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Ideas, Coalition Magnets and Policy Change: Comparing Variation in Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Expansion across Four Latecomer Countries

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Abstract

This article examines variation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) expansion in four 'latecomer' reformers: Germany, England, South Korea and Japan. Taking a comparative approach through an analysis of policy documents, it focuses on the role of ideas as coalition magnets in explaining the more extensive and sustained policy shifts in Germany and Korea, in contrast to the more limited and fragmented reforms in England and Japan. As the comparative literature struggles to explain variation in ECEC expansion, this focus on ideas provides a significant contribution, highlighting why ECEC reform became supported by a broad cross-class coalition in Germany and Korea but not in England or Japan. The theoretical contribution argues that coalition magnets are formed when the polysemic potential of a policy is drawn out by key actors strategically linking it to several problem definitions, which can appeal to diverse political actors and forge lasting consensus for reform.

Keywords: South Korea; Japan; Germany; England; ideas; early childhood education and care

Since the 1990s many OECD countries have followed the earlier Scandinavian example and expanded early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies (Daly and Ferragina 2018). Such changes are remarkable because they represent path-departing reforms in many 'latecomer' countries previously characterized as 'strong male-breadwinner model' welfare states (Lewis 1992). While the comparative literature has sought explanations for this cross-national trend, less attention has been paid to variation in the extent and momentum of ECEC expansion. Why have some latecomer countries undergone a 'Nordic' turn, while the expansion in others has been more modest?

This article examines the sources of variation in ECEC policy development across four latecomer countries, England, Germany, South Korea and Japan.[1] It asks why ECEC reform was more extensive and continuous in Germany and Korea, in comparison to reforms in England, where a waning of political momentum towards ECEC expansion is evident, and in Japan, which saw much more modest expansion. It argues that this variation can be explained by a focus on the role of ideas in the political processes of reform and, more specifically, by ideas acting as 'coalition magnets', drawing together support for policy change from across traditional political cleavages. Drawing on recent advances in the theoretical ideational literature, the article demonstrates that in Germany and Korea ECEC expansion was attached to problem definitions that were sufficiently broad to be polysemic – that is, to be interpreted differently by different actors. In Germany and Korea, actors from across the political spectrum interpreted ECEC expansion as in their interests, including some actors previously hostile to progressive family policy reforms. By contrast, ECEC reform was attached to more narrowly defined problem definitions in England and Japan, and in these countries no significant realignment of actors occurred.

Each of the four countries are 'latecomers' to ECEC reform, having previously shown little inclination to support families with the care of young children, and have all more recently undergone significant shifts away from traditional policies which promoted, implicitly or explicitly, male-breadwinner model families (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014; Lewis et al. 2008). Such a four-country comparison permits a broader perspective than much of the comparative literature, which is overwhelmingly focused on Western Europe (but see Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016; Fleckenstein and Lee 2014). A brief examination of comparative data demonstrates variation in the extent and momentum of ECEC reform in these four cases. While Japan was the first of the four countries to increase expenditure on ECEC in the early 1990s, this increase pales in comparison to the largest periods of expansion in the other three countries: the UK (1997–2005), Germany (2008–present) and Korea (2004–present) (see Figure 1). The growth in spending in the UK is also striking, as is the decline since the high point of 2005, not all of which can be ascribed to austerity in public spending since 2010. By contrast Germany and Korea demonstrate more recent and continued expansions of spending, most dramatically in Korea. While spending appears to be increasing in Japan again in recent years, expenditure per child on ECEC remains lower than in Germany or Korea (OECD 2021). Table 1 demonstrates a similar story regarding the availability of ECEC. In both Germany and Korea, growth in ECEC provision since the 2000s has been continuous – especially in Korea, where enrolment rates now rival Scandinavian countries. By contrast, Japan's expansion has been sluggish while the UK has seen stagnation since the mid-2000s.

The comparative policy literature on ECEC expansion has focused on explanations for the presence or absence of change, rather than variation in that change; as such, the dominant explanations struggle to account for the observed pattern between England, Germany, Japan and Korea. For example, new social risks theory, which argues that demographic changes, women's employment and post-industrial labour markets have pressured governments into enacting reforms, cannot illuminate why Germany and Korea undertook the greater reforms, given that the

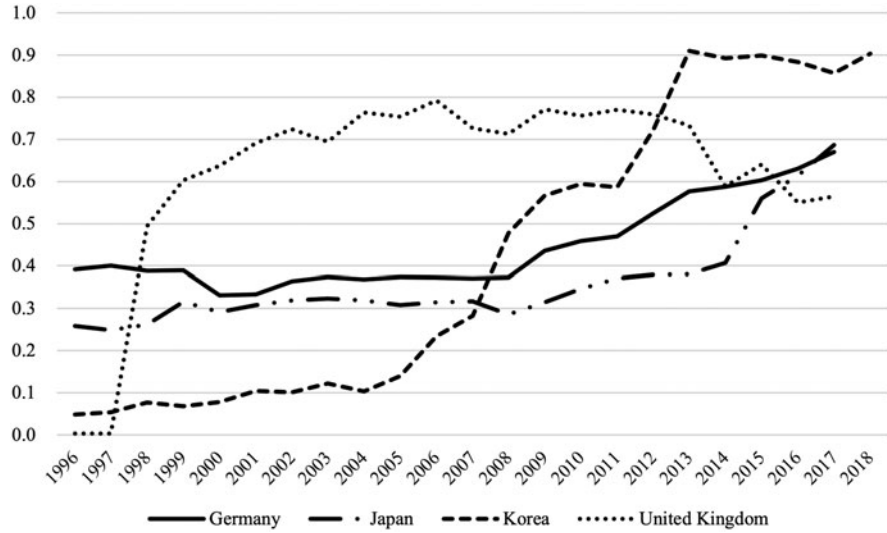

Figure 1. Public Expenditure on ECEC, % of GDP, 1996–2018
Source: OECD (2021).

functional pressures were not obviously larger in these countries (Bonoli 2005). Political theories that highlight the role of left parties or female agency (Huber and Stephens 2001) also do not seem able to account for the observed variation, especially given it was centre-right governments that undertook the most significant expansions in Germany and Korea, although the initial impetus for reform in all four countries came when centre-left parties held power. Electoral competition, which has been cited as an explanation for change in all four cases (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014, 2017; Morgan 2013), can help explain ECEC expansion by right as well as left parties, in that it explains why new ideas came onto the political agenda, but has little to say about the extent or momentum of reform.

Recently some scholars have aimed to build on the electoral competition argument to explain its greater applicability in some contexts rather than others. Margarita Estévez-Abe and Manuela Naldini's institutional explanation focuses on the importance of majoritarian, single-party governments with agenda-setting powers; but this struggles to explain the English case, which seems to meet the conditions for significant electoral competition, or the German case, which does not

Table 1. Percentage of Under-3s Enrolled in ECEC, 2005–2018

	2005	2010	2018
Germany	17	27	38
England	37	40	38 (2017)
Korea	n/a	38	63
Japan	16	19	32

Source: OECD (2021).

Table 2. Social Attitudes towards Maternal Employment, 1994–2012

A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works			
	1994	2002	2012
Japan	2.9	2.6	2.4
South Korea	n/a	n/a	3.7
West Germany	3.8	3.3	2.8
East Germany	2.7	2.6	2.1
Great Britain	2.9	2.9	2.8

Source: ISSP (1997, 2013, 2016).
Note: Scores are mean responses on a five-point scale. The higher the score the higher the average level of agreement with the statement.

(Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016). The other prominent argument in this literature, that electoral competition relates to social attitudes towards the care of young children (Blome 2016; León et al. 2021), also cannot account for the fact that the greatest policy change has occurred in countries with more conservative attitudes (see Table 2).

Electoral competition therefore provided the catalyst for new ideas about ECEC to come onto the political agenda, but in order to explain *variation*, it is necessary to examine the role that these new ideas played in the reform processes in each country. Such an approach highlights that while institutional or structural accounts can specify the circumstances under which new ideas emerge, without paying attention to the ways in which ideas are used in political discourse we cannot fully account for the content and direction of change (Béland 2016; Béland and Hacker 2004; Blyth 2001). Indeed, from a comparative perspective, an ideational account provides an explanation of variation that goes beyond the view that different policy outcomes are a function of institutionally channelled preferences (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones 1993), highlighting that the motivating ideas themselves vary cross-nationally, as do the ways in which they are strategically wielded in the political arena. This is particularly relevant for policies relating to families, such as ECEC, which as Jochen Clasen (2005: 140) notes, are 'rarely based on a clear diagnosis of existing problems, needs, demands, interests, and attitudes of families or children'. Instead, they relate to deeply held beliefs and are particularly infused with normative notions relating to gender roles, child-rearing and the relationship between individuals and the state (Lewis 2008; Strohmeier 2002).

Through focusing on the ideas that underpinned the reform of ECEC expansion and the ways in which they were used in each of the four cases, we highlight the importance of ideas acting as 'coalition magnets', which is the process by which polysemic ideas can appeal to broad political constituencies through being viewed differently by different groups (Béland and Cox 2016). The next section elaborates on this concept and situates it in the literature; subsequently, the methodological approach is discussed before the four cases are examined in detail. The concluding section suggests ways in which this research agenda could be furthered.

Coalition magnets and polysemic framing

The politics of post-industrial social policy is characterized by multifaceted interests and preferences in which the formation of diverse, cross-class coalitions can help explain both stability and change (Bonoli and Natali 2012; Häusermann 2010). Understanding how such diverse coalitions are formed is therefore of great importance. Daniel Béland and Robert Cox (2016: 429) define coalition magnets as 'the capacity of an idea to appeal to a diversity of individuals and groups, and to be used strategically by policy entrepreneurs (i.e. individual or collective actors who promote certain policy solutions) to frame interests, mobilize supporters and build coalitions'. Drawing on the literature on agenda-setting, they highlight three processes by which coalition magnets are created. First, ideas are strategically framed by their promotors, policy entrepreneurs, in new ways. Second, these ideas are promoted by key actors in the policy process, which grant the new ideas legitimacy. Third, 'the ideas bring together actors whose perceived interests or policy preferences had previously placed them at odds with one another; or the ideas might awaken a policy preference in the minds of actors who were not previously engaged with the particular issue' (Béland and Cox 2016: 429).

Ideas acting as coalition magnets therefore form a particular kind of ideational explanation, which, as Craig Parsons (2016) notes, is a subset of a wider category of ideas being important because they empower actors to achieve their aims. As Béland and Cox (2016) suggest, while coalition magnets can exert influence through inducing potential opponents to reassess their interests, another mechanism for influence is by providing a 'focal point' around which existing interests can be combined in new ways (e.g. Goldstein and Keohane 1993). The nascent literature on coalition magnets therefore emphasizes that a key trait of successful coalition magnets is that they are 'polysemic', that is, they 'mean different things to different people' (Béland and Cox 2016: 432). Put another way, a polysemic idea can act as a coalition magnet because it is sufficiently broad and ambiguous to be able to provide previously opposed actors with new common possibilities for achieving their interests.

To define polysemy in such a way does not rely on constructivist notions of new ideas providing actors with *new* understandings of their interests; rather, it highlights that polysemy can also be strategically exploited by actors in order to frame ideas differently for different audiences, in ways that appeal to their different interests. Critics might suggest that this collapsing of ideas and interests relegates ideas to an epiphenomenal role – ideas are merely the conduit for actors to pursue their existing interests. However, following Peter Gourevitch (1989: 87–88), it should be noted that it is precisely when ideas and interests overlap that change comes about: 'To become policy, ideas must link up with politics – the mobilization of consent for policy.' Change occurs when coalition magnets provide actors with new possibilities for combining interests in ways that can shift previously rigid balances of power. Indeed, as Béland and Cox (2016) stress, in order for a coalition magnet to form, the polysemic properties of an idea must be actively highlighted by policy entrepreneurs.

Unsurprisingly given it emerged from the agenda-setting literature, the notion of broad coalitions for change uniting around an ambiguous idea aligns with many of

the pre-eminent public policy frameworks. For example, coalition magnets can help explain why certain issues attract political attention and why 'policy images' shift to become more appealing to previous opponents, a key focus of punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). From the perspective of the multiple streams approach, coalition magnets demonstrate how interrelated the politics and problem streams are, in that the process of defining problems is partly one of broadening the way an issue is conceived in order to attract the attention of decision-makers (Kingdon 2003). Coalition magnets as set out above also chime with the thrust of the advocacy coalition framework, highlighting how changes in 'secondary beliefs' and even in 'policy core beliefs' can lead to significant realignment of coalitions and therefore policy change (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

However, while ideas as coalition magnets form part of these broader frameworks, they are worthy of focus from an ideational perspective as a mechanism for change in and of themselves. From this perspective, it is necessary to be more precise about what kind of idea can act as a coalition magnet. Distinguishing between ideational elements has been a feature of the ideational literature. For example, John Campbell (2004) distinguishes between ideas operating in the political foreground and those that influence politics from a background position. The latter, which can be cognitive 'policy paradigms' or normative 'public sentiments', constrain what is possible in the political foreground, setting boundaries of what is considered legitimate or necessary. Ideas in the political foreground, however, are seen as potential sources of change. These can be cognitive 'programmes' or normative 'frames', and Campbell (2004: 98) suggests the former are most likely to act as coalition magnets: 'cognitive concepts and theories that enable or facilitate decision making and institutional change by specifying for decision makers how to solve specific problems'. However, this distinction between normative and cognitive elements of foreground ideas appears to contradict many of the insights of the framing literature, which points to the importance of successful framing making claims to both cognitive necessity and normative legitimacy (e.g. Schön and Rein 1994; Stone 1989). An alternative to this bifurcated distinction therefore is a hierarchical typology of 'levels' of ideas, in which 'policy solutions', specific policy proposals, are nested within 'problem definitions' in the political foreground (e.g. Béland 2016; Carstensen 2015; Mehta 2011).

One advantage of this typology is that it draws attention to the way that ideas at different levels of abstraction link together. This chimes with the latest theoretical innovations in the ideational literature, which instead of conceptualizing ideas as monolithic and purely interpretative entities is moving towards a conceptualization of ideas as malleable and strategic resources that are combined and recombined by policy entrepreneurs (e.g. Boswell and Hampshire 2017; Carstensen and Hansen 2019). Indeed, Vivien Schmidt (2008) highlights the dual importance both of an idea itself and of the way it is communicated, emphasizing the interdependencies between policy ideas and the broader frames within which they are embedded. Such notions are helpful for defining coalition magnets, which as Béland and Cox have highlighted are ideas with specific properties (polysemy) that are actively used by policy entrepreneurs. Thus not only does a coalition magnet need to be a policy solution that has the potential for polysemy, but that polysemy needs to be brought out through the strategic linking of the policy solution to problem

definitions that are of interest to a broad coalition. Put simply, coalition members do not necessarily all support a particular policy for the same reason; the more problem definitions a policy solution can be interpreted as addressing, the broader its potential to act as a coalition magnet.

It can therefore be hypothesized that coalition magnets are most likely to be policy solutions that have the potential to be polysemic. They are picked up by policy entrepreneurs who are able to exploit this potential by linking the policy solution to several problem definitions. In doing so, new coalitions can form among actors with different interests, who, due to the coalition magnet, now see the policy in question as a solution to a particular (and potentially different) problem which they have an interest in solving. The active support of actors who might be expected to oppose or at least be uninterested in reforms, such as employers or conservative parties in the case of ECEC, should therefore be evident in episodes of change involving coalition magnets.

As a policy solution, ECEC provides much potential for polysemic framing and, indeed, the expansion of ECEC has been associated with a number of different problem definitions (e.g. Mätzke and Ostner 2010). These include problems relating to child development and educational inequality; problems related to women's labour market participation including concerns about labour market supply, gender inequality, family incomes and child poverty; problems related to demographic factors such as ageing populations and low birth rates. The argument set out in the empirical cases below is that these problem definitions were articulated to different extents in the four cases. In Germany and Korea, broad problem definitions were constructed, in which the policy solution of ECEC was presented as a solution to several problems conceived of as threatening the long-term economic and social prospects of the country. In doing so, ECEC became a policy solution that appealed to a broad coalition of supporters, including conservative actors prepared to acquiesce to it despite its potential to threaten traditional gender roles. By contrast, in the UK, ECEC was attached to a fragmented discourse of problems, strongly linked to existing priorities of the government, but which did not draw them together into an overall problem definition which would keep ECEC at the top of the political agenda. In Japan, ECEC was conceived of primarily in relation to the low birth rate and did not attract the political attention of key decision-makers.

Methodology: an ideational approach to comparative policy analysis

In order to elaborate this ideational approach, we adopt a comparative analytical framework that seeks to explain variations in the extent and momentum of ECEC reform in the four countries. Our cases focus on how the ideas behind ECEC policy reform were developed and promoted, examining which were the most relevant problem definitions and policy solutions in each case. The cases concentrate on the success or failure of the initial justifications of reform to develop into a coalition magnet by looking at the extent to which potential opponents were persuaded to support reforms – in particular, employers and conservative political actors.

A thorough and consistent analysis of relevant policy documents was undertaken in order to illuminate the policy ideas and debates in each case. The policy documents included parliamentary debates, presidential statements, government

reports and public speeches, where relevant. The findings were triangulated through extensive use of secondary literature. Given the central argument that the crucial aspect of ideational change is how the initial ideas for reform were developed, the temporal focus varies in each case, concentrating on the critical juncture at which centre-left parties began to initiate reform. The focus of the analysis therefore begins in Japan in the 1990s, in England in the late 1990s and early 2000s, while the critical juncture lies in the early and mid-2000s for the cases of Germany and Korea. Nevertheless, the argument also highlights the ongoing power (or not) of coalition magnets, and so while the focus of ideational analysis is on the earlier period, each case also attempts to illuminate the political effects of the (un)successful development of coalition magnets, which are visible over longer periods of time.

Examining variation in ECEC expansion

Germany

The archetype of the 'conservative-corporatist' welfare regime, the post-war (West) German welfare state provided few services and relied on families and traditional gender roles for its functioning: the epitome of a strong male-breadwinner model welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990; Ostner 1994). From 1986 this model was modified with the introduction of parental leave, which promoted a 'sequential' model of female labour market engagement, and was reinforced by a right to part-time kindergarten places for children aged 3 and over in 1996 (Blome 2016). The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green coalition government, elected in 1998, initially only further modified this situation by introducing some flexibility to parental leave, but initiated a fundamental change in approach after 2002.

Family policy discourse had been dominated since the 1980s by the idea that the family was in decline, beset by increasing individualism and neglect by the state (Bleses and Seeleib-Kaiser 2004). The new approach set out a more specific problem definition: that families were struggling to reconcile work and family responsibilities. While this had previously been acknowledged as a problem for individuals, the new approach recast it as a social problem, focusing on two 'dangers': 'that more and more young women and men will not fulfil their wishes for children, or that those who start a family will not be able to develop their professional skills' (SPD 2001: 305). This dual problem was backed up by 'hard' economic evidence. From 2003 the family ministry commissioned a series of economic analyses on improving work–family reconciliation, with reports highlighting benefits from improvements in the maternal employment rate, in arresting the falling birth rate, in improving child development and in reducing poverty (Bertram et al. 2005; BMFSFJ 2005; BMFSFJ et al. 2004; Rürup and Gruescu 2003). Breaking a taboo around pro-natalism, the family minister, Renate Schmidt, made the claim about demographics explicit in a speech to the SPD in 2003, arguing, 'Germany needs more children if we want to maintain our prosperity' (Schmidt 2003), thus linking the agenda to an ongoing media discussion about demographic ageing and the fiscal sustainability of the German social model.

The policy solutions proposed by the ministry emphasized the broad interpretation of the problem and were not solely aimed at easing mothers' access to the labour market, but also improving quality of life for parents, so that

more women would choose to fulfil their *Kinderwunsch* – their desire to have children – as well as to have careers (BMFSFJ 2005). This idea was sufficiently broad for the chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, to deny that the new approach contained any normative prescription; rather it was about enabling families to choose how to balance employment and family responsibilities and thus did not overtly threaten traditional family norms (Bundestag Plenarprotokoll 2002).

This definition of the multiple problems relating to work–family reconciliation was followed by a period of paradigmatic reform between 2004 and 2008, spanning two different governments. In fact, the pace of expansion was accelerated after 2005 under Christian Democratic Union (CDU) family minister Ursula von der Leyen. Childcare expansion for under-3s was initiated in 2004 and extended in 2008 with the aim of increasing coverage to 33% by 2013, at which time a universal legal right to a childcare place from a child's first birthday would also come into force. Political compromise with conservatives saw the introduction of a childcare allowance from 2013 as an alternative to the right to public childcare.[2]

Central to these successful reforms was the building of a broad coalition of support. Employers were persuaded that German competitiveness depended on the retention of women's skills in the labour market, especially because women were achieving higher levels of educational attainment than men. Employers' associations became active promoters of reform and business leaders made numerous public appearances calling for reform alongside Schmidt and von der Leyen (e.g. BDA 2006; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2005; ZDH 2007). Along with the concerns about the birth rate, such arguments were also important in persuading key figures in the socially conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) of the need for reform (Blum 2012).

Overall, successive family ministers were able to make a broad case for improving work–family reconciliation, which challenged previously dominant ideas about the male-breadwinner model family. This recast what had been previously seen as an individual issue into a broadly defined societal problem, closely related to Germany's future prosperity, which had different emphases for different groups. For the SPD, this included concerns about gender equality, both in the labour market and in the household, and poverty and inequality; for modernizers in the CDU it could be used to promote the changes they wanted to see in their party, incorporating employers' demands for skilled labour, the demands of women within the party and concerns about the fiscal sustainability of status-preserving social insurance systems. For the more conservative wing of the CDU and the CSU it could help solve a national 'crisis' over the low birth rate, while for employers it could lead to skilled women remaining in the labour market and could address fears about the labour force of the future. Thus, the broad problem definition was able to create a broad consensus in favour of ECEC reform, evident both in the acceleration of reform under centre-right governments and in its continued high profile in recent years (Henninger and von Wahl 2019).

England

English family policy before Labour's election in 1997 was largely limited to residual cash transfers and 'welfare' daycare services for those 'in need' (Lewis 2009). In line with the liberal tenets of the limited state, the private realm of the

family and the emphasis on individual self-help and market forces, ECEC was considered a private responsibility outside the remit of government. England was therefore a 'strong male-breadwinner model welfare state', albeit as a result of a lack of government intervention rather than through explicit promotion (Lewis 1992). In this policy vacuum, a market of ECEC provision had developed since the 1970s but was expensive and variable in terms of quality and availability.

Labour's approach to ECEC was fragmented, with separate arguments for early education and childcare. The long-term benefits of investment in education for young children were emphasized: Prime Minister Tony Blair stressed that 'children are 20 per cent of the population but they are 100 per cent of the future' (Blair 1999). This discourse highlighted the potential benefits of investment in early years education, both in relation to the importance of education in the labour market of the future, and regarding savings in the costs of long-term social problems: 'for every pound that we invest in a child's early years we shall save many pounds later on everything from support for a child with special educational needs to the payment of income support' (DfEE 1998; Hansard 1999).

Childcare was justified in relation to Labour's employment-oriented approach to social policy, which was defined as 'a modern form of welfare that believes in empowerment not dependency' (DSS 1999: 19). 'Activation' of those not working was at the heart the approach, and a priority was to increase the proportion of mothers in employment, particularly lone parents, who were a focus partly due to high rates of child poverty, which Labour pledged to eradicate by 2020 (Blair 1999). The lack of childcare was identified as a barrier to employment and was therefore discussed primarily in economic terms: 'care should be regarded as part of the national economic infrastructure and as important to women as the roads and railways on which they travel to work' (Hansard 1997).

This fragmentation of ECEC justifications was the result of their different routes onto Labour's agenda: the development of early education policy was led by Margaret Hodge, an MP with close links to child-development professionals and a pioneer of integrated ECEC centres at a local level (Pugh 2001). The employment agenda was driven by the chancellor, Gordon Brown, and had been developed while Labour was in opposition. Harriet Harman, a high-profile feminist campaigner and Brown's deputy in the early 1990s, was instrumental in ensuring that childcare became central to this agenda (Harman 2017). This fragmentation was not only ideational: responsibility for the policy areas was split between different government departments, which was a further barrier to coordinated policymaking (see Eisenstadt 2011). Fragmentation was also evident in policy design: early education was a universal offer of free, part-time provision to parents of 3- and 4-year-olds, while the National Childcare Strategy was targeted with its main aim to support low-income *employed* parents through means-tested in-work tax credits, which could help support parents with the costs of market provision (DfEE and DSS 1998). Despite attempts in Labour's second term to integrate ECEC with a focus on child development and 'good quality education and care' (e.g. HMT et al. 2004), conflict between the aims of early education and childcare policy remained in the second childcare strategy of 2004, which committed significantly more resources to ECEC but retained the fundamental approach of publicly funded early education and market-based childcare (Eisenstadt 2011).

While in Germany the polysemic potential of ECEC was brought out through its connection to several problem definitions that could appeal to a broad coalition, in England ECEC was split between two problem definitions that remained separate in national discourse and required different policy responses. The lack of an overarching polysemic discourse meant that each policy area fared differently, and momentum for continued reform has varied between them since Labour left office in 2010. While employers were supportive of childcare expansion, they did not take the role of active promotors, as they did in Germany; indeed, they opposed reforms that shifted away from a focus on market provision (e.g. *Financial Times* 2005) and have only rarely called for significant increases in investment in childcare (e.g. *Daily Telegraph* 2016).

Moreover, while the Conservatives became supporters of ECEC expansion, which marked a shift from their pre-1997 position of non-intervention in a private family responsibility (e.g. DfEE 1996), the emphasis of reforms under the Conservative-led coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative government (2015–present) has been on developing the market and increasing support for the costs of childcare for employed parents (Lewis and West 2017). While this has involved some increased investment, England's model of market-based ECEC continues to see stagnant growth in ECEC attendance rates and some of the highest costs for parents in the OECD (OECD 2021). More broadly, the lack of attachment to a broader agenda of work–family reconciliation has meant that in England there is little integration between ECEC and maternity, paternity and parental leave policies, in contrast to reforms in many countries (Koslowski et al. 2021).

South Korea

Korea shares the common cultural heritage of Confucianism with its East Asian neighbours, which emphasizes the role of the family and an obligation for women to take on the roles of housewife and/or caregiver rather than paid employment (Peng 2004; Sung 2003). However, these norms have been challenged by demographic and socioeconomic trends, especially since the 1990s. Most notably the rapid decline in the fertility rate was seen as a serious socioeconomic threat because of its implications for the size of the future workforce and also due to the wider economic implications of an ageing population (KNSO 2003). A dramatic increase between 1960 and 2000 in female employment rates, especially among married women, has been a significant social change, alongside an increase in the proportion of women working shorter hours and holding temporary jobs. Further, increases in the number of single-parent families and the child poverty rate have made both into political issues (Peng 2004). In the context of publicly funded and provided day nurseries comprising only 6% of total childcare provision in 2002 (MHW 2019), a statement of strong commitment to ensuring greater public childcare support, especially for working families, was made by centre-left President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2007) during the 'Women's Week' celebrations in 2003: 'Once you give birth, the government will look after your children' (Presidential Secretary Office 2004).

Some childcare expansion had begun during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2002), whose centre-left government aimed to expand the female workforce,

following the ideology of 'productivism' in which 'social policy is strictly subordinate to the overriding policy objective of economic growth' (Holliday 2000: 708). Notable was the founding of the Ministry of Gender Equality (MGE) in 2001 under the Kim government, which institutionalized 'femocrats' (that is, female bureaucrats) and played an agenda-setting role to which the Roh government in particular responded. This was especially the case from 2005, when the fertility rate hit a new 'lowest low' of 1.08 (S-H. Lee 2017, 2020): the policy goal of 'investing in children's development and work–family reconciliation' was associated with a proliferation of ECEC policies and programmes (Kim et al. 2007). The Presidential Committee on Ageing and Future Society announced four policy goals: to 'boost fertility rates and foster superb children', to 'alleviate the cost of childcare for parents', to 'increase women's working participation' and to 'create new job sectors' (Presidential Committee on Ageing and Future Society 2004). These were seen as investments in both children and women and would reap returns in numerous areas, including an increased birth rate, a greater use of women's skills in the labour market and improvements in economic growth (Presidential Counsel of Policy Planning Committee 2007: 5–8).

These policy goals, announced in two Childcare Support Policies in 2004 and 2005, represented a paradigm shift: a new acceptance that welfare expansion could be viewed as a form of investment. Indeed, the policy announcements of the Roh government raised the political profile of expanding publicly funded and provided childcare and reconciling work–family, and these became widely accepted as areas requiring government attention, as demonstrated by the 'Saessak Plan' announced in 2006 by the MGE, and the 'Saeromaji Plan' issued in the same year by the Committee on Ageing Society and Population (Government of the Republic of Korea 2006; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2006). As in Germany, this paradigm shift was consolidated and accelerated by the centre-right, first through the government of Lee Myung-bak from 2008 and then of Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), which established universal, free childcare in 2013 (S.C. Lee 2018). While the initial expansion had been justified with appeals to economic growth and gender equality, the more polysemic framing of the Roh government attracted a broad social consensus for reform. In particular, employers, who had previously been hostile to reforms, consented to the agenda, calculating that it was preferable to support ECEC expansion financed by the state, rather than through employer contributions (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014). Political consensus has continued to the present day and free childcare for children aged under 6 was further extended in 2018 through the provision of six hours of free childcare for stay-at-home mothers and 12 hours for those seeking or in employment.

The polysemic discourse of supporting work–family reconciliation in Korea led to a significant path departure and continued momentum for reform. Further, it attracted political support from across traditional cleavages: centre-left governments favoured it for its implications for reducing inequalities and the gender perspective, while the prospect of future economic growth and a higher birth rate proved sufficiently attractive to conservative parties in government. Like in Germany, and unlike the English case, this polysemic discourse emerged in a top-down manner, stemming from central government with the direct involvement and support of successive prime ministers. However, the Korean case also illustrates some of the

limitations of this top-down discourse, in that while the politics of ECEC has undergone a paradigm shift, the changes have clashed with the strong cultural legacy of traditional gender roles, which continue to influence women's ability to reconcile work and family life, especially normative issues about which parent is responsible if childcare services are unavailable. While top-down political efforts were made to bring a gender awareness into the policymaking process, it cannot be claimed that the predominance of traditional gender roles has been explicitly addressed or transformed in Korea (S-H. Lee 2017).

Japan

Welfare provision in Japan has traditionally taken a residual form, which emphasizes the role of self-help, the market and enterprise-based provision. While the influence of Confucianism has been watered down in the last few decades, its hierarchical rules and traditional social norms regarding gender roles remain strong influences on the work–family nexus. This combination of residual welfare and strong normative beliefs about the family has fostered a 'familialist welfare approach', in which the male-breadwinner model is relied on to provide welfare to family members (Kwon 1997). However, this approach has been challenged by demographic concerns since the '1.57 shock' of 1989, in which the low birth rate provoked a sense of crisis and an ongoing public debate about the 'few children problem' (Boling 2015). The low fertility rate was viewed with alarm, and associated in public discourses with labour shortages, the implications of a rapidly ageing population on social spending and services, reduced economic productivity and eventual population decline (e.g. Cabinet Office 2011; Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2007; JILPT 2013; MHLW 1999; NIPSSR 2003). Indeed, with each publication of new population projections, concern over the 'few children problem' has intensified (NIPSSR 2002, 2007, 2012; Schoppa 2020).

Two main factors prompted a shift towards ECEC expansion. First, the bursting of the bubble economy in the early 1990s led to the end of the socially conservative Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) 40-year one-party rule in 1993. The following year a major electoral reform opened up the political system to the influence of new ideas, and while the LDP soon returned to government, it could only do so as part of a coalition. Second, government and bureaucrats in the powerful Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) became persuaded of the need to better support child-rearing through policy. Alarmed by the fall in the birth rate, the government launched a committee to develop policy measures to address it and urged academics to identify its causes (Suzuki 2006). Studies focused on the opportunity costs associated with having children as well as the difficulties that women had in reconciling work and family life. Cognizant of social trends in which multigenerational households and male-breadwinner model families were becoming less common than dual-earner, two-generation families, bureaucrats also began to look at European examples that demonstrated that countries that made it easier for women to combine work and families were those with higher birth rates (Boling 2015). The crisis of the low birth rate prompted a change in assumptions about gender roles among bureaucrats, and reports from 1998 onwards began to emphasize the importance of enabling work–family reconciliation (MHLW 1999; NIPSSR 2003).

Having been developed under a short-lived centre-left coalition, the five-year Angel Plan (1994), or Basic Direction for Future Child Rearing Support Measures, was launched, which set ambitious targets for the expansion of childcare provision and aimed to improve work–family reconciliation through employment legislation. The 'few children problem' galvanized policymakers to attempt to increase childcare provision, evidenced by numerous initiatives: Basic Ideas on Low Fertility – Population Decreasing Society, Responsibility and Choice for the Future (1997), The New Angel Plan, or Basic Principles to Cope with the Fewer Number of Children (1999), Basic Direction for Policies Supporting Work and Childcare Compatibility (2001), Measures for Fertility Decline Plus One (2002), the Promotion of Measures to Support the Next Generation Act (2003) and the New Measures for Fertility Decline (2006).

However, much of the policy focus was on deregulation and on encouraging existing institutions, especially in the private sector, to increase capacity (Boling 1998). Since the first Angel Plan, ambitious targets have not been met, due to insufficient funding and local government struggling to deliver the required improvements (Ikezoe 2014). Unmet demand for childcare was a growing problem and the long waiting lists for childcare centres became a major political issue, especially in the large cities. Pledges to eliminate waiting lists have been a feature of Japanese governments since 2000, but in straitened fiscal circumstances this has not been achieved, leaving many families to resort to expensive and poor-quality unlicensed childcare arrangements (Boling 2015; MHLW 2014).

It is notable that, unlike the focus on the birth rate in Germany or Korea, work–family reconciliation policies were not the primary focus for policymakers in response to the crisis. Politicians and bureaucrats considered long-term care more of a priority in dealing with an ageing society, and significantly more resources were invested in this area than in childcare (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017). Indeed, bureaucrats saw childcare as a 'declining sector' due to the low birth rate, compared to the booming demand for long-term care, which is significant given the influence of bureaucrats in policymaking and their practice of using policymaking to find sectors in which they can personally find 'post-retirement' positions (Estévez-Abe and Kim 2014: 667). There was therefore a reluctance to dedicate significant resources to an area that was seen to be in decline – something that can be seen in the failure of the centre-left Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) attempts to restructure childcare and child-raising support in 2009–2012, which were undermined by opposition from within the MHW (Estévez-Abe and Kim 2014). Further, despite the DPJ's stated aims of childcare expansion, resources were concentrated on family allowances (Boling 2015).

As well as a lack of will within the MHW, in the 2000s the LDP moved away from what had appeared in the 1990s to be a consensus on departing from the male-breadwinner model. Indeed, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, during his first term (2006–2009), expressed concern about the growing trend of dual-earner families and spoke of 'respecting traditional Japanese norms of distinction between the masculine and the feminine' (quoted in Ochiai and Joshita 2014: 174), a notably different approach to that of the 1990s.

The lack of consensus about reform demonstrates that in Japan ECEC did not develop into a coalition magnet. Unlike in the other cases, justifications for

work–family policy expansion have remained focused on the 'few children problem' and must compete with other ideas within the LDP, such as not overburdening firms with regulation and an attachment to the traditional family. However, after Abe returned to power in 2012 there was a shift in rhetoric about work–family policies, with a focus on retaining and increasing the use of women's skills in the labour market and therefore on work–family policies' benefits for economic competitiveness. Indeed, the third 'arrow' of 'Abenomics' has been associated with women's labour market attachment: the phrase 'Abenomics is Womenomics' being a feature of Abe's discourse (e.g. Abe 2013; Dalton 2017). In 2019 a large investment in childcare was announced, making childcare free for all 3- to 5-year-olds and for under-3s from families with low incomes. While it remains to be seen if this will finally raise Japanese enrolment rates to the level of comparable countries, it is notable that it has followed a broadening of the discourse about work–family policies, in which improvements to the low birth rate appear as only one among many potential benefits (Matsui et al. 2019; Schoppa 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

This study has focused on ideas acting as 'coalition magnets', that is, on the role of ideas in uniting diverse political actors and creating a broad coalition for change. In doing so it makes contributions not only to the comparative policy literature on ECEC expansion but also more broadly to theorizing the role of ideas in political processes of reform. In both Germany and Korea, the linking of ECEC to the idea of work–family reconciliation as a national and multifaceted problem definition was able to persuade a broad coalition, including previously hostile employers and conservatives, that reform was desirable. In England and Japan, such broad consensus did not emerge, and both countries have seen political momentum ebb and flow. In explaining reform in comparative perspective, the findings demonstrate the utility of supplementing the dominant electoral competition explanation with a focus on ideas. While electoral competition provided the catalyst for reform in each of the four latecomer countries, without paying attention to ideas, the variation in this reform cannot be explained.

One important conclusion is that whether an idea becomes a coalition magnet is not solely related to the properties of that idea. Indeed, the way an idea is strategically 'used' by key actors is just as important. While ECEC has the potential for polysemy given its association with a range of problem definitions, this potential had to be realized through framing. In Germany and Korea, the framing of ECEC was much broader than in England or Japan. In Germany the notion of work–family reconciliation as a problem not just for individuals but for the country stressed numerous demographic, social and economic aspects. In Korea ECEC was associated with gender equality and women's struggles with employment, as well as with concerns about an ageing society and economic productivity linked to the low birth rate. In both countries this drawing out of the polysemic potential of ECEC meant that different groups could favour policy change for their own reasons. Arguments about the birth rate were persuasive for conservatives who had previously opposed policies that 'weakened' traditional family structures; justifications related to productivity and women's employment appealed to employers,

while progressive voters and actors supported reform for the sake of equality. In England, such a coalition did not form. Instead fragmented justifications for early education and childcare meant that each was the focus of debate and negotiation. Employers and conservatives have only periodically supported further reforms and a consistent agenda of ECEC expansion is not evident. In Japan, the framing of expansion was predominately focused on the low birth rate, which placed ECEC in competition with other policy areas, such as long-term care. Key actors, such as the LPD, employers and the MHW all demonstrated opposition or indifference to ECEC reform. As mentioned, it is too early to evaluate if recent policy changes indicate Japan is undergoing a belated expansion, but it is notable that they have been accompanied with a broadening of the discourse about work–family reconciliation.

This focus on the role of strategic framing draws attention to key actors. In both Germany and Korea agenda-setting came from those at the very top of government and ECEC was prioritized as a key element of government programmes, which happened only partly in England, where the impetus for ECEC reform emerged through the activism of feminist campaigners within Labour, and not at all in Japan. Yet the German and Korean cases also indicate potential drawbacks of a coalition magnet from the perspective of agenda-setters. In Germany, the top-down process did not imply a straightforward imposition of the ideas of the powerful: it involved compromise and flexibility in order to incorporate sufficient polysemy to convince potential opponents and necessitated compromise over the incorporation of a childcare allowance. The Korean case demonstrates that the top-down nature of reform has led to significant change at the policy level, but these new policies run up against the lived realities of families and the ongoing predominance of traditional gender roles. These insights return to some key questions that public policy frameworks investigate and help to situate the notion of coalition magnets within the research agendas of broader frameworks of the policy process. It is hoped that this article can help draw attention to such dynamics and stimulate a new research agenda of how coalition magnets relate to questions of strategic agency, political power and policy implementation.

Notes

1 Because ECEC policy differs in each of the four nations of the United Kingdom, this article takes England as the case study. However, the remainder of this section also refers to the UK or Great Britain when discussing comparative ECEC expansions, according to the available comparative data. Given that the purpose of this section is to chart comparative trends, and that England is by far the largest of the UK's, or Britain's, constituent nations, this data, while imperfect, is representative of the overall picture of ECEC reform in England. South Korea will henceforth be referred to as Korea.

2 This was subsequently struck down in 2015 by the Constitutional Court, although has been retained in some federal Länder.

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