to compete with social democratic parties in recruiting emerging electorates (Grandner, 1995, p. 165; Morgan, 2006, p. 64).

Existing literature suggests that social democratic parties were more likely to promote welfare policies for women and to be women-friendly agents than other parties, given their greater inclusion of female political actors and their equality-based ideologies. Furthermore, the women's components of social democratic parties were likely to organise political pressure in parliaments through their male colleagues, as they constantly set gender policies as party agendas since the late nineteenth centuries.

**Hypothesis 1:** Women's social rights were advanced more strongly when social democratic parties had more power in the cabinet.

Another hypothesis from previous research is that gender cleavage failed to be translated into any form of opposition between parties. If women had no distinctive or weak political demands, as traditional gender gap theory suggests, political parties would neither be motivated to react to women's political interests nor consider gender issues to be 'real politics' (Hobson, 1993, p. 412). Consequently, both social democratic and Christian democratic parties would have pushed for family allowance and paid maternity leave to react to socioeconomic pressure, such as the low total fertility rate or

economic crisis, rather than to the political pressure of women. Alternatively, both parties may have agreed upon the necessity to provide financial support for families while dismissing the issue of paid maternity leave, because all political parties across the ideological spectrum endorsed traditional male breadwinner models before the rise of the second feminism<sup>5</sup> (Morgan, 2006, p. 68).

**Hypothesis 2:** Social democratic and Christian democratic parties did not differ in their stance on paid maternity leave and family allowance.

Gender cleavage may not have manifested as a clear opposition between political parties, particularly if it intersected with other cleavages, as cleavage theory suggests. Both leftist and rightist parties may have *selectively* endorsed gender policies that aligned more closely with their ideological frameworks or served their political interests.

Case-based evidence have shown that women's sections of social democratic parties played a crucial role in steering their parties toward advocating for women's social and labour rights (e.g., paid maternity leave). Social democratic and labour parties were mindful of the political demands of women, and they adopted welfare policies to collect female voters, even shortly before the extension of female suffrage (Lake, 1993, p. 379; Ravn, 1995, p. 217; Thane, 1993, p. 344). Male politicians' decision to support gender policies in early history, when women had limited access to the political process, depended on whether they had information about (future) female voters' preferences (Teele, 2018). Social democratic or labour women set a gender agenda, particularly related to women's labour and social rights, within the parties and used various strategies to integrate contrasting political interests of women or other actors across ideologies and economic structures (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997). For instance, women from the Swedish Social Democratic Party formulated women's labour right as a basic citizenship right and thus created a collective identity of all women as workers and homemakers. They initiated coalitions across parties and the whole spectrum of women's organisations, including the National Association of Housewives, around specific policies. Taking another example, Lily Braun, a social democratic feminist in Germany, founded the *Bund für Mutterschutz* in 1904 to call for the statutory provision of maternity protection, which was later supported by male politicians and intellectuals such as Max Weber, who perceived maternal and child mortality as a major social problem in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sachße, 1993). Once women obtained voting rights, many social democratic women became the first female parliamentary members and continued to push for an increase in paid maternity leave in parliament (Lovenduski, 1986; Son, 2024). Thus, I expect that social democratic parties supported paid maternity leave, which was a particular interest of social democratic and labour women, to embrace (emerging) female voters.

Moreover, paid maternity leave was more compatible with their political interests, and thus was more likely to be supported by social democratic parties than family allowance. The working class tended to oppose family allowances, perceiving them as a means of wage system control (Lewis, 1994; Pedersen, 1993b). In many countries, family allowances were initially funded and supported by employers, later incorporated into public welfare systems (International Labour Office, 1948). During the wartime and postwar (inflationary) periods, it became a major social problem that the average wage of male breadwinners could not sustain large families. Employers practically viewed family allowance as a cheaper alternative to wage increases or social insurance benefits to support families (Pedersen, 1993b). They used family allowances as an effective tool to labour controls, conditioning the entitlement of these allowances on the absence of labour unrest or harsh labour conditions. Therefore, even if social democratic parties indeed pursued gender policies to achieve tangible electoral benefits, it would have been difficult for them to support family allowance, which disadvantaged their main electorate, the working class.

**Hypothesis 3a:** The strong political power of social democratic parties within the cabinet would have extended paid maternity leave, but not family allowance.

In contrast, it is clear that Christian democratic parties emerged as strong proponents of family allowances. For religious organisations, family allowances were seen as a means of adapting capitalism to align with the Catholic ideal of a family wage and encourage women to return to their perceived traditional roles (Koven & Michel, 1993, pp. 254–255). Scholars also provide empirical evidence that rightist parties were particularly motivated to support family allowances as a pronatalist policy in the early and mid-twentieth centuries, given their greater responsiveness to (de)population concerns compared to others (Obinger & Schmitt, 2024). These interests intersected with women's political demands. Some maternalist movements, particularly Catholic women, strategically formed political coalitions with religious and pronatalist groups. Their goal was to elevate the status of mothers by recognising and economically rewarding their role as homemakers, thereby providing economic freedom to leave waged work. For example, in France, the Catholic women's organisation *Union Féminine Civique et Sociale* (UFCS) urged employers to introduce employer-funded family allowances, and (semi-) governmental pronatalist associations joined UFCS's petitions for family allowances. However, such alliances dissolved once religious and pronatalist groups began advocating for restrictions on women's right to work (Pedersen, 1993a).

**Hypothesis 3b:** The strong political power of Christian democratic parties within the cabinet would have extended family allowance but not paid maternity leave.

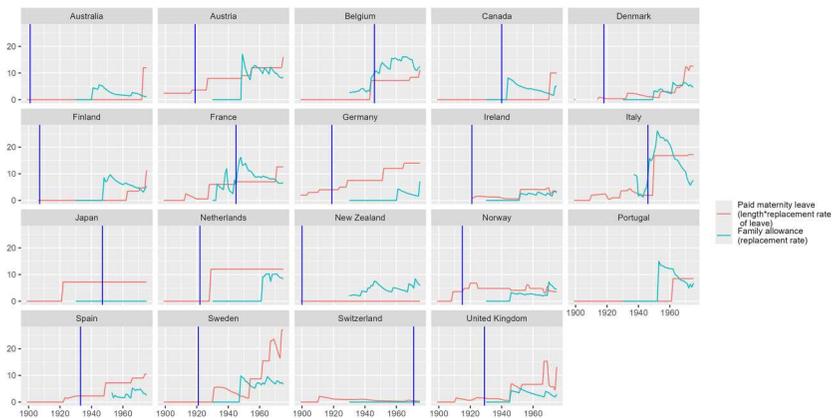
In summary, social democratic and Christian democratic parties may have supported gender policies that were salient for women's movements and female voters only selectively. However, contrary to social democratic parties, within which women's sections exerted political pressure to adopt paid maternity leave, the interest of Christian democratic parties in family allowances coincided with (or may have been reinforced by) that of women's movements rather than being directly driven by the political demands of women's movements.<sup>6</sup> The fact that both social democratic and Christian democratic parties supported gender policies may help us understand why women voted for either party in early history. However, parties' selective support for gender policies, contingent on specific policy issues, does not imply that the parties served as platforms for women to organise *their* political interests.

I propose that gender cleavage manifested in elsewhere. Although Lipset and Rokkan emphasise that political parties are a primary channel for articulating cleavages and mobilising citizens' influence on decision-making processes, cleavage theory does not restrict these channels solely to parties, but identifies other influential bodies, such as trade unions, and employers' associations (Flora *et al.*, 1999, p. 50). Prior studies suggest that female parliamentary representation was an alternative channel to represent gender cleavage (Bratton & Ray, 2002; Debus & Hansen, 2014; Hernes, 1987; Kittilson, 2008; Son, 2024). First, the integration of women's movements into governmental policy-making bodies enabled the effective organisation of political pressure on longstanding issues advocated by women's movements, namely a 'wish list' of maternity benefits and other women-centered policies (Hobson, 1993, p. 413). For instance, many leading figures of women's movements who had long advocated for maternity benefits, such as Adelheid Popp in Austria, Gertrud Bäumer in Germany, Helga Karlsen in Norway, and Kerstin Hesselgren in Sweden, became the first female MPs and continued to advocate for these policies in the legislative arena. Second, female parliamentarians coordinated each other across party affiliations and grassroots women's movements (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997; Ohlander, 1991; Pedersen, 1993a; Peterson, 2018). For example, in 1919, under the leadership of the social democrat Louise Schröder, one of the first female MPs, female legislators from all seven German parties drafted a bill for independent maternity insurance schemes (Stoehr, 1991, p. 227). Although men outnumbered women in parliaments in the early and mid-twentieth century, the presence of women was still crucial for the representation of their political interests in maternal and child welfare (Hernes, 1987). Especially shortly after the extension of female suffrage, female parliamentarians were likely to emphasise their identity as women (a minority group) and rally together across party affiliations to focus on a set of policy priorities, given their severe underrepresentation (Crowley, 2004). Therefore, I suggest the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** The strong political power of female representatives in parliaments may have advanced women's social rights.

## Data and measurements

My empirical analyses are based on a new historical database that traces the annual development of paid maternity leave and family allowances in 19 welfare states from 1900 to 1975. I focus on the extension of paid maternity leave and family allowances rather than on their introduction. A recent study by Son (2024) shows that the adoption of welfare policies for women was highly contingent upon the institutional context, giving political actors little room to maneuver.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, their adoption often occurred before the extension of female suffrage (e.g., the first paid maternity leave was adopted in 1883) when female MPs did not exist. Thus, the analyses exclude countries that never introduced these policies or did so only shortly before 1975: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand for maternity leave, and Japan and Switzerland for family allowances (See Figure 1). I define paid maternity leave as leave with state-funded payments available for working mothers shortly before and after childbirth, and family allowances as payments to workers' families with children or universal endowments for children funded by the state. The definition of paid maternity leave includes cases in which unpaid leave and lump-sum cash benefits are provided to an identical group, which is functionally equivalent to paid maternity



**Figure 1.** The historical development of maternity leave and family allowance in 19 welfare states, 1900–1975.

Notes: The family allowance data for Spain and Portugal begins in 1953, corresponding with the SFB 1342's initiation of average wage data coding. For all other countries, the data starts in 1930, aligning with the onset of average wage records from the SCIP. Earlier observations (i.e., Australia from 1926 to 1929) are excluded. The vertical blue line marks the point at which suffrage was extended to the entire female population, indicating when the de facto female suffrage variable in the V-Dem project began to be coded as 100. Portuguese women attained voting rights in 1976.

leave (e.g., in France from 1913 to 1928 and the United Kingdom from 1911 to 1945). Following this definition, the first parental leave, introduced in Sweden in 1973, is also included in the analyses as maternity leave.

I constructed the historical database of family policies using various sources, in particular the ILO Legislative Series, ILO reports, the Social Policy and Law Shared Database (SPLASH), and the European Family Policy Database (Maucher & Bahle, 2000), which are the major sources of information about the historical development of family policies (Gauthier & Koops, 2018, p. 12). The standard measurements of family policy generosity are used for the analysis. For paid maternity leave, I calculate the full-time equivalent (FTE) entitlement by multiplying the wage replacement rate by the duration of paid weeks. If a country provided a flat-rate benefit, such as Switzerland (1911–1975) and the United Kingdom (1912–1952), I convert this flat-rate benefit to the replacement rate of the average wage of women workers, which I extract from the ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics Series and Monthly Labour Review. To enhance the validity and reliability of the calculation of the replacement rate, I compare the result with the Comparative Family Policy Database (Gauthier, 2010), which measures the generosity of paid maternity leave in Western countries since 1950. For family allowance, I calculate the replacement rate (RR) in the average wage of a production worker with a dependent wife and two children aged 2 and 7<sup>8</sup>, following the operationalisation of the Child Benefit Database (CBD) (Nelson *et al.*, 2020), the most renowned database for family allowance, which measures its generosity since 1960. The average production workers' wage is extracted from the Social Citizenship Indicator Programs (SCIP)<sup>9</sup> (Nelson *et al.*, 2020) and from the SFB 1342 for Spain and Portugal. Finally, I cross-check the replacement rate of family allowance with the CBD from 1960 until 1975.

My key explanatory variables are (1) the strength of political parties and (2) the strength of female MP representation. I use the share of cabinet seats held by the different parties from the Parliaments and Governments Database (ParlGov) (Döring *et al.*, 2023), which provides a disaggregated measure of the partisan complexion (e.g., social democratic and Christian democratic parties). To measure the strength of representation of female MPs, I use women's political participation index from the V-Dem project (Sundström *et al.*, 2017), which calculates the average of indicators for the descriptive representation of women in the legislative process (i.e., the proportion of lower chamber female legislators) as well as the power distribution by gender in the legislative arena.

## Empirical results

To analyse the partisan effect on the early history of welfare policies for women, I employ two different units of analysis. Standard panel analysis

assumes that policy changes at each time point have an equal effect on the dependent variables, disregarding that short-lived cabinets may have more limited influence compared to long-lived cabinets (Schmitt, 2016). Thus, I conduct OLS regressions with cabinet-based periodisation, as recommended by Schmitt (2016). A cabinet is considered another observation if it comprises different parties from the previous one. Apart from cabinet duration, party composition, and time trends (i.e., Great Depression and wartime), I calculate country-specific averages for all independent variables for the first half of the cabinet period. For robustness check, I use country-years as another unit of analysis and conduct error correction model (ECM) regressions with fixed effects and panel-corrected standard error estimation (PCSE) employing robust Eicker–Huber–White standard errors. I weight panel-specific autocorrelations by panel sizes since the sizes vary.

My main independent variable (i.e., partisanship variable) assumes a democratic setting. Since many European countries experienced authoritarian regimes during wartime or transitioned to democracy only shortly before 1975, the number of cases is reduced considerably; for instance, in Spain and Portugal, the first elections were held in 1977 and 1975, respectively. Thus, my main models include only democratic regimes, while the analyses for robustness checks include both democratic and non-democratic periods to avoid that significant changes in maternity leave and family allowances are overlooked. In the latter case, I code the partisan variables during non-democratic periods, namely authoritarian regimes or times in which legislative bodies lost their functions (e.g., in Germany under Allied occupation), as '0' since no political party was able to influence the legislative process. I also add a dummy variable that measures democracy to distinguish the impact of the independent variables during democratic and non-democratic periods, which is drawn from Boix *et al.* (2013).

In all models, I control for socioeconomic and political variables that are considered important determinants of welfare legislation for women by comparative welfare state research and feminist studies. First, I include the logged GDP per capita (in 2011 US Dollars) from the Maddison Project Database (Bolt *et al.*, 2018) to account for financial and bureaucratic capabilities to implement statutory provisions for family support. I expect a positive impact of economic affluence on the early development of paid maternity leave and family allowance. Since depopulation motivated policymakers to introduce and extend family policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gauthier, 1996; Jenson, 1986; Obinger & Petersen, 2017), I include the total fertility rate, extracted from Gapminder. I assume that policymakers would diagnose depopulation problems based on a medium-term perspective rather than on the total fertility rate from the previous year. Thus, I calculate the average total fertility rate over the previous five years.

Furthermore, I include a measure of political regime type, extracted from the Polity IV Project, when examining only democratic periods, expecting that citizens' demands for welfare are better translated into public policy in a more democratic setting. I also include a dummy variable that captures the proportional representation (PR) system, as it amplified women's political participation (Skorge, 2023) and may have incentivized policymakers to introduce social policies for women. Lastly, I control for specific time periods for each policy. For paid maternity leave, I include a dummy variable that equals 1 for the years between 1929 and 1933 to control for the effect that the Great Depression might have had, expecting that women's right to maternity protection was extended. Even though the rights of working women, who were accused of taking men's jobs, came under attack during the Great Depression (Ohlander, 1991), the employment pattern of working women shifted rapidly from predominantly young, childless women to married women, as high male unemployment increased the necessity for married women to engage in paid labour to ensure their family's survival, thus raising the demand for paid maternity leave (Klein, 1984, pp. 37–38). For family allowance, I include a dummy variable that equals 1 for the war periods between 1914 and 1921 and between 1939 and 1948, since the world wars exacerbated the demographic problem and left families in precarious economic situations (Obinger & Schmitt, 2024). The descriptive statistics of all variables are presented in Appendix 1.

Which political parties supported welfare policies for women in early history? That seems to depend on the policy issue. Tables 1 and 2 present my main findings and the results of ECMs with country-year unit, respectively. Nearly all models report no evidence that social democratic parties were more likely to extend maternity leave or family allowance than other parties. Only in the models examining family allowance during non-democratic and democratic periods (Appendix 2), the coefficient of social democratic parties is significant, potentially amplified by the significantly low probability of family allowance extension during non-democratic times. In the robustness checks, the effects of all political actors, whose presence is contingent on democratisation, have greater statistical significance than in the main models. When Christian democratic parties were dominant in the legislative arena, welfare policies for women were more likely to be extended, *albeit* selectively. The impact of the strength of Christian democratic parties on the generosity of family allowance is significant at the 5% level (see Model 3 in Table 1, and Model 6, 8 in Table 2), while there is no significant association between the strength of Christian democratic parties and the extension of maternity leave. The 10 percent increase in Christian democratic parties in a cabinet led to a replacement rate of family allowance of approximately 0.7, which is a substantial impact considering that the mean replacement rate is 6.5. Political actors tend to have

**Table 1.** Multivariate analysis using the cabinet-based periodisation: extension of paid maternity leave and family allowance, 1900–1975.

|                             | Δ FTE of maternity leave |                       | Δ RR of family allowances |                       |                       |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|                             | (1)<br>OLS               | (2)<br>OLS            | (3)<br>OLS                | (4)<br>OLS            | (5)<br>OLS            |
| FTE of maternity leave t-1  | -0.237***<br>(0.0505)    | -0.230***<br>(0.0503) |                           |                       |                       |
| RR of family allowances t-1 |                          |                       | -0.272***<br>(0.0473)     | -0.302***<br>(0.0482) | -0.310***<br>(0.0486) |
| Female MP                   | 2.790**<br>(1.388)       | 3.272**<br>(1.545)    |                           | 5.762***<br>(1.641)   | 4.987***<br>(1.862)   |
| Social democratic           | -0.00958<br>(0.0172)     |                       |                           | 0.0114<br>(0.0233)    |                       |
| Christian democratic        |                          | -0.0216<br>(0.0262)   | 0.0713**<br>(0.0306)      |                       | 0.0273<br>(0.0343)    |
| Ln GDP per capita           | 0.543<br>(0.447)         | 0.444<br>(0.449)      | -0.723*<br>(0.432)        | -1.811***<br>(0.547)  | -1.717***<br>(0.563)  |
| Total fertility rate        | 0.0206<br>(0.380)        | 0.178<br>(0.389)      | -0.127<br>(0.378)         | -0.0288<br>(0.369)    | -0.135<br>(0.371)     |
| Polity IV                   | 0.616<br>(0.407)         | 0.608<br>(0.407)      | -0.157<br>(0.193)         | -0.120<br>(0.189)     | -0.132<br>(0.189)     |
| PR                          | 0.185<br>(0.156)         | 0.227<br>(0.170)      | 0.753**<br>(0.379)        | 0.695*<br>(0.375)     | 0.678*<br>(0.374)     |
| Great Depression            | 0.114<br>(0.536)         | 0.157<br>(0.536)      |                           |                       |                       |
| Wartime                     |                          |                       | 1.308**<br>(0.502)        | 1.424***<br>(0.514)   | 1.429***<br>(0.495)   |
| Cabinet length              | 0.171<br>(0.106)         | 0.180*<br>(0.107)     | -0.0480<br>(0.110)        | -0.0270<br>(0.109)    | -0.0301<br>(0.108)    |
| Constant                    | -6.529<br>(4.319)        | -7.021<br>(4.365)     | 9.851*<br>(5.692)         | 15.84**<br>(6.090)    | 16.02***<br>(6.044)   |
| Country dummies             | YES                      | YES                   | YES                       | YES                   | YES                   |
| Observations                | 243                      | 243                   | 186                       | 186                   | 186                   |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

long-term effects on the policies rather than the short-term ones as shown in Table 2.

Female MPs turn out to be consistent supporters of gender policies. The coefficient of female descriptive representation is statistically significant at the 5% level in 10 out of 12 models. The analyses that include non-democratic periods also yield coherent results (Appendix 2). Moreover, there are indications of a conditioning effect of female MPs on partisan effects: the significance of the Christian democratic party variable disappears (Model 5 in Table 1) once the female MP variable is included. Case-based studies have shown that female representation played a significant role both within political parties (e.g., Misra, 2003) and in parliaments (e.g., Lovenduski, 1986). Female MPs had the potential not only to identify the policy preferences of emerging electorates (i.e., women), but also to persuade male counterparts to include gender issues in the party agenda. While their influence was most prominent within social democratic parties, alliances between women's movements and Christian democratic parties for advancing family



|                     |          |          |          |          |          |          |         |         |
|---------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|---------|
|                     | 0.0213   | 0.101    | 0.0170   | 0.109    | -0.556   | -0.916   | -0.843  | -0.477  |
|                     | (0.797)  | (0.817)  | (0.855)  | (0.910)  | (0.991)  | (1.008)  | (1.066) | (1.068) |
| Polity IV t-1       | 0.0549   | 0.0690   | 0.0934   | 0.108    | -0.0872  | -0.0784  | -0.0839 | -0.0923 |
|                     | (0.0681) | (0.0707) | (0.0752) | (0.0750) | (0.0860) | (0.0840) | (0.110) | (0.111) |
| Δ Polity IV         | 0.0631   | 0.0633   | 0.0795   | 0.0865   | 0.214    | 0.241    | 0.225   | 0.195   |
|                     | (0.172)  | (0.172)  | (0.167)  | (0.166)  | (0.174)  | (0.174)  | (0.222) | (0.220) |
| PR                  | -0.0122  | -0.0130  | -0.00907 | -0.0106  | 0.210    | 0.202    | 0.200   | 0.207   |
|                     | (0.139)  | (0.139)  | (0.123)  | (0.123)  | (0.151)  | (0.150)  | (0.152) | (0.153) |
| Great Depression    | 0.0986   | 0.0857   | 0.121    | 0.116    |          |          |         |         |
|                     | (0.227)  | (0.228)  | (0.221)  | (0.225)  |          |          |         |         |
| Wartime             |          |          |          |          | 0.473*   | 0.596**  | 0.603** | 0.480*  |
|                     |          |          |          |          | (0.260)  | (0.243)  | (0.252) | (0.278) |
| Constant            | -2.445   | -2.521   | -4.160** | -4.505** | 6.410*** | 5.730**  | 6.350** | 6.922** |
|                     | (1.668)  | (1.678)  | (1.810)  | (1.885)  | (2.369)  | (2.400)  | (2.774) | (2.824) |
| Country dummies     | YES      | YES      | YES      | YES      | YES      | YES      | YES     | YES     |
| Observations        | 601      | 601      | 601      | 601      | 426      | 426      | 426     | 426     |
| Number of countries | 14       | 14       | 14       | 14       | 15       | 15       | 15      | 15      |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

allowance were also observed (Pedersen, 1993b). In rare cases, labour party women openly supported rightist party candidates who advocated for maternalist policies (Koven & Michel, 1993, p. 12), implying that female MPs' presence in parliament may have influenced the positions of policy-makers across party lines.

The figures in Appendix 3 illustrate how the presence of female MPs representation alters partisan dynamics. As expected, social democratic parties tended to show more robust support for gender policies, when female MPs wielded significant influence, although their effect in general turns out not to be statistically significant, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Interestingly, a similar conditioning effect is seen within Christian democratic parties, which historically have not reflected women's voices. When female representation was higher, both social democratic and Christian democratic parties took markedly different positions on family allowance than when female representation was lower. However, there is only limited evidence that the strength of representation of female MPs moderates partisan effects on paid maternity leave. In these cases, the conditioning effect is statistically ambiguous with low representation of women in parliament. Nonetheless, Models 6 and 8 in Table 2 show a converse relationship, confirming the interaction between the strength of Christian democratic parties and the strength of female MP representation, while cautioning against hasty conclusions about the conditioning effect.

In sum, the empirical findings prove Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 to be untrue: gender cleavage did not manifest as a clear opposition of social democratic and Christian democratic parties, although partisan politics still mattered in gender policy making. The findings underscore the intersectionality of gender cleavage, as political parties selectively supported gender policies that fit their ideologies or interests. When Christian democratic parties were strongly represented in cabinet, family allowance tended to be promoted but not paid maternity leave, which supports Hypothesis 3b. On the other hand, Hypothesis 3a is not supported. It seems that the constant lobbying efforts of social democratic women have been ignored by their male colleagues, as gender was not the main political interest of the social democratic party. Alternatively, social democratic women may have chosen to cooperate with female parliamentary representatives from other parties instead of their male colleagues, thus replacing the effect of social democratic parties with the effect of female parliamentary representatives. The signs of women's power in parliaments point in the expected direction, supporting Hypothesis 4. The presence of female representatives across parties mattered for the extension of welfare policies that supported the different roles of women.

The results for the control variables also show interesting dynamics surrounding the extension of family policies. Lagged dependent variables indicate that the welfare states converged over time. For instance, the

Scandinavian countries introduced paid maternity leave later than other countries (e.g., Germany, Austria, and France), but Denmark, Finland, and Sweden increased the generosity of paid leave from the 1960s onward, becoming new forerunners of leave policies. In line with functionalist theory, more affluent states encountered fewer constraints in terms of bureaucratic capabilities and financial outlays to extend paid maternity leave (Wilensky, 1975). However, the coefficient of economic development is negatively and significantly correlated with the generosity of family allowances, as these were meant to be income supplements for working-class families during financial crises. The findings also confirm that wartime negatively affected the economic situation of families, thus stimulating the extension of family allowances (Obinger & Schmitt, 2024).

## Discussion and conclusion

Despite the extensive body of research on gender politics, our understanding of gender cleavages remains incomplete, leaving women's early voting behaviour an enduring research puzzle. As women's interests and political parties' stances on gender policies have evolved over time, a new theoretical framework and empirical evidence are needed to understand how gender cleavages were incorporated into partisan politics when women finally gained access to political arena. By examining the partisan impact on two welfare policies supporting women's dual roles as mothers and workers from 1900 to 1975, this study makes a unique contribution, assessing how gender cleavages shaped women's political interests and whether political parties represented those interests.

Three major findings stand out. First, gender cleavage was not translated into political party structures. Despite arguments in existing literature based on contemporary empirical evidence that class politics often overlap with gender politics (e.g., Korpi, 2000), I find that Christian democratic parties also advocated for welfare policies for homemakers, a stance widely supported by women's movements *at that time*. Social democratic parties did not campaign more strongly than other parties either for women's working rights or for family allowance. Second, political parties' support for gender policies often did not aim to enhance women's empowerment. As cleavage theory suggests, cleavages intersect with other cleavages. Women's movements recognised this complexity and often sought to gain powerful allies by reframing gender issues as depopulation or religious concerns (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997; Pedersen, 1993a). Third, women were not passive actors within gender politics. While existing studies interpret the traditional gender gap as women following their husbands' votes or prioritising religion over economic concerns, my findings suggest that women had reasons to choose to vote for Christian democratic parties. Furthermore, female

representatives in parliaments actively pursued gender policies that supported women's diverse roles, thereby replacing political parties' role as agents representing women's political interests and integrating different opinions of women about their roles within societies.

Overall, this paper provides the first systematic and historical overview of partisan effects on gender policies. While the empirical analyses in this paper investigate welfare policies, a growing literature focuses on different types of gender policies (e.g., women's political or civic rights) in early history (Doepke *et al.*, 2012; Teele, 2018). Although comparing partisan effects on more than one closely related policy field simultaneously would require immense efforts in data collection, it is a highly promising avenue for future research, given the intersectionality of gender politics. Furthermore, the stance of social democratic parties on women's labour seems to have rapidly changed between the 1970s and the 1980s, raising the following questions: When did social democratic parties in different countries accept women's right to work and become champions of gender equality? What changed the gender norms within social democratic parties? Understanding the discourse about women's labour within political parties during the Fordism era would help us understand the political origins of women's labour rights. Lastly, the empirical analyses in this paper suggest a conditioning effect of the strength of female MPs on partisan politics. However, due to the absence of comprehensive historical data capturing the gender composition of MPs across countries, this study was unable to explore the underlying mechanisms behind these interaction effects. Do these interactions stem from the substantial representation of women within parties? Are there thresholds that amplify this effect? Why does a high representation of female MPs within other parties (e.g., social democratic parties) influence the policy preferences of Christian democratic parties? Addressing these questions would not only require more fine-grained data but also discourse analysis, such as of parliamentary debates during periods like the Weimar Republic. Answering them would greatly enhance our understanding of gender politics and its evolution.

## Notes

1. In the early and mid-twentieth century, women's roles as caregivers or homemakers were an important foundation of their political empowerment (e.g., Koven & Michel, 1990), whereas the equality-focused approach became more prominent after the 1970s. Women's political interests mirrored these shifts: first-wave feminists pursued economic rights both as homemakers and as workers, while second-wave feminists prioritised 'defamilializing' policies (Leitner, 2003), which aimed to reduce women's care burdens. Leftist parties were also not champions of the rights of women workers in early history, embracing the traditional male breadwinner model as the social norm (Jenson & Mahon, 1993).

2. Following the conventional approach, the distinction between leftist and rightist parties is primarily rooted in ideological positions, as articulated by Castles and Mair (1984). Leftist parties encompass communist, socialist, green, and social democratic factions, corresponding to the left–right score in ParlGov. Conversely, rightist parties include those aligned with Christian democracy, conservatism, and right-wing ideologies. Liberal parties, meanwhile, are considered centrist.
3. Women legitimised their political citizenship by emphasising their role as mothers both within households and in society, focusing on shaping one particular area of public policy: maternal and child welfare (Koven & Michel, 1993, p. 2).
4. When examining issues such as women’s voting rights, marriage laws, or contraceptive legislation, the stances of each political party and those with significant influence over policy decisions vary greatly. Liberal parties, for example, are likely to advocate for abortion rights and the expansion of female suffrage, but they are likely to be reluctant to the expansion of the welfare system, including paid maternity leave and family allowance.
5. Taking an example, the Swedish social democratic welfare regime, currently known as the frontier of women-friendliness system, originated from the *Folkhemmet* (People’s Home), that defined women’s major role as housewives and mothers. To contribute to the initial development of the Swedish welfare system, women’s movements and social democratic women were allowed to play only a gender-specific role despite their aspiration for gender equality (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997; Jenson & Mahon, 1993). Consequently, social democratic parties may have supported welfare policies but rather for homemakers than for women workers.
6. Although case-based studies (Allen, 2005; Kulawik, 1999; Ohlander, 1991) have shown that social democratic parties’ support for paid maternity leave stemmed from the women’s component within those parties or from their electoral motives, there has yet to be a study showing whether the women’s movements had a direct influence on Christian democratic parties or whether Christian democratic parties took female voters into consideration when they pushed for family allowances.
7. Her empirical findings show that the absence of other welfare institutions, specifically unemployment and health insurance (e.g., in the United States), set high institutional hurdles for political actors to push for the introduction of paid maternity leave.
8. Using the average worker with two children indicates that family allowances for only large families (more than two children) will be excluded from analyses.
9. Since the SCIP provides panel data every 5 years, I interpolated the wage data to construct yearly data.

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