LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDIES
2026, VOL. 52, NO. 4, 643–664
https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2025.2465956

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Partisan politics, economic hardship, and full-time day care for children in German cities

Marc Debus[a], Keonhi Son[b] and Sarah Wagner[c]

[a]School of Social Sciences, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany; [b]Department of European Societies and their Integration, Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung (MZES), Mannheim, Germany; [c]School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

ABSTRACT

The availability of full-time day care spots for children is important for integrating parents into the job market and for reducing the prominence of traditional role models within families. We argue that political parties with redistributive economic policy positions and progressive views on the order of society put more emphasis in establishing full-time day care places. We make use of an original dataset that covers information on the annual number of children in full-time day care places, which we use as an indicator of availability, in 108 German cities between 2006 and 2020. We find that – when controlling for the economic and political context of a city and for personal characteristics of the mayor – the number of full-time day care spots for children per capita in cities that face economic hardship is significantly lower, in particular if the mayor belongs to a left-wing party.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 24 May 2024; Accepted 4 February 2025

KEYWORDS Childcare; German cities; mayor; political parties

Introduction

The provision of formal childcare services for young children has emerged as one of the key social policies in contemporary era where dual-earner households are increasingly the norm and concerns about population decline continue to mount. Universal, high-quality childcare services do not only facilitate mothers' full-time employment, but also yield long-term benefits for child development, which in turn can enhance school performance and broader life outcomes. Recognising its growing importance, a burgeoning body of research has explored formal childcare services, highlighting the

CONTACT Marc Debus marc.debus@uni-mannheim.de School of Social Sciences, University of Mannheim, Mannheim 68131, Germany

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

limited accessibility of such provisions in many European countries (e.g., Ghysels and Van Lancker 2011).

Recent studies attribute the low coverage of formal childcare primarily to supply-side constraints, specifically inadequate investment in childcare services, rather than insufficient demand (Pavolini and Van Lancker 2018). In response, scholars have increasingly examined the barriers to expanding access to childcare (Busemeyer and Seitzl 2018; Mätzke 2019; Walenta-Bergmann 2023; West, Blome, and Lewis 2020; Yamada 2024). Particularly, much attention has been directed towards the role of municipalities, as the governance and implementation of childcare services in many European countries are largely the responsibility of regional and local governments (West, Blome, and Lewis 2020). Municipalities often bear the primary responsibility for delivering childcare services, while federal governments typically play a supplementary role, offering subsidies and introducing broad regulations to ensure legal entitlement to childcare. However, existing local government studies have largely focused on the availability of childcare, often measured by coverage rates (e.g., the percentage of children enrolled in childcare facilities). This narrow emphasis overlooks the critical dimension of quality, which profoundly influences the effectiveness of childcare support. For example, high coverage rates may be insufficient if accompanied by limited operational hours, as such constraints fail to accommodate the needs of dual-earner households. This paper seeks to address this gap by conducting the first systematic analysis of full-time day care provision at the municipality level.

We make use of an original dataset that covers information on the annual proportion of children aged under 14 years that attend full-time day care in 108 German cities over a time period of almost 15 years (2006–2020). Full-time day care indicates that the children can stay in the nursery or school for more than seven hours and will receive a proper lunch, making it compatible with both parents' full-time employment. While the public provision of childcare spots varies significantly across other European Union member states, Germany's case highlights fundamental structural barriers that hinder access to formal childcare services, underscoring the urgent need to examine the supply-side dynamics of childcare provision. Specifically, among the 27 European Union member states, the highest proportion of parents in Germany who were either not seeking employment or working only part-time answered in the 2010 European Union Labour Force Survey that the availability, affordability, or quality of childcare facilities influenced their labour force participation decisions (Pavolini and Van Lancker 2018).

Using methods that allow for analysing panel data, we find that party politics and financial constrains formulate the implementation of full-time childcare services in Germany. An affiliation of the mayor, who is the agenda-setter in political decision-making at the local level in Germany, with parties

on the left of the centre does not result in a significantly higher number of full-time day care places. However, if a city faces economic hardship, the level of full-time day care places is significantly lower, in particular if the mayor is affiliated with a social democratic, socialist, or green party, or does not have an affiliation with a party at all. This implies that when constituencies are low in debt and have a left-wing mayor, the number in childcare places per capita covering more than seven hours per day is significantly higher than when the mayor is not left-wing. The implications of these findings go beyond understanding the availability of childcare on a local level. The results show that for local level government decisions, party politics matters in addition to local budgetary restrictions or demographic patterns in the region in the case of a policy domain that is essential for the daily life of families in general and the role of women in society and politics in particular.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the governance of childcare provision in Germany, emphasising the necessity of systematic examination at the local level. We then discuss the potential determinants of childcare provision in German municipalities, drawing on insights from the broader literature on partisan politics and family policy. Specifically, we argue that the partisan affiliation of political decision-makers at the local level should – in combination with the economic and financial situation of a city – matter for the number of full-time childcare spots. Following this, we present an overview of the dataset and the empirical strategy. We evaluate the hypotheses by means of descriptive and multivariate analysis, considering the character of the panel data set we make use of in this contribution. The final section examines the findings and theoretical as well as empirical shortcomings. Moreover, we discuss incentives for further research on the politics of day care policy for children.

The local governance of childcare provision in Germany

In Germany, childcare is predominantly funded by the state, and its legal entitlement to early childhood education has become universal since the 1990s. In 1992, the right to a childcare place was granted to children aged three to six years, and four years later, this entitlement was extended to all children. The 2005 Daycare Expansion Act (*Gesetz zum qualitätsorientierten und bedarfsgerechten Ausbau der Tagesbetreuung für Kinder, TAG*) mandated that local governments ensure sufficient day care places for children under three, particularly for those with working parents, to meet growing demand. This pressure on local governments increased further in 2013 when the German federal government established a legal right for every child aged one to six to have access to a day care place or childminder. *Kindertagesstätten*[1] (Kitas), or day care centres, provide a structured

environment where children of similar ages can engage in activities such as playing, exercising, painting, and singing. The law stipulates that every employed parent must have access to a childcare place, enabling parents to take legal action and exert pressure on municipalities if this right is not fulfilled. Proposals such as the 2023 '*Kita-Qualitätsgesetz*', which earmarks €4 billion for improving day care facilities, highlight the federal government's commitment to enforcing these entitlements. By 2025, parents will be legally entitled to secure a full-time day care place[2] for their children in an elementary school setting.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain in meeting the demand for childcare services in Germany. Federal legislation has not succeeded in bridging the gap between legal entitlements and the actual provision of childcare. West Germany faces a shortage of approximately 250,300 day care places for children under three, while East Germany (including Berlin) is short by around 20,700 places (Bertelsmann 2022). This discrepancy stems primarily from the subsidiarity principle of the German welfare system and the multi-level governance structure of childcare provision.

As a Christian democratic welfare state, Germany traditionally assigned childcare provision to families and voluntary-sector providers, including churches and national non-profit welfare associations (*Wohlfahrtsverbände*). The state stepped in only when these private actors failed to meet demand, offering financial subsidies rather than direct intervention. This legacy endures, as voluntary welfare associations continue to operate 78.7% of daycare facilities in West Germany and 41.6% in East Germany (Mätzke 2019). These non-state actors retain significant control over operational decisions, such as setting opening hours and hiring staff.

Furthermore, policymaking and implementation are fragmented across regional, municipal, and district levels. State (*Länder*) governments establish regulatory frameworks, including child-to-educator ratios, inspection protocols, childminder training, and fee structures. At the local level, county-free cities and municipalities are responsible for financing and determining parental contributions. Childcare costs are typically divided among municipalities (50%) and state governments (28%), with the federal government providing only partial funding for childcare provision. Municipalities depend heavily on local business tax revenues – creating disparities based on the industrial presence within a municipality (Yamada 2024). In other words, while federal and state governments set overarching goals for expanding childcare facilities and regulations, the burden of implementation and financing falls primarily on municipalities. This underscores the critical role of local governments in bridging policy intentions with tangible outcomes, as highlighted by Zohlnhöfer and Tosun (2021) in their analysis of Germany's multi-level policy design framework.

Theoretical framework: partisan politics and childcare provision

Despite the decentralised nature of governance, comparative welfare scholars have predominantly focused on the politics of family policies at the national level (Engeman 2023; Esping-Andersen 1999; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015; Fleckenstein and Lee 2014; Huber and Stephens 2000; Iversen and Stephens 2008). Left-liberal and Green parties tend to champion progressive societal policies, including social services and gender-equal labour market initiatives, more so than their counterparts. Power resource scholars argue that the commitment of leftist parties to social equality often overlaps with gender equality, as exemplified by the social democratic welfare regimes in Scandinavian countries (e.g., Korpi 2000). Furthermore, following the significant rise in female labour force participation during the 1980s, highly skilled women and middle-class voters – favouring a dual-earner model and supportive of progressive family policies such as parental leave and childcare provision – emerged as a core constituency for these parties (e.g., Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Schwander 2018). These electorates are more likely to reward parties for expanding access to childcare, thereby incentivising their representatives in legislative or executive bodies to advocate for the creation of more full-time childcare spots. Case studies in Germany, for instance, demonstrate that the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party are actively advocating for reforms in education, parental leave, and childcare policies (Leitner 2010; Turner 2011).

In contrast, right-leaning parties frequently oppose or provide only minimal support for the expansion of full-time childcare provision. Christian Democratic parties, for example, have traditionally prioritised the preservation of family structures rooted in religious doctrines, which emphasise the male breadwinner and female homemaker model. These parties also uphold the principle of subsidiarity, favouring cash transfers to families over direct state involvement in caregiving responsibilities. Interestingly, in countries where Christian Democratic parties have been predominant, the responsibility for childcare has historically been delegated to the Church. Morgan (2013) suggests that the early development of universal childcare provision in France can be attributed to the absence of strong Christian Democratic parties. However, Church-led childcare initiatives were not designed to promote dual-earner family models. Instead, they focused on the educational aspects of childcare, reflecting broader historical tensions between church and state over authority in educating future citizens. As a result, church-provided childcare was often limited to older children, typically aged three to six (Bahle 2023). More importantly, the opening hours of these facilities were generally short, making them incompatible with the needs of dual-earner families.

Recent research by Schwander (2018) and Giuliani (2022) suggests that shifts in social norms, changes in electoral demographics, and broader socio-economic transformations have pressured these parties to reconsider their stances. Historically, women tended to vote for rightist parties, often due to religious affiliations (Emmenegger and Manow 2014). However, from the 1980s onward, as societal roles shifted and the influence of religious values diminished, right-wing parties began to lose support among women. In response, these parties increasingly sought to engage with family policies, particularly those aimed at supporting working women. Still, scholars find that the preference of rightist parties for traditional male breadwinner models remains evident, while Conservative parties have become more involved in family policy reform (Schwander 2018).

Case-based evidence that political parties' local representatives and their ideological orientations play a significant role in early childcare policy decisions. For instance, Teghtsoonian (1992) argues that conservative political representatives in Canada and the United States opposed a centralised approach to childcare as part of an ideological commitment to traditional family structures, presenting regional and local level childcare regulation as supportive of both market-based service provision and the family unit; this approach framed federal minimum standards as restricting parental choice, reinforcing the belief that families, rather than the state, should bear primary responsibility for childcare. Similarly, Fiva and Natvik (2013) show that in Norway incumbent members of the local executive increase aggregate public investment to boost re-election chances. Left-bloc incumbents specifically increase investments in childcare. In Germany, rightist parties in federal governments did not agree that the *Kita* entitlement law introduced in 2013 was the best way to support parents of young children. Instead, the federal level government coalition between the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), its Bavarian sister party CSU and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) introduced the Care Allowance Act, a social benefit for parents who look after their toddlers without using public services such as day-care centres. While this was ruled to be unconstitutional under the Basic Law a few years later, amendments of the Care Allowance Act, like a specific state education allowance (*Landeserziehungsgeld*), exist on a regional level, for example in Saxony and Bavaria. These measures are used to incentivise a traditional family pattern with one breadwinner and the other parent taking over most of the unpaid care work.

Hypotheses: partisan affiliation of mayors and economic hardship

Local government studies find that partisan politics shape various local policy outcomes (Debus, Knill, and Tosun 2013; Foremny and Riedel 2014; Freier and Thomasius 2016; Goerres and Tepe 2013; Lindh and Johansson Sevä 2018),

including childcare provision (Busemeyer and Seitzl 2018; Walenta-Bergmann 2023). However, we expect that the policy preferences of key local political actors matter more than the partisan composition of local governments *per se*. Mayors, in particular, have substantial agenda control and budget-drafting authority. In all German states, they are directly elected, serve as the head of the local council, and lead and represent the city. Thus, they must demonstrate an impressive policy record for renomination and, especially, re-election. In contrast, city council members serve voluntarily and often alongside their regular jobs (see, e.g., Schwarz 2020). Furthermore, mayoral candidates usually present election manifestos heavily influenced by their ideological backgrounds and their parties' general policy profiles (e.g., Gross and Debus 2018; Gross and Jankowski 2020). Since mayoral candidates directly or indirectly refer to their party affiliation in the election campaign (and rely on the support of their parties during the campaign), voters are likely to associate the policy preferences of the mayor with the party which supports the respective mayoral candidate.

Adopting this perspective to the issue of childcare policy and by taking the key role of the mayor in political decision-making on the local level into account, we develop the following hypothesis:

H1: The level of full-time day care spots for children is higher if the mayor belongs to a party which favours an expansion of the welfare state and prefers progressive positions on the order of society.

Under the retrenchment era, however, partisan politics do not alone determine the expansion of welfare programmes (Pierson 2003). The chances to implement the policy pledges of parties and their representatives should depend on budgetary restrictions. The financial capacity of a municipality, which is closely tied to its broader economic conditions, serves as a crucial contextual factor that shapes the behaviour of political actors (Ferree, Powell, and Scheiner 2014). In many policy areas, legislative authority predominantly resides at the national level, leaving sub-national and local governments with limited autonomy and primarily tasked with implementing decisions made at higher levels (e.g., Block 2024). Local political units thus rely heavily on financial transfers from national or regional levels to carry out their responsibilities (see Ladner, Keuffer, and Bastianen 2023). Gross et al. (2024) highlight that political parties are aware of their institutional and financial constraints and therefore tend to prioritise issues where local authorities have greater legal autonomy. However, financial pressures significantly affect this dynamic, particularly in cost-intensive areas. Consequently, focusing on issues where local authorities lack the financial capacity to address problems is not a prudent strategy for political actors, as it undermines their ability to present themselves as effective problem-solvers – a key expectation of voters,

especially for governing parties (Mortensen et al. 2011). When municipalities are financially well-resourced, local parties raise more parliamentary questions on such issues, but under financial strain, their focus shifts away from cost-intensive areas, with engagement instead remaining comparable to less costly issues (Gross et al. 2024).

Therefore, if economic hardship becomes severe to the point where a political unit, such as a county or city, is forced to curtail funding for projects due to budget constraints, the scope for elected officials to implement costly policies is likely to diminish – irrespective of their party affiliation or policy preferences. Furthermore, in such circumstances, the likelihood of fulfilling originally promised policy commitments generally decreases significantly. This challenge is even more pronounced when it comes to creating full-time childcare spots for young children, as this represents a particularly costly and resource-intensive policy objective. We thus derive the following hypothesis:

H2: An increasing degree of economic hardship results in a lower level of available full-time day care spots, even if the mayor is a member of an economically left-wing and societally progressive party.

Data and methods

In order to unpack the relationship between the composition of the city parliaments and the number of full-time day care spots in a municipality, we use a dataset of German municipalities which provides information to evaluate our hypotheses. This dataset covers information on the annual number of available full-time day care places in 108 German cities over a time period of 15 years (2006–2020). In addition, we complemented this data with information on the party affiliation of the mayor and the share of seats that each party controls in the city parliament. The data furthermore provides information on the socio-economic situation in a city, that is, the level of unemployment, the number of live-born children, the population, and the cities' public debt.[3] Furthermore, we include information on the mayors' gender and age in the analysis. The data was pooled using publicly available information from relevant constituency and regional level resources like the statistical offices of Germany and of the 14 German states that we covered in the analysis.[4]

The coding of our dependent variable is based on the number of children aged under 14 years in full-time day care spots per capita for every year in a German city that does not belong to a county.[5] Full-time day care means that the children can stay in the *Kita* or school for more than seven hours and will receive a proper lunch. We measure the level of available full-time day

care spots as a total of the number of children having full-time day childcare places, which are provided by public childcare facilities or childcare facilities funded through non-public resources. These non-public facilities may include church or private institutions that receive public subsidies from the respective city or municipality. Since the number of available full-time day care spots and, thus, of children in full-time day care will unlikely change from one year to the next and are rather signalling gradual increase, with size of the city contributing to the absolute number of spots offered, the dependent variable is measured by the number of children having full-time day care places, divided by the number of inhabitants of the respective city.

Our independent variables are, first, the party affiliation of the mayor. We differentiate between mayors who belong to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the socialist Left Party, and the Greens since these three parties adopt positions that favour an expansion of the welfare state and prefer societally progressive policies. We identify the Christian Democrats (CDU), its sister party in Bavaria (CSU), the 'Free Voters' which are a group of local lists, the right-wing populist 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) and the liberal party (FDP) as parties with fiscally conservative positions and – in case of CDU/CSU, AfD and Free Voters – a societally conservative profile which favour traditional roles in a family (see Jankowski et al. 2022). Mayors that belong to other parties or do not have any party affiliation serve as the reference group.

We further estimate the effect of the seat share of left-wing parties and of right-wing parties in city parliaments on the number of full-time day care spots available in a constituency. We use the same classification of the left-wing and right-wing parties' seat share as we do for the party affiliation of the mayor. We limit the coding of the seat share variables to the main parties that exist on the German federal and state level and do not – except for the Free Voters which have a state and federal organisation (see Wurthmann, Angenendt, and Thomeczek 2023) – select smaller local parties within these categories. Parties that only exist within a specific city may also fit into an economic and societal left-right dimension; there is, however, no adequate data available to classify these local party lists on an economic and societal policy dimension.

By taking findings from the literature on substantive representation into account (Yamada 2024), we control for the gender of the mayor to see if women officeholders implement early childcare policies once in political office. Furthermore, we include the mayor's age as a proxy for the likelihood of having younger children. If the mayor is at a stage in life where they are likely to have younger children, stronger support for full-time day care provision is expected. Along these lines, the amount of public debt per capita is an important factor in decision-making structures on all levels of the political system. Controlling for unemployment is therefore also important as it may, on the one hand, lead to a budgetary restriction,

but on the other also provide an understanding of the possible demand for early childcare in the constituency. We furthermore control for the share of live-born children among the cities' population. While this is a proxy, since we cannot capture people moving to a different constituency after having a child, this still accounts for the visible possible demand of childcare in the respective local unit. This is especially relevant as we are interested in the level of childcare from a very early age on and therefore the annual number of live births is a close estimate of the possible demand for childcare in the upcoming years. All these explanatory variables are lagged by one year, so that we analyse whether the number of children having full-time day care places per capita in a given year are affected by, for instance, the party affiliation of the mayor or the cities' budget in the previous year.

Furthermore, we include a time-trend variable to cover the tendency of increasing full-time day care places in the observation period, and state-fixed effects to account for institutional and contextual differences between the states, for instance in terms of the amount of fees parents have to pay for full-time day childcare.[6] In addition, we include a dummy variable that identifies the East German states due to the different historical and institutional legacy in childcare policy in the former German Democratic Republic. Finally, as the number of children in full day care per capita should be strongly influenced by the number of children in full day care per capita in the year before, we include the lagged dependent variable in the analysis. Given the panel structure of our data, the statistical method we employ is the estimation of several linear regression models with panel-corrected standard errors (Plümper, Troeger, and Manow 2005).

Results

Before evaluating our hypotheses, we start with a descriptive overview of the data. Figure 1 demonstrates that the number of children in full-time day care is increasing over time, while there is a significant amount of variation in the number of children in full-time day care places per capita across cities. The patterns that become observable from Figure 1 clearly set incentives for a detailed analysis that takes the political and economic situation on the local level into account.

We thus turn in the following section to the presentation of multivariate regression models that take the time-series structure of the data into account. Table 1 presents the results of the analyses. The dependent variable is the annual number of children with a full-time day care place in a city per capita. As already indicated, we use this variable as a proxy for the level of available full-time day care places for children in a city in a year. The first regression model allows for estimating the first hypothesis, that is, whether the number

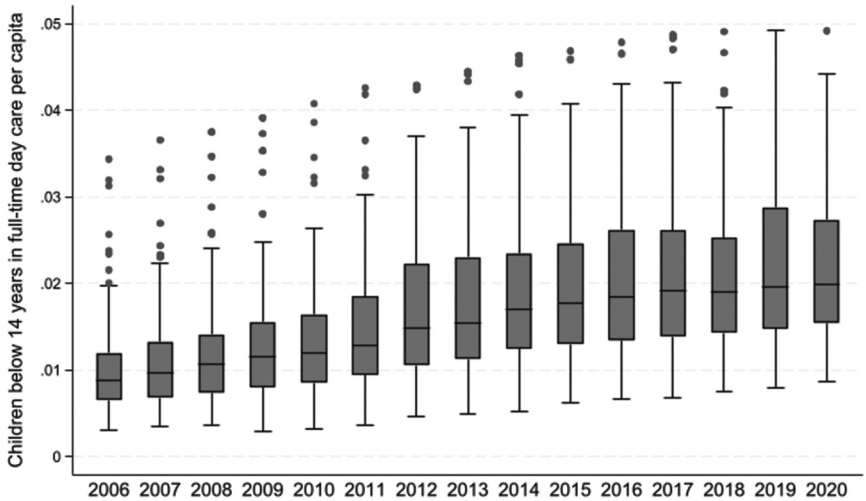

Figure 1. Number of children in full-time day care per capita in the German county-independent cities across time.
Source: own illustration based on data from https://www.bildungsmonitoring.de/bildung/online/.

of full-time day care spots for children per capita is related with the mayor's party affiliation. To evaluate our second hypothesis, we interact the party affiliation of the mayor with the variable that provides information on the amount of the respective city's public debt per capita in model 2. Figures 2 and 3 visualise the substantive implications of the key variables.

The regression results indicate no support for hypothesis 1, but we do find evidence for the reasoning outlined in hypothesis 2. The first model in Table 1 shows the expected positive effect of the variable identifying mayors affiliated with either the Social Democratic, the Green and the Socialist party on the number of full-time day care places for children per capita. However, this effect is only significant on the 90% level and Figure 2 below indicates no statistically significant difference between the three different groups mayors – mayors from left-wing parties, mayors from right-wing parties, and mayors who are not affiliated with a party – on the number of full-time day care places for children per capita. By contrast, there is empirical support for the expectation that the political opportunities for elected mayors to create more childcare spots that cover the whole working day decrease if the budget of the city does not allow for such a policy, even if the mayor comes from a party that favours the creation of more full-time day care places for children.

While the results of model 1 already indicate that the degree of a city's public debt has a negative effect on the number of full-time day care

Table 1. Determinants of the level of full-time day care places for children per capita in county-independent German cities, 2006–2020.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mayor (SPD, Greens, The Left) *t*-1	0.001^{+}	0.001^{+}	0.001**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Mayor (CDU/CSU, FDP, Free Voters) *t*-1	0.000	−0.001	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Public debts per capita *t*-1	−0.034**	−0.051**	−0.033**
	(0.010)	(0.016)	(0.011)
Mayor (SPD, Greens, The Left) *t*-1 X Public debts per capita *t*-1		−0.007	
		(0.011)	
Mayor (CDU/CSU, FDP, Free Voters) *t*-1 X Public debts per capita *t*-1		0.061**	
		(0.019)	
Seatshare left of centre-parties *t*-1	0.008**	0.008**	0.008**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Seatshare right of centre-parties *t*-1	−0.001**	−0.002**	−0.001**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Female mayor *t*-1	−0.001**	−0.001**	0.001
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)
Mayor (SPD, Greens, The Left) *t*-1 X Female mayor *t*-1			−0.001
			(0.001)
Mayor (CDU/CSU, FDP, Free Voters) *t*-1 X Female mayor *t*-1			−0.003*
			(0.001)
Age of mayor *t*-1	0.005**	0.006**	0.006**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Share of live births among local population *t*-1	0.108**	0.101**	0.108**
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Share of unemployed people *t*-1	−0.104**	−0.115**	−0.100**
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Time course (years)	0.001**	0.001**	0.001**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Children in full day care per capita *t*-1	0.839**	0.836**	0.833**
	(0.197)	(0.188)	(0.195)
East Germany	0.012**	0.012**	0.012**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
State dummy variables	Included	Included	Included
Constant	−1.200**	−1.153**	−1.202**
	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.106)
N	1109	1109	1109
R^2	0.767	0.772	0.768

The dependent variable is the number of children in full-time day care per capita in a county-independent city in a given year. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Reference category are mayors without party affiliation. Significance levels: + $p \leq 0.1$; * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

places per capita, model 2 interacts the public debt variable with the information on the partisan affiliation of the city's mayor. The substantive result of the interaction effect is presented in Figure 3 below. The results show that the number of full day child care spots per capita do not decrease with an increasing public debt if a mayor belong to a party from the right of the centre. Yet, the patterns are different in case of mayors from left-wing parties and when a mayor is not affiliated with a party. In those cases, the number of full-time childcare spots per capita decrease significantly when the public debt of a city increases. This difference between the three groups of mayors diminishes if the city's debt

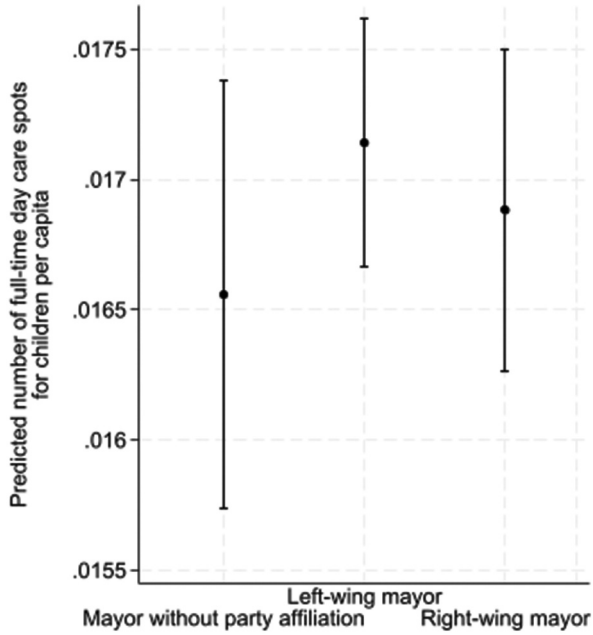

Figure 2. Effect of a mayor's party affiliation on the number of full-time day care places for children per capita.
Comment: Estimates based on model 1. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

decreases and thus the opportunities to implement costly childcare policies increases. This is intuitive as the boundaries of the agenda-setter may be reached at the point of high financial restrictions, thus supporting our second hypothesis, so that mayors from parties that favour an extension of the welfare state and progressive societal policies are only able to implement their policy agenda if the city's budget allows for increasing the level of day care places for children.

These effects remain robust when not only controlling for dummy variables that identify the German federal states, which provide an important policy framework for child care policy, in which the cities are located. Moreover, the effects remain stable when taking further variables into account that reflect the socio-economic, demographic, and political situation in the respective city, and personal characteristics of the mayor. For instance, in line with our theoretical reasoning, the seat shares for parties on the left or on the right of the ideological spectrum in the city council matter for the level of full-time day care places: the higher the seat share for social democratic, socialist and green parties in the local council in a given year, the higher is the share of children in full day care per capita in the next year. Furthermore, a higher level of unemployment in the city results in a lower level of full-time

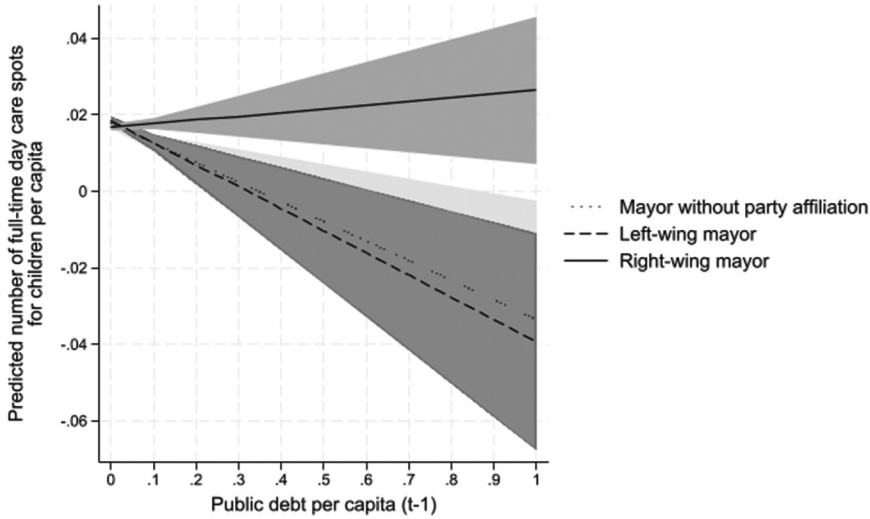

Figure 3. Effect of a mayor's party affiliation on the number of full-time day care places for children per capita, depending on the public debt of the city.
Comment: Estimates based on model 2. Grey-shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. The public debt per capita is divided by 100.000.

day care for children, indicating that a city which faces economic hardship cannot invest funds to create additional childcare places. Not surprisingly and indicated already in the descriptive analysis, the number of full-time day care places per capita in the cities under study increased significantly during the observation period. Furthermore, the number of childcare places in a given year depends on the level of available full-time day care places in the year before.

A surprising result of the empirical models is, by contrast, that – in contrast to existing studies (e.g., Yamada 2024) – male mayors are associated with a higher number of full day care spots for children.[7] A similarly surprising pattern is observable when focusing on the age of mayors: an increasing age of a mayor is correlated with a higher number of full-time day care spots for children per capita. To shed more light on the surprising effect of the mayors' gender, we estimated a third model in which we interact the variable that identifies the gender of a mayor with his or her party affiliation. Figure 4 shows the substantive effects of the interaction term. The results indicate that the party affiliation of a mayor does not affect the number of full-time childcare spots if the mayor is male. However, if the mayor is female and belongs to a right-wing party, the childcare places per capita are significantly lower than in the case of male mayors (regardless of party affiliation) and female mayors (if they belong to a left-wing party). One possible explanation for this finding could be that female politicians in right-wing

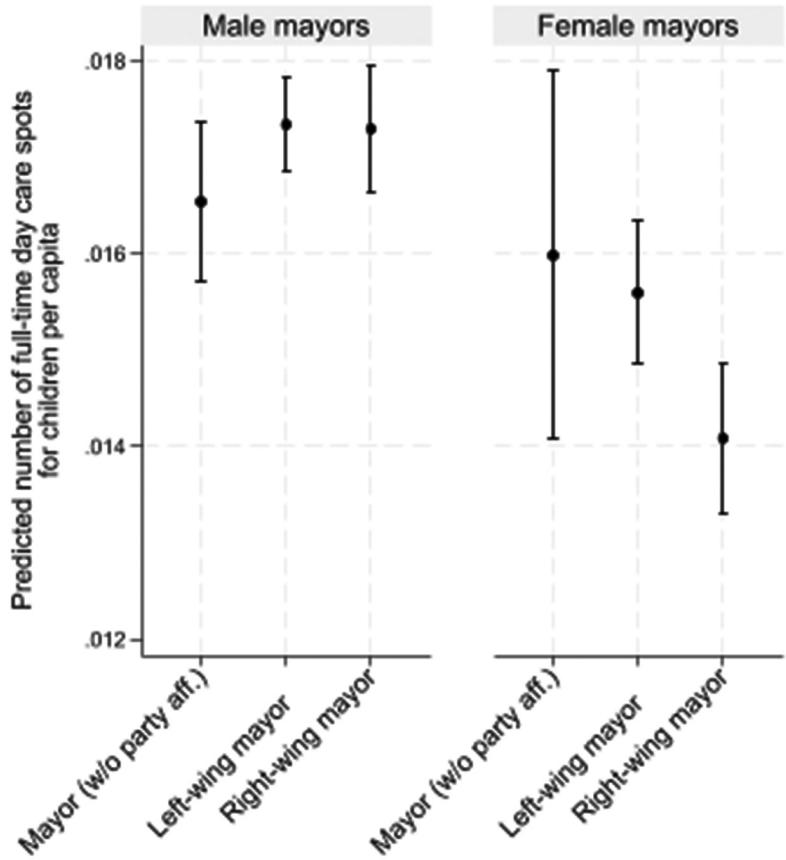

Figure 4. Effect of a mayor's party affiliation on the number of full-time day care places for children per capita, depending on the gender of the mayor.

parties do not want to or cannot implement a more progressive family policy agenda because it would decrease their career chances within the respective right-wing party which is often traditionalist on societal issues. Further research is, however, required to unpack this potential mechanism, so that we learn more about the relationship between childcare policy outcomes, the personal background of politicians and their ideological/party background.

Conclusion

Many factors contribute to political decisions and thus policy outcomes on the local level. In this contribution, we focused on a specific policy domain in which the local level plays a decisive role – at least in Germany, the case we concentrated on – namely childcare policy and

the number of full-time day care spots for children aged under 14 years. We argued that besides socio-economic factors, like public debts of the respective local community and the share of unemployed people have an impact on the amount of childcare offered to parents in the respective regions, the patterns of local party competition – more concretely, the partisan affiliation of the mayor as the key actor on the local political sphere – should contribute to a possible lack of childcare facilities in cities and municipalities.

The results of this study highlight the significant influence of party politics on the political process and policy outcomes at the local level, challenging the assumption that local governance is less affected by the ideological orientation of officeholders. While the party affiliation of mayors alone has limited direct impact, it becomes crucial when considered in conjunction with a city's financial situation. Mayors from left-wing parties and those mayors not affiliated with a party seem to reduce the amount of full-time day care spots for children when a city is in a financially problematic situation. Furthermore, the empirical findings indicate that the party strength in the local council matters significantly for the policy outcomes in childcare policy. Of course, we only focused on the determinants of a very specific policy outcome on the local level of one political system, i.e., Germany. Further studies could increase the scope of the analysis by adopting a comparative research design that integrates countries with different welfare state traditions (Daly and Ferragina 2018; Esping-Andersen 1999), so that one could analyse whether the level of available childcare places is generally higher and/or increased faster in the Nordic countries compared to, for instance, areas with more restricted welfare state regimes. Furthermore, we could not take the specific policy positions of parties on childcare into account, which might have changed over time and is likely to be different across the local units (e.g., Gross and Jankowski 2020). Future studies could consider the specific policy profile of the local parties and their candidates for the mayoral office and could also identify the majority situation in the council in a more detailed way. Moreover, since well-developed early childhood education is necessary for a low degree of educational inequality, future studies could analyse the implications of the availability of full-time day care places on the achievements of children in school. In addition, the finding that the number of full-time day care places for children is significantly lower when a woman from a right-wing party is the mayor of a city deserves more attention in future research. Given that the gender of politicians affects the political process on several levels, for instance legislative debates or policy outcomes (e.g., Bäck and Debus 2019; Homola 2022; Koch and Fulton 2011), it is worthwhile to focus on the impact of

politician's gender on the local level of the political process in more detail and with more sophisticated data.

A further incentive for future research could be to study the implications the availability of full-time day care for children has on the integration of parents and in particular of women into the local job market on the one side and in the political life on the local level on the other. While the availability of full-time day care places may seem like a minor issue only affecting few (e.g., Busemeyer et al. 2018; Goerres and Tepe 2010), the implications can be wide-reaching. As childcare availability affects whether parents decide to re-join the labour market after parental leave, on a more aggregate level these local decisions impact the gender balance and labour force of a country. Finally, recent studies show that public service deprivation, defined as reduced access to public services for which child care could be an indicator, plays an important role in explaining far-right support in elections (Cremaschi et al. 2024). Given the increasing support for populist parties from the far-right and far-left in Germany, another incentive for future research could relate the availability of child care spots to the election results. If populist parties from the far-left and far-right benefit from public service deprivation, the problems of local decision-makers in German cities might be a further piece of the puzzle for explaining the success of extremist parties.

Notes

1. In Germany, *Kitas* are categorised into three types based on age: nurseries for children under three, kindergartens for children aged three to six, and after-school care for primary school children in the afternoons.
2. Full-time care offers an important point of distinction here, as school hours in Germany typically end at midday or 2pm, depending on age of the child (Goethe Institute, n.d.). Full-time day care is typically classified as whole day, until 4 or 5pm.
3. The public debt variable was divided by the factor 100,000 for visualisation reasons in the following tables and figures.
4. More specifically, the data for the number of full-time-day childcare spots for children aged under 14 years comes from the education data base of the statistical offices in Germany). Data for the state of Saarland was not available.
5. Unfortunately, data on the number of children in full-time day care is only available at the county-level and for county-independent cities. Since the municipalities (and independent cities) are the decisive actors in terms of the implementation of childcare policy and data for the number of full-time day care spots in the municipalities are not available at www.bildungsmonitoring.de, we have to restrict the analysis to the county-independent cities in Germany.
6. We refrain from including an additional series of fixed-effects variables that identify the cities included in the analysis in order not to overspecify the empirical model which already covers fixed effects for each German state.

7. The effect remains robust when replacing the gender variable with the share of years a female mayor was in office in the respective cities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [DE 1667/4-3].

Notes on contributors

Marc Debus is Professor of Comparative Government at the School of Social Sciences at the University of Mannheim. His research interests include political institutions and their effects on the political process, party competition and coalition politics, and political decision-making in multi-level systems.

Keonhi Son is a research fellow at the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES). Her research encompasses the political origins of women's social and labor rights in advanced capitalist societies, work-family challenges in the Global South, and the role of family policies in addressing these challenges.

Sarah Wagner is a Lecturer in Quantitative Political Science at Queen's University Belfast. Her research focuses on political parties and their strategic approaches, with a particular emphasis on radical left parties and their voter dynamics.

ORCID

Marc Debus http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7151-7942
Keonhi Son http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3494-5080
Sarah Wagner http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2659-900X

References

Bäck, H., and M. Debus. 2019. "When Do Women Speak? A Comparative Analysis of the Role of Gender in Legislative Debates." *Political Studies* 67 (3): 576–596. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718789358.

Bahle, T. 2023. "Family Policies in Long-Term Perspective." In Daly, M., Pfau-Effinger, B., Gilbert, N., and Besharov, D.J. *The Oxford Handbook of Family Policy*, 119–138. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Bertelsmann, S. 2022. "2023 fehlen in Deutschland rund 384.000 Kita-Plätze." Accessed November 28, 2024. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/themen/aktuelle-meldungen/2022/oktober/2023-fehlen-in-deutschland-rund-384000-kita-plaetze.

Block, S. 2024. "Parliamentary Questions as an Intra-Coalition Control Mechanism in Mixed Regimes." *European Political Science Review* 16 (2): 298–314. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773923000322.

Busemeyer, M. R., J. L. Garritzmann, E. Neimanns, and R. Nezi. 2018. "Investing in Education in Europe: Evidence from a New Survey of Public Opinion." *Journal of European Social Policy* 28 (1): 34–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928717700562.

Busemeyer, M. R., and L. Seitzl. 2018. "The Partisan Politics of Early Childhood Education in the German Länder." *Journal of Public Policy* 38 (2): 243–274. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X16000313.

Cremaschi, S., P. Rettl, M. Cappelluti, and C. E. De Vries. 2024. "Geographies of Discontent: Public Service Deprivation and the Rise of the Far Right in Italy." *American Journal of Political Science*. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12936.

Daly, M., and E. Ferragina. 2018. "Family Policy in High-Income Countries: Five Decades of Development." *Journal of European Social Policy* 28 (3): 255–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928717735060.

Debus, M., C. Knill, and J. Tosun. 2013. "Registration Fees for Same-Sex Unions, Local Party Politics and Societal Demand." *Local Government Studies* 39 (6): 756–776. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2013.767798.

Emmenegger, P., and P. Manow. 2014. "Religion and the Gender Vote Gap: Women's Changed Political Preferences from the 1970s to 2010." *Politics & Society* 42 (2): 166–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329213519419.

Engeman, C. 2023. "Making Parenting Leave Accessible to Fathers: Political Actors and New Social Rights, 1965–2016." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 30 (4): 1137–1161. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac038.

Esping-Andersen, G. 1999. *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Ferragina, E., and M. Seeleib-Kaiser. 2015. "Determinants of a Silent (R)evolution: Understanding the Expansion of Family Policy in Rich OECD Countries." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 22 (1): 1–37. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu027.

Ferree, K. E., G. B. Powell, and E. Scheiner. 2014. "Context, Electoral Rules, and Party Systems." *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (1): 421–439. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-102512-195419.

Fiva, J. H., and G. J. Natvik. 2013. "Do Re-Election Probabilities Influence Public Investment?" *Public Choice* 157 (1–2): 305–331. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-012-9946-8.

Fleckenstein, T., and S. C. Lee. 2014. "The Politics of Postindustrial Social Policy: Family Policy Reforms in Britain, Germany, South Korea, and Sweden." *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (4): 601–630. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012451564.

Foremny, D., and N. Riedel. 2014. "Business Taxes and the Electoral Cycle." *Journal of Public Economics* 115 (1): 48–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2014.04.005.

Freier, R., and S. Thomasius. 2016. "Voters Prefer More Qualified Mayors, but Does it Matter for Public Finances? Evidence for Germany." *International Tax and Public Finance* 23 (5): 875–910. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10797-015-9382-z.

Ghysels, J., and W. Van Lancker. 2011. "The Unequal Benefits of Activation: An Analysis of the Social Distribution of Family Policy Among Families with Young Children." *Journal of European Social Policy* 21 (5): 472–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928711418853.

Gingrich, J., and S. Häusermann. 2015. "The Decline of the Working-Class Vote, the Reconfiguration of the Welfare Support Coalition and Consequences for the Welfare State." *Journal of European Social Policy* 25 (1): 50–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928714556970.

Giuliani, G. A. 2022. "The Family Policy Positions of Conservative Parties: A Farewell to the Male-Breadwinner Family Model?" *European Journal of Political Research* 61 (3): 678–698. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12470.

Goerres, A., and M. Tepe. 2010. "Age-Based Self-Interest, Intergenerational Solidarity and the Welfare State: A Comparative Analysis of Older people's Attitudes Towards Public Childcare in 12 OECD Countries." *European Journal of Political Research* 49 (6): 818–851. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01920.x.

Goerres, A., and M. Tepe. 2013. "Für die Kleinen ist uns nichts zu teuer? Kindergartengebühren und ihre Determinanten in Deutschlands 95 bevölkerungsreichsten Städten zwischen 2007 und 2010." *Dms – Der Moderne Staat – Zeitschrift Für Public Policy, Recht Und Management* 6 (1): 169–190. https://doi.org/10.3224/dms.v6i1.11.

Goethe-Institut. n.d. "The German School System." Accessed November 29, 2024. https://www.goethe.de/prj/mwd/en/indeutschlandleben/sas/schulsystem.html.

Gross, M., and M. Debus. 2018. "Gaining New Insights by Going Local: Determinants of Coalition Formation in Mixed Democratic Polities." *Public Choice* 174 (1–2): 61–80. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-017-0489-x.

Gross, M., and M. Jankowski. 2020. "Dimensions of Political Conflict and Party Positions in Multi-Level Democracies: Evidence from the Local Manifesto Project." *West European Politics* 43 (1): 74–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1602816.

Gross, M., D. Nyhuis, S. Block, and J. A. Velimsky. 2024. "The Impact of Institutional and Financial Constraints on Party Behaviour in Local Politics." *Swiss Political Science Review*. https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12628.

Homola, J. 2022. "The Effects of women's Descriptive Representation on Government Behavior." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 47 (2): 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12330.

Huber, E., and J. D. Stephens. 2000. "Partisan Governance, Women's Employment, and the Social Democratic Service State." *American Sociological Review* 65 (3): 323–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240006500301.

Iversen, T., and J. D. Stephens. 2008. "Partisan Politics, the Welfare State, and Three Worlds of Human Capital Formation." *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (4–5): 600–637. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007313117.

Jankowski, M., A. S. Kurella, C. Stecker, A. Blätte, T. Bräuninger, M. Debus, J. Müller, and S. Pickel. 2022. "Die Positionen der Parteien zur Bundestagswahl 2021: Ergebnisse des Open Expert Surveys." *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 63 (1): 53–72. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-022-00378-7.

Koch, M. T., and S. A. Fulton. 2011. "In the Defense of Women: Gender, Office Holding, and National Security Policy in Established Democracies." *Journal of Politics* 73 (1): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000824.

Korpi, W. 2000. "Faces of Inequality: Gender, Class, and Patterns of Inequalities in Different Types of Welfare States." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 7 (2): 127–191. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/7.2.127.

Ladner, A., N. Keuffer, and A. Bastianen. 2023. "Local Autonomy Around the World: The Updated and Extended Local Autonomy Index (LAI 2.0)." *Regional & Federal Studies*: 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2023.2267990.

Leitner, S. 2010. "Germany Outpaces Austria in Childcare Policy: The Historical Contingencies of 'Conservative' Childcare Policy." *Journal of European Social Policy* 20 (5): 456–467. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928710380482.

Lindh, A., and I. Johansson Sevä. 2018. "Political Partisanship and Welfare Service Privatization: Ideological Attitudes Among Local Politicians in Sweden." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 41 (1): 75–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12109.

Mätzke, M. 2019. "Comparative Perspectives on Childcare Expansion in Germany: Explaining the Persistent East–West Divide." *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 21 (1): 47–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2017.1416817.

Morgan, K. J. 2013. "Path Shifting of the Welfare State: Electoral Competition and the Expansion of Work-Family Policies in Western Europe." *World Politics* 65 (1): 73–115. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887112000251.

Mortensen, P. B., C. Green-Pedersen, G. Breeman, L. Chaqués-Bonafont, W. Jennings, P. John, A. M. Palau, and A. Timmermans. 2011. "Comparing Government Agendas: Executive Speeches in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Denmark." *Comparative Political Studies* 44 (8): 973–1000. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011405162.

Pavolini, E., and W. Van Lancker. 2018. "The Matthew Effect in Childcare Use: A Matter of Policies or Preferences?" *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (6): 878–893. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1401108.

Pierson, P. 2003. *The New Politics of the Welfare State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plümper, T., V. E. Troeger, and P. Manow. 2005. "Panel Data Analysis in Comparative Politics: Linking Method to Theory." *European Journal of Political Research* 44 (2): 327–354. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2005.00230.x.

Schwander, H. 2018. "Electoral Demand, Party Competition, and Family Policy: The Politics of a New Policy Field." In *Welfare Democracies and Party Politics: Explaining Electoral Dynamics in Times of Changing Welfare Capitalism*, edited by P. Manow, B. Palier, and H. Schwander, 197–224. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schwarz, L. 2020. "Empowered but Powerless? Reassessing the Citizens' Power Dynamics of the German Energy Transition." *Energy Research & Social Science* 63:101405. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.101405.

Teghtsoonian, K. 1992. "Institutions and Ideology: Sources of Opposition to Federal Regulation of Childcare Services in Canada and the United States." *Governance-An International Journal of Policy Administration and Institutions* 5 (2): 197–223. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.1992.tb00036.x.

Turner, E. 2011. *Political Parties and Public Policy in the German Länder: When Parties Matter*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Walenta-Bergmann, C. 2023. "Does Local Political Representation Affect the Childcare Coverage Rate in Austrian Municipalities?" *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 30 (4): 1162–1185.

West, A., A. Blome, and J. Lewis. 2020. "What Characteristics of Funding, Provision and Regulation are Associated with Effective Social Investment in ECEC in England, France and Germany?" *Journal of Social Policy* 49 (4): 681–704. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000631.

Wurthmann, L. C., M. Angenendt, and J. P. Thomeczek. 2023. "Die Freien Wähler: Eine anständige Alternative für Konservative?" *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 65 (1): 99–122. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00470-6.

Yamada, A. 2024. "Gender Representation and Policy Implementation: Is it Women or the Left Wing That Increases the Childcare Supply?" *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 31 (3): 558–585. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxae005.

Zohlnhöfer, R., and J. Tosun. 2021. "From the 'Rationalist Consensus' to 'Exclusive Incrementalism': The 'New' German Policy Style." In *The Routledge Handbook of Policy Style*, edited by M. Howlett and J. Tosun, 50–62. London: Routledge.