

# Policy Frames and Coalition Dynamics in the Recent Reforms of Swiss Family Policy

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## Abstract

Family policy development calls for explanations that go beyond the traditional approaches of welfare state analysis. We draw on the concept of policy frame to analyze the politics of family policy reform in Switzerland. More precisely, we consider that family policy development must be explained by a focus on underlying policy frames (distant cause) that organize thought and behavior of policy actors who coalesce to produce majorities in decision-making opportunities (proximate cause) within a given institutional setting (stable over time). Empirically, we analyze recent change in the fields of parental leave, childcare and family allowances. Successful reform in Swiss family policy was driven by coalitions that form around measures of family policy that allow specific combinations of family policy frames. The two patterns of winning coalition that emerge suggest that Swiss family policy is driven by a range of reconfiguring alliances and ambiguous agreements. Switzerland is far from experiencing the emergence of a new, progressive dominant coalition in favor of family policy modernization. Our analysis suggests that the plurality of frames that underlie family policy creates a structural potential for reform, but this potential must be mobilized each time anew.

## Zusammenfassung

Die Entwicklung der Familienpolitik verlangt nach Erklärungen, die weiter gehen, als die traditionellen Ansätze der Wohlfahrtsstaatsanalyse. Wir greifen auf das Konzept des *policy frame* zurück, um die prozedurale Dimension von Familienpolitikreformen in der Schweiz zu analysieren. Konkret erklären wir die Entwicklung von Familienpolitik mit einem Fokus auf *policy frames*. Diese wirken strukturierend auf die Überzeugungen und das Verhalten der politischen Akteure, welche sich in Entscheidungssituation zu Koalitionen zusammenschliessen, und dies innerhalb eines gegebenen institutionellen Rahmens. Empirisch analysieren wir den kürzlich erfolgten Wandel

in den Bereichen Mutterschutz, Kinderbetreuung und Kinderzulagen. Die Reformen der Schweizer Familienpolitik gehen auf Koalitionen zurück, die sich rund um spezifische Kombinationen von *policy frames* gebildet haben. Die beiden Muster von siegreichen Koalitionen zeigen, dass die Familienpolitik der Schweiz auf vielschichtigen Bündnissen und fluktuierenden Abmachungen beruht. Eine stabile und dominante progressiv orientierte Koalition gibt es nicht. Unsere Analysen zeigt, dass die Vielfalt der *policy frames*, auf denen die Schweizer Familienpolitik beruht, ein strukturelles Potential für Reformen schafft, aber dass dieses Potential jedes Mal neu mobilisiert werden muss.

## 1 Introduction

When it comes to social policy development, Switzerland has always been a laggard in international comparison. Whereas most other OECD countries have seen rapid growth of the welfare state during the post-war decades of welfare state expansion, social policy was still very limited in Switzerland up until the 1970s. In international comparisons, the Swiss welfare state was therefore often qualified as ‘liberal’ or ‘residual’ (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990). From the late 1970s onwards, however, social policy in Switzerland has gradually expanded, bringing the country closer to the ideal type of a continental European welfare state (Armingeon 2001). This catch-up effect first affected the traditional social policy schemes such as unemployment insurance (which became compulsory only in 1984), occupational pensions (in 1985), as well as health insurance (in 1994). Family policy benefits, by contrast, remained on a very modest level and care services were virtually non-existent until the late 1990s. It was only at the turn of the millennium that a series of successful reforms gave a boost to Swiss family policy. The most important reforms include the implementation of a federal program to subsidize childcare infrastructure (in 2003), the introduction of compulsory maternity insurance (in 2005), as well as a nationwide harmonization and—in some of the cantons—increase of family allowances (in 2006). Observers seeking to explain why the development of Swiss social policy lags behind the pack (Armingeon 2001: 152) generally point to the specific institutional and political features that characterize Switzerland. For instance, Bonoli

(2007: 767) nicely shows how the development of legislation in the field of social policy was “institutionally delayed” by direct democracy, federalism and the interaction between the two. Direct democracy was a major brake to public sector expansion, as voters tend to oppose new taxes. The introduction of a maternity insurance, for instance, was rejected no less than four times at the polls in direct democratic referenda between 1984 and 1999. Due to federalism, the central state is weak, and therefore unable to propel the development of social policy—unless a constitutional change (subject to referendum) explicitly assigns to it competences and resources that are required. Family policy is until today mainly organized at the cantonal and the local levels. Until the harmonization in 2006, the cantonal differences, e.g. in the level of child allowances, were as large as between the most generous and the most liberal European countries (Häusermann 2007).

On the political dimension, the power balance between political parties in Switzerland is unfavorable to welfare state development. Both in Nordic and in Continental countries (Esping-Andersen 1990; van Kersbergen 1994), Social Democrats and Christian Democrats were the major driving forces of welfare state development. In Switzerland, both of them have always been weaker than in the neighbouring countries, and they traditionally faced a dominant market-liberal party, which opposed welfare state expansion in general and family policy expansion in particular. Under this strong liberal influence, the Swiss Christian Democrats also played a somewhat more cautious role than Christian Democrats in other Bismarckian countries, such as Germany or the Netherlands, where they were usually among the main drivers of (transfer-oriented) family policy (van Kersbergen 1994). An additional political impediment—especially in the field of family policy—was the weakness of the feminist movement during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due among other factors to the belated introduction of female suffrage in 1971 (Martin 2002).

The growth of the Swiss welfare state since the 1970s, however, and in particular the introduction of new family policy schemes since the late 1990s, raise questions with regard to the

factors that may explain these developments. Indeed, while the reference to the institutional obstacles and the political weakness of the left in Switzerland can plausibly explain the *delay* of welfare state development in Switzerland with respect to other countries (see also Olivia Thoenen's contribution to this issue), they seem less helpful in explaining its recent expansion, especially in the field of family policy, given that both the institutional framework as well as political power relations have not shifted dramatically. Institutional theories of the welfare state generally suffer from the weakness that they are very capable of explaining inertia and resilience, but have difficulties explaining policy *change* (see van Kersbergen 2002). And when it comes to power- and interest-based explanations, they seem more helpful to explain recent welfare retrenchment (Allan and Scruggs 2004) rather than the expansion we see in the realm of family policy.

For all these reasons, family policy development in Switzerland (as well as in Germany and other European countries, see the contributions to this issue) calls for explanations that go beyond the traditional approaches. This is all the more true given that developments in Swiss family policy since the mid-1990s denote not an incremental, but a *major change* (Häusermann 2006; Kübler 2007), both in terms of the underlying conceptions of social risks to be addressed, as well as in terms of the values and models of society embodied in the policy goals that are pursued.

The objective of this article is therefore twofold. On the theoretical level, we aim to provide an analytical framework that is able to complement the traditional factors, institutions and interests, to achieve more analytical leverage. More precisely, we will argue that a stronger emphasis on policy frames, ideational factors and political coalitions as drivers of reforms is needed to understand the politics of family policy reform in Switzerland. It is only by analyzing the *dynamics of coalition-formation* on the background of the *ideational frames* that underlie these dynamics and the *institutional incentives* that shape them that we can account for recent policy development. On the empirical level, we provide a systematic account of recent changes of Swiss family

policy at the national level, and gauge the prospects of future developments in this field.

In order to do this, the article is divided in three sections. In a first, theoretical section, we discuss various idea-based approaches to (family) policy change and present the analytical framework that is used for the subsequent empirical analysis. The second section assesses recent developments in three major issues of family policy in the light of this theoretical perspective: parental leave schemes, childcare services, as well as family and child allowances. On this basis, we identify essentially two different patterns of winning coalitions that form around measures of family policy that allow specific combinations of different family policy frames. We conclude on the prospects of future family policy reform in Switzerland.

## **2 Explaining family policy change**

### ***2.1 Ideational approaches and the concept of frame***

Family policy has always posed particular challenges to traditional approaches in welfare state analysis. While the three welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990) can largely be recognized also in family policy benefits and services (see e.g. Lewis 1993; Ferrarini 2006), the pace and direction of development has often-times been out of step with major other social policy programs. On the one hand, the evolution of family policy in OECD countries differed significantly from the development of other components of the welfare state (Gauthier 1999). Family policy expanded less rapidly than other policy sectors during the “*trente glorieuses*”, the three decades following the end of WW2. State support for families was also less affected by cuts in public spending since the 1970s; it was even expanded in many European countries, in spite of an often difficult budgetary environment (Henderson and White 2004). In addition, the traditional explanatory factors identified for other fields of social policy seem to have little explanatory power in the recent development of family policy. At best, the evidence is mixed. While Bonoli

(2006) shows that the generosity of family policy still correlates with the traditional variables explaining welfare generosity (mainly left power), Henderson and White (2004) find no evidence for this link, nor for an association of recent family policy development with institutional factors (such as the existence of veto points). In a similar vein, Gauthier (1999: 963) concludes that family policies appear to be driven by different forces than other components of the welfare state. This does not come as an utter surprise, since family policy has always been much more than an instrument of distributive class conflict. In particular, family policy has always been particularly value-laden, expressing ideas and ideologies on the organization of family and gender roles in the society (Lewis 1992; van Kersbergen 1994). Therefore, it is particularly important to take ideational factors into account when analyzing family policy.

Several authors have recently come to the conclusion that the development of family policy in Switzerland since the turn of the millennium denotes major policy change that must be analyzed in the context of ideational transformations. Seeking to explain the strengthening of gender equality policy in Switzerland since the 1990s, Martin (2002) argues that the presence of feminist ideas in political and discursive arenas played an important role, as did alliances that women's movements constructed with parties and organized interests. Cognitive framing, combined with coalition building, she argues, was important for the development of policy measures in this realm. A similar line of argument is followed by Ballestri and Bonoli (2003) in their analysis of the decision-making process leading to the adoption of the federal impulse program for more child daycare in 2002. They argue that, unlike "old social policies" structured by the cleavage between labor and capital, "new social policies" such as family policy portend cleavages of values (traditionalism versus modernism), age or gender (Ballestri and Bonoli 2003: 37). In their view, the daycare program is the result of a convergence of interests between a modernizing left and a liberal right both in favor of improving the reconciliation of work and family life.

The literature, however, has not come to a consensus as to whether the recent family policy modernization represents a dur-

able paradigm shift in this area or a fortuitous set of reforms. Ballestri and Bonoli (2003: 52) take a clear stance on this, explaining the introduction of public childcare subsidies as the result of a set of coincidences (p. 52) such as employers' fear of a shortage in qualified labor, the good shape of public finance thanks to economic growth during the 1990s, and the Christian Conservatives party seeking a new profile after a massive electoral defeat. Implicitly, their analysis conveys the notion that recent developments in Swiss family policy could be of a transient nature. Kübler (2007) defends the opposite view in his analysis of the recent expansion of Swiss family policy in the fields of maternity leave and child daycare. Reviewing actors' positions and coalition behavior in family policy decision-making over the last decade, he argues that cognitive processes triggered by deliberate framing strategies have led to the formation of a new "advocacy coalition" (see Sabatier 1998) based on a common problem perception and a common policy program that favors gender equality over the traditional breadwinner model as a policy goal. Here, recent change in Swiss family policy is presented as the result of a successful hegemonic strategy of a coalition of actors, including political parties, organized interests as well as civil servants and researchers. This coalition is qualified as fairly stable and is therefore viewed to having produced a completely new line-up of allies and opponents on major family policy issues. Häusermann's (2006) study, in which the value dimension also plays an important role, can be seen as in between these two positions. Looking at decision-making processes and political conflicts on maternity insurance, she shows that issues related to new social needs and demands denote the relevance of a new value-axis in addition to the traditional distributional division. This bidimensionality of the political space of social policy-making has resulted in modernizing value coalitions between social democratic, liberal and Christian democratic parties, and even cross-class alliances between the left and employers. At odds with each other on the left-right dimension, affinities on the libertarian-authoritarian values dimension allowed these actors to defend similar positions in the realm of family policy. Häusermann therefore explains recent developments in Swiss family policy by

a more general transformation of the political space that has re-configured the positions of relevant actors and rendered possible alliances between them. The multidimensionality of the political space is presented as fairly stable, since it is the result of a more profound dynamic, but the coalitions of actors that form in this space vary from one reform to the next.

While all these authors emphasize the role of values and policy ideas, they differ quite significantly in how this ideational dimension is articulated with other potential explanatory factors and therefore come to quite different assessments of the recent developments of Swiss family policy. For Ballestri and Bonoli, the articulation between values and other explanatory factors is coincidental, and the observed policy change therefore appears as extremely fragile. Kübler presents policy change as driven essentially by cognitive processes and by the hegemony of a new collective actor in the field of family policy and, on this basis, suggests that change can be considered as fairly stable. Finally, Häusermann views values as a structuring element of opportunities for new alliances, thereby arguing that change is not coincidental but is still potentially unstable as the decisions to form alliances is left to the discretion of policy actors.

In order to provide a valid assessment of recent developments in Swiss family policy, we construct an analytical framework that goes beyond the approaches discussed above: we theorize the articulation between ideational and other, i.e. institutional and interest-related explanatory variables. In order to do this, we suggest to draw on the concept of *frame*, as it is used, for instance, by Ferree et al. (2002: 105): frames are central organizing ideas that provide coherence to a designated set of idea elements. A frame is a “thought organizer” (Ferree et al. 2002: 13), frames

call our attention to certain events and their underlying causes and consequences and direct our attention away from others. At the same time, they organize and make coherent an apparently diverse array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is at stake on the issue (Ferree et al. 2002: 14).

This concept echoes some tenets of sociological institutionalism (see March and Olsen 1989; Powell and Di Maggio 1991)



where it is argued that cognitions and ideas shape actors' perceptions, ensure common interpretations of the world and thereby coordinate actors' behavior. Although they can be subject to change, frames are something rather durable. They provide meaning to social practices, and are, to some degree, beyond actors' control. Nevertheless, frames can be the object of deliberate attempts to alteration in the context of hegemonic strategies: there can be framing contests (Ferree et al. 2002: 61) between groups that seek to gain influence over a policy field. And there can be—and usually are—multiple parallel (and contested) frames or discursive dimensions that shape the politics and coalitional dynamics of a specific policy (Hall 2010).<sup>1</sup> Frames appear as power resources in the sense of Steven Lukes' (1974) third face of power. They outline the terms in which actors think about a policy, thereby structuring what is thinkable and what is not.

As a tool to analyze the development of public policies, the concept of frame therefore points to a clear hierarchy—or difference in analytical levels—between the three 'T's (Heclo 1994), i.e. the three main categories of explanatory variables in policy analysis (ideas, interests and institutions). The development of a public policy must be explained by a focus on frames (distant cause) that organize thought and behavior of policy actors who coalesce to produce majorities in decision-making opportunities (proximate cause) within a given institutional setting (stable over time). Empirically, we therefore need to flesh out the *frames on family policy* that were present in the period under scrutiny and show how they relate to actors' behavior in decision-making processes.

## ***2.2 Frames of family policy in Switzerland: old habits and new challenges***

As explained above, policies are usually characterized by multiple frames, i.e. central organizing ideas (Ferree et al. 2002: 13), which can be seen as interpretations of a particular policy in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is an important difference to the sociological institutionalist literature where cultural matrices are not considered as products of conscious human design (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

sense that they provide meaning to what a policy is about, what its goals are, and therefore draws attention to specific aspects of a policy rather than others. For a specific policy, there can be one dominant frame at a specific point in time, but usually there are several competing parallel frames (Hall 2010: 210-211).

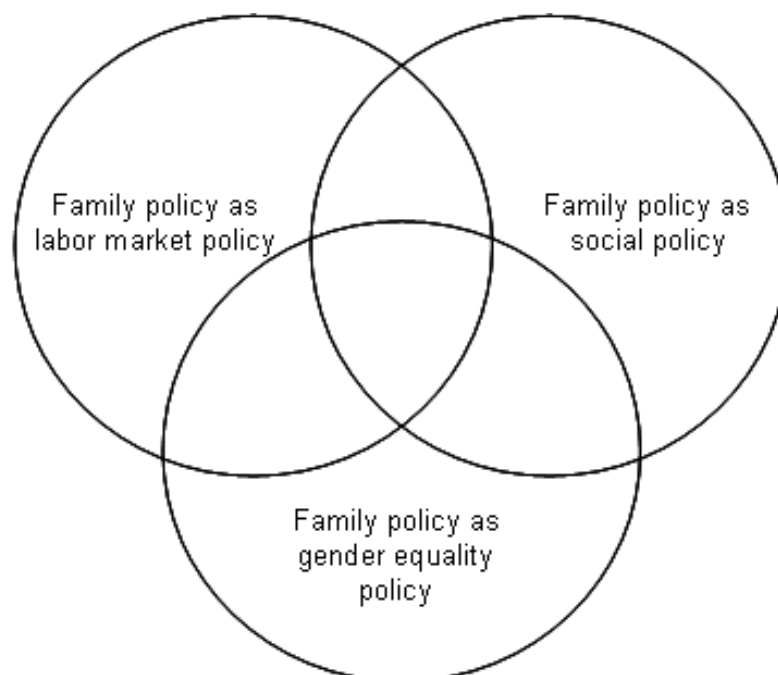
Swiss family policy has traditionally been very scarcely developed and heterogeneous between cantons. However, the inter-cantonal difference almost exclusively referred to the level of child benefits rather than the overall orientation of the policy, which for all cantons was similarly conservative (Dafflon 2003), i.e. a male breadwinner model (Lewis 1992; Orloff 1993). The male breadwinner model can therefore be seen as a dominant frame in Swiss family policy until the 1990s: it refers to an interpretation of family policy as a means of sheltering families from economic harm through the protection of the main income. The underlying values of this frame stem from a conservative ideology of social stratification and traditional gender roles, which has been dominant throughout continental Europe after the Second World War (van Kersbergen 1994; Morgan 2006). In terms of family policy instruments, a male breadwinner model implies financial transfers (child allowances) that are tied to labor market participation and income, and which are universal, i.e. not means-tested. Hence, in this traditional dominant frame, family policy has no role to play with regard to female labor market participation, gender equality or even poverty. It rather is a means of social regulation, of strengthening the traditional family as the cornerstone of the society.

Due to socio-structural and value change, the male breadwinner model has come under strain in most continental countries, not least in Switzerland (Fux et al. 1997). In the wake of demographic pressure, increased female labor market participation, as well as divorce and lone parenthood, alternative family policy frames have increasingly resonated in the policy debates and have appeared on the political agenda. In Switzerland, the emergence of these alternative frames has been observed empirically in several studies, which traced the underlying rationale driving the recent reforms (Häusermann 2006; Kübler 2007). These frames, however, can also be related to more general theoriza-

tions of family policy modernization (Fraser, 2001; Commaille et al., 2002).

In this article, we argue that three frames structure current family policy debates: family policy as *labor market policy*, family policy as *social policy* and family policy as *gender equality policy*.<sup>2</sup> The thrust of our argument in this article is that the various combinations of these frames have resulted in new coalition opportunities between actors. Thereby, actor alliances have in some instances been able to achieve reforms through ambiguous agreement (Palier 2005), i.e. a number of actors agreed on a specific policy change for different reasons that are not necessarily shared by all actors of the alliance. As Figure 1 illustrates, the three frames intersect. This means that there are certain policy instruments, which can be read through more than one frame. Let us explain the frames and their intersections in somewhat more detail.

**Figure 1:** Frames underlying current family politics in Switzerland



<sup>2</sup> Over the past few years, a further frame, presenting family policy as a part of education policy, can be observed in some European countries. In Switzerland, this frame has, however, so far remained virtually absent from reform debates. Under the influence of diffusion and Europeanization processes, however, this may change in the future and multiply the possibilities of framing and coalition-building.

The framing of *family policy as labor market policy* has become increasingly widespread over the past 15 years throughout Europe, not least under the impact of the OECD and the EU, which advocated this frame in various publications and treaties.<sup>3</sup> In Switzerland, such a policy frame has increasingly been put forward by the Swiss Employers' Association (SAV 2001), and the liberal party FDP (FDP 2001). The ideational foundation of this frame is that family policy can enhance both individual welfare and income for parents, as well as macro-economic growth and labor market performance, if—and only if—it is clearly oriented towards work incentives. This implies that family policy should focus on work-care conciliation policies, particularly for middle-class and skilled women who are seen as a valuable resource for post-industrial labor markets. The frame advocates a societal model that comes close to Lewis' dual career model (1992) or Fraser's universal breadwinner model (2001).

The *social policy frame of family policy* differs quite strongly from the labor market frame, particularly in terms of the target groups. According to a social policy frame, family policy's first and foremost goal is to reduce and prevent that parenthood becomes a source of poverty. As in other European countries, this frame is principally advocated by the Social and Christian Democrats, as well as by the trade union movement (CNG 2001; SP 1999; CVP 1999). Family policy as social policy has the primary goal of supporting low-income families financially, through transfers. Labor market incentives for middle-class women, by contrast, are not a relevant idea in this frame, and neither is it about gender equality. Indeed, generous child allowances or flat-rate parental leave payments create disincentives for female labor market participation, and stabilize traditional gender roles because they compensate the opportunity costs of labor market abstention.

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<sup>3</sup> The OECD reports *Babies and Bosses* (various years) provide benchmarks for family policies that help increase female labor market participation, and the EU Lisbon agenda has explicitly defined family policy as one means to boost labor market participation rates in Europe.

Finally, the framing of *family policy in terms of gender equality* refers to the potential of family policy incentives to regulate the distribution of work and care more equally. In its most radical form, it aspires to a societal organization around a dual career/dual caregiver model (Lewis 1992), where both parents participate in work and care on an equal footing. The introduction of (mandatory) paternal and maternal leaves, for instance, goes in this direction. Somewhat weaker forms of the gender equality frame also encompass the goals of enabling female labor market participation or acknowledging unpaid care work. In Switzerland, the gender equality frame has been most consistently advocated by women's organizations (Martin 2002; EKFF 2000) and left parties (SP 1999; GP 1999).

The important point in terms of politics is that particular policy instruments can be linked to more than one policy frame, i.e. they can be located at the intersections of frames, which creates potentials for policy alliances. Let us illustrate this with a few typical examples before analyzing it empirically for the Swiss case. Maternity insurance, i.e. income replacement for working mothers with a guarantee of job stability, is both an incentive for female labor market participation and a means to foster gender equality in the work place. Generous parental leave schemes, by contrast, which allow *both parents* to take a longer time off from work by compensating them financially appeals to both a social policy frame (since it compensates for income loss) and to the gender equality frame. Finally, workfare policies, i.e. social assistance for low-income groups which is tied to labor market incentives, can be read both as labor market and as social policies. As we will show in the subsequent systematic analysis of Swiss family policy development since the late 1990s, the combinations of ideational frames are a powerful tool in explaining why different reform proposals could—or could not—find viable majorities in the decision-making processes.

### 3 Empirical analysis

In this section, we will first descriptively trace policy developments in the three major fields of family policy, before assessing in more detail the underlying coalitional dynamics that allowed actors to combine different frames and to build agreements for reform.

Empirically, we focus on the federal and supra-cantonal levels of policy development, rather than systematically integrating the cantonal and local reform performances. This empirical focus necessarily implies an incomplete view of the Swiss family policy reform performance. However, the plurality of reforms in the 26 Swiss cantons would go beyond the scope of this article and—more importantly—the assessment of our theoretical argument does not depend on a complete review of reform performance, since we focus on the explanatory dynamics rather than the overall output. Moreover, a systematic comparison of federal, cantonal and local level family politics has identified similar political mechanisms at work at the different state levels (Binder et al. 2004). Methodologically, our data on reform processes and actor positions stem from content analysis of primary sources (parliamentary and governmental documents) as well as from our previous work and secondary sources quoted in the text.

#### *3.1 Policy change in Swiss family policy*

The following three sub-sections provide an overview of recent developments in the three major fields of family policy: parental leave schemes, childcare services and financial transfers. Before reviewing the major (attempts at) reform, let us briefly remind the starting point of Swiss family policy reform in the mid-1990s. Switzerland has clearly been a continental-conservative welfare regime in the realm of family policy, because family allowance schemes were the main—and, indeed, only—policy instrument that was implemented in all cantons after the 1960s (Dafflon, 2003). These family allowances were mostly financed by employers and tied to an income. Hence, self-employed, part-time workers or people absent from the labor market had very limited

or no rights to child allowances. In addition, family allowances diverged strongly across the cantons (see Dafflon 2003; Binder et al. 2004), according to different cantonal worlds of welfare (Armingeon et al., 2004). Several reform attempts at harmonizing family allowances or at introducing a maternity insurance had been made before the mid-1990s (Dafflon 2003), but they had all failed in parliament or in direct democratic referenda. These reform proposals had been introduced mostly by Social and Christian Democratic parties, as well as by women's organizations (Häusermann 2007), but they failed to gather sufficient political support. It was only in the late 1990s, when the labor market frame of family policy gained saliency that reform opportunities arose.

### 3.1.1 Parental leave schemes

The introduction of parental leave schemes has been, and still is, a very thorny process in Swiss family policy. A constitutional article giving the federal government the competence to set up a nationwide maternity insurance scheme was adopted as early as 1945. However, the corresponding legislation to actually implement such a scheme failed in the years 1984 and 1987. In the early 1990s, female members of Parliament pertaining to the Social Democratic Party or to the Social-Catholic current of the Christian Democratic Party put increasing pressure on the federal government to elaborate and submit a new proposal in this sense. Under the aegis of the (female) social-democratic minister of Domestic Affairs, the federal government elaborated a bill for the creation of a compulsory maternity insurance for professionally active women, featuring 14 weeks of maternal leave with payments equivalent to 80 percent of the last salary. This part of the law referred to both labor market- and gender equality-related objectives, since it encouraged continuous female labor market participation, and it improved women's position vis-à-vis their employer. In addition, however, a benefit payment was foreseen for non-professionally active mothers. This was a concession to conservatives who saw family policy first and foremost as an instrument of rewarding and strengthening traditional families.

Hence, this “birth allowance” for non working mothers appealed to a male breadwinner frame that stood in contrast to the other objectives of the law. Financially, the insurance scheme would have been funded via an increase of wage costs or via an increase of value-added taxes (VAT). The bill was submitted to parliament in 1998. It gained the unconditional support of left wing members of Parliament (the Social Democrats and the Greens), as well as of the majority of the Christian Democrats, who were particularly in favor of the benefit payment for non-professionally active women. The Liberal Party was divided. Some (especially female) Liberal members of Parliament supported the bill, viewing it as a contribution to a better integration of highly qualified women in the labor market. Other (mainly male) Liberal members of Parliament opposed it and argued that the creation of a new compulsory insurance scheme would increase regulation density and state expenditures, both of which was bad for economic growth. In addition, they opposed the benefit payments to non-professionally active women, precisely because this aspect detached the law from its close connection to labor market policy. The Swiss People’s Party openly opposed the bill, arguing that it was mainly a “matter of prestige for feminism” (quoted in Pessina 2004: 68) and therefore unnecessary. For the same reason, some (male) Members of Parliament (MPs) of the Catholic-conservative wing of the Christian Democrats also opposed the bill, but did not speak out openly in parliament. The bill was accepted with a comfortable majority: 116 yes to 58 no in the National Council (Lower House), and 25 yes to 10 no in the Council of States (Upper House).

After their defeat in Parliament, the Swiss People’s Party, the Liberal Party as well as some Christian Democratic MPs joined to get a referendum underway. They were soon supported by the Swiss Employers’ Association (SAV) and the Swiss Association of Small Businesses (SGV), who were opposed to the maternity insurance—and in particular the “birth allowance”—because of the increase of wage costs and/or VAT it involved and because of the universal benefit payment. Against the background of declining tax revenues and rising public deficits, they coined the slogan “no tax millions for the most private matter” (quoted in Pessina



2004:70) for their referendum campaign. They were successful: 61 percent of the electorate rejected the maternity insurance in the popular vote on June 13<sup>th</sup> 1999.

The popular verdict, in turn, sparked new activism among female MPs of all major parties. A group of MPs from all major parties—including even some female MPs from the Swiss People's Party—formed and formulated a new bill intended to be acceptable to a large audience in order to pass a referendum. This group was led by the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Swiss Association of Small Businesses (SGV)—who was also an MP for the Liberal Party. The revised bill was based on the one defeated in the referendum but it excluded benefit payments for non-professionally active women. In the debate in parliament, the bill was only opposed by the Swiss People's Party, arguing that the new project discriminated against mothers who stayed at home with their children and therefore posed a threat to the traditional family. Acceptance in Parliament was high: 146 yes against 41 no in the National Council, 27 yes against 6 no in the Council of States. The Swiss People's Party launched a referendum against this new bill but this time, it was not supported by its former allies. Indeed, the employer organizations this time supported the bill, on the ground that it now had a clear focus on labor market participation, rather than supporting all women, whether professionally active or not. Hence, they gave their support on the basis of arguments referring to the labor market frame. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2004, the maternity insurance bill was accepted by 55.4 percent in the popular vote.

With the new bill coming into force in July 2005, the long process of establishing a maternity insurance scheme in Switzerland has finally come to an end. It certainly has facilitated the integration of young mothers in the labor market. As the maternity insurance is the only element of parental leave in Swiss family policy, young *fathers* are largely absent from the picture. They are generally entitled to one or two days off when their partners give birth. Parental leave schemes known from other countries, where both parents are entitled to paid or unpaid leave, or can share this entitlement as they wish, is still unheard of in Switzerland. From the end of the 1990s, proposals for introducing vari-

ous forms of paternity leave (paid or unpaid) were put on the political agenda. Most of them emanated from left wing politicians, i.e. the Social Democratic Party, trade unions or the Green Party. Arguments put forward in favor of paternity leave usually referred to the gender equality frame, in the sense that stronger involvement of fathers in childcare and education is seen as beneficial for an improved sharing of responsibility between men and women. All these proposals were, however, unsuccessful. In Parliament, these initiatives were systematically rejected by a large right-wing majority, arguing that paternity leave schemes were, at best, nice to have but unnecessary, as the integration of fathers into the labor market has never been a problem at all. Hence, the right rejected them on the grounds that they were irrelevant to economic and labor market purposes. In contrast to the maternity leave scheme that was finally enacted due to a coalition of supporters of both the gender equality and the labor market frames, paternity leave was proposed and discussed as a policy measure referring only and exclusively to the gender equality frame, and it was therefore unable to draw sufficient support.

### 3.1.2 Childcare services

In the field of childcare infrastructure, Switzerland—as a conservative welfare regime—has obviously always lagged behind the Nordic or the French level of services. However, what is more striking, and maybe surprising, is that Switzerland is now starting to lag behind even continental neighboring countries such as Germany. In 2005, Switzerland has—according to the OECD—spent less public funds on childcare and early education policies than any other EU country except Greece (numbers are relative to the GDP<sup>4</sup>). According to the same OECD statistics, only about 7.2 percent of children below the age of three are in external childcare, as opposed to an EU-15 average of 35 percent (30 percent without the Nordic countries).

These numbers may give the impression that not much has changed in Swiss childcare politics. However, this is partly mis-

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<sup>4</sup> OECD Family Database ([www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database))

leading. Both at the level of cantons as well as at the federal level, childcare policy initiatives have been adopted and are on the agenda. As with other areas of social policy, reform performance is particularly slow in Switzerland (partly due to federalist fragmentation), but there is an obvious and paradigmatic change in the saliency and framing of this issue, which had been virtually absent from the political agenda until the late 1990s (due to low female full-time labor market participation and relatively high main earner incomes). At the federal level, two policy initiatives are essential and they illustrate well the ongoing coalitional dynamics.

In 2003, the Swiss parliament for the first time approved of federal public subsidies for childcare centers. The proposal had been introduced by a large alliance of Social Democratic, Christian Democratic and Liberal parliamentarians. It was approved of by these parties (the market-liberal FDP being split on the issue), against the opposition of the conservative Swiss People's Party and the Association of Smalls Businesses (SGV). Particularly notable is the support by the main Employers' Association SAV, which considered the law compatible with their new family policy strategy. The federal subsidies can be given to private or public childcare centers, which means that the federal government itself does not interfere in the actual provision and offer of childcare services, but only in the financing. Also, the law does not make detailed prescriptions about the organization and pricing of care services. Hence, it respects both federalist diversity, as well as private providers, both of which are cornerstones of the Swiss welfare state. But it made clear reference to both a labor market and a gender equality frame: employers supported the law because it facilitated female labor market participation, while feminist and left-wing actors praised the contributions of external daycare services to women's free choice between work and care. The law did, however, not appeal to a more conventional poverty-related social policy component. Childcare services in Switzerland are and remain very expensive in international compari-

son<sup>5</sup>, and the law did not include any provision to make it more affordable depending on the parent's income. Rather, it was an impulse for enhancing female employment mostly among middle- and higher educated women.

The second regulatory initiative in the field of childcare concerns the inter-cantonal agreement on school harmonization Harnos. The agreement has been ratified by 12 cantons so far and it includes, among other purely curriculum-related matters, the introduction of a mandatory 2-year Kindergarten for children aged 4 years and older, as well as all-day schooling with fixed time schedules throughout primary education. Again, the agreement received widespread support by left-wing parties (who emphasized the gender egalitarian effect of the law), women's organizations, as well as centre and liberal parties and employers, who stressed the advantages of the agreement for working parents and labor market mobility for families in Switzerland (Beyeler and Büchel 2010). As the childcare subsidies law, Harnos mobilized both the labor market and the gender equality frames, thus accounting for a broad political support base that explains the success of these reforms.

Equally illustrative, however, are reform failures. Harnos, for instance, was rejected in direct democratic referenda in no less than six cantons during 2009 and 2010<sup>6</sup>, and the decision-making process is still pending in eight cantons. Beyeler and Büchel (2010) have shown that the campaigns that led to reform failures were dominated by discursive frames that explicitly contested the labor market participation and gender equality goals of the project. Opponents mobilized the traditional male breadwinner frame, arguing that children should grow up within the family as long as possible and that Harnos would introduce a policy bias against the traditional model of gender roles. Proponents of the gender equality and labor market frames were not strong enough in these cantons to build a majority.

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<sup>5</sup> According to 2004 OECD numbers, the average net full-time childcare cost for a dual earner family making 167 percent of the median income is 39 percent of their household income, as opposed to 12.6 percent in the EU-15 average (OECD Family Database).

<sup>6</sup> These were Graubünden, Uri, Nidwalden, Zug, Luzern and Thurgau.

Similarly, a parliamentary intervention from Social Democratic and Christian Democratic members of Parliament in 2000<sup>7</sup> has recently been suspended: the aim of the proposal was to introduce means-tested supplementary family allowances for low-income families (a clear social policy measure). In order to mobilize support from some right-wing actors, the proposal included labor market incentives in the form of a reimbursement of child-care expenditures for those beneficiaries of the supplementary allowances who take up work. Since the supplementary allowances are distributed mainly to low-skilled and low-income families (who are less attractive to employers than skilled labor), the proposal did not receive enough cross-class support.

### 3.1.3 Family allowances and transfers

Family or child allowances have been the traditional instrument of Swiss family policy since the 1960s, and their existence has not been contested since. However, the heterogeneity in the level of allowance generosity, as well as the strong link between labor market participation and the right to allowances have been repeatedly challenged in the political discussion. In 1986, the canton of Lucerne proposed a harmonization of child allowances, independent from labor market participation, and a parliamentary initiative in 1991 argued along similar lines for harmonized, more generous benefit levels. In both cases, however, the proposals were rejected by a majority in parliament, which did not deem the problem pressure high enough for an intervention of the federal state.

The Christian democratic trade union CNG circumvented parliament in 2003 by launching a popular initiative for fairer child allowances. A popular initiative must—if it is backed by 100'000 signatures—be submitted to a direct democratic referendum. With this proposal, CNG claimed equal child allowances in all Switzerland of not less than 450 CHF per month (about 300 Euro), for both full-time and part-time employees. The initiative was supported by other trade unions as well, and by the left-wing and Christian democratic parties. However, a majority in parlia-

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<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Initiatives 00.436 and 00.437

ment decided to elaborate a counter-proposal with a similar content, but a minimum allowance of only 250 francs (about 170 Euro) per month, to increase the financial viability of the proposal. In the referendum campaign, the supporters of the initiative argued that child poverty rates in Switzerland were on the rise, and that the current organization of allowances depending on (full-time) work created unjustified inequalities. They thus clearly appealed to both a social policy frame (by pointing to the risk of child poverty) and a gender equality frame (by criticizing the discrimination of part-time and non working parents). The opponents, by contrast (market-liberal parties and employers) criticized the fact that increased allowances would create labor market disincentives, i.e. they rejected the proposal on the basis of an argument belonging to the labor market frame. In 2006, a majority of voters and cantons approved of the new law and it has come into effect in 2009.

Again, reform failures are equally instructive as reform success. In that sense, it is important to notice—along the lines described in the previous paragraph—that the proposal for means-tested, supplementary allowances (launched in 2000, see footnote 7) was rejected in March 2009, after almost eight years in parliamentary debates. Contrary to the successful initiative by the trade union CNG, this proposal focused on a narrower circle of beneficiaries only, mostly lone mothers with low incomes. Thereby, it clearly mobilized both social policy and gender equality frames, but it challenged the male breadwinner model, according to which child allowances should be universal, because they strengthen families as such, not the poor. This more narrow focus may explain the failure of higher benefits for low-income parents.

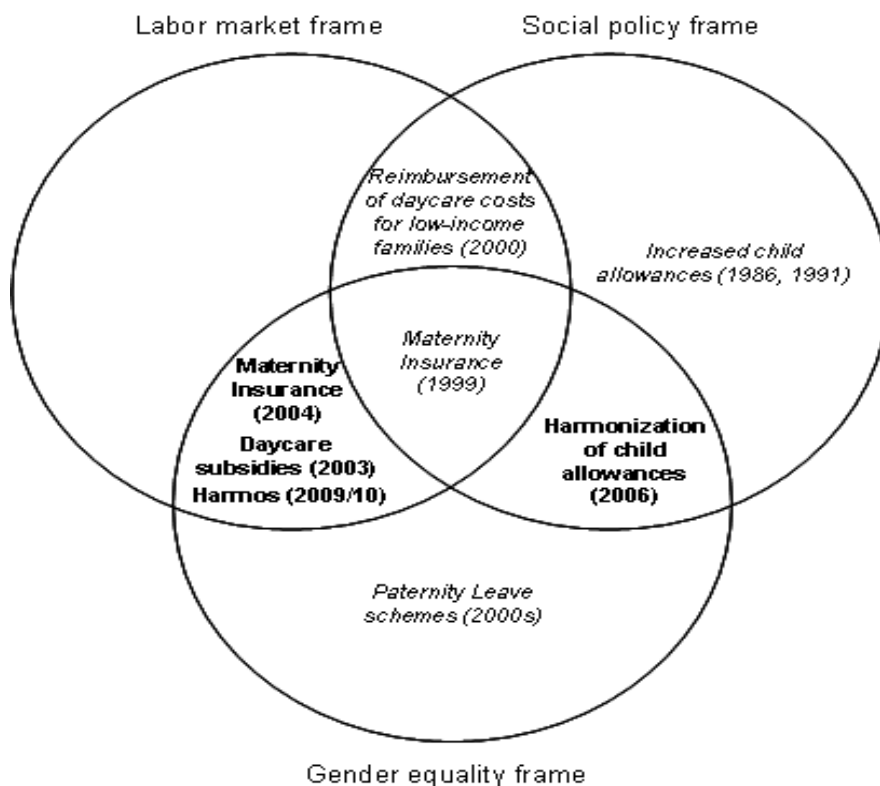
### ***3.2 The politics of family policy reform***

The analysis of reform successes and failures in the fields of parental leave schemes, childcare and family allowances has demonstrated that all successful reforms were eventually adopted by political coalitions that based their support on different family policy frames. This dynamic corresponds to what Palier (2005)

calls ambiguous agreements, i.e. agreements between actors who pursue very different policy goals by means of the same policy instruments. Ambiguous agreements become relevant with policies that can be interpreted with reference to a range of policy frames, such as family policy. In this section, we assess the comparison of policy successes and failure in recent Swiss family policy modernization and we extract the coalitional dynamics that underlie it. This comparison brings about a pattern of winning coalitions that allows deriving hypotheses for (future) reform chances.

In Figure 2, we illustrate our findings by locating reforms in the analytical framework developed above. Reforms in bold characters were successfully enacted, while reforms in italic characters failed. We locate the reforms in the frames or intersection of frames they pertain to, which allows us to draw conclusions on winning coalitions.

**Figure 2:** Location of successful and failed reforms with regard to the three frames of Swiss family politics



Reforms were successfully implemented in all areas of family policy, by means of the maternity insurance scheme (2004), day-care subsidies (2003), day-schooling (Harmos 2009/10) and the harmonization of child allowances throughout Swiss cantons (2006). The first three reforms all dealt with work-care conciliation policies, i.e. they introduced incentives and support for working parents. They all had a clear link to the labor market frame, since they aimed at facilitating female labor market participation. This is obvious for daycare subsidies and Harmos, which both strengthened external childcare infrastructure. It is also true for maternity insurance, which allowed women to hold on to their jobs after giving birth. By allowing more women to choose more freely between work and care, they also all had a strong link to the gender equality frame. However, since none of these three measures implied any redistributive effect for lower incomes (maternity insurance-benefits are income-related and costs for daycare are not regulated in Switzerland), they lacked the link to poverty-prevention that is typical of the social policy frame. The fourth policy change—harmonization of child allowances—by contrast, refers to a more traditional form of family support by means of financial transfers. Therefore, it had a clear link to poverty prevention and thus to the social policy frame. At the same time, it ended the discrimination of part-time workers' rights to family-allowances, which gave it a gender equality dimension, as well, given that part-time work in Switzerland usually is female work.

From these four cases, two winning coalitions emerge. First, it is striking to see that all reforms regarding work and care mobilized a combination of policy goals pertaining to the labor market and the gender equality frames, because all of them both encouraged skilled women to remain in the labor market and, at the same time, fulfilled long-standing goals of the left-wing and women's movement. For these reasons, all of them were supported by a very heterogeneous coalition of left-wing parties, employer organizations and parts of the Liberal and Christian Democratic parties. The opponents of these reforms could be found each time among the conservatives (the Swiss People's Party) as well as—to different extents—among the Association



of Small Businesses (SGV). Seeing the Left and the main Swiss employer organization (SAV) joining forces for the purpose of welfare state expansion is indeed what one may call an unexpected coalition (Pierson 2001: 427), especially in times of austerity and welfare retrenchment. The formation of this coalition is less surprising, however, in the light of the labor market frame it entailed: employers saw a clear interest in furthering female labor market participation.

However, the support of employers—which was clearly decisive for reform success—was always strictly conditional on relatively narrow economic goals, namely the activation of skilled women, which is illustrated by the policy failures we also observed. The maternity insurance scheme of 1999 was rejected mainly because it included benefits to non-professionally working women, a policy measure pertaining to the social policy frame. Similarly, employers rejected the proposal of means-tested family allowances for low-income families, even though this proposal incorporated labor market incentives. However, it was focused on low-skilled, rather than high-skilled women, which made the proposal less attractive in a labor market perspective. Finally, employers clearly rejected any introduction of parental or paternity leave, since this measure refers to gender equality concerns only.

The upshot of this comparison is that when it comes to work-care policies, the Left and part of the Christian Democrats<sup>8</sup>—favoring gender equality—are stable and reliable supporters of all policy initiatives. What makes the difference for success or failure, however, is the position of the market-liberal party and employers (Kübler, 2007). When they are on board, proposals have a good chance of being accepted in parliament and at the direct democratic polls.

The second winning coalition refers to a strong alliance between the Left, Christian Democratic and conservative actors in favor of harmonized and relatively generous child allowances

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<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the Christian democrats have evolved considerably over time from a conservative male breadwinner oriented stance towards more social policy- and gender equality-related concerns (Häusermann, 2007).

(2006). This policy change was adopted against the opposition of the liberal party and employers' organizations in a popular referendum. The reform benefited from a sufficiently strong coalition of actors, because it furthered a combination of social policy goals (higher benefits), male breadwinner goals (universal benefits for all families) and even gender equality concerns (by ending the discrimination of part-time workers with regard to family allowances). Previous reforms that had had the sole purpose of raising child allowances had failed in 1986 and 1991. Hence, when it comes to financial transfers, a social-conservative alliance for reform can be equally successful as the coalition centered on left-wing parties and employers we observed in work-care policies (Häusermann, 2006). There is not a single winning coalition in Swiss family policy. Rather, there is a potential for a range of reconfiguring alliances for policy change. It is only when we take the coalitional dynamics into account that we understand recent policy development.

#### **4 Conclusion**

In this contribution, we argued that family policy modernization cannot be understood with reference to isolated factors only—be they institutions, power relations or ideas—, but that we need to understand the interaction of power relations and institutions against the background of ideational change. The concept of policy frames has turned out to be particularly helpful in this respect, because a frame denotes a discursive, i.e. ideational, blueprint for policy reforms. Frames provide possible meanings and interpretations of policy instruments. Actors use these interpretations to understand and articulate their own position, and defend it with regard to allies and opponents. The analysis of Swiss family policy development has provided a particularly telling instance of precisely this logic.

We found that Swiss family policy reform was not driven by one single dominant coalition of actors, but by two winning coalitions, each one pertaining to a specific combination of policy frames. When gender equality and labor market goals are mobi-

lized, this combination creates a potential for an alliance of left-wing and centre-liberal parties as well as employer organizations. This coalition has become a strong and powerful driver of work-care service policies from the late 1990s onwards. At the same time, a different combination of social-conservative actors successfully defended and increased child allowances against the opposition of market-liberal parties and employer organizations. Reforms that appealed to a single policy frame only (such as paternity leave) lacked the sufficiently broad coalitional support to pass.

What do our results imply for the prospects of future family policy modernization in Switzerland? We argue that they entail both opportunities and risks for reforms. Our analysis shows that carefully crafted compromises, which balance different interests and goals, have a good chance of being accepted—even in times of financial austerity and generalized welfare retrenchment. However, Switzerland is far from seeing the emergence of a new, progressive dominant coalition in family policy modernization. Since reform coalitions are based on ambiguous agreements between very different actors, they are fragile and may be reconfigured or break apart in each reform. The support of the employers' organizations, for instance, which was so decisive for work-care policy reforms in the early 2000s, is strongly conditional on their interests in increasing female labor market participation. If this goal should become less salient for economic reasons, for instance, they may withdraw support for further policy change. In a nutshell, we have found that the Swiss family policy reform performance is not coincidental and ephemeral, but it is not stable and guaranteed either. The plurality of frames that underlie family policy creates a structural potential for reform, but this potential must be mobilized each time anew.

A final question pertains to the international comparison of the Swiss reform performance. We noted earlier that despite the significant reforms Switzerland has enacted with regard to maternity insurance and childcare infrastructure, the country comparatively remains a laggard and the gap to its neighbors seems to be widening (see also Thoenen's assessment of reform performance in this issue). Why is Switzerland moving so slowly in the direction

of a more labor-market oriented family policy, especially since the support coalition—as we have shown and discussed above—has been there from the late 1990s onwards? Aside from cultural factors and the relatively weak representation of women in Swiss politics (see Thoenen (this issue) for an argument along these lines), the most important explanatory factor seems to be institutional, i.e. the federalist state structure. The federalist fragmentation of policy competence blurs responsibilities. Hence, even though the political support coalition for modernizing reforms may exist at both the federal and cantonal levels, the discussion with respect to care infrastructure oftentimes focuses on issues of organization and financing, rather than the actual policy substance. Bonoli and Häusermann (forthcoming) call this a revolving door effect, since actors shift responsibility from one state level to another, rather than engaging in substantial policy reform (see also Bussmann 1986, and more recently Trampusch 2009 for analyses of similar effects shifting responsibility in federalist systems). Unless reform coalitions form across the boundaries of state levels, this fragmentation is likely to hamper policy development also in the future.

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