

## The Comparative Politics of Gender

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper supplements the usual economic and sociological explanations of women's economic status with an exploration of the effects of partisan and electoral variables. Using OECD-wide data, as well as on the basis of a more careful look at four very different countries, we find that women piggyback on the strength of organized labor for achieving relative hourly wage equality. Proportional electoral systems are more likely to give labor a strong political voice than are plurality systems, and are therefore more likely to compress the wage structure in a way that brings up the bottom quartile, where working women disproportionately are. A more complete look at the constraints on women's choices, using fertility as an indicator, suggests that strong labor unions may make it difficult for outsiders--including women--to break into the work force on an equal basis.

## I. Introduction

The secular decline in fertility in the past half century has done more to help the cause of working women in the industrialized west than anything else women could possibly have done. Putting Malthus on his head, governments across the OECD are now worried about what demographic thinning means for tomorrow's economy: how can businesses thrive in the face of labor shortages? Who will pay income and social security taxes to support the aging population? Apparently awakening to fact that an inhospitable labor market does not make women more inclined to stay at home and have babies, many governments are striving to increase child care support in order to make it easier for women to balance family and career.

The "baby strike," of course, was not the result of a collective movement but rather the aggregate effect of decisions by millions of women against simultaneously managing a career and a large family. Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, when a growing number of women joined the workforce, the average number of children born to families in OECD countries began to drop precipitously. These two curves match so well—inversely—that their juxtaposition on the same graph looks almost like a perfect X.

FIGURE 1 about here

The standard interpretation of this phenomenon became one of opportunity costs: women's access to paid work improved in the labor shortage years of postwar economic growth (Becker, 1960, 1988; Easterlin, 1968). Women responded to the increasing marginal opportunity cost of children by having fewer children and instead getting paid to work outside the home. Women in industrialized countries therefore faced a very different set of incentives from their counterparts in developing countries, where higher infant mortality, the need for agricultural labor, and the hope for child-provided retirement security combined to keep fertility levels quite high. Women in the west, it seemed, were satisfied to join the labor force at the expense of motherhood, and some governments sought to tilt the balance back the other way with childcare allowances.

Beginning in the late 1980s, fertility rates in industrialized countries began to settle into a variegated pattern that told a somewhat different story: below-replacement fertility was not an inevitable fact of modern life, but was instead an indication that women were having difficulty balancing a career and family in the way they would like. In Sweden, where an accommodating labor market and extensive childcare support made this balancing act easier, women chose to have more babies. In Japan and Italy, despite strong cultural support for the at-home mother role, thick glass ceilings and scarce childcare support discouraged women from having children. The Australian demographer Peter McDonald (1999, 2000), among others (Jain and McDonald, 1997; Esping-Andersen, 2000; OECD, 2001; Kono, 1996; Ahn and Mira, 1999; Walby, 2000), found a systematic gender-equality effect on fertility in the demographic data, suggesting that the relationship between work opportunities and child bearing decisions was not as linear as everyone once thought.

In this paper, I begin with the premise that women, as well as men, are likely to want to have both a family and a career, if possible. Not having a career carries with it several costs: being widowed or divorced can impoverish a woman without marketable skills; by extension, not having an exit option to a marriage can leave a married woman in a weak bargaining position vis a vis her husband over a whole range of issues. On the other hand, having children is a source of joy, if a hard-earned one. I therefore take fertility decisions as a useful indicator of the constraints that women face, requiring a trade-off between family and career that most women would rather not make. Supplementing the usual gender-wage gap data with fertility data allow us to see a more nuanced picture of the well being of women that the wage information by itself cannot show.

What is the causal explanation for why women are relatively better off in some places than in others? It depends on whether or not women have invested in skills, say the economists; it depends on the intensity of patriarchal values, say the sociologists. There is undoubtedly truth in both of these kinds of explanations, but in this paper I explore the effects of political variables, including how electoral rules shape the incentives of politicians who compete for public office. Under plurality rules, where a politician must win the support of more voters than any other candidate running for office, I expect labor will be relatively weak politically. Under proportional rules, where political parties cultivate smaller niches of the electorate, labor's voice tends to be institutionalized in the policy making process. To the extent that women tend to be at the bottom of the wage distribution, the success of organized labor in compressing the wage structure should reduce the gender wage gap (Blau and Kahn, 1996).

The effects of electoral rules on fertility are interesting to contemplate, because they reveal a more complex reality. Hourly wage parity can mask a variety of ways in which women are still constrained in their inevitable trade off between family and career. The nature of some of these constraints and the reasons for them become clearer when we examine fertility patterns across time and place.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the rationale for focusing on the policy consequences of electoral incentives. Section 3 presents some cross-country comparisons of the relationship between electoral rules and various indicators of women's well being. Section 4 takes a closer look at some of the countries that drive a wedge between some competing hypotheses: Sweden, Germany, Japan, and the U.S.. Section 5 concludes.

## **2. The Policy Consequences of Electoral Rules**

The study of electoral incentives has a venerable tradition in comparative politics, but most of the scholarship has focused on how electoral rules shape the structure of the party system: how many parties there will be, and how they will position themselves ideologically (for example, Downs, 1957; Rae, 1971; Grofman and Lijphart, 1986; Hinich and Munger, 1994; Cox, 1991 and 1997; Bawn; Taagepera and Shugart). In this paper, I am joining the ranks of a small but growing group of scholars trying to sort out

how electoral rules shape not only the contours of electoral competition, but the very content of policies that politicians enact once they are in office (Rogowski, 1987; Myerson, 1993; Ramseyer and Rosenbluth, 1993; Carey and Shugart, 1995; McGillivray, forthcoming; Persson and Tabellini, 2000).

## 2.1 Centripetal and Centrifugal Electoral Systems

Electoral rules vary along almost as many dimensions as there are cases to examine. To facilitate comparison, I focus on one of the most powerful ways in which they differ: whether they require politicians to go after the median voter (Cox, 1991, called these electoral systems *centripetal* in their effect), or whether they motivate politicians to target smaller groups of voters away from the political center (*centrifugal*). In this section, we explore how and why these two types of electoral rules differ, with what consequences for policy.

As Downs (1957) showed nearly a half century ago, plurality electoral rules are centripetal in their effect because politicians who do not position themselves in the political center should lose elections to those who do. Plurality systems with single member districts, moreover, tend to have two parties in equilibrium. Scholars and observers had noticed this since the 19<sup>th</sup> century but Duverger (1951) gets the credit for clarifying the phenomenon and asserting it as a law. Voters are not likely to waste their votes on a politician with little hope of winning elections, even if that politician represents a position closer to the voter's interests. Politicians, for their part, are unlikely to keep wasting resources on electoral campaigns that they never win. Given these incentives, only politicians with strong electoral chances—or as Downs would say, those who represent the interests of voters in the middle of a bell-shaped curve of voters—survive the competition over time. In equilibrium, this seems to be two: one winner, and one close loser who has a chance to win the next time. The effect is centripetal, because both candidates have to stay close to the median voter's preferences.

The next trick is to link the behavior of voters and politicians to the formation of nationwide parties. It is in the interests of politicians to form large parties in order to gain a legislative majority that can command governmental resources. So long as a nation's electoral districts bear enough similarity to each other that viable politicians in each district can coalesce into national parties, Duverger's Law seems to hold. India and Canada have more than two parties despite plurality rules, not because their voters think differently from voters elsewhere, but because regional differences have raised insurmountable barriers to nation-wide party building (Riker, 1984; Cox, 1997).

The reverse is true for large district proportional systems: Large district magnitudes produce numerous parties because voters are not wasting their votes on a politician closer to their interests. The effect is centrifugal because politicians, depending on their respective political endowments, have incentives to cultivate groups of like-minded voters all along the political spectrum (Cox 1991; Myerson, 1993). Cox (1997) formalized the folk proposition that proportional systems have  $m+1$  parties in

equilibrium, where  $m$  is the district magnitude, or number of representatives elected from each district.

To draw a causal connection between electoral rules and policy content, I next have to show that parties in centripetal and centrifugal systems would aggregate the interests of an equivalent set of voters differently. Even with the same underlying distribution of preferences in society, politicians in centripetal systems have to build larger coalitions of voters in order to win elections than politicians in centrifugal systems. Centripetal system parties are motivated to de-emphasize differences within the large coalition, and stress instead issues that the mass of voters care about, at least somewhat. Centrifugal system parties, by contrast, focus on narrower issues that intensely concern the group of voters they are cultivating.

It is no surprise that electoral campaigns in centripetal systems capitalize on issues that reach across voters in the middle of the political spectrum: keeping the tax burden low, and protecting their power as consumers. To adapt an argument by Pzeworski and Wallerstein, centripetal systems can be thought of as a compromise between the profit making motive of business, given its mobile assets and hence its exit power, on the one hand, and voters as consumers and taxpayers, on the other. The result is a policy menu that is tethered, by dint of electoral incentives, to a fairly unregulated market. The Labour Party in the UK is an instructive example. When organized labor controlled the nomination process in the Labour Party and hence the Party's platform, Labour languished in the polls. Only when a change in party rules allowed Party leaders to go after the median voter with more centrist policies did the Labour Party revive (Tsebelis, 1990).

At the other end of the electoral rules continuum, it is no surprise that centrifugal systems tend to produce corporatist bargaining rather than unregulated markets. Organized labor and business each represent large and stable niches of electoral interests that become institutionalized in parties and their legislative programs. That these groups have lower collective action costs than some alternative groupings of voters accounts for why they are electorally attractive to parties in centrifugal systems; but the fact that they are electorally attractive reinforces their institutional staying power.

All else equal, then, we should expect organized labor to be treated better in centrifugal systems than in centripetal systems. Income inequality should be less as wage structures are compressed. Note the irony: centripetal systems, with their median voter orientation, actually have fewer voters stacked up on the median point because the "tails" at the low and high ends of income are larger. We should also expect more women to be elected into legislatures under proportional rules, assuming that it is relatively harder for a woman to win a plurality of votes than it is for a man. But we don't have a clear sense of how much these the two systems should differ in their treatment of women more generally. I will explore this question with descriptive statistics in Section 3. But for now it remains to show what happens to policy preferences when centrifugal systems have a strong dose of intra-party competition.

## **2.2 Intra-Party versus Inter-Party Competition**

The argument about the strength of organized labor holds only for centrifugal systems with strong party discipline. It is possible for other features of the electoral rules, such as preferential ordering within a party list, or a single-nontransferable vote in multimember districts, or an open rather than a closed party list, to inject an element of intra-party competition into electoral races. This was the case for Italy and Japan prior to their recent electoral reforms, and it still characterizes the electoral rules in many Latin American countries. When co-partisans compete with one another for representation from the same district instead of forming a united programmatic front against other parties, they are motivated to use whatever resources they have at their disposal to cultivate loyalty to themselves rather than to their party. As a number of scholars have shown, the result is, among other things, higher levels of government spending on pork barrel projects that can be targeted to specific groups of voters. Electoral campaigns are also more expensive under these circumstances, because politicians are buying loyalty with private goods rather than on the basis of a coherent party platform (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Ames; Ramseyer and Rosenbluth, 1993; McCubbins and Rosenbluth, 1995; Cox and Thies, 1998).

In centrifugal systems with intra-party competition, organized groups such as labor unions should have far less institutional integrity than when an entire party represents their interests. Women, who face colossal collective action problems as it is, should be even more fragmented and disunited when politicians are angling for electoral support on the basis of private goods and personal loyalty. In the next section, we see if these political variables, along with other better understood socio-economic factors, can help to explain how women fare as a group.

## **3. Women in Industrialized Countries**

In this section, I review some data from industrialized countries to see if political factors help to explain some of the patterns that emerge.<sup>1</sup> First, I look at the employment data for working women: what percentage is working, and in what capacity (full time or part time), and at what wages relative to men's? Second, because many gains that women have achieved in the labor market have come at the expense of their family lives, I compare trends in fertility to understand the circumstances that give women the widest range of choice in balancing career and family.

### **3.1 Female Participation in the Labor Market**

Women have marched into the workforce across the OECD in great numbers, but compared to men in all of these countries, women are more likely to be in low skill jobs, are more likely to quit upon having a child, are more likely to work part time, and invariably get paid less than men. <FIGURE 3.1.1 ABOUT HERE>

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<sup>1</sup> I focus on women in the industrialized world to simplify the analysis because their constraints and opportunities differ considerably from those of women in developing countries.

The gender wage gap in industrialized countries is typically about 20% (less in Nordic countries), not controlling for skills or experience. That is, women get paid about 80% of the man's hourly wage for any particular job. But this figure alone does not tell us how many people are working in the more and less remunerative jobs. As Blau (1997) points out, women across industrialized countries disproportionately remain in the lowest quartiles of the wage scale: women are far more likely to be in lower paid jobs than men are.

Centrifugal countries raise the distribution of female wages when they compress the wage structure because women are disproportionately at the bottom end. In these countries, the minimum wage tends to be higher, progressive taxes chop off the top end, and government transfers even out disposable income even more. The wage effects alone are quite remarkable. The median female wage in the U.S. (centripetal) and Sweden (centrifugal) is at about the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of men's median wage in both countries. But because the lowest and highest wage figures are much farther apart in the U.S., far more females live in poverty in the U.S. than in Sweden (Blau, 1997).

The reasons why women earn less than men in the industrialized world are not hard to fathom. If wage statistics are controlled for skill level, they would show that men have stronger job related skills and longer experience; as a result, the part of the wage gap explained by gender alone is smaller than it appears (Mincer and Ofek, 1982; Goldin, 1990; Kunze, 2000). But it seems equally true that women have fewer incentives to invest in those skills. As Estevez-Abe, Iversen, and Soskice (1999) have shown, workers tend to invest in firm-specific skills if they have employment assurance with that firm; they tend to invest in industry-specific skills if they have industry-specific employment security; and otherwise they invest in general skills. Estevez-Abe (1999) shows that women, because of their career interruptions due to child care and other family responsibilities, are less likely to see a long run career as a viable option and will therefore invest less in skill acquisition than men. Parental leave policies and job guarantees upon return from leave should motivate women to invest more in marketable skills. Perhaps even more important is access to high quality childcare support that allows a working mother to focus on her work without worrying about the welfare of her young children.

The record of OECD countries on parental leave and childcare support is quite varied. <TABLES HERE> Although we might have expected that organized labor in centrifugal countries would raise the level of government spending for leave and childcare, the table shows that there is wide variance that the electoral variable does not capture. Within centripetal systems, on the other hand, the leave and childcare policies cluster at the ungenerous end of the spectrum. The US, UK, and Australia, by and large leave child care arrangements to the private market, with the result that quality of child care within those countries ranges from abysmal to excellent, depending on the woman's family income or on the availability of helpful family members. The US and Australia are the only OECD countries that do not require employers to pay any salary at all for parental leave, and the required leave itself is short by comparison to those in other countries (Ruhm and Teague, 1997).

There is another problem for working women, however, that may be even thornier than the availability of parental leave and childcare support. As economists (Becker, 1957; Mincer, 1963) noted decades ago, a woman's labor is worth less than a man's to the employer, even if the two are equally skilled, because women disproportionately take time out to bear and rear children. Being required by legislation to pay maternity leave makes this only worse: in addition to the cost of whatever portion of her salary the employer is required to pay, the employer has to pay to retrain her after maternity leave (particularly in high skill sectors), and the employer has to pay for additional workers to cover for her while she's absent. On top of that, if she quits because she can't stand the hassle of maintaining a growing family while being employed in the workforce, the employer fails to recoup the investment made in her expected future productivity.

One solution to this problem would be to require men to take paternity leave of equal length to whatever maternity leave the woman was provided.<sup>2</sup> Legislation that merely *allows* either parent to take leave would be inadequate, because employers assume (rightly, based on statistics) that women are more likely to take the available leave. Sweden is the only country to require fathers to take paternity leave, but the allotted time of 10-40 days is too short to even out the burden that employers bear between their male and female employees. Sweden has achieved the greatest gender neutrality in the world, but even there, women are more likely than men to reduce work days in order to take care of the family. According to a government survey, Swedish working mothers worked an average of 73 hours a week, of which 34 were unpaid, compared to 18 hours of unpaid work out of a total of 65 hours for Swedish working fathers (Lewis and Astrom, 1992).

Aggregate labor market data have left us with as many questions unanswered as they have answered. What difference does it make that females remain at the lower end of the wage structure in wage-compressed centrifugal countries? Why do centrifugal countries have such a wide range of parental leave and childcare policies? What does this imply for the ability of women to balance family and work? For insight into these questions, we turn to an examination of women's fertility decisions.

### 3.2 Fertility

Fertility data reveal a startling finding: fertility is, if anything, *inversely* correlated with the strength of labor. <FIGURES HERE> The wage data had seemed to point in the opposite direction: if wage compression disproportionately helps women, aren't women freed up by better wages to manage work and family? Apparently, a higher minimum wage is not sufficient to lift the constraints that women face in balancing these facets of life. The positive relationship between women's share in managerial positions and fertility <FIGURE HERE> suggest that labor-strong countries are not necessarily those that have done the most to help the cause of working women. To unravel this puzzle, we turn now to a closer look at four countries that combine the independent and dependent variables in different ways.

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<sup>2</sup> Torben Iversen made this point to me. Another solution would be for a woman to present an employer with sterilization papers, which shows just how stark a woman's choices are (Alastair Smith).

|                   |      | Fertility |        |
|-------------------|------|-----------|--------|
|                   |      | LOW       | HIGH   |
| Strength of labor | HIGH | Germany   | Sweden |
|                   | LOW  | Japan     | U.S.   |

#### 4. Comparative Case Studies

##### 4.1 Sweden

By virtue of its women-friendly policies, Sweden stands in a class of its own. Of all the countries on the planet, Sweden best combines high female labor participation rates and high gender wage equality with high fertility rates. Swedish women have achieved this work-and-family balance because government subsidies ensure the wide availability of high quality child care, and because municipal governments have hired large numbers of women for service sector positions without regard to the cost of parental leave.

Swedish spending on childcare, and the upward trend in women's labor market participation and fertility that followed, dates back to the 1960s when rapid economic growth produced a labor shortage that men alone could not fill (Jenson and Mahon, 1993; Kjulin, 1995; Nyberg, 2000). Employers and unions at that time agreed on the wisdom of easing female entry into the workforce, perhaps because of the relative unavailability of immigrant labor (Hammar, 1985; Huber and Stephens, 2000). The government followed suit with a series of measures. Legislation in 1971 taxed wages on an individual, rather than on a family, basis to encourage women to work.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the government steadily increased the supply of public daycare to meet the rising demand (Gustafsson and Kjulin, 1995). In 1974 the government introduced a scheme of parental insurance whereby parents were offered compensation for loss of market earnings on account of parental leave. In 1979, the legislature gave parents with children under eight the right to reduce their working day from eight to six hours (though mothers, rather than fathers, are most likely to take advantage of this provision. Lewis and Astrom, 1992; Hwang and Broberg, 1992).

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<sup>3</sup> This contrast with Germany, for example, where couples are taxed at lower rates than single people. Swedish women earned 39% of aftertax family income in the late 1980s compared to 12% for German women (Lewis and Astrom, 1992).

By the 1990s, a large percentage of union membership was female in Sweden, as well as in other Nordic countries.<sup>4</sup> Female membership in the largest union affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, the LO, was 40% by 1985 after a steady climb from 18% in 1945. In the nonpartisan Central Organization of Salaried Employees (TCO), female membership exceeded 50% by 1985. Female membership in the Municipal Workers Union is astoundingly high, because of the concentration of women in municipal jobs: 80% of the members of that union are women (Curtin, 1999: 118-123; Karvonen, 1995). As a result, these politically strong unions represent the interests of both women and men in the workforce.

Many of these female union members work part time: 32% of Swedish women, compared to 7.4% of men, work part time, which are comparable to figures elsewhere in the OECD; and as many as 60% of the women in the Municipal Workers Union, for example, are part timers (Curtin, 1999: 138; Higgins, 1996). But Swedish women work part time on long term contracts that provide them with benefits and union membership status comparable to full time workers (Klausen, 1999). This is rare outside Scandinavia, and as we shall see, German women have tried but failed to win this status for part time workers. For a central wage bargaining system to be able to protect the interests of core union members, it is useful to have an expendable part time workforce to accommodate employers' fluctuating need for labor. In Sweden, the government, rather than the private sector, pays the principal cost for hiring part time women on long term contracts.

Many Swedish women remain dissatisfied with the number of leadership positions they hold in the unions,<sup>5</sup> and they would prefer that fathers, along with mothers, share more of the family work that motivates them to contract for part time work in the first place. In 1976, half of the women legislators in the Social Democratic Party staged a "coup" in which they defied party leadership in insisting on mandatory paternity leave. They eventually got the government to legislate a take-it-or-lose-it leave for fathers, but the amount of time (10 to 40 days) is hardly comparable to the year's leave that mothers typically take.<sup>6</sup> In 1990, the LO leadership chose to push for longer holidays, which the men favored, rather than shorter working hours, which the women preferred (Karlsson, pp. 44-68). These setbacks pale by comparison to the difficulties women face elsewhere. Swedish women's legislative representation (40 percent in 1994) and union membership put them in a far stronger position than women in other countries where unions represent the interests of their primarily male members (Curtin, 1999, pp. 118 ff; Bergqvist, Kuusipalo, and Satyrkarsdottir, 1999, pp. 137 ff.).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> By the early 1980s, 33% of all women, and 68% of all men in Sweden, were members of trade unions. In Denmark, the figures were 45% for women and 60% for men; in Finland, 37% for women and 51% for men; Norway, 22% for women and 43% for men (Hernes and Hanninen-Salmelin, 1985: 126).

<sup>5</sup> Although women make up a substantial part of union membership, only 7% of the executive board of the LO and 18% of the executive board of the TCO are women (Curtin, 1999; Mahon, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the "mother's and father's month", which fathers cannot transfer to mothers, fathers have 10 "daddy days." Almost all fathers make use of the latter, but many forego the former. Gunnarsson, Korpi, and Nordenstam, 1999:19-20.

<sup>7</sup> In 1997, the Social Democratic Party adopted the principle that every other name on the party list would be a woman's. Christensen, 1999. Norwegian parties use gender quotas as well.

Swedish policies in support of female labor market participation involve trade-offs against other values that other governments have not chosen to make (Blank, 1994). Because women are disproportionately in the unexposed segment of the economy, their wages do not have to be attached closely to the market value of their work.<sup>8</sup> Private sector firms that compete on world markets for their products have shied away from hiring women and paying the mandatory costs for parental (mostly maternity) leave and career interruption. Women have achieved gender wage equality, not by increasing their investment in marketable skills, but by being protected from the world price for labor (Hansen and Wahlberg, 1997). No wonder, then, that Swedish women are far less positive about integration into the EU and the rest of the world's economy than men are (Lindstrom, 1995; Scheve, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Klausen, 1999). More extensive economic globalization could mean some unpleasant choices: either Swedish employers get the wage flexibility they desire and the government trims subsidies, or the economy faces inflation or currency devaluation or fails to compete on foreign markets.

The recent slump in Swedish fertility data underscores the vulnerability of being segmented into the public sector in a globalizing economy (Hank, 2001; Hoem, 2000). The Swedish government did indeed tighten fiscal policy since the early 1990s, forcing municipal governments to cut back on personnel costs. Women have felt the pinch the most intensely, and in response, many have curtailed plans to have more children. As the fertility rate volatility shows, the strong position of women as a group has become closely tied to government spending.

#### **4.1 Germany**

German women have gotten much less help from their government than Swedish women have, despite the political strength of German labor unions. By international comparison, Germany has low female labor force participation and a low fertility rate. Relative few women work full time and without an interruption in their careers on account of childrearing. One in three working women, and fully half of working mothers, work on parttime status. By contrast, only 2.2% of men work less than 35 hours a week (Backer and Willig, 1994; see also Hank and Kreyenfeld, 2000; Bardasi and Gornick, 2000; Trzcinski, 2000; Abraham and Houseman, 1993; Gustafsson, Kenjoh, and Wetzels, 2000; Schmal, 1993).

German legislation and union practices have discouraged German women from staying on a career track after the birth of their children. In 1979, women in the large IG Metall union lobbied for, but failed to get, part time workers included in union membership (Morgenroth, 1996). The German government under the CDU/CSU adopted generous maternity leave policies, for up to three years, but did not increase the supply of childcare services that would make it possible for women to reenter the workforce with minimal career disruption (Butterwege and Hausler, 2001). CDU/FPD legislation in 1992 made preschool for 3-6 year olds a legal entitlement, but these schools were only for half the

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<sup>8</sup> Esping-Andersen (2000: 6) reports one estimate, by Sumner Rosen, that puts the total cost of maintaining working mothers with small children in Sweden at 50 percent higher than the value they produce. See also Hansen and Wahlberg, 1997.

day, and there were no provisions of this kind for younger children (Hank and Kreyenfeld, 2000; *Focus Magazin*, October 9, 2000; *Die Tageszeitung*, August 1, 1996). As evidenced by a drop in fertility in the former East Germany, the lack of childcare support was felt most dramatically by women there when childcare services in the new laender were dismantled to levels comparable to those in the west (Hank, Tillmann, and Wagner, 2001; Witte and Wagner, 1995; Backer and Willig, 1994; Ochs and Seifert, 1994).

As Esping-Andersen (1990; 1999; see also Fix, 1998; Kersbergen, 1996; Schmidt, 1993) argues, the strong influence of the Catholic Church in German politics gives patriarchy in that society more staying power. Opinion surveys do indeed show a stronger belief in Germany than in Sweden in the importance of children staying at home with mother for the first few years of life, and German policies do encourage longer maternity leave with part time labor or none while children are very young. But it is also important to remember that the belief in mother-at-home once seemed indestructible in some other countries that have now relaxed those beliefs. Time series opinion analysis seems to suggest, in fact, that attitudinal changes have followed the behavioral changes of women, who have been relentlessly practical, rather than the other way around (Rindfuss, Brewster, and Kavee, 1996; Badgett, Davidson, Folbre, and Lim, 2000).

Another reason for the difference between Swedish and German government policies towards working women could be the different labor market situations in these countries. In Sweden, women have gained substantial influence over the labor unions and have been able to steer union efforts in support of their interests. In Germany, by contrast, immigrant labor has been a more immediate and obvious solution to the problems of labor shortages. Women in Germany are far more likely to be in part time positions than in Sweden. This situation is self-reinforcing. When women are not in the regular workforce in great numbers, women are not in a position to put labor or the labor party in service of the interests of working mothers.

Partisan politics supplies a third reason for the difference between Swedish and German policies towards working women, though there is a chicken-and-egg element to this explanation. As long as a center-right government is in power, it has an incentive to keep women out of the workforce. These parties seem to understand that working women should disproportionately value the kinds of government services in childcare and elderly care that left leaning governments are more likely favor. To the extent that center-right governments make concessions to women, it is along the lines of longer maternity leaves, more flexible working hours, and more part time job opportunities. But judging from the lower fertility rates in these countries, these policies that support the mother-at-home model fail to relieve the constraints that women most want lifted.

Since 1999 the Social Democratic Government has taken a more accommodating position towards working women, despite the ambivalence that the labor unions themselves have exhibited. A new parental leave, effective January 2001, encourages women to reenter the workforce by reducing the leave stipend after the first year. Parents are given legal claim to return to full time status when the leave is over, for all companies over 15

employees (*AP Worldstream German*, September 29, 2000). The government has also pledged to increase full day childcare facilities and to support after school care for school age children, but these provisions, and the large budget expenditures they would require, have not yet cleared the political process.

## 4.2 Japan

We turn now to a country where electoral and partisan pressures are considerably different from those in Sweden and Germany, but particularly intriguing because recent electoral reform hypothetically allows us to see if changes in the electoral rules have policy effects. Until 1994, Japan had a centrifugal system with intra-party competition.<sup>9</sup> Multi-member districts, in which each voter got only one vote, required the ruling LDP to field multiple candidates in most districts. LDP co-partisans in any given district could not appeal to voters on the basis of a party platform because one party candidate might too many votes and another might not get enough to get elected. To avoid this problem, each co-partisan cultivated niches of loyal voters with a particular set of favors such as agricultural protection, support for small business, or public works for the district. Big business under these rules becomes very important, because businesses can most easily supply campaign contributions for expensive campaigns. Labor, by contrast, is weak because its strength would hurt business contributors. Large aggregations of voters such as women are even weaker because they don't help with the all-important task of dividing the vote in multi-member districts.

Large Japanese corporations are renowned for their commitment to their core workers, but as we would expect from an understanding of the electoral rules, they are not required by law or by the strength of labor unions to keep their workers. Japanese firms learned a hard lesson in the tight labor markets after the two world wars that firing skilled workers can hurt their reputation when they come back into the labor market for new hires. They maintain this reputation by using part time workers—who are principally women—as the expendable part of the work force.<sup>10</sup> Firms have been reluctant to hire women into full time positions, in part because they want to preserve their pool of part time labor, and in part because they didn't want to get in the business of paying for all of the direct and indirect costs related to parental leave and child care. How convenient for firms that their (male) employees can work late hours and commute long distances, because the mother is

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<sup>9</sup> Japanese electoral rules until 1993 divided the country into multimember districts, ranging from four to six representatives each. Voters chose one person for whom to vote, even though the majority party had to run multiple candidates in most districts to maintain its legislative majority. As a result, politicians could not rely on a party platform, but instead had to carve out a niche of voters that would be as safe as possible from his or her co-partisans. They did this by lavishing favors—regulatory, tax, budgetary, financial—on their respective constituents.

<sup>10</sup> In Japan, 30% of employed women are part time compared to 7.9% of employed men. Income tax and social security tax penalties provide strong disincentives for women to earn more income than the allotted ceiling for spouses, unless they exceed the ceiling by a substantial amount. “Paato roodoo: 103man en, 130 man en no kabe,” *Yomiuri Online*, [www.yomiuri.co.jp/atmoney/zeikin/000728.htm](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/atmoney/zeikin/000728.htm). For the origins of this provision, see “Tsuma no za o doo miru ka,” *Asahi shimbun*, May 21, 1960; and “Haiguuusha koojo kyuumanen ni,” *Asahi shimbun*, September 10, 1960.

at home with the kids. The government, more or less in full alliance with business, stayed out of this issue.

Women were expected to get out of the workforce, preferably upon marriage, but at least, certainly, upon the birth of their first child. Some women returned to the labor force after their children were older, but it was usually to part time jobs with few or no benefits (Brinton, 1990; Shinotsuka, 1995, Nagase, 2000; Houseman and Osawa, 2000). This famous M-form female labor profile--that typified all industrialized countries until the 1940s and 1950s—showed only modest smoothing in Japan through the 1990s (Kosei rodosho happyo, May 25, 2000).

Public supported childcare is reputedly of very high quality, but the government intended it as a welfare provision for families that could not live off of the father's income. The means-tested access to childcare has changed gradually, but the quantity of spaces is still far lower than the demand (Boling, 1998; Boling, 2000; Zenkoku shiritsu hoikuen renmei, ed., 1999). Moreover, until recently, mothers of children in government sponsored nurseries were expected to iron their children's clothes, make their lunches, and even iron the cloth wrapper for the lunch box—hardly activities designed for busy working mothers (Hirao, 1991). Unregulated childcare arrangements popped up here and there, including 24-hour “baby hotels” that reached the notice of the public principally from the occasional accidents and deaths of children lodged there. (See, for example, “Do kawaru ka, hoiku en,” *www.Asahi.com*, January 19, 2001).

Matters didn't become much easier for mothers of older children. Relatively low labor market volatility in Japan—meaning that many people are stuck with the firm they join right out of school—raised the stakes for parents to get children into the best school possible. Men were busy with long hours at the office, or commuting long distances, or socializing with co-workers, all in order to win the fierce intra-firm competition for promotions. So mothers were left with the job of helping their children study for and pass exams into each successive level of school. “Exam hell” probably describes the scene as much for the mothers as for the children themselves (Keiko Hirao, personal communication, 2001).

For all its inhospitability, the labor market did not keep women out. But for the women who decided to persevere in the labor force, the combination of thick glass ceilings and the lack of childcare support did ensure that they had to put disproportionate resources into balancing career and family.<sup>11</sup> A record low fertility rate of 1.37 is partially the result of this problem (Shirahase, 2000; Lesthaeghe and Moors, 2000; Kaneko, 1999; Maruyama, 1999; Retherford, Ogawa, and Sakamoto, 1996; Kono, 1996; Osawa, 1988).

Japan's electoral reform in 1993 did two things simultaneously: it pushed electoral incentives towards the centripetal part of the spectrum (though a PR portion of the ballot keeps in play a larger number of parties than would be the case in a purely single member

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<sup>11</sup> Caring for the elderly—usually in-laws, in the case of the wife of the eldest son—is yet another job that women have been expected to undertake in Japan. These norms are changing only slowly. Long and Harris, 2000.

district system), and it vastly reduced intra-party competition. The system is still in transition because politicians have not yet sorted themselves out into programmatically coherent parties, but it is possible to see the contours of the new political terrain. To be successful, politicians have to rely less on pork barrel projects and instead position themselves towards the political center. Voters in their guise as consumers and taxpayers, rather than voting blocs such as labor, will be the objects of political attention. A new focus on the issues that many people care about, at least somewhat, has already started to shift the public debate towards livelihood issues. Both of the two largest parties talk about the need for more public support for child care, though no one is talking about pouring huge amounts of government money into it<sup>12</sup>.

With its more centripetal system, it is likely that markets will be allowed to work with less interference than the business-coddling practices of the past. Bank cartels are starting to crumble, and cross share holdings of stocks among firms are unraveling somewhat. With banks making decisions increasingly on the basis of profits rather than market share, businesses are losing the financial stability required to hold onto their core workers, and inter-firm labor markets will increasingly take the place of internal labor markets. Wages among professional males will become more dispersed to reflect marketable skills. Women will disproportionately stay on the bottom of the wage distribution, as they are everywhere else, but there will be less to keep them out of the market and less to keep the more ambitious from rising through the ranks.

This combination of a growing female workforce and the continued situation of women at the bottom of the wage scale has already swelled the ranks of women voting for parties on the left. Although the LDP recently won a landslide election, the victory was thanks to the decidedly anti-status quo campaign promises of the LDP's reformist Prime Minister Koizumi. Should the LDP fail to please the large mass of voters in the political center, we might expect working women to lead the rout of the LDP in the next election.

### **4.3 The US**

US fertility is currently higher than that in Sweden, and rivals the highest in Europe. The female labor participation rate in the US is also in the highest category for OECD countries; 73% of mothers, including 59% of women with infants under the age of 1, are in the workforce (Census 2000). But aggregate US statistics on fertility and labor tell us less than they seem to at first glance, because they lump together contrasting groups of women who have made very different trade offs between career and family (Martin, 2000).

Women are disproportionately on the bottom of the scale, as they are elsewhere, but the widely dispersed wage structure means that more of them are impoverished than in countries with compressed wage structures. US wage dispersion has actually increased in recent decades as integration into the global economy has raised the premium that goes to

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<sup>12</sup> "Shigoto to kosaadate no ryooritsu shiensaku no hooshin ni tsuite," *Kakugi kettei*, July 6, 2000; *Nikkei Online*, June 20, 2001; Osawa, 2000.

skilled labor, while many low skill jobs have been exported to lower wage countries (Garrett, 2000; Scheve and Slaughter, 1999; Blau, 1997; Gittleman and Howell, 1993).

US women with the highest fertility--of over 2 children each--are those with family income of less than \$20,000, presumably because of the limited opportunity costs for these women and perhaps because there is some means-tested assistance per child. Women in the middle income bracket have an average of 1.9 children, but this group also contains a fairly high number of women (23%) who have chosen to remain childless (Census 2000). These women have to make tough decisions about how much to invest in career versus child rearing, given their modest income.

The intra-gender wage inequality in the U.S. makes it possible for almost anyone to hire another woman to care for her children, but the difficulty of monitoring childcare quality transfers substantial risk onto the children in many cases. This may especially be true the large number of children in family day care settings where a mother takes in other children along with her own. A survey of childcare establishments concluded that childcare minders in family day cares spend about 40% of their time doing things other than watching the children—cleaning the house, doing errands, cooking, or watching TV (Haskins, 1988). Even in for-profit or non-profit establishments that are regulated by state governments, the status and pay of early childhood staff are low and turnover is high by OECD standards (OECD 2001).<sup>13</sup> The low priority in the US on childcare support is mirrored by child poverty statistics: 22.4% of US children live in poverty, even after transfers. Only Mexico has a higher percentage of children living in poverty, at 26.2%. In Sweden, government transfers reduce child poverty from 26.7% to 2.6%; government transfers in Germany reduce the number from 16.8% to 10.7%. (OECD, 2001).

In centripetal countries, where politicians appeal to voters on the basis of their spending power, it may be especially difficult to raise taxes substantially on behalf of segments of the population such as women or children. In the late 1980s Bill Clinton commissioned a crack team of childcare economists and psychologists to examine the childcare issue for possible inclusion in his electoral campaign. When Edward Zigler, a child welfare advocate and godfather of Head Start, estimated the cost of providing quality childcare to every child in the US to be \$75 to \$100 billion, the Clinton campaign moved on to other issues. They apparently recognized that, unless the government were willing to use substantial tax dollars for childcare, increasing the quality of childcare through more stringent regulation would have the effect of putting it out of financial reach for many families (Rose-Ackerman, 1983a and 1983b).

Only 19% of American women, a smaller proportion than in Europe or Japan, work part time. Unlike in Sweden, where women as a group have taken refuge in a mother-friendly public sector, American women have taken a wide range of responses, depending on their education, income, and marketable skills. There are women all along the wage scale, including some close to the top.

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<sup>13</sup> Worse yet: 10% of American children of working mothers are left alone, according to some estimates (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

Among the women in the US have been financially very successful, fully 48% of women between the ages of 25 and 35 who make \$75,000 and over remain childless (Census, 2000). Wage penalties, in the US as elsewhere, are for motherhood and the interrupted career path that it implies, rather than for women per se. To get around this problem, many educated women have delayed their families to get careers established, and a fair number choose to remain childless. In today's America, as in past decades, the goal of balancing career and family remains elusive (Goldin, 1997: 50).

## 5. Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper shows that women have gained substantial wage equality in today's industrialized world, but that many women still have to choose between family and career, or some suboptimal mix of the two. Apparently, women have collectively responded to glass ceilings, not by giving up and staying home to reproduce, but by trying even harder to achieve career success at the expense of household size.

The most surprising finding was that the strength of organized labor of the kind found in centrifugal countries does not necessarily help women achieve the work and family balance that many men take for granted. Because labor unions are most intent on protecting the livelihood of their own members, they support the interests of working women only if women are already strongly represented in the unions. This is a Catch 22. Working women have trouble achieving full time careers unless the government socializes some of the family services that consume so much of many women's—and especially mothers'—time. Ironically, male union workers share employers' preferences to keep women and immigrants available as a flexible part of the labor force in order to protect their own gains. Germany, with its strong unions, and Japan, with its strong employers, have both tended to keep women in expendable auxiliary positions. If I am right, they will also continue to have low fertility rates until they do more to ease women's access to the labor force.

In a centripetal country such as the US, fertility varies substantially with income. Many women at the bottom of the wage distribution seem to have given up on achieving meaningful career success, and specialize instead on reproducing. Women with higher income can contract for childcare on the private market but many have chosen to postpone or even forgo childbearing in order to focus energies on career building.

The claims in this paper are tentative, based on incomplete evidence. The topic begs for better data and more research on a number of issues. First, we should learn more about the relationship between workforce entry and political outcomes. To the extent that women succeed in entering the workforce rather than staying on its margins, we might expect to see a partisan realignment, at least in centrifugal countries, towards the parties on the left. This is because full time working women value the social expenditures for services that once were in the province of at-home mothers. But this electoral realignment coincides with pressures from economic globalization to cut government spending and reduce wage compression. As a result, we should expect to see gendered conflict over the trade offs between fiscal spending and economic competitiveness

Second, we ought to learn more about the costs, both to children now and to society later, of private sector solutions to childcare in countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia. Experts agree that the quality of childcare includes some costly variables such as the ratio of adults to children and the continuity of care (Kamerman, 2001; Shonkoff and Phillips, eds., 2000; Thornton, ed., 2001). It is possible that neither the parents nor society at large have yet internalized the costs of what may now appear to be only mild forms of neglect. If children are not getting the nurturing and stimulating environment they need to develop into healthy adults, society could be handed a hefty bill in the future.

Third, we come back to a question that motivated this paper: how do electoral rules affect gender equality? What difference does it make to the well-being of women that centripetal systems generate broad pre-election coalitions while centrifugal systems produce post-election bargaining among groups with intense interests? The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that working women remain penalized in one way or another in all political systems, but to different degrees and in various ways (Folbre 1994). Among centrifugal countries, there is a wide range between labor-strong countries where women have harnessed the power of labor government to serve their interests, and labor-strong countries that protect the interests of the primarily male unions. In centripetal countries the variance is among females themselves, by income. It is not clear who has the more daunting collective action problem: women in centripetal systems who are divided by economic interests, or women in centrifugal systems who are on the outside of labor unions, looking in.

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