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Pushes and pulls of father leave policy reform: Unpacking divergent father leave reforms in the Czech Republic and South Korea

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Abstract

The development of father leave policies marks a critical step toward gender equality in family policy. Despite promising policy developments, father leave policies continue to face resistance and negative feedback from various stakeholders, constraining their development. Their implementation has exhibited considerable variation across countries, ranging from mere symbolic gestures to substantive reforms. This article provides a comprehensive framework for understanding their evolution, emphasising that progress depends not solely on public support but on a mix of factors, including electoral competition, policy diffusion, negative feedback, and crises. The contrasting outcomes observed in South Korea and the Czech Republic highlight how similar drivers can produce divergent policy responses, challenging the view that drivers (like crises or electoral competition) have a predictable effect on policy change. This complexity necessitates a re-evaluation of existing theoretical frameworks to more accurately reflect the intricate dynamics at play in policy development.

Keywords: crisis; father leave; feedback; party competition; policy diffusion; public opinion

Introduction

The role of fathers as breadwinners has long been taken for granted, but only recently has their contribution as caregivers to children been recognised and developed as an important policy issue (Gornick and Meyers, 2008; O'Brien, 2013; Gornick, 2015; Ellingsæter, 2021; Engeman and Burman, 2023). A variety of policy instruments have been implemented to encourage greater participation of fathers in childcare. Welfare states across the globe have adopted measures such as the father's quota and financial bonuses, which provide families with either additional leave entitlements or increased financial resources when both parents share parental responsibilities (Moss and Deven, 2015; Dobrotić and Stropnik, 2020; Koslowski et al., 2021).

One factor that complicates analyses of policy formation regarding father leaves¹ is that relevant actors and decision-makers, both public and private, have diverse motivations for promoting new

¹As *father-leave* policies, we consider: (a) Paternity leave: a short-term leave entitlement provided to fathers at the time of childbirth, intended to support their partner and establish early bonding with the child. (b) Father-specific parental leave: allocations within the broader parental leave framework that are reserved exclusively for fathers, allowing them to care for their child during its early years. In the academic literature, these entitlements are classified as either individual transferable (allocated to fathers but with the option to transfer to the mother) and non-transferable (commonly referred to as the "father's

fatherhood and those motivations vary within countries, across countries, and over time. Some welfare states, for example, aim to engage men as fathers to achieve gender symmetry both in caregiving, thereby ensuring a more equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities between mothers and fathers, and in employment, thereby improving mothers' position in the labour market (Duvander and Johansson, 2012). In some countries, father involvement is increasingly viewed as beneficial for child development, and father entitlements are advocated to strengthen the father–child relationship (Ellingsæter, 2007). In others, instrumental goals such as the future sustainability of the welfare state, with concerns driven by declining fertility rates, prompt consideration of supporting and enforcing fathers' right to provide care for their children (Duvander and Johansson, 2012; O'Brien, 2013; Mohun Himmelweit, 2023). Often, these diverse motivations overlap and intersect, and many shift or cycle over time.

Equality-promoting policies (Brighthouse and Wright, 2008), or what O'Brien (2009) terms “father-care sensitive” policies, hold the potential for social policy to take the above objectives more seriously as they facilitate actual utilisation by fathers. Previous research suggests that this is heavily contingent upon factors such as the generosity of wage replacement, the form of entitlement, eligibility criteria, flexibility, and duration. The take-up of paternity and parental leave (i.e., the percentage who claim among those who are eligible) by fathers tends to be higher in contexts when there is no significant wage penalty for taking such leave, that is, when income replacement and leave benefit ceilings (caps) are high (Duvander, 2014; Moss and Deven, 2015; Kaufman, 2018). To maximise incentives for fathers' take-up, leave regulations should provide for an individual, non-transferable entitlement (Duvander and Johansson, 2012; Escot et al., 2014; Brandth and Kvande, 2018; Kvande and Brandth, 2020). Shared, transferable entitlements allow but do not promote gender equality (Brighthouse and Wright, 2008) and are predominantly used by mothers (Brandth and Kvande, 2019). Moreover, to ensure a more equitable distribution of childcare time between mothers and fathers and to enhance men's parenting competencies, it is imperative that leave entitlements are not too short (O'Brien, 2009; O'Brien and Wall, 2017). Lastly, eligibility requirements and the flexibility of leave regulations also influence fathers' real choices (Javornik and Kurowska, 2017; Dobrotić and Blum, 2020).

Despite some promising policy developments regarding leave policies for fathers (Engeman and Burman, 2023), they continue to be a contentious family policy, facing resistance and negative feedback from various stakeholders, which constrain their development (Ellingsæter, 2012, 2021; Bergqvist et al., 2016; Gurín, 2024). Moreover, there are also striking differences among countries in the timing of introduction and the extent of changes in father leave policies (Ray et al., 2010; Engeman and Burman, 2023; Mohun Himmelweit, 2023). To date, there has been a lack of attempts to shed light on these phenomena, as the primary focus of research has been on describing policy changes or take-up.

This study examines the divergent trajectories of father leave policy reform in the Czech Republic – a laggard – and South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea), a frontrunner (Gurín, 2024). By drawing on established theories of welfare state change, including institutionalist approaches, policy feedback, and political competition frameworks, it positions five key drivers – public support, electoral competition, policy diffusion, negative feedback, and crises – as crucial mechanisms in understanding father leave policy transformations. This study thus considers both enabling (“push”) and constraining (“pull”) factors, drawing on existing scholarship to outline their predicted effects on policy change in father leave policy.

quota”). These provisions aim to promote fathers' engagement in caregiving through various incentive mechanisms: For instance, additional months of leave may be granted when both parents share portions of parental leave, or financial bonuses may be provided to fathers who utilize their leave entitlement. Such incentives may be exclusively targeted at fathers or extended to both parents (e.g., concurrent leave bonuses). Another notable mechanism is the Use-it-or-Lose-it bonus, which stipulates that leave is forfeited if not utilized by fathers. Both (a) and (b) can be structured as either automatic entitlements (granted by default) or non-automatic entitlements (requiring additional requests or special permissions). The take-up of leave may be voluntary, where fathers have the option to participate, or mandatory, requiring fathers to take a portion or the entirety of their allocated leave.

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that reform outcomes in this policy area result from a combination of factors that vary between the two cases, rather than from any single driver. In Korea, the convergence of public support, a prolonged fertility crisis, and electoral competition has facilitated more substantial father leave policy changes. In contrast, the Czech Republic's reforms were primarily influenced by external pressures from the European Union, with public support playing a secondary, albeit important, role. Public support, while crucial in creating the possibility for reform, was alone not sufficient to produce father leave policy change.

Historical accounts reveal that the same drivers can yield divergent outcomes depending on context. For instance, crises – particularly the long-term fertility crisis – in Korea created opportunities for policy expansion, opening a critical window for reform. Conversely, crises in the Czech Republic constrained reform efforts, maintained policy stability, and even closed the window of opportunity when conditions favoured change. The electoral competition also produced contrasting effects. In Korea, paternity and father-specific parental leave policies were framed as instruments of political advantage, prompting bold electoral commitments that ultimately spurred significant reforms. In the Czech Republic, however, these policies were viewed as electorally risky, with some proposals deemed to exceed public policy preferences. This led to a cautious, status quo-oriented approach, where political actors prioritised stability over change in parental leave. This study uniquely illustrates that father leave policies are particularly susceptible to local political climates and risk perceptions. This adds a fresh dimension to welfare state theory by emphasising the unique political sensitivities around gender-specific social policies.

The following section reviews the current knowledge of these five theoretical perspectives on welfare state change. We then outline the changes in father leave policies in both countries and explore the roles of these drivers of change. The last part concludes.

Theoretical perspectives on welfare state change

Public support is widely regarded across social sciences as a central – or even sufficient – force driving policy change. In the welfare state literature specifically, public support is often emphasised as a key influence on reforms, as it reflects societal values and norms that can generate strong demand for policies like father leave. In practice, however, policy reform outcomes are rarely the result of a single factor; instead, they emerge from the interplay of multiple drivers, which can either push policies forward or hold them back. Following this approach, we consider several key drivers of policy change, which literature often categorises as either “enablers” (or “pushes”) that facilitate change or “constraints” (or “pulls”) that resist it. Each of these factors brings its own set of predicted effects, as outlined in the existing literature below.

Push (I): Public support

Public support (or public demands for policy adoption) is a critical driver of policy change and welfare reform in democratic systems (Soroka, 2002; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). In democracies, governments are highly responsive to public demands, as aligning policies with citizen preferences is key to avoiding backlash, such as protests or electoral defeat (Erikson et al., 2002). This dynamic reflects the reciprocal influence between welfare state outputs and public expectations, underscoring the centrality of public sentiment in shaping policy evolution.

In the lead-up to elections, governments often prioritise policies that resonate with voters to secure political support. As Pierson (1996, p. 176) observes, addressing salient voter concerns enhances re-election prospects. By championing popular but overlooked issues, governments can expand their appeal and attract new voter bases, leveraging these policies as a strategic tool in electoral competition (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Morgan, 2013).

One particularly potent force in this cycle of responsiveness is accelerating policy feedback, where initial policy implementations generate increased public demand and set higher expectations for government action (Busemeyer et al., 2021). Positive policy outcomes amplify public support, creating a feedback loop that pressures governments to expand reforms. This dynamic not only intensifies public demand but also positions governments to gain politically by meeting rising expectations. As a result, governments are incentivised to sustain and extend reforms, capitalising on the momentum created by public expectations.

Recent shifts in family policies exemplify these dynamics, with welfare states increasingly aligning with female voters' preferences. These policies, addressing work–family balance, reflect the growing labour force participation of women and their demand for support in balancing caregiving and employment roles (Fleckenstein, 2010; Lee, 2018). Politicians are motivated by a desire to secure these voters' support, emphasising that responsiveness to public (family policy) preferences is (also) driven by office-seeking aspirations.

However, it remains to be seen whether political actors are equally responsive to public support (and specific policy designs demanded) around father leave policies. The underdevelopment of such policies in many countries presents an opportunity for politicians to gain electoral support by advocating for reforms, particularly as these policies align with evolving social norms like increased paternal involvement in caregiving. As Lee (2018) highlights, political parties often capitalise on new opportunities arising from social changes to expand their appeal, potentially framing father leave policies as a response to shifts in family structures and gender roles. However, in countries where public support for these policies is low, substantial reform is unlikely, as politicians may perceive limited electoral benefits or fear backlash for promoting such changes.

This pattern of responsiveness, however, is not uniform across all issues or regions and varies over time and between countries (Brooks and Manza, 2006). While public preferences shape policy agendas, the extent to which governments align with these preferences can differ significantly (Rasmussen et al., 2019). For instance, governments might implement father leave policies even with limited public support or, conversely, ignore strong public demand. These variations necessitate an examination of both the level and nature of public support. In some countries, high public demand for father leave policies may lead to more extensive policy changes, while in others with weaker support, changes may be limited or absent.

Moreover, support varies not only in intensity (Lee, 2018) but also in the specifics of policy design, which significantly shapes reform outcomes. Constituencies in some countries may favour non-transferable, individual entitlements, while in others they prefer shared family rights that parents can allocate as they choose. These nuanced preferences influence which specific policy instruments – such as paternity or father-specific parental leave – and policy designs (e.g., take-up voluntary or mandatory) gain traction within different national contexts. By analysing both the level and nature of public support, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving policy change and the ways in which governments navigate complex public preferences in their policymaking.

Push (II): Electoral competition

When both governing and opposition parties vie for the support of constituencies favouring policy change, the likelihood of significant reforms increases, particularly during election periods (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Fleckenstein, 2010; Lee, 2018). This dynamic is evident in the development of work–family balance policies, where political parties have competed to win over female or male voters by making progressively ambitious promises to expand family policy initiatives (Fleckenstein, 2010; Morgan, 2013; Lee, 2018).

Father leave policies, in particular, have the potential to become a focal point of electoral competition. As more young voters – both male and female – show increasing support for family policies that accommodate evolving gender roles, political parties may see father leave policies as an effective means to

appeal to this demographic. This could elevate father leave policies to a central issue in election campaigns, with parties vying to outbid each other by pledging more substantial reforms to attract young voters.

Furthermore, when campaign promises around father leave policies are only partially fulfilled, it can lead to voter disillusionment, creating an opening for opposition parties to push for further reforms. This competitive landscape not only facilitates the initial adoption of father leave policies but also sustains momentum for future expansions, as political parties continue to respond to shifting public expectations and vie for electoral advantage.

Push (III): Policy diffusion

While domestic factors such as public support and electoral competition are critical drivers of family policy reform, external forces play an equally significant role in shaping these changes. Policy diffusion from international organisations, particularly the OECD and the EU, adds an influential external layer that encourages the adoption and expansion of father leave policies (Gurín, 2024). These organisations often promote reforms inspired by Scandinavian models that emphasise gender equality and shared caregiving (Windwehr et al., 2022; Kim and Lundqvist, 2023). By employing voluntary and/or coercive strategies, they complement and reinforce domestic drivers, creating additional momentum for policy change.

The voluntary aspect of policy diffusion relies on the persuasive power of evidence and best practices (Marsh and Sharman, 2009). Organisations like the OECD disseminate extensive research, comparative data, and success stories from countries with advanced father leave policies, such as Sweden and Norway. These examples highlight the social and economic benefits of gender-balanced caregiving, including improved work-life balance, increased fertility rates, enhanced gender equality, and positive child development outcomes. OECD social policy reports and global rankings further support this narrative by showcasing progressive family policies as hallmarks of modern, equitable welfare states. This strategic dissemination of data and success stories serves to legitimise father leave policies on the international stage, framing them as not only desirable but essential for countries striving to meet global standards of social progress (Gurín, 2024).

The coercive aspect of policy diffusion involves conditionality and compliance requirements, exemplified by the EU's 2019 Work–Life Balance Directive (WLBd). This directive mandates minimum parental leave standards – 2 months of paid non-transferable leave per parent and 10 days of paid paternity leave – to advance gender equality (De La Porte et al., 2023). Countries failing to comply may face infringement procedures, with potential financial penalties imposed by the European Commission, thereby creating strong incentives for alignment with EU standards.

Alongside this vertical diffusion, horizontal diffusion also drives father leave policy adoption (Gurín, 2024). Horizontal diffusion occurs when policies adopted in one or more countries affect the policy developments of others, often through mechanisms such as emulation, competition, or learning (Meseguer, 2005). For instance, countries may emulate successful policies implemented by their neighbours, particularly when those policies are perceived as effective. Alternatively, competitive dynamics may drive countries to adopt similar reforms to maintain their social or economic standing relative to other countries. Learning from the experiences of others – whether by observing successes or avoiding pitfalls – further reinforces the spread of policies across national boundaries. These horizontal mechanisms complement vertical diffusion, collectively fostering cross-national influences on father leave policy development.

Pull (I): Negative feedback

Despite public support and policy diffusion, policy reforms often face barriers because of *negative feedback*. This refers to resistance and counter-mobilisation efforts – whether in the form of political

backlash, institutional resistance, or negative public opinion – aimed at preventing or limiting policy change (Baumgartner and Jones, 2002). In the case of father leave policies, this negative feedback can come from various stakeholders, such as factions within political parties whose norms or election strategies clash with the planned reform (Bergqvist et al., 2016), employers who fear that their interests will be jeopardised by the proposed policy (Windwehr et al., 2022), and segments of the public that view these policies as incompatible with traditional family roles or detrimental to their interests. As the disfavoured actor(s) mobilise(s) to demonstrate its/their own power, the government is constrained to operate within a certain range of acceptable action (Baumgartner and Jones, 2002).

Father leave policies in particular have become a “battleground” for polarised views on family structure and gender roles (Ellingsæter, 2012). Proposals for these policies often encounter strong negative feedback framed as a defence of traditional family values or parental choice, particularly when policy designs, like individual non-transferable entitlements (known as *father’s quota*), are seen as imposing foreign norms on domestic contexts. International organisations such as the OECD and EU promote Scandinavian-inspired father leave policies that emphasise equitable parental involvement and individual non-transferable entitlements (De La Porte et al., 2023), but these models can clash with the cultural values of countries with more traditional family structures. In such settings, highly prescriptive policies may provoke backlash from political actors and segments of the public who view these entitlements as intrusive (Gurin, 2024). This opposition can be especially strong in societies that prioritise family autonomy, where father’s quotas are viewed as restrictive and out of alignment with local norms (Duvander and Johansson, 2012). Even Nordic countries have experienced resistance, with some scaling back or abolishing policies, such as Denmark’s repeal of its “daddy quota” in 2002 (Abrahamson, 2010; Ellingsæter, 2021).

Negative feedback may also arise when father leave policies are perceived as undermining the roles of mothers or conflicting with prevailing beliefs about parental roles. Some opponents argue that father-specific parental leave entitlements reduce mothers’ time with children and encroach on traditional maternal roles, ultimately limiting parental choice (Ellingsæter, 2012). Additionally, cultural beliefs that cast fathers primarily as breadwinners and mothers as natural caregivers make some aspects of these policies, like father’s quota, particularly controversial (Suwada, 2017). For example, in some countries, such quotas are criticised as a “socialist straitjacket of unwanted state interference in family life” (Ellingsæter, 2021, p. 1006), and seen as contrary to the best interests of children, who opponents argue benefit from greater maternal involvement in early childhood. As these tensions escalate, policy diffusion from international models can become even more contentious, especially when coercive strategies are involved; mandates from international organisations can trigger resistance if they are perceived as imposing foreign values over national traditions and preferences (Gurin, 2024).

Adding to this complexity is the “thermostat model” proposed by Soroka and Wlezien (2010), which suggests that public opinion adjusts to policy shifts by supporting moderate reforms but reacting negatively to those seen as excessive. In the context of father leave policies, while the public may support incentives or bonuses that encourage paternal involvement, they may reject more prescriptive or sanctioning designs that are not widely desired. If such policies are proposed, public opinion could shift sharply against father leave policies, generating a powerful negative feedback effect that reshapes the political landscape. In such cases, even politicians initially supportive of father leave policies may turn against them, anticipating an electoral backlash if they continue to champion unpopular designs. Anticipating electoral risks, politicians may dilute or abandon reforms, prioritising public approval over contentious policies if opposition among their constituencies intensifies.

Push (IV) and pull (II): Crises

Even when public support and significant pressure for reforms exist, desired policy changes may be obstructed by countervailing forces. However, disruptions to the established order, such as demographic crises or the recent COVID-19 pandemic, can alter this dynamic, weakening negative feedback and

creating openings for policy change (Vis et al., 2011). In the realm of family policy, various crises have catalysed discussions on reform. Some of these crises, like the Asian financial crisis (1997–1998), the Global Financial Crisis (2007–2008), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), have been relatively short-term disruptions. Others, like the ongoing demographic crisis of low fertility rates that began in the 1960s in many affluent nations, represent long-term structural challenges. Further investigation is needed to understand how each type of crisis affects the development of father leave policies across countries.

Crises often act as critical junctures, enabling rapid welfare state transformation by legitimising previously contested ideas (Béland and Cox, 2010; Starke et al., 2011). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic redefined caregiving norms as fathers took on greater caregiving roles because of the convergence of work and family life at home (Yerkes et al., 2020). This shift could alter public support for expanded father leave policies (both in terms of level and preferred design), especially among fathers themselves, encouraging policymakers to adopt more responsive reforms that sustain these new dynamics.

However, not all short-term crises result in expansionary reforms. Financial crises, such as the Global Financial Crisis, often prioritise economic stability over social policy, delaying or scaling back planned reforms (Richardson, 2010; Nygård and Krüger, 2012). For example, momentum for father leave policies may dissipate during financial crises, leading to minimal adjustments or even retrenchment of previously expanded policies because of fiscal pressures.

In contrast, long-term demographic crises, such as persistently low fertility rates, tend to foster policy innovation. These ongoing challenges compel policymakers to reconsider traditional approaches, gradually reducing resistance to father leave policies (Mohun Himmelweit, 2023). As countries face the societal and economic consequences of declining birth rates, father leave policies are increasingly seen as tools to encourage family formation and promote gender equity (Duvander and Johansson, 2012; O'Brien, 2013). Over time, the fertility crisis amplifies domestic pressures for reform, creating opportunities to reshape welfare states in response to these demographic needs.

Methodology

To disentangle the role of various drivers of father leave policy reforms, we employed process tracing, a qualitative research method uniquely suited to analysing complex causal mechanisms. Process tracing allows researchers to identify and map out the sequential and interactive pathways through which specific factors contribute to policy outcomes, enabling a nuanced understanding of causal inference (Beach and Pedersen, 2012). By tracing the chronological development of father leave policies in the Czech Republic and Korea, we examined how different drivers of our study functioned as either “pushes” or “pulls” for reform. This approach is particularly appropriate for our study because the method’s reliance on detailed empirical evidence ensures that we can establish a credible link between drivers and policy outcomes while ruling out rival explanations.

Our study draws on a robust empirical foundation, including government reports, strategic policy documents, media coverage of reforms, public opinion surveys, and parliamentary minutes (from the Czech Chamber of Deputies), as well as academic literature in Czech, Korean, and English. These sources provide rich contextual evidence for connecting policy changes with their underlying drivers. Importantly, we supplemented these documentary sources with expert interviews to address gaps and ambiguities not readily available in written records. Interviews with a government researcher (Korean case), a representative of a non-governmental organisation, and two ministry officials (Czech case) offered insider perspectives on policy decision-making processes and the influence of specific actors, complementing our documentary analysis.

Empirical part: Transformation of father leave policies in the Czech Republic and Korea

The analysis is structured to explore the evolution of father leave policies in relation to key drivers of policy change, divided into two distinct periods with differing organisational approaches. From 2000 to

2009, a joint discussion examined both the Czech Republic and Korea, as father leave policies were absent in both countries. During this time, discussions focused on their potential introduction but yielded limited outcomes. For the second period (2010–2024), the text is divided into separate discussions for each country. This approach highlights the stark divergence between the two, as Korea pursued substantial policy expansions, whereas the Czech Republic remained a laggard. This reorganisation offers a clearer analysis of how these drivers influenced prolonged inaction during the first period and shaped the contrasting policy developments in the second.

Laying the groundwork: Early discussions on father leave policies, 2000–2009

In 2001, both the Czech Republic and Korea implemented reforms to parental leave entitlements, formally extending access to fathers. In the Czech Republic, parental leave became a shared family entitlement, marking a legal milestone as fathers had not previously been recognised as eligible caregivers under the law. In Korea, the reform was rooted in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis (1997–1998), which exposed the inadequacies of traditional Confucian gender norms that relegated men to breadwinning roles and women to caregiving. This upheaval galvanised feminist activists to demand institutional reforms that acknowledged fathers' responsibilities in childcare. Responding to these pressures, the centre-left government led by Kim Dae-jung undertook transformative measures. In 2001, unpaid parental leave was converted into a paid benefit of 200,000 KRW² per month, equivalent to 11.47% of the average wage, and financed through the employment insurance fund. The reform granted both mothers and fathers an individual, non-transferable entitlement (Jeoung, 2021). However, family entitlements in the Czech Republic and father's quota in Korea fell short of adequately addressing the specific needs of fathers.

Public support for father leave policies in Korea began to coalesce in the early 2000s, reflecting a cultural shift toward recognising the value of involved fatherhood. Terms like “*Super Daddy*” and “*Friendly*” (a blend of “friend” and “daddy”) gained traction, celebrating fathers actively engaged in childcare. Surveys consistently revealed broad support for paternity and mandatory father's quota reforms, with income security identified as essential for enabling fathers to take leave. However, the parental leave benefit of 200,000 KRW – less than half the minimum wage – was widely regarded as insufficient, deterring take-up.

In 2002, women's groups and labour organisations advocated increasing benefits to 30% of the average wage (Kim et al., 2016), but resistance from business and government ministries, concerned about economic consequences related to the potential increase in beneficiaries, stalled significant reforms (Gurín, 2023). By 2005, the National Family Survey revealed stronger public backing for father leave policies: 77% endorsed mandatory father's quota of at least 4 weeks, and 88% favoured paternity leave, with 7–10 days of paid leave as the most preferred option. In response, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family committed in 2006 to reviewing mandatory father's quota and paternity leave proposals, though positioned them as long-term policy goals.

Korea's escalating low fertility crisis brought father leave policies to the forefront of public and political discourse. By 2002, experts highlighted paternity leave and father-specific parental leave entitlements as vital tools for addressing the country's declining birthrate. Framing low fertility as a national crisis proved instrumental in garnering support for family policies, emphasising the economic and social risks of inadequate welfare state intervention (Gurín, 2023; Kim, 2018; Kim, 2018; Lee, 2018). In response, the government's *First Basic Plan for Healthy Families (2006–2010)* proposed paternity leave and a quota system for fathers' parental leave, signalling a policy shift toward gender-equal caregiving as part of the fertility crisis response.

By 2006, this urgency had deepened, with women's groups, policymakers, and activists advocating transformative measures to expand fathers' caregiving roles. Central to these efforts was the push for a

²To provide a current reference as of December 18, 2024, 100,000 KRW is approximately equal to 66.37 euros or 68.74 USD.

mandatory “Daddy’s Quota” to guarantee fathers’ participation in childcare. The 2006 public *birth strike* further amplified these demands, with fathers calling for a mandatory 1-month father’s quota paid at 100% of the average wage to ensure meaningful involvement in childcare.

Policy diffusion played a secondary but influential role in shaping Korea’s parental leave policies, including father leave measures. While the fertility crisis and public support provided the primary impetus for reform, the OECD influenced the framing and design of these policies by presenting the Nordic countries, especially Sweden, as exemplary models. The OECD emphasised Sweden’s success in addressing low fertility and promoting gender equality through flexible work arrangements, robust income security, and active paternal involvement (Gurín, 2024). Korea gradually adopted some of these elements – such as reduced working hours in 2008 – but significant reforms on income security and gender equality were delayed. Nonetheless, Sweden’s example remains a reference point in Korea’s policy discourse, illustrating the enduring influence of OECD-driven policy diffusion on long-term goals related to fertility and gender equality.

In the Czech Republic, father leave policies were similarly shaped by evolving public attitudes and external influences. Surveys revealed growing support for shared childcare, with most respondents endorsing paternity leave. A majority preferred 1–2 weeks of paid leave, while nearly 30% supported longer durations exceeding 2 weeks (CSO, 2003).

Unlike in Korea, where policy diffusion played a supplementary role, international influences were pivotal in advancing discussions in the Czech Republic. The country’s 2004 EU accession brought external pressure to align with broader EU goals, such as promoting work–family balance and increasing women’s labour market participation. Additionally, neighbouring welfare states with similar cultural and institutional contexts, many of which had implemented father leave policies, bolstered the case for reform and shaped domestic debates (Gurín, 2024). This convergence of public demand and external influence culminated in the 2008 Pro-Family Package proposed by Petr Nečas (ODS), which included 7 days of paid paternity leave and active fatherhood initiatives. These themes had already emerged in the Social-Democratic government’s 2005 policy proclamations, reflecting an evolving commitment to father leave policy reform.

Concurrently, both Korea and the Czech Republic encountered significant resistance to father leave policies, though the nature and intensity of opposition varied. In Korea, business associations, led by the Korea Employers Federation, strongly objected to such reforms, citing financial burdens on companies. They argued that existing parental leave provisions were sufficient and advocated for expanded childcare infrastructure as a more pragmatic solution to the fertility crisis. Employers warned that increased leave take-up could reduce profit margins, hinder economic growth, and threaten the sustainability of the employment insurance fund.

These objections shaped the government’s cautious approach. Rather than bold reforms, policy-makers opted for incremental changes. For instance, parental leave benefits increased only modestly from 200,000 to 500,000 KRW in 2007, with the primary aim of boosting women’s employment rather than promoting gender-equal caregiving roles (Jeoung, 2021). Resistance diluted father leave reform significantly. The introduction of a 3-day unpaid paternity leave in 2008 merely formalised voluntary practices already implemented by some companies, falling to meet public calls for extended, paid paternity leave or a mandatory 1-month father’s quota. This outcome highlighted the dominance of corporate objections over public preferences in shaping policy.

In the Czech Republic, employer resistance to father leave policies was less pronounced than in Korea but still evident. Businesses voiced concerns over the financial and administrative burdens of paternity leave, warning of potential cost increases and operational challenges. However, the Global Financial Crisis (2007–2009) played a more decisive role in stalling reform efforts. With economic stabilisation and unemployment mitigation taking precedence, family policy discussions were sidelined. Despite bipartisan political support and growing public demand for paternity leave, the crisis closed the window of opportunity, leaving reform proposals unrealised.

By the end of the decade, progress in father leave policies remained limited in both Korea and the Czech Republic, despite strong public support and external pressures. In Korea, public demand, OECD

guidance, and a deepening fertility crisis underscored the need for reform. However, resistance from business stakeholders restricted outcomes to a modest 3-day unpaid paternity leave, reflecting the primacy of economic concerns. In the Czech Republic, EU influence and shifting public attitudes spurred promising debates, but the Global Financial Crisis redirected national priorities to economic recovery. In both cases, economic pressures and opposition from influential actors ultimately curtailed meaningful advancements in father leave policies.

Paths of divergence: Korean reforms and Czech stagnation in father leave policies, 2010–2024

The Czech Republic: Since 2015, paternity leave has re-emerged as a focal point in discussions within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs' expert Commission, tasked with developing the Family Policy Plan (*Koncepce rodinné politiky*). Reflecting evolving public preferences, the Ministry has prioritised voluntary measures to promote active fatherhood over mandatory quotas or punitive (Use-it-or-Lose-it) mechanisms. This approach aligns with Czech fathers' preferences for initiatives that encourage paternal involvement while preserving freedom of choice. Among proposed measures, paternity leave has garnered strong support as a key policy tool (Kuchařová and Psychlová, 2016). The optimal design envisions 2–3 months of flexible leave, allowing intermittent use, with income replacement of at least 70% of average earnings to mitigate financial disincentives and encourage participation.

However, the proposal has faced significant resistance, particularly from right-wing parties (TOP09 and ODS), who questioned its effectiveness in fostering stronger father–child bonds or advancing gender equality. They criticised paternity leave as a universal benefit applied indiscriminately, raising concerns about its potential to burden small employers and strain the state budget. This opposition marked a notable shift from their earlier support for the policy, reflecting evolving political priorities. The governing party ANO also expressed concerns, primarily regarding the fiscal impact. Employer associations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises and Craftsmen, further constrained policy expansion, highlighting administrative complexities and financial implications of implementing paternity leave. They dismissed the proposal as “pure populism,” stressing discomfort not with the principle of active fatherhood but with what they perceived as its “coercive imposition” (ČRo Plus, 2017).

Paternity leave was ultimately enacted in 2018 under mounting pressure from the European Union. The Czech Republic faced criticism from European Parliament members as one of the few nations lacking such a policy, and this scrutiny intensified with the impending Work–Family Balance Directive (WLBD), which mandated paternity leave under threat of sanctions. Although the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs anticipated the directive before its formal adoption in 2019, the initial policy offered only 7 days, falling short of the required 10 days. Efforts to extend the benefit began in 2019 but were delayed as the COVID-19 pandemic redirected government priorities toward urgent health and economic challenges. The extension to 14 paid days was ultimately realised in 2022.

As noted above, Czechs broadly support policies fostering active fatherhood, provided they respect family autonomy and avoid coercion. Beyond paternity leave, these include father-specific incentives within parental leave frameworks. Kuchařová and Psychlová (2016) found that 82% of respondents supported extending parental leave by 1 month without reducing the primary caregiver's time and only 23% endorsed a mandatory father quota. Similarly, a 2020 survey by LOM, an organisation promoting active fatherhood, revealed diverse preferences for parental leave aligned with the WLBD. One-third of fathers preferred a 2-month non-transferable entitlement taken concurrently with the mother in a rigid block, while another third favoured a flexible, intermittent approach. Only 6% indicated they would forgo such leave entirely, underscoring widespread interest in individualised non-transferable, flexible leave policies.

Opposition to father-specific parental leave policies, however, has been a persistent theme, often invoked by political leaders appealing to conservative constituencies. Debate on individual, non-transferable entitlements began in 2013 when the Orange Club (*Oranžový klub*) proposed a Use-it-

or-Lose-it model for fathers, inspired by Nordic practices. The proposal faced criticism from right-wing political parties and employers, who denounced it as “social engineering” that prioritises mothers’ interests over children’s and infringed on freedom of choice. Even the Social Democratic Party, unofficially linked to the Orange Club, distanced itself from the proposal despite its inclusion in the party’s 2012 family policy manifesto. Concerns over alienating voters during the election year led party leaders to avoid endorsing the proposal.

The issue resurfaced in 2015 during deliberations on a new Family Policy Plan aimed at aligning leave policies with the forthcoming WLBD. A working group led by Steven Saxonberg proposed a bold, Nordic-inspired model (Saxonberg et al., 2023), but it failed to gain political traction as it diverged from public preferences. Instead, the Ministry suggested a more moderate incentive-based “alternating bonus” (*střídací bonus*) system, modelled on the German parental leave framework, to achieve broader acceptability.

Despite aligning with the WLBD and public policy preferences, implementing the proposed alternating bonus appears increasingly unlikely. Political actors on both the left and right view father-specific parental leave policies as electorally risky, fearing they may alienate conservative voters. Consequently, there is a tendency to either delay discussions or oppose such measures outright. This reluctance is evident in responses to a Czech Radio article falsely claiming the WLBD mandates 2 months of obligatory leave for fathers. Political parties across the spectrum condemned the supposed mandate as EU overreach and an unprecedented intrusion into family autonomy.

In March 2022, MP Marie Jílková proposed reserving 2 months of individual non-transferable leave for fathers, as required by the WLBD. Her initiative failed, and no similar proposals are currently under consideration by the Chamber of Deputies. Most recently, in November 2024 – just 1 year before parliamentary elections – the Czech government explicitly rejected implementing such entitlements, deeming them “unnecessary” since the existing system allows fathers to utilise parental leave freely. It remains unclear whether this decision violates EU law and if sanctions will follow. This decision underscores the persistent difficulty of advancing father-specific leave policies in a politically cautious environment where electoral considerations overshadow substantive family policy reforms.

Korea: Efforts to introduce father-specific parental leave entitlements began in 2010 as a response to a persistently low fertility rate. For instance, in March 2010, Democratic Party lawmaker Hong Young-pyo proposed a 14-month parental leave system, requiring fathers to take at least 2 months with generous (average wage) income replacement. By 2011, electoral competition intensified the focus on father leave policies, particularly after the ruling party’s defeat in the school lunch referendum. This victory underscored the growing electoral influence of voters in their 20s to 40s, a demographic newly acknowledged for its politically destructive power. To regain voter support, the ruling party announced plans to expand paternity leave to 5 days. Representative Kim Sung-sik of the ruling Saenuri Party pushed further, proposing a 30-day mandatory father’s quota alongside 3 days of paid paternity leave and two additional unpaid days. From this point onward, father leave policies became central to electoral campaigns, with political parties competing to win the favour of younger, family-oriented voters.

This shift sparked resistance from businesses, which dismissed father leave proposals as overly populist and overlooking operational challenges faced by companies. They warned that these measures would undermine the investment climate, stifle job creation, and hinder economic recovery. Instead, they advocated for pragmatic, economically viable alternatives, criticising expansive father leave reforms as politically motivated gestures disconnected from the country’s immediate economic needs. Amid these tensions, the only reform deemed “passable” by the business community was a promise by then-President Lee Myung-bak to modify the parental leave system to an earnings-related model, aimed at increasing the generosity of parental leave in alignment with public policy preferences. This reform introduced a replacement rate of 40% of regular earnings, capped at 1,000,000 KRW – a relatively low ceiling, reflecting the business community’s concerns about cost burdens (Kim and Lundqvist, 2023). However, this measure drew criticism from civil society organisations, which deemed it inadequate and father insensitive.

As political parties competed for the support of female voters amidst a fertility crisis that showed little sign of improvement (see Figure 1), father leave policies gained prominence during the 2012 presidential

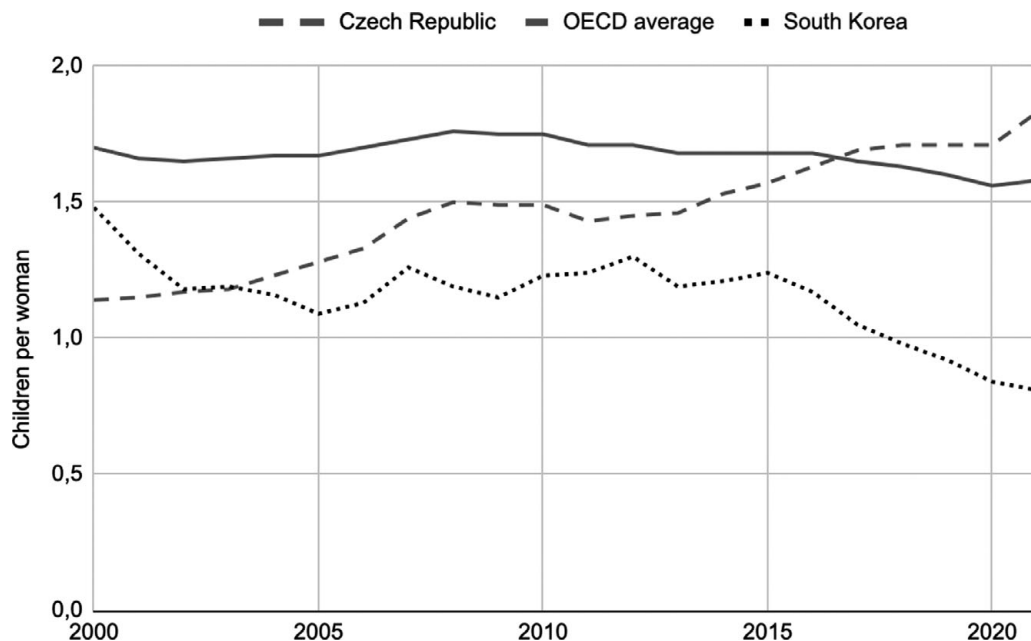


Figure 1. Total fertility rates.
Source: OECD (2024).

election, with Park Geun-hye pledging a 1-month mandatory *Daddy Month* entitlement, offering payment at 100% of the father's monthly regular wages, covered by employment insurance and Moon Jae-in proposing bold paternity leave entitlements (2 paid weeks), along with a month of individual, non-transferable parental leave entitlement for fathers.

Despite the prominence of father-specific parental leave policy in Park Geun-hye's campaign rhetoric, her administration failed to deliver on its ambitious pledge because of opposition from the Ministry of Employment and the Ministry of Strategy and Finance over funding concerns, and pressure from employers who viewed the policy as a financial and managerial burden. Negative feedback, particularly from small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), emphasised the need to "meet market realities" and highlighted challenges related to human resource management and financial constraints. Consequently, a watered-down version was introduced, which faced numerous challenges in its specific design (Kim, 2018). This revised policy granted a benefit equivalent to a full monthly wage, capped at only 1.5 million KRW, exclusively to the second leave-taker³. This policy fell short of expectations, as it lacked a mandatory father's quota and perpetuated traditional assumptions of fathers as primary breadwinners and secondary caregivers (Gurín, 2023; Han, 2016). Structural barriers further limited its effectiveness: only regular employees in large companies could access parental leave, and fathers were ineligible if mothers – typically the first leave-takers – were not covered by employment insurance or were employed in SMEs. In 2016, modest progress was achieved when the *Daddy Month* entitlement was extended to 3 months, with the benefit cap raised to 2 million KRW, representing ~58% of the average wage. This policy shift was largely influenced by a gradual softening of resistance from the business community, which began to perceive the nation's declining fertility rates as a significant threat to its future economic sustainability.

³Fathers receiving higher pay for parental leave compared with mothers constituted clear discrimination. To circumvent this, a method was employed whereby greater compensation was provided to the second leave taker. However, in practice, this approach primarily targeted fathers.

Under Moon Jae-in, reforms accelerated, reflecting a concerted effort to address barriers to parental leave take-up, which had long been attributed to insufficient benefit generosity. In 2017, the replacement rate for the first 3 months of standard parental leave increased to 80% (capped at 1,500,000 KRW), and by 2022, benefits were standardised at 80% of wages for the entire leave period. Additionally, starting in 2020, both parents were allowed to take parental leave simultaneously and receive benefits. Father leave reforms under Moon were even more transformative. In 2019, paid paternity leave was extended to 10 paid days, and the Daddy's Month benefit cap increased to 2,500,000 KRW, ~65% of the average wage. The introduction of the "3 + 3 Parental Leave System" in 2022 was a notable innovation. This policy allowed both parents of children under 12 months to take 3 months of leave, either sequentially or simultaneously, with monthly benefits of up to 3,000,000 KRW, incentivising greater paternal participation in childcare.

Building on this foundation, President Yoon Seok-yeol's administration has expanded these reforms further. In October 2023, the "6 + 6 Parental Leave System" was introduced, enabling parents to take 6 months of simultaneous leave, with benefits starting at 2 million KRW and increasing to 4.5 million KRW by the sixth month, offering a potential combined leave benefit of 39 million KRW. Looking ahead to 2025, further enhancements are planned. Standard parental leave will extend to 18 months if both parents take at least 3 months, with greater flexibility through segmented leave options. Parental leave benefits will also rise, with monthly caps reaching 2.5 million KRW for the first 3 months and tapering to 1.6 million KRW for subsequent months. Meanwhile, paternity leave will double to 20 days.

Under the administrations of Moon Jae-in and Yoon Seok-yeol, Korea witnessed significant expansions in father leave (especially father-specific parental leave) policies, presenting a striking contrast to developments in the Czech Republic. This divergence can be attributed to a confluence of factors: intense electoral competition, the mounting urgency of a fertility crisis, and the broader societal shifts catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these forces shaped Korea's expansionary policy trajectory.

First, the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections showcased an unprecedented focus on father leave and father sensitivity of standard parental leave, as candidates vied to capture the support of both male and female voters. In 2017, Moon Jae-in positioned himself as a "feminist president," proposing an increase in replacement rates to 80% for the first 3 months and introducing a father-specific bonus system, asserting fathers' right and duty to childcare. His rivals quickly followed suit: Lee Jae-myung advocated for uncapped benefits at 80%, while Ahn Cheol-soo pledged 100% income replacement for the first 3 months of parental leave. Sim Sang-jung went even further, proposing a bold reform package that included mandatory 3-month quotas for both fathers and mothers and extending the total parental leave period to 16 months. These proposals marked a decisive shift in Korea's policy debate, as candidates competed to position themselves as champions of gender-equal family policy. By 2022, electoral competition evolved to reflect a stronger focus on male voters, particularly young men in their 20s and 30s. Lee Jae-myung called for a mandatory father's quota, and Yoon Seok-yeol, who ultimately won, proposed extending leave to 1.5 years per parent while omitting mandatory quotas.

Electoral competition over parental leave policies has also permeated National Assembly elections, with a noticeable intensification of focus on mandatory take-up. In 2020, elections, for instance, the Minseong Party called for a mandatory father's quota, paired with generous benefit levels, while the Democratic Party proposed increasing benefit ceilings to 2.5 million KRW. In 2024, the ruling People Power Party targeted the MZ generation (individuals born between the 1980s and 2000s) with plans to increase benefits to 2.1 million KRW and mandate at least 1 month of leave for fathers, while the Green Justice Party championed progressive reforms like automatic parental leave system and mandatory leave allocations for fathers.

This electoral competition has been closely tied to the rising involvement of fathers in childcare, a trend that has gained considerable traction over the years. By 2017, the steady increase in fathers taking parental leave, spurred by earlier policy reforms, had positioned fathers leave policy as an emerging political priority. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with the nationwide postponement of school years and heightened caregiving demands prompting more fathers to take leave, as evidenced in [Figure 2](#). The growth in fathers' take-up of parental leave has been striking, climbing from just 1.9

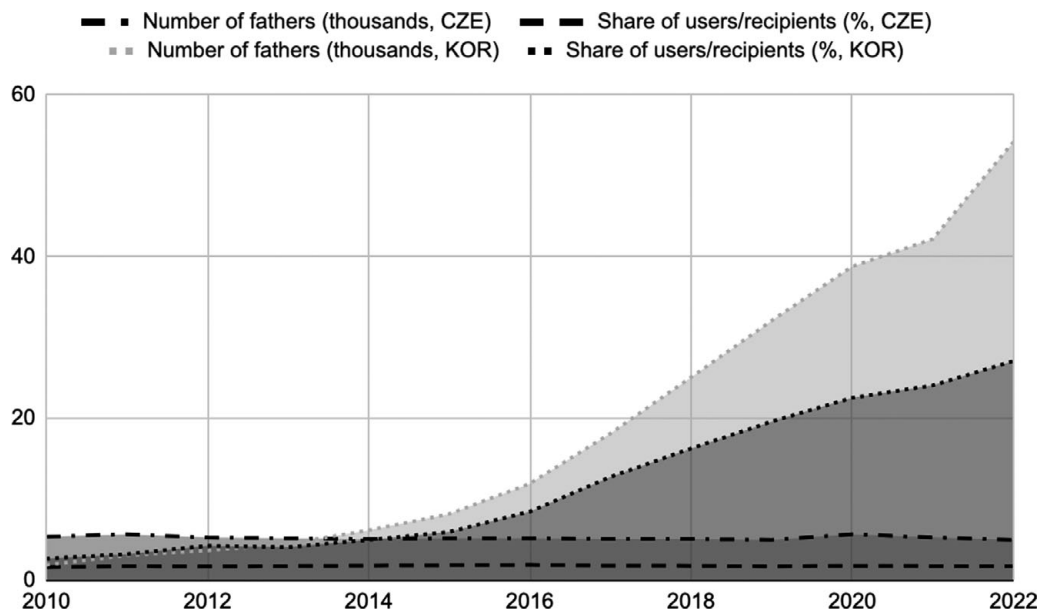


Figure 2. Gender distribution of users/recipients of statutory parental leave.
Source: MPSV and KOSIS.

thousand in 2010 to an impressive 54 thousand in 2022 (27% of all leave-takers), signalling a cultural shift toward shared caregiving, underpinned by evolving workplace norms that became more accommodating of parental leave during the pandemic.

In stark contrast, the Czech Republic witnessed limited paternal engagement throughout the pandemic, with fathers largely adhering to traditional gender roles (Haskova et al., 2022). Korea's experience stands out, as the crisis prompted workers to make greater use of the parental leave system to address urgent family needs. Notably, take-up of the *Daddy Months* initiative surged by 52.8% in the first half of 2020 compared with the previous year. This shift not only highlighted changing family dynamics but also emphasised the importance of institutional reforms in embedding parental leave within the framework of Korea's employment safety net. Amid these changes, father-specific parental leave policies gained political prominence, becoming a focal point of electoral competition. Political parties sought to capitalise on growing public demand for father leave policies that are father-sensitive, leveraging the momentum of this cultural transformation to frame themselves as advocates/champions of shared caregiving.

More critically, Korea's fertility crisis has been the primary driver behind the expansion of father leave policies. With the fertility rate plunging to a record low of 0.78 in 2022, the discourse has increasingly revolved around a looming "population cliff" and an unprecedented demographic crisis. The government's consideration of establishing a dedicated Ministry of Population underscores the urgency of this issue. This alarming reality has sparked urgent debates on overhauling parental leave policies, positioning father leave policies as a vital mechanism to foster shared caregiving and encourage birth rates. This demographic imperative has also spurred bold initiatives at local and corporate levels. Municipalities, regions, and leading companies, such as Lotte – which became the first to introduce mandatory father's quota – have pioneered independent programs as part of broader family-friendly strategies. The fertility crisis has thus amplified the political and social salience of father leave, cementing its role in Korea's family policy agenda.

Nonetheless, significant gaps remain. Electoral competition has driven the expansion of father leave policies, but many pledges remain unfulfilled. Calls for making parental leave mandatory, automatic, more flexible, and financially viable have grown increasingly prominent and have been reiterated

consistently over the past 20 years. The system's partial responsiveness and lacking father sensitivity appear rooted in strong negative feedback from SMEs, for which the take-up of leave poses operational challenges. SMEs frequently point to difficulties in arranging substitute workers and managing personnel costs, emphasising the need for targeted government support to mitigate these burdens. Simultaneously, there seems to be a lack of willingness within the government and its ministries to expand parental leave more boldly, likely driven by concerns over depleting the employment insurance fund. Proposals such as the Korean Childcare Insurance, proposed in 2021, present a promising solution.

Conclusions

Father leave policies have emerged as a crucial policy issue with far-reaching implications for gender equality and family dynamics (Gornick and Meyers, 2008; O'Brien, 2013; Gornick, 2015; Ellingsæter, 2021; Engeman and Burman, 2023). The recognition of the importance of involved fatherhood has driven discussions and policy changes globally (Moss and Deven, 2015; Dobrotić and Stropnik, 2020; Kosłowski et al., 2021). This is because providing fathers with equal opportunities for parental leave helps break down stereotypes and encourages a more balanced distribution of caregiving responsibilities, and is said to have positive effects on the child's development and overall well-being of families (Ellingsæter, 2007; Duvander and Johansson, 2012).

However, our understanding of the evolution of father leave policies and cross-country differences has been limited. This study addresses this gap by examining five driving forces of change: public support, electoral competition, policy diffusion, negative feedback, and crises (financial, fertility, and pandemic). These drivers, central to understanding policy change, including family policy reforms (e.g., Erikson et al., 2002; Vis et al., 2011; Fleckenstein and Lee, 2017; Lee, 2018), have not been fully explored for father leave policies. A comparative analysis of reforms in the Czech Republic and Korea supports the argument that these interconnected drivers are central forces shaping father leave policy reforms.

An important observation is the presence of public support for father leave policies in both the Czech Republic and Korea since the early 2000s. Although preferences for specific policy configurations vary between the two countries, constituents in both express a general desire for the establishment of father leave policies. Yet, while public support can create the potential for reform (cf. Erikson et al., 2002), it alone appears insufficient to drive father leave policy change. Instead, additional factors – varying across time and national contexts – must interact with public support to translate this potential into actual policy reform. In Korea, for example, public support for father leave policies required alignment with policy diffusion, a long-term fertility crisis, and eventually electoral competition to facilitate concrete policy shifts. In the Czech Republic, instead, policy change was made possible primarily through coercive policy diffusion from the European Union, which complemented existing public preferences for father leave policies.

Much of the focus remains on the factors driving change, like shifting social norms or international influence. Yet, an equally powerful force works in the opposite direction: Negative feedback, which resists or tempers the pace of reform. Negative feedback occurs when political and economic risks foster resistance among key stakeholders, such as employers or factions within political parties, who may perceive father leave reforms as (economically/electorally) costly or disruptive (Bergqvist et al., 2016; Windwehr et al., 2022; Gurín, 2024). In this context, incremental steps toward reform may be more effective than abrupt calls for sweeping changes, particularly when such changes challenge prevailing public policy preferences regarding father leave or gender equality policies. Policies perceived as overly misaligned with public sentiment tend to trigger pushback, cooling the policy climate and reinforcing resistance (cf. Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). The Czech case, for instance, demonstrates how overly ambitious or rapid proposals can intensify skepticism or opposition to father leave policies, creating a broader resistance to gender equality reforms. Policy costs, employer concerns, and the perception that father leave could disrupt traditional family roles all amplify these feedback effects, reinforcing the status quo by magnifying potential downsides. The result is a complex balancing act where reform momentum

is slowed or redirected, making it clear that without addressing these underlying currents of resistance, fathers leave policies may struggle to reach their transformative potential. Recognising negative feedback as an integral part of the process gives us a more nuanced view of how, and why, fathers leave policies often face an uphill battle to evolve.

Despite resistance, *alignment of pressures* enables change. In the Czech Republic, a less successful case, alignment between public preferences and international pressures – particularly EU mandates – has enabled the introduction and modest expansion of paternity leave. In Korea, meanwhile, a long-term fertility crisis has had a more transformative effect. The urgency of this crisis forced even opponents (businesses) of father leave policies to compromise, as the demographic challenge threatened their interests and broader societal stability. Here, the fertility crisis, reinforced by international policy diffusion and public preferences, weakened resistance and was later reinforced by electoral competition, which opened the door to more substantial policy changes. Yet, lingering negative feedback remains. In Korea, the take-up of parental leave is gradually increasing but remains low, constrained by workplace culture. In contrast, resistance to more father-specific parental leave reforms in the Czech Republic continues to stall progress in introducing the bonus-based entitlements increasingly favoured by the public. These cases illustrate how persistent negative feedback tempers the responsiveness of welfare states to evolving public preferences for father leave policies and father “sensitivity” of these policies.

Finally, we observe that the effects of policy diffusion, crisis, and electoral competition on father leave policy reforms diverge significantly between the two countries. In the case of policy diffusion, international organisations like the OECD and EU advocate for father leave policies as part of broader gender equity goals and economic-led social policy. However, these ideas appear only to take hold when they are compatible with, or reinforced by, domestic policy preferences and political incentives. In Korea, where father leave policies resonated with domestic concerns about fertility, ideas disseminated by OECD reinforced local policy preferences, leading to meaningful reforms. Conversely, in the Czech Republic, where these ideas faced resistance and were misaligned with public policy preferences, policy diffusion contributed to increased negative feedback. The perceived coercion of EU mandates created resistance, stalling reform efforts and reinforcing the status quo.

The impacts of crisis and electoral competition further illustrate the distinct pathways of reform. In Korea, a persistent fertility crisis served as a long-term catalyst, gradually eroding negative feedback and opening windows for reform. As the government recognised the demographic urgency, father leave policies became central to efforts aimed at reversing low birth rates. Over time, this crisis pressured policymakers to implement and expand father leave policies, viewing them as essential to addressing population decline. In contrast, economic and COVID-19 crises in the Czech Republic constrained reform efforts, reinforcing policy stability as political priorities shifted toward fiscal restraints. In fact, the Global Financial Crisis closed the window of opportunity for reform when conditions favoured change. Similarly, electoral competition played contrasting roles: In Korea, politicians actively sought issues capable of appealing to a broad spectrum of voter groups to secure electoral victories (Lee, 2018). This led to parties engaging in a bidding war, making increasingly bold pledges regarding the expansion of father leave policies, given their popularity, necessity in addressing the fertility crisis, and historical neglect. In the Czech Republic, father-specific parental leave is viewed as electorally risky, leading political actors to avoid proposing it or even to oppose it in an effort to appeal to conservative voters. Together, these drivers help explain why Korea emerged as a frontrunner in father leave policy reform, while the Czech Republic remained a laggard.

The study’s findings hold important implications for theories of welfare state change, particularly by proposing an integrative model that bridges multiple theoretical perspectives to explain father leave reform across diverse national contexts. By synthesising public support, electoral competition, policy diffusion, negative feedback, and crisis-driven change, this research demonstrates that welfare state transformations are rarely driven by single forces; rather, they emerge from the dynamic interactions of multiple factors, each shaped by the unique political and cultural landscape of each country. This model not only enhances our understanding of why some states advance more rapidly in father leave reform but also offers a valuable framework for examining other welfare policy areas, such as healthcare or pensions,

where similar forces may be at play. Moreover, the model invites scholars to investigate additional forces, such as the issue of salience, that may further refine our understanding of welfare state evolution that reflects the complex realities of policymaking in the contemporary era.

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