

Freedom of choice, gender equality, or employment promotion? Finnish party positions on childcare in the light of election manifestos 2015

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Abstract

The principle of freedom of choice has been a central element of Finnish family policy since the 1980s. It has been manifested most notably through the right for parents to choose between paid work supported by the use of public childcare and the right to stay home with children under three supported by the use of child home care allowance/leave.

This article investigates how the principle of freedom of choice was politicized by eight leading parties during the Finnish parliamentary election campaign in 2015, through an analysis of election manifestos. First, we analyse to what extent this principle was politicized, and by whom? Secondly, we study how the principle was framed. The findings show that the principle of freedom of choice was a rather politicized topic, creating a cleavage between conservative and leftist/liberal parties. Moreover, they indicate a renegotiation of this principle in favour of higher parental employment promotion and gender equality.

Key words: freedom of choice, family policy, public childcare, child home care, politicisation, election manifesto, Finland

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Introduction

Every welfare state is founded on a series of principles, values and ideas that underpin and shape its social policy system (*e.g.* Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005; Hewitt, 1992). For example, as a member of the Nordic family policy model (Hiilamo, 2002; Korpi, 2000) Finland has not only nurtured the idea of universal benefits and public childcare for families, but it has also distinguished itself from other Nordic countries through a stronger emphasis on the principle of freedom of choice in questions relating to childcare, perhaps most notably through the child home care allowance system (Hiilamo, 2002; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). This dualism of public childcare and state-subsidised child home care emanates from a historical and political compromise between the political left and agrarian/conservative parties in the 1970s and 1980s, and even though it has been contested from time to time, it has remained a cornerstone of Finnish family and care policies (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000; Tyyskä, 1995).

In the late-2010s, however, scepticism towards this dualism, and notably the child home care system, began to grow as it was increasingly argued by some experts that this system, *inter alia*, creates traps for women or, in other words, obstructs work-family reconciliation, and acts as a barrier for employment for mothers (STM, 2011). Some years later, the universal provision of full-day public childcare also became debated, as the Finnish economy showed no signs of foreseeable recovery (Autto & Nygård, 2014). As a consequence, during the recent four-five years the principle of freedom to choose, and most notably the right to child home care, has been increasingly politicized in the Finnish public debate, and the government

has on several occasions proposed cuts in this system, and more recently, an insertion of a gender quota that forces parents to share the leave (*ibid.*).

The aim of this article is to investigate how the principle of freedom of choice in relation to childcare, was politicized during the Finnish parliamentary election campaign in 2015. The reason for this is twofold: First, as discussed previously, Finland can be seen as a unique member of the Nordic family policy league, through its dualistic accentuation of freedom of choice for parents in questions relating to childcare. Second, the recent years of growing criticism of this principle, raises the question of where Finnish parties currently stand on this issue. Therefore, the article focuses on the most recent election campaign, as a case for showing how this principle was politicised, and it analyses election manifestos and some supplementary programs of the eight most influential parties with representation in the parliament.

According to Heywood (2007), 'politicization' refers to processes where actors create, preserve and renegotiate the rules for the distribution of common resources and the solving of social problems. Since such deliberations on a parliamentary arena are informed to a large extent by parties, and their ideological views, the article uses theory on party ideologies and the 'parties matter' argument (*e.g.* Budge & Robertson, 1987; Korpi & Palme, 2003). Our first research question is to what extent this principle was politicized in the election manifestos, and by whom? Secondly, we ask, if there was a trace of a renegotiation of this principle in terms of claims for amendments of the existing childcare programmes, and if so, in what way, and how were such manoeuvres framed? If signs of such a renegotiation are visible, could this possibly indicate an ongoing shift away from 'Nordic' approach to family policy in Finland?

The article contributes to the literature on family policy change in at least two ways. First, it points at the importance of politics, and the highly contested nature of family and care policy (Tyyskä, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995/2011). In order to understand how policies come to

be, and how they are renegotiated, we need to investigate how such underlying principles are politicised, contested and (re)framed in political discourses (Schmidt, 2008). Second, by focusing on the politicisation of freedom of choice, and by linking the analysis to contextual factors, the article sheds light on the ideological drivers of social policy change (*cf.* George & Wilding, 1985; Taylor, 2007).

We argue, that the principle of freedom of choice was indeed politicized in the election manifestos, most notably in relation to child home care, but also in relation to parental leave, creating a cleavage between three of the conservative parties on the one hand, and the leftist/liberal parties, supplemented by the conservative National Coalition Party on the other. The results indicate a partial renegotiation of this principle in the election manifestos, in favour of higher parental employment promotion and gender equality.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss theoretical starting points by pointing at the significance of parties and ideologies for family policy, and by listing previous research in this field. Thereafter, we discuss the data and methods, and in the following chapter the findings are presented. The final section offers some conclusions, together with a discussion about the findings.

Parties, ideologies, and family policy

The literature on family policy distinguishes between various theoretical traits when it comes to explaining the emergence, design and change of family policy. The first of these explains family policy mainly as a function of changing structural, social and economic needs (Gauthier, 1996), the second focuses on the political struggle between conflicting interests and actor groups (Montanari, 2000; Wennemo, 1994), the third uses institutional considerations as its starting points (Ferrarini, 2006), and the fourth tradition emphasises the role of ideas (*e.g.* Kuebler, 2007). Theoretically, this article departs from the second trait by

focusing on the role of party ideologies, for the outlook of family policy (Tyyskä, 1995; Zimmerman, 2001/1995) and the ‘politics matter’ contention (Allan & Scruggs, 2004; Budge & McDonald, 2006; Budge & Robertson, 1987; Castles, 1998; Huber & Stephens, 2001; Korpi & Palme, 2003), which argues that politics – and notably parties – play a vital role for the development and changes in welfare policy, as well as family policy. One main argument underlying this theoretical trait, is the assumption that political parties represent different classes, groups or classes in society, and that these interest shape the behaviour of parties in politics. Another contention is that parties also position themselves in relation to ideologies, and that such formulations bear certain expectations, claims and discourses on the state, the economy and the market (Nygård, 2003/ 2006; George & Wilding, 1995) on the state’s role for social welfare. According to the literature on party ideology (e.g. Freedman, 1996; Seliger, 1976), parties formulate party-specific belief systems, which not only define its core values and principles of *modus operandi*, but that also provide heuristic guidance in complex situations. These systems consist of a deeper core of fundamental normative and ontological axioms about the world, as well as a more dynamic core of operative frameworks and considerations for achieving strategic goals and influencing day-to-day politics (Seliger, 1976). The fundamental aspect of party ideology is often formulated in general party programs or similar documents that serve as guidance for members and followers. The more operative considerations and direct recommendations for action are on the other hand formulated in more specific programs, such as election manifestos (Budge & McDonald, 2006; Budge & Robertson, 1987).

However, in many Western Democracies with a legacy of (broad) government coalitions parties operate in an environment influenced by both political compromise (Kitschelt, 2001) and state ‘cartelism’ (Katz & Mair, 1995), which suggests that parties cannot be altogether externalised from the state, and that some influential parties can be said

to have their tentacles penetrating many sectors within the state itself. Moreover, in a Finnish context, some parties are ‘insiders’ – *i. e.* natural parties for government – whereas others are outsiders, *i. e.* the natural opposition forces or parties that play a supporting role, filling in gaps to build a coalition with support from a majority of the MPs, such as the Swedish People’s Party for instance (Mickelsson, 2007; Nousiainen, 1998). This can be expected to have some bearing for the ideological orientations of parties, at least when it comes to strategic considerations in relations to campaigns and election manifestos (Budge & Robertson, 1987; Kitschelt, 2001), so that ideological position of ‘insiders’ – for example – are more informed by concerns for the economic performance of the nation, and less prone to express clear or distinct positions than are ‘outsiders’ (Löwdin, 1998).

How have these theoretical starting points been implemented on family policy, in the light of previous research? Family policy can be defined as all the things the state does for the family (Gauthier, 1996; Kamerman & Kahn, 2003). Traditionally, the main objectives of Finnish family policy have been to redistribute family incomes, both horizontally and vertically, and to facilitate high (female) employment and work-life balance through investments in public day care (Hiilamo, 2002). The origins of this system are in the Mid-war poor relief systems, but it was gradually developed during the post-war period starting with the introduction of universal child benefits in the late-1940s (Hiilamo, 2002). In the 1960s, income-related parental insurance was introduced, and in the 1970s investments were made in the childcare system. Around 1990, the Finnish family policy system had evolved into a relatively extensive and ‘de-familised’ system that did not only facilitate female employment and promote gender equality, but it also gave parents freedom to choose between public and home childcare (Forssén, Jaakkola & Ritakallio, 2008; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009).

Ideologically, this system has been founded on a mixture of social democratic and agrarian/conservative values (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2000; Hiilamo, 2002; Välimäki & Rauhala,

2000). The first set of values relate to equality and incorporates income redistribution between different families, as well as notions of ‘positive freedom’ (Taylor, 2007), that is, *freedom to* social security. Consequently, the right to public day care can be seen as a freedom for mothers, and increasingly for fathers as well, to choose between domestic work and labour market participation (Autto, 2012/2015). The latter set of values, in turn, emphasises the inherent value of the family institution along with traditional family roles, but it also reflects the right, or freedom, to decide in matters that relate to the family, that is, it can be seen as a freedom from state interventionism– or a ‘negative freedom’ (Taylor, 2007) or ‘negative right’ (Hobson & Lister, 2002). Accordingly, some matters – such as child rearing or care – should be kept out of reach for the state (Zimmerman, 2001). Another way of looking at it, is to use the distinction between ‘familism’ and ‘de-familism’ (Jallinoja, 2006), where the first relate to traditional family structures, gendered family roles and values, whereas the latter emphasises gender equality and a dual-earner model of family roles. According to Jallinoja (2006) ‘familism’ enjoys a long a deep-rooted history in Finland, due to its agrarian tradition and late industrialisation, and it has even been able to prevail and even grow stronger during the 2000s.

Politically, the system stems from social pacts and historical compromises between conservatives, the working class, employers and farmers. One example is the political quarrel about the institutional configuration of the Finnish parental insurance system and the income-related parental allowance, which was introduced in the 1960s as a part of the national sickness insurance system (Hiilamo, 2002). While farmers and the communists supported a system of flat-rate benefits, the social democrats and the conservatives advocated a system with income-related benefits, which they saw as a more just system for the wage-earner population. After years of debate, a political compromise was reached in 1963, according to which the benefits would become income-related, but with a minimum flat-rate sum and a

collective financing structure administered by the Finnish National Social Insurance Institution, Kansaneläkelaitos (Kela) (Häggman, 1997).

Another example is the system of child care support. In the 1970s, the issue of public childcare services surfaced, as women's rights organizations started to demand publicly funded childcare services, as an element of the struggle for gender rights and higher labour participation of mothers. However, among farmers and their wives public childcare was seen as unjust, since it would benefit wage-earning families, while leaving the farmers outside. As a consequence, farmers and their main political voice, the Centre Party, launched a campaign to claim a compensation in form of a 'mother's wage', that is, a pecuniary acknowledgement of the work and care that is given at home (Tyyskä, 1995; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000). When the Child Day Care bill was finally presented in the Finnish parliament in 1973, it became subject to political debate, with the Centre Party opposing the bill and the political Left supporting it. Ultimately, the Centre Party supported the bill after some concessions from the Left to support a future extension of the child home care system, that is, the 'mother's wage' idea advocated by farmers (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2000; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000).

In 1980, the system of child home care allowance was introduced in some municipalities on an experimental basis and in 1985 the Child Home Care Allowance Act was passed as a part of a bigger policy package that reinforced the principle of universal public childcare and gradually extended the rights for parents with children under three to either use public childcare or to receive home care allowance. This so-called subjective social right to childcare came into force in 1990, and was expanded to all children under school age in 1996 (Hiilamo, 2002). This duality of family policy values, the so-called principle of freedom of choice in matters of childcare, has continued to play an important role in Finnish family policy since then providing a freedom for parents to choose the form of work-family reconciliation they believe to be best for them and their children (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009).

Previous research on the politics of family policy reveals ideological differences between left-wing and conservative parties in Finland (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Kangas, 1986; Nygård, 2003/2007/2010; Tyyskä, 1995; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000). Whereas left-wing parties, notably the Social Democratic Party, have generally advocated public day care services and ‘freedom of choice’ in terms of right for the mother to choose paid employment, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats have accentuated more traditional, or ‘familist’, values and championed ‘freedom of choice’ in terms of the right to care for small children at home and to receive child home care allowances from the state (Kangas, 1986; Nygård, 2007/2010). The positions that parties take on family policy, however, tend to be conditioned by constitutional factors, such as the parliamentary status of parties, or by strategic considerations that pertain to the party’s ambition to maximize the number of votes in competition with rival parties (Autto, 2009/2012/2015). For instance, incumbent parties are generally more constrained by fiscal realities in their actions than are parties in opposition (Kitschelt, 2001). Yet, family policy reforms can also be utilized as credit-seeking instruments in order to secure future voter support (Pierson, 2001).

It should also be noted, that family policy positions of Finnish parties have changed a lot since the ‘Golden Age’ of welfare state expansion through the ‘new politics of the welfare state’ (Pierson, 1996/2001), and decades of market internationalization and liberalization, leading to an increasing openness and competitiveness (Hemerijck, 2014; Huber & Stephens, 2001). Today, politicians and parties operate within stricter frames of manoeuvrability, due to the (perceived) pressures from globalization, but their world is also characterized by higher degrees of uncertainty, which is likely to increase the role of idea diffusion and social learning (e.g. Béland, 2009; Hulme, 2005). This can be seen, for example, in form of higher susceptibility to dominant ideas and policy recommendations from international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, IMF, or the Organization for Economic Cooperation

and Development, OECD (Béland & Orenstein, 2013; Hemerijck, 2014), or supra-national bodies such as the European Union (Hay & Rosamond, 2002).

On the basis of this discussion, and the fact that the ongoing economic downturn and the growing ideational influence in terms of employment imperatives from the European Union has created an impetus for family policy reform, we can expect an increasing politicization of family policy in the Finnish 2015 election campaign also expect influential ‘insider’ leftist parties (such as the Social Democrats), and smaller ‘outsider’ parties on the left (such as the Left Alliance), to be more prone to advocate a restriction of parents’ use of child home care, and to support public childcare for the sake of higher gender equality and dual employment. Moreover we expect both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’-parties on the conservative flank to support both of these ‘freedoms’.

Data and methods

The data consisted of eight election manifestos from the Finnish 2015 general election and five supplementary programs (see appendix 1). The data represents the eight largest parties in the Finnish parliament, namely the Centre Party [CP], Left Alliance [LA], National Coalition Party [NCP], The Finns Party [FP], Social Democratic Party [SDP], Swedish People’s Party [SPP], Green League [GL], and Christian Democrats [CD]. On top of this, we also used some supplementary party programs, since the Social Democratic Party had recently launched a special family policy program to supplement their election manifest, and the Finns Party used a number of supplementary programs to substantiate their main (and rather short) election platform, which did not mention family policy at all. Also, since the National Coalition Party did not explicitly mention family policy in their manifesto, we used a proxy document in the form of a declaration of intent in relation to the ongoing government formation in April 2015. The main reason for focusing on parties, instead of governments or social partners, is that

parties play a vital role for the public opinion by framing political alternatives and that they play a central role in the actual policy making process (Bourdieu, 1984; Mickelsson, 2007; Nousiainen, 1998).

For the empirical analysis we deployed qualitative content analysis, a research method that allows the researcher to analyse text data both explicitly and implicitly. In qualitative content analysis the researcher examines the language used in the text data (Weber, 1990) and engages in “subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Content analysis can be conducted either deductively or inductively. The former starts from theory, which guides the construction of a coding scheme (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), while the latter extracts meaning from the text in an inductive way (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

We analysed the politicization of the principle of freedom of choice in relation to childcare; is the freedom of choice understood as a freedom to choose to participate in paid labour while using day care, or, is freedom of choice understood as the freedom to choose to stay at home taking care of the child while receiving the mother wage? For our main departure point we deployed a deductive approach, but as it turned out during the analysis, we also needed to add an inductive approach, as the parties also emphasized the freedom of choice in relation to parental leave. The deductive approach, which Hsieh & Shannon (2005) calls directed content analysis, enables the researcher to search for meaning by using a coding scheme with predetermined categories developed from theory or previous research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Previous research (*e.g.* Hiilamo, 2002; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Kangas, 1986; Nygård, 2007/2010; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000) suggests that there has been an ideological divide between conservative and left-wing parties when it comes to family policy in general,

and the principle of choice of freedom in particular. Whereas conservative parties have primarily advocated home care allowance and the traditional role of the family, left-wing parties have mainly advocated public childcare service. In a way, such family policy positions can be said to represent different views on the principle of ‘freedom of choice’. While the first position can be said to represent a choice between child home care and public care, the latter can be seen as a freedom (for mothers, and more recently also fathers) to choose paid labour (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Nygård, 2010). This divide guided the construction of the coding scheme, since we assume that there is still a division between conservative and left-wing parties, as described in previous research (see table 1).

The first step of the analysis was to obtain a sense of the whole, which we achieved through initial readings of the programs and after this we conducted a deeper analysis of the text corpuses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this second step of the analysis, we searched for explicit and implicit mentions related to freedom of choice in relation to childcare policy, which became most eminent in text passages concerning child home care and public childcare, and – somewhat surprisingly – in text passages concerning parental leave. Words or phrases we ultimately focused on were Finnish and Swedish mentions of ‘day care’, ‘childcare’, ‘parental leave’, ‘homecare allowance’, and ‘freedom’. These two main categories were supplemented with subcategories: ‘economic perspective’, ‘gender equality’ and ‘general’, in which the supportive or non-supportive arguments were placed. Furthermore, a third category, with general arguments in relation to freedom of choice in relation to family policy, was also used (see table 1).

Table 1. Freedom of choice in relation to childcare. Main categories and subcategories.

Freedom of choice in relation to childcare		
Childcare and homecare allowance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •economic perspective •gender equality perspective •general perspective 	Parental leave <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •economic perspective •gender equality perspective •general perspective 	General freedom of choice in relation to family policy

The analysis process described in this paper was carried out in June and July of 2015. We analysed thirteen documents in total, and in order to substantiate our analysis, our categorizations and our interpretations of meaning, we have used some text excerpts as quotations.

Findings

There was considerable variation in opinion on which policy fields needed to be prioritized in the election campaign, and in our analyse, the division in political opinion on freedom of choice in relation to family policy, and especially in relation to childcare policy, become evident. Six parties referred more explicitly to childcare policies (FP, CP, SDP, SPP, CD and LA), whereas others barely mentioned childcare policies (NCP and GL). It also became evident that the current economic situation, as well as the recent years of austerity measures, has resulted in a more strained politicization of the topic in question making the parties more prone to reforms of existing policy schemes. Below, we will examine this politicization closer, by first turning the attention to the debate on home care allowance and public childcare, and then to the parental leave.

Freedom of choice in relation to home care allowance and public childcare

The current Finnish family policy system provides parents with two options in relation to the care of small children (children under three): *either* one parent can stay at home taking care of the child, while receiving the state-subsidized home care allowance, *or*, both parents can choose to participate in the labour market and place the child in public (or private) childcare. These two options represent the two main ideological ‘camps’ that became visible in our analysis: one consisting of most of the conservative parties defending freedom of choice in terms of the home care allowance, and the other one consisting of left-wing parties implicitly defending freedom of choice in terms of public childcare.

As champions of the first camp, the Finns Party, Centre Party and Christian Democrats considered ‘freedom to choose’ as the right to stay at home taking care of the child and receive home care allowance, without the government deciding which parent should stay at home with the child. These parties also displayed a more traditional view on the family, where the roles of the spouses are divided more squarely into a (male) breadwinner and a (female) homemaker role. The parties also tended to share a common belief that the parent, or most notably the mother, is more important for the development of the young child whereas public day care providers cannot fill this role.

The main departure point was that the family knows best what type of childcare suits them and therefore the government should not interfere. These parties also rejected the idea of a gender quota of the home care allowance. As an example, the Centre Party “acknowledges the families’ freedom of choice, [and] this goes equally for home care and day care” (CEN,

2015b, p. 6). Furthermore the party suggests that “freedom to choose in the combining of family and work, supports the capacity of families to cope on their own” (CEN, 2015b, p. 3).

According to the Christian Democrats, parents should stay at home taking care of the child. However, instead of using the term ‘home care allowance (*kotihoiton tuki*)’, they used ‘childcare allowance’ (*lapsen hoitotuki*). The party is a keen supporter of traditional family values, and by using the term ‘childcare allowance’ they can be said to pinpoint the importance of caring for the child (at home). The party also highlighted that “the families should have the right to choose how the childcare allowance should be divided between the parents”. Furthermore, they defended this standpoint by suggesting that “young children should be given the possibility [to] be cared for in the most home-like environments possible” (CD, 2015).

As one of the defenders of the home care allowance, the Finns Party’s opposition to a gender quota is based on the notion that such a change would imply “a forced division of the homecare allowance”, and that is an “unsustainable idea” (FP, 2015b). Furthermore, the party declared that it rejects governmental “control and coercion” and that it prefers solutions that enhance “flexibility and the family’s freedom of choice” (FP, 2015b). The party deprecated the idea of more governmental involvement suggesting that “the right to self-determination [...] has been taken away from several [people]” (FP, 2015b).

Table 2. Opinions and arguments regarding freedom of choice in relation to the home care allowance.

Party	Opinion	Argument
Centre Party	Freedom of choice is for families to take care of the child at home, receiving home care allowance. Reject the idea of a gender quota of the home care allowance.	Family knows best, family values and preferences
Left Alliance	No specific opinion regarding freedom of choice. Home care allowance is among other social	

	benefits, which should be replaced by the basic income.	
National Coalition Party	The home care allowance system needs to be renewed	To better combine work and family life. Gender equality in family and work life
Finns Party	Freedom of choice is for families to take care of the child at home, receiving home care allowance. Reject the idea of a gender quota of the home care allowance.	Family knows best. Family needs a genuine freedom to choose, no government control.
Social Democratic Party	No specific opinion regarding freedom of choice. The home care allowance need to promote equality and the transmission to the labour market.	
Swedish People's Party	Freedom of choice is to be able to choose paid labour. Reform of the home care allowance needed. Critical of the home care allowance.	Prolonged period of time on home care will increase poverty among children.
Green League	No specific opinion regarding the freedom of choice. The home care allowance is among other social benefits, which should be replaced by the basic income.	
Christian Democrats	Freedom of choice is for families to take care of the child at home, receiving home care allowance. Reject the idea of a gender quota of the "child care allowance" (home care allowance).	Family knows best. Traditional view on the family. Home-like environment.

The other ideological 'camp' that became visible in the analysis was the left-wing camp consisting of the Social Democrats, the Left Alliance supported by the social-liberal Swedish People's Party. The parties in this camp emphasized (sometimes implicitly) the role of public and universal childcare services, and supported a reform of the home care allowance system in order to make it more gender neutral. In other words, this position challenges the position taken by the conservative parties mentioned above and suggests at least a partial infringement upon the traditional notion of freedom of choice in the child home care system.

The Social Democratic Party declared that one of the main pillars of the family policy system is the public and universal childcare service system, which provides wellbeing not only for families and their children, but also for the whole society (SDP, 2015b). The principle of freedom of choice for parents was not, however, explicit in neither the election

manifesto, nor the family policy program. Instead, childcare services were considered something good for both children and for the employment of parents. This kind of ‘employment imperative’ has been inherent in the Social Democratic Party, as well as other parties for a long time, and falls back upon the objectives outlined in the European Growth and Stability Pact. It has also been linked closely to the social inclusion objectives of the EU Lisbon Agenda (Hemerijck, 2014), since employment has been widely considered to be the best remedy against poverty among families (Eurofound, 2014). The Social Democrats supported the subjective right to day care, and that families should be able to choose for themselves what childcare solution suits them best. However, in contrast to other parties, the party also mentioned disabled children’s right to qualitative care, both in public day care and domestic care. The party also pinpointed the importance of qualitative day care outside office hours, arguing that this would benefit the child and the parents, as well as the society.

The Social Democratic Party also suggested that the home care allowance needs to “support [gender] equality and the transition to the labour market” which can be achieved by giving “both parents equal rights and possibilities to care for the child at home up until the child is three years of age” (SDP, 2015b, p. 10). The party, however, did not explicitly support a state-regulated division of the home care allowance between the parents.

Another party, which also took a critical approach on the homecare allowance, was the Swedish People’s Party, suggesting that “families with small children that use home care allowance for a longer period of time risk ending up in financial difficulties” (SPP, 2015b, 6). In order for families with children to avoid economic difficulties, the party supported the introduction of a gender quota in the home care allowance system, and therefore also a remodelling of the parental leave system in accordance with the ‘6+6+6 model’ (for arguments, see next subchapter). The party did not, however, explicitly support the right of the parents to choose to participate in the labour market, although it implicitly supported a

flexible childcare service provision, as well as an effective reconciliation of family and working life. The same goes for the Left Alliance, which suggested that “everyone who wishes to have a permanent job and to work full-time should have the right of doing so” (LA, 2015, p. 10). This could be interpreted as a statement that supports the parents’ right to participate in the labour market while using state-subsidized child care, although this right was not framed in terms of a freedom of choice for parents.

Freedom of choice in relation to parental leave

Also parental leave was frequently highlighted in the election manifestos and the supplementary programs. The current Finnish parental leave system consists of maternity and paternity leave, followed by parental leave. During this leave period, which stretches until the child is around 10 months old, an income-based compensation is paid. After this, should one parent, or a grandparent, choose to stay home with the child, a state-subsidized home care allowance is paid. This amount, however, is lower than the income-based maternity and paternity leave (Kela, 2015). Here, the Swedish People’s Party, Green League and Left Alliance advocated an alternative parental leave system, namely the ‘6+6+6 model’. This model differs from the current parental leave system, since it consists of three paid leave periods, each period being six months. One period is reserved for the mother, one for the father and the third period can be freely divided between the mother and father.

Even though the Green League, Left Alliance and the Swedish People’s Party supported the ‘6+6+6 model’, they had different opinions on why it should be introduced. The Green League and Left Alliance advocated the model from the employer’s economic point of view, suggesting that the model is needed to equalize the now uneven distribution of costs between different employers. The Left Alliance argued, that measures need to be taken in order to

prevent discrimination of women in the labour market, and that the ‘6+6+6 model’ is an attempt to equalize wage differences between men and women. The Swedish People’s Party also advocated the ‘6+6+6 model’, but for somewhat other reasons. The party pointed out that the current parental leave system is no longer sufficient and needs to be changed in order to “ensure the welfare of the children and promote gender equality in the families, and in the labour market” (SPP, 2015b, p. 5). The party considered the ‘6+6+6 model’ a good solution, as it would strengthen gender equality, and since it would put the child’s best interest in the first room. Firstly, the ‘6+6+6 model’ would promote gender equality, since mothers would return to work earlier. This would profit mothers economically, since they would not lag behind as to the level of salary and pension. It would also give fathers the opportunity to stay at home to take care of the child, which would enhance a more even distribution of the costs for childcare between all employers. According to the party, the ‘6+6+6 model’ would show that “parenthood [...] concerns both women and men” (SPP, 2015b, p. 6).

Secondly, this would benefit the children, as child poverty rates would be reduced, due to the fact that the parental allowance is income-based, and the amount is therefore higher than the home care allowance. Parents could claim income-based parental allowance up until the child is roughly 18 months of age, compared to the current system, according to which the parents can only claim income-related parental allowance until the child is 9-10 months (Kela, 2015).

Table 3. Opinions and arguments regarding freedom of choice in relation to parental leave.

Party	Opinion	Argument
Centre Party	Negative towards a governmental division of the parental leave, but recognizes the need of renewing the current parental leave system	Family’s genuine freedom of choice, parental leave is an equal right between parents
Left Alliance	Introduce the ‘6+6+6’ model	Financially more equal between gender and employers.

National Coalition Party	Current paternity leave should be prolonged. One off payment to the mother's employer once the mother returns to work.	Gender equality, work and family life balance important, cost of parental leave more equally distributed between employers.
Finns Party	Negative towards a governmental division of the parental leave, but recognizes the need of renewing the current parental leave system	The family should have a genuine freedom to choose, financially more equal between employers
Social Democratic Party	Flexible parental leave: 16 months long parental leave (1+3+3+9)	Promoting, equality, guarantees the child is cared for at home for a longer period of time, sustainable careers and female employment
Swedish People's Party	Introduce the '6+6+6' model.	Financially more equal between gender and employers. Reduces poverty among children. Allows the father to take care of the child.
Green League	Introduce the '6+6+6' model	Financially more equal between employers.
Christian Democrats	Oppose the '6+6+6' model, but recognizes the need of renewing the current parental leave system	The family knows best, but the costs for the employers are unequally distributed

On the other hand, the Christian Democrats, the Centre Party and the Finns Party opposed an alternative parental leave model. The main argument for opposing a governmental division of the parental leave was that it, according to the three opposing parties, would take away the families' freedom to choose. The Christian Democrats explicitly opposes the '6+6+6 model' arguing that it is "wrong" and the decision "should be withdrawn" (CD, 2015). The Christian Democrats based their position on their belief that parents know what is best for the child and the family, and that small children should be taken care of in homelike environments. On the other hand, the party also suggested that "the division of costs due to parenthood in the labour market need to be renewed" (CD, 2015), but they did not mention any specific alteration to the parental leave scheme.

The Centre Party did not explicitly mention the '6+6+6 model', but they emphasized that a governmental division of the parental leave would be a negative alteration. The party

used the Finnish term ‘pakkojako’, which here translates to a (negative) ‘forced division’ of the parental leave system. The Centre Party mentioned that “the families should have a genuine freedom to choose” when it comes to deciding what childcare and leave arrangements suit them best (CP, 2015a, p. 4). On the other hand, the Centre Party did mention, that the current parental leave system “should be developed to take into account the needs of the mothers, the fathers, the children, the employees and the employers”, with a special emphasis on the needs of the children (CP, 2015b, p. 6). As an alternative to the current parental leave system, they suggested that a “moderate extension of a quota for fathers” should take place and that the long-term objective would be to “prolong the duration of the parental leave” (CP, 2015b, p. 11). However, the party implicitly distanced itself from the ‘6+6+6 model’, pointing out that “the complexity of everyday life cannot be bent down into schematically quotas: the best of the child is always to be put first” (CP, 2015b, p. 11). According to the party, parental leave policy is not the right forum to strive for gender equality, since “the development of the parental leave system is not benefited by objectives bases on streamlined notions of gender equality” (CP, 2015b, p. 6). Even though the Centre Party is not supportive of the ‘6+6+6 model’, the party emphasized that “parental leave and the care of the child is the equal right of the parents” (CP, 2015b, p. 6).

The Finns Party also took a critical approach on a division of the parental leave, similar to that of the Centre Party, by referring to an alternative parental leave scheme as ‘a forced division’. Even though the Finns Party did not explicitly mention the ‘6+6+6 model’, they implicitly argued against this model by using rhetoric phrases such as ‘governmental control’ and ‘forced division of the parental leave’. Having said that, it also needs to be pointed out that they, similar to the Christian Democrats, considered some kind of an alteration of the current parental leave scheme to be warranted in order for the system to become more just in terms of the distribution of costs between different employers, but this did not imply a

governmental division of the parental leave. They claimed that “society must support people in their individual efforts to reconcile family and work, and alike, appreciate the parents who remain at home to care for children (FP, 2015b).

According to the Social Democratic Party, equality is one important characteristic of the welfare state, and the party therefore supports mothers’ participation in paid labour. They suggested, that “the aim is to equally divide the parental leave between the parents” (SDP, 2015a, p. 18). They also suggested a more flexible parental leave scheme, which consists of a 16-months long parental leave. Both parents would be entitled to a period of three months of parental leave, as well as one month of prenatal parental leave for the mother. In addition to this, a freely distributed nine-month leave period be available for the parents. According to the party, this would guarantee that the child could be cared for at home during a longer period of time, compared to the current model (SDP, 2015b, p. 14). The party also pointed out that the flexible parental leave for the father should apply until the child has reached three years of age. The main motive behind this more flexible parental leave scheme would be to promote “equality, sustainable careers and female employment” (SDP, 2015b, 14).

The National Coalition Party (NCP, 2015b, p. 9) emphasized the importance of a functioning arrangement between work and caring obligations. The party stressed gender equality and suggested a prolonging of the paternity leave would do this. It also highlighted that the costs of parental leave should be more equally distributed among employers, and suggested that this could be done through a one-off payment to the mother’s employer once the mother returns to work after being on parental leave.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined the politicization of the freedom of choice in relation to childcare policy during the Finnish general election of 2015 by analysing election manifestos,

and supplementary programs, from the eight most influential political parties in Finland. On the basis of this analysis, three main conclusions can be drawn.

First, we can see that the principle of freedom of choice still seems to hold sway in Finnish parties' constructions of childcare policy. This principle was highlighted most notably in relation to the future of the child home care system, as well as in the discussion about a remodelling of the parental leave system. When it comes to the public childcare system, however, we found no explicit mentions of freedom of choice, even if it seems clear that most parties implicitly supported this kind of public service. We also found considerable variation between parties when it comes to the textual attention that they gave childcare policy and the principle of freedom of choice. While the Social Democratic Party, the Swedish People's Party, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats and the Finns Party were quite active in discussing these matters, the Green League, Left Alliance, and especially the National Coalition Party did not highlight these matters to any greater extent. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the analysed parties mentioned the need to reform the subjective right to day care, although a restriction of the subjective right to whole-day childcare was something that happened to be on the governmental agenda, but was withdrawn, just before the parliamentary election in April 2015. Interestingly the new Centre-right government formed after the election placed the cutback back onto the agenda after the election and prepared a bill that was enacted as law in December of 2015 (Hallituksen esitys HE 80/2015 vp).

Second, we found a clear ideological divide between parties in terms of views on freedom of choice, as well as the arguments being used in order to legitimate their positions. While the Finns Party, the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party advocated freedom for parents to choose between home care and public childcare, and that the home care allowance system should be preserved in order to offer parents this genuine freedom, the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance (supported by the Swedish People's Party) criticized the

home care allowance (and its inherent freedom of choice) for creating traps for women and for being counterproductive to parental employment. This result largely confirms the findings in earlier research on family policy positions of Finnish parties (*e.g.* Nygård, 2010; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000) suggesting that there is still an ideological divide between parties on the right and parties on the left in matters relating to the family and to the question on what the state ought to do, or not to do, for families with children. This divide tends to boil down to the essential question on whether parents should be given the right to choose child home care or not, and whether or not such as freedom constitutes an illegitimate infringement upon the imperatives of gender equality and parental employment. Although the divide is not a straightforward left-right divide, with some of the smaller ‘outsider’ parties (such as the Green League and the Swedish People’s Party) and one of the ‘insider’ parties (National Coalition Party) taking a middle position, the findings suggest that there still exists a dualistic view on childcare policy, and most notably on what kind of ‘freedom of choice’ the state should support (*cf.* Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). In the conservative party camp, both home care and public childcare are viewed as important, whether the leftist parties implicitly support childcare while suggesting an introduction of a gender quota in the home care system.

As noted above, most of the analysed parties (either implicitly or explicitly) supported the public childcare system, although its virtues were not framed so much in terms of parents’ freedom to choose between paid work and family roles. Instead, the main arguments behind a preservation and future development of this system were that it has a positive influence on parental employment, which at the same time prevents child poverty, and that it facilitates work-family balance.

The ideological divide observed in relation to childcare also seemed to pertain to the issue of parental leave, and most notably the proposed ‘6+6+6 model’. The parties advocating the ‘6+6+6 model’, believed it to create a fairer division of the parental leave, since it would

spread the costs of parental leave more equally between employers, create gender equality and enhance flexibility needed for creating a well-functioning daily life. By contrast, the parties that were opposing the ‘6+6+6 model’, believed it to be a ‘forced division’, infringing on the home care allowance system. Allegedly, the family knows best what child care arrangements suit them, and there is a fear that this freedom of choice is taken away if the government sets up alternative guidelines.

Surprisingly enough, we found very little textual attention on family policy in the National Coalition Party manifesto. The only thing that related to this policy field was a mention emphasising the importance of ‘creative day care’ and the importance for children to learn to communicate at a young age (NCP, 2015a). It can only be speculated as to why the National Coalition Party, being one of the largest ‘insider’ parties, chose to downplay family policy, as well as the issue of freedom of choice, in their 2015 manifesto. One plausible explanation is that the party has recently played a visible role in the proposed downscaling of child benefits, effective from the beginning of 2015, and that it may have considered it to be too great an electoral risk to discuss further family policy reforms in their election manifesto. If so, this can be interpreted as a ‘strategy of avoiding’, which enables political actors to shun topics that they see as challenging to their traditional ideological positions, or that are simply seen as too controversial (*cf.* Autto, 2015).

Thirdly, although the findings show that the principle of ‘freedom of choice’ within Finnish family policy, and especially in childcare policy, has not lost its importance, they tend to suggest a gradual renegotiation of the meaning and role of this principle, at least when it comes to the parties on the left flank as well as the smaller parties in the political centre. Not only did the left-wing parties and the Swedish People’s Party criticize the ‘true freedom of choice’ the home care allowance system, but we also found that they were willing to renegotiate the role of this freedom in favour of higher gender equality and parental

promotion. Similarly, the availability of public childcare was not framed in terms as a ‘freedom to choose’, but as a means to create higher parental employment. To what extent this constitutes a leftist ideological attack on the traditional agrarian/conservative idea of a ‘mothers’ wage’, and whether or not this will lead to a future downscaling of this particular kind of ‘freedom to choose’ in Finnish childcare policy, still remains to be seen. At the moment, however, the current centre-right government (consisting of the Centre Party, the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party) has put aside the plans to cut down, or impose a gender quota in, the child home care system, but this does not mean that a future government will refrain from doing so.

In order to make any qualified predictions as to the future of the ‘mothers’ wage in Finnish family policy, we need to extend the analysis to other platforms than election manifestos, since the results from this study provide us with only a limited view of parties’ childcare positions from one parliamentary election campaign. Therefore a departure for future research would be to extend the analysis to also other textual data, such as government programs or political speeches, and to also include the positions of social partners such as the trade unions.

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Appendix: the analysed programs

Centre Party. (2015a). *Keskustan vaaliohjelma*.

Centre Party. (2015b). *Perheiden pärjäämisestä kasvaa onnellinen Suomi. Suomeen tarvitaan johdonmukaista lapsi- ja perhepolitiikkaa. Keskustan linjaus lasten, nuorten ja perheiden hyvinvoinnista*.

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Social Democratic Party. (2015b). *SDP:n perhepoliittinen tulevaisuusohjelma. Kasvu alkaa perheestä – lapsi- ja perheystävälliseen yhteiskuntaan.*