




# Policy reform and fathers' use of parental leave in Germany: The role of education and workplace characteristics

Journal of European Social Policy  
2019, Vol. 29(2) 273–291  
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DOI: 10.1177/0958928718765638  
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## Abstract

The introduction of the parental leave benefit scheme in 2007 is widely regarded as a landmark reform that has shifted the German welfare state towards a model that better supports work and family life compatibility. In this article, we investigate whether and how this reform has affected men's use of parental leave based on data from the German microcensus of 1999–2012. We find that parental leave usage has increased across all educational levels, but the shift has been strongest for university-educated fathers. Public sector employment is beneficial for men's uptake of leave, while self-employment and temporary work lowers fathers' chances of taking leave. The parental leave reform has not affected these associations much.

## Keywords

Family policies, fathers' involvement, Germany, parental leave, parental leave benefit reform

## Introduction

Supporting gender equality and the equal participation of men and women in the labour market is a recurrent theme on the agenda of the European Union Commission of the European Communities (2005). It is, however, also clear that European governments have been largely concerned with increasing women's labour market participation through measures such as the expansion of public childcare, while policies that support a more equal division of household labour and that push men to take on child-rearing obligations have not been adopted with the same enthusiasm.

Only a few countries – notably, the Scandinavian countries – have a tradition of implementing policies that exert more direct influence on the involvement of fathers in child-rearing. These policies include the creation of parental leave schemes with high-income replacement rates coupled with proactive measures

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such as the so-called ‘paternity quota’ (Sundström and Duvander, 2002).

In 2007, Germany followed the Swedish example by enacting a radically new parental leave benefit scheme. The old parental leave benefit system, which included a monthly flat-rate benefit of only €300, had been held responsible for the persistence of traditional employment patterns and regressive gender role behaviours among mothers and fathers in Germany (Gangl and Ziefle, 2009; Ondrich et al., 1996). This system was abolished and was replaced with a system that was modelled on the Swedish system (Erler, 2009; Spieß and Wrohlich, 2008). The new system grants parents 65–67 percent of their previous net income and includes particular incentives (frequently labelled ‘daddy months’ or ‘paternity quotas’) for couples to share parental leave. The new regulations were seen as representing a radical shift in German family policies (Henninger et al., 2008; Leitner et al., 2003; Spieß and Wrohlich, 2008). After long being described in cross-national comparisons as having a conservative welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen, 1999), Germany seems to have veered off its ‘established policy path’ (Fleckenstein, 2011: 546). For many observers, it is still a puzzle that this landmark reform was enacted under the leadership of a family minister from the Christian Democratic Party. Demographic concerns, and particularly Germany’s record-low birth rates, appear to have motivated conservative policymakers to undertake this reform. Nevertheless, increasing maternal employment and providing incentives for fathers to use parental leave were also cited as primary objectives in the reform bill (Deutscher Bundestag, 2006: 2).

Since the enactment of this reform, several attempts have been made to evaluate its impact on the demographic and employment behaviour of men and women in Germany. In fact, the German Family Ministry (*Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend*) commissioned an evaluation of the reform (BMFSFJ, 2008, 2009). A major conclusion from these investigations has been that maternal employment rates have risen in response to the reform (BMFSFJ, 2014; Kluve and Tamm, 2013; Reimer, 2013; Wrohlich et al., 2015). While the effect of the reform on maternal employment is largely undisputed, there is conflicting evidence on

the effect of the reform on birth dynamics. (Western) Germany’s total fertility rate has remained fairly stable at around 1.3–1.4 children per women for decades but increased to 1.5 children in 2015. The recent increase could suggest a belated impact of the reform, but no firm evaluations of the effect of the parental leave benefit reform on fertility has been undertaken so far. The most significant shift seems to have occurred with respect to the behaviour of fathers. According to official statistics, the percentage of fathers among all benefit recipients has risen sharply from less than 5 percent before the reform to 26 percent in 2014 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017a). Among the children who were born in 2014, more than a third had a father who received parental leave benefit (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017c).

Recently, several quantitative studies have been conducted that also provide us with information about the socio-demographic characteristics of the fathers who are using leave (BMFSFJ, 2008; Reich, 2010; Trappe, 2013). These studies have reported that highly educated men are more likely than less educated men to use their parental leave entitlement. In addition, workplace characteristics – and, particularly, having a stable public sector position – have also been shown to play a role in fathers’ leave-taking decisions (Pfahl and Reuyß, 2009). However, up to now, there have been no representative studies that have compared fathers’ behaviour before and after the reform. Thus, the question of whether all population subgroups have reacted similarly to this reform, or whether particular groups have been more responsive than others, has remained unanswered. In this article, we seek to close this research gap. We do so by extending prior research that was conducted with microcensus data and investigated the role of fathers’ education and the relative education of the partners in parental leave usage before the reform (Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2011). This prior study examined whether highly educated men, who are generally assumed to be vanguards of involved fatherhood, would also be more likely to take leave than less educated men. The study did not find support for this claim which was explained by the high earning potential of highly educated men which ‘seems to draw them back into the labour market and away from being an “involved father”’ (Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2011: 96). In this article, we expand these

prior investigations and examine whether the parental leave reform of 2007 has resulted in a shift in the behaviour of highly educated men. Furthermore, we examine the role of workplace characteristics in parental leave usage. Here, we particularly examine whether fathers in stable public sector employment and with permanent working contracts profited more strongly from the reform than fathers in the private sector or on temporary contracts.

## The German parental leave system

West Germany introduced its parental leave system in 1986.<sup>1</sup> Since its inception, both fathers and mothers have been entitled to take leave. The duration of parental leave was initially limited to a maximum duration of 10 months, and parental leave benefits were paid at a flat rate of DM600 (€307).<sup>2</sup> People who could not use parental leave because they were unemployed or not in the labour force were also entitled to the same amount of benefit. High income earners were not or only partially eligible for the benefit if their household income exceeded certain thresholds.<sup>3</sup>

Since its introduction, the period of leave has been extended bit by bit. The first significant change in regulations was enacted in 1992, when the parental leave period was extended from 18 to 36 months. Germany thus had among the most generous parental leave entitlements in Europe at that time (Ray et al., 2010). With the extension of parental leave to 36 months, the duration of the parental leave entitlement and the duration of parental leave benefits no longer matched, as the benefit payments had not been extended to 36 months (see Table 3 for an overview of the parental leave regulations).

The next major reform in 2001 introduced greater flexibility into the parental leave system as fathers and mothers were allowed to use parental leave simultaneously for the first time. Furthermore, parental leave was no longer restricted to parents with a child under the age of 3 years, as parents were given the option of taking the maximum duration of 3 years of leave over the first 8 years of the child's life. In addition, the benefit of €300 per month could be increased to €450 if only 12 months of leave were taken. Although these new regulations provided

parents with greater flexibility, the low benefit and the long duration of leave were increasingly seen as an ineffective tool for fostering women's labour market integration and fathers' involvement with their young children (Budig et al., 2012). Many observers argued that the 2001 reform, which also included a renaming of the parental leave entitlement from *Erziehungsurlaub* (parental vacation) to *Elternzeit* (parental time) was a semantic shift rather than a serious policy reform (Bothfeld, 2005: 14).

Unlike these previous family policy adjustments, the parental leave benefit reform, enacted 1 January 2007, must be characterized as a landmark change. Most importantly, the reform included a radical change of the parental leave benefit system. Instead of receiving a flat-rate benefit of €300, parents were granted 67 percent of their prior net income while on leave. Compared to the Swedish role model, the German system is less generous. With 65–67 percent of prior income, Germany provides a much lower income replacement than Sweden, which grants 80 percent.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the German system includes an income cap for people who earn more than €2700 per month, while benefits are topped up for low-income earners.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, under the revised system, parental leave benefits come much closer to replacing the parent's income while on leave than under the previous system. While the parental leave duration (up to 3 years of parental leave) was left unchanged under the new regulations, the length of time during which the parental leave benefit could be collected was shortened: that is, although previously the parental leave benefit could be collected for 24 months, the maximum duration is now 14 8

months. In total, 2 months of the leave benefit were reserved for each parent<sup>6</sup> and would be lost if they were not used. This so-called 'paternity quota' – which was occasionally ridiculed as the "*Wickelvolontariat*" (diaper-changing internship) in the German press – created the most direct incentive for fathers to use leave.

## Hypotheses: differential response to policy change

As a result of the parental leave benefit reform of 2007, Germany moved away from having a flat-rate

benefit system towards having an earnings-related benefit system. This policy shift has obviously altered the economic incentives for parents to take parental leave. Apart from unemployed men (who are not included in our investigation), all groups have seen an increase in the absolute amount of parental leave benefits. In addition, the 'daddy months' create an additional incentive for fathers to take leave. All else being equal, one would assume that the probability of parental leave uptake has increased for all men after the reform (*Hypothesis 1*).

Highly educated people are generally assumed to be more likely to earn higher wages. As the parental leave benefits are now earnings related, those who are highly educated seem to have profited most from the reform. They may temporarily withdraw from the labour market and still receive a decent household income. Economic theory tells us, however, that decisions of this kind are not based on the absolute amount of benefits. Instead, the transfers during parental leave are weighted against the foregone income and career opportunities in the labour market. Highly educated men face higher opportunity costs for taking leave than less educated men because of the higher income that is associated with more education. As higher earners usually pursue career tracks that are more sensitive to career interruptions, the opportunity costs of foregone income are also higher for this group of men. With the reform, the opportunity costs for using parental leave declined for all groups. However, high-income earners benefitted less in relative terms. The parental leave benefit covers only 65–67 percent of prior net income. Furthermore, benefits are cut for men with a net monthly income of more than €2700. Conversely, payments for men with a net income of less than €1000 are topped up, and the parental leave benefits may greatly exceed 67 percent of prior income. As education and income are closely correlated, we would assume that a negative educational gradient not only persisted but may have even become steeper after the reform (*Hypothesis 2a*).

An alternative sociological view suggests that parental employment decisions are not influenced by economic determinants alone; instead, they are embedded in cultural and moral norms of appropriate behaviour for parents (Duncan et al., 2003).

People make 'care decisions' based on moral and socially negotiated views about proper behaviour, and these views vary by population subgroups. Less educated men are usually assumed to adhere to traditional gender roles, while the highly educated are seen as being at the forefront of a trend towards the greater involvement of fathers in child-rearing (Juby and Le Bourdais, 1998; Sayer et al., 2004). However, they often fail to live up to these ideals as their high earnings pull them into employment and into the role of the male breadwinner (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000). The new parental leave benefit scheme does not provide full income replacement, but it allows men to temporarily step back from the role of a breadwinner and lessens the tension between their ideals of involved fatherhood and the continued need to provide enough income to support the family. Against that background, we assume that highly educated men are more likely to embrace the new opportunities compared to less educated men. As a result, highly educated men are expected to have changed their behaviour more strongly following the implementation of the parental leave benefit reform than less educated men (*Hypothesis 2b*).

Employment decisions are not made in isolation, but in the household context. A standard assumption is that the person in the household who can expect the higher labour market earnings is the most likely to work, while the other takes care of the child or the children. As education and income are closely related, we expect that men are more likely to take leave in cases in which they are less educated than their partners. Conversely, men who are more highly educated than their partners should be less likely to take leave. However, the contrasting, abovementioned argument about highly educated men being vanguards of modern gender role attitudes could also extend to an analysis that examines women's and men's combined education. Highly educated men who are partnered with less educated women might have wanted to use leave but have had little leeway under the old system to act as involved fathers, because they need to provide the income for the household. The newly introduced income-related benefit enables these fathers to step back from that role for a certain time to care for their children. Thus, we expect to see the highest increase in

the probability to use parental leave after the reform among men with partners who are less educated than themselves (*Hypothesis 3*).

Apart from education, workplace characteristics are important determinants of whether a father takes leave. Although all employees, regardless of their job status, have the right to use parental leave, men in more precarious or atypical employment situations might be more reluctant to ask for leave. Fathers on temporary contracts may be worried that leave-taking may be regarded as a negative signal to the employer so that their working contract would not be renewed if they took leave. Self-employed fathers might also be reluctant to make use of that option as they may fear losing their clients during leave. In general, the new regulations are primarily concerned with the details of income replacement but did not include any regulations that would have strengthened the rights of workers in precarious employment. After all, the regulations were targeted at workers with standard working contracts who are able to interrupt their employment after childbirth. Against this background, we assume that men on permanent contracts have been more likely than other men to take advantage of the new parental leave regulations (*Hypothesis 4*).

Compared to the private sector, public sector employment is usually more conducive to the compatibility of family and work. The high prevalence of collective agreements provides a higher degree of job protection. Wages are usually set by collective wage agreements and are thus less subject to individual performance and negotiations. In addition, the public sector is usually non-profit so that a production loss due to the absence of an employee might be more accepted than in private companies (Bygren and Duvander, 2006: 365). Furthermore, employees' rights may be guarded to a higher degree in the public sector, as work councils are more established there than in private firms. Finally, some public sector employees are employed as civil servants (*Beamte*) who benefit from a privileged system of a right to lifelong employment. Against this background, one would expect to find men who work in the public sector to be more likely to take parental leave than fathers who are employed in the private sector. It is less clear whether this association has

strengthened after the reform. On the one hand, both private sector and public sector employees profited from the reform as they both were subject to the same level of income replacement. On the other hand, private sector employees may have been reluctant to make use of the new options, as they may still fear that leave-taking is not accepted in their firms or that it may eventually be harmful for their career development. Against that background, we expect that public sector employees were more eager to embrace the new opportunities and were more likely to take leave after the reform (*Hypothesis 5*).

### **Prior studies on fathers' parental leave usage**

The German parental leave system was largely copied from the Swedish system. The Nordic countries were, however, not only pioneers in the introduction of parental leave benefit schemes, but the large amounts of register data made available by these countries have greatly advanced empirical research in this area. Several studies for the Nordic countries have found that better educated men are more likely than less educated men to use parental leave (Lappegard, 2008; Sundström and Duvander, 2002). However, Sundström and Duvander (2002) only found a positive effect of men's education when earnings were controlled for, and Bygren and Duvander (2006) reported no association between fathers' education and the use of parental leave. It has also been shown that fathers with highly educated female partners are more likely to use parental leave than other fathers (Bygren and Duvander, 2006; Duvander and Johansson, 2010; Haas et al., 2002; Lappegard, 2008). There are only few studies that investigated the effect of the relative education of the partners, and the evidence is mixed. While Naz (2010) reported that men are more likely to take leave if their female partners have the same or a higher level of education, other studies found no differences (Duvander and Johansson, 2010; Lammi-Taskula, 2008). There is consistent evidence that whether fathers use of leave is heavily influenced by their type of occupation and the characteristics of their workplace (Bygren and Duvander, 2006; Haas et al., 2002; Naz, 2010). Bygren and Duvander

(2006) showed that fathers who work in the public sector or in a larger company are more likely to use parental leave than fathers in the private sector or in a small company. Using Swedish survey data, Haas et al. (2002) found that the organizational culture of a company is another vital factor in men's parental leave usage. They showed that the perceived norms regarding overtime as well as the level of support from management greatly influence men's decisions about whether to take leave.

Studies for Sweden that have examined the effects of policy changes on men's behaviour have found consistent evidence that fathers' usage of parental leave increased after the implementation of the paternity quota (Björnberg, 2002; Duvander and Johansson, 2012). However, there is some dispute over how substantial and how durable the effect of the paternity quota has been. Duvander and Johansson (2012) compared the long- and short-term effects of the paternity quota in 1995, and again in 2002, following the extension of the quota from 1 to 2 months. They further investigated the effectiveness of the gender equality bonus, introduced in 2008, which provides tax credits for couples who share their parental leave equally. They found that the initial introduction of the paternity quota had the most pervasive influence on fathers' use of leave, while the extension of the quota had a smaller effect. Their results further showed that the introduction of the gender equality bonus did not lead to any significant behavioural changes. Duvander and Johansson (2010) also investigated how different population subgroups responded to policy changes. They found that fathers with tertiary education were more likely to take leave than fathers with lower levels of education after the introduction of the paternity quota and identified a similar pattern for the gender equality bonus. However, they did not find that highly educated fathers responded differently than other fathers when the paternity quota was extended from 1 to 2 months.

Until recently, there were very few studies for Germany on men's use of parental leave. The few studies that existed were based on the results of qualitative interviews or attitudinal surveys that asked men, women and employers for their opinions

regarding parental leave usage by fathers (Beckmann, 2001; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2005; Vaskovics and Rost, 1999). Following the reform of the parental leave benefit system, however, research in this area increased in tandem with the growing share of fathers using leave. A study commissioned by the Family Ministry (BMFSFJ, 2008) that investigated the behaviour of the fathers of children born in 2007 found that men's educational level had a positive effect on their likelihood of taking parental leave. Using data from the German microcensus 2008, Reich (2010) reported that less educated as well as highly educated men had elevated chances of taking leave. Trappe (2013) investigated the effects of the couples' education on the likelihood that the man would take leave and found that the chances were strongly elevated when both partners were highly educated. Based on register data from two German states, she also examined the effect of earnings on the length of parental leave taken by the fathers of children born in 2007–2009. A finding is here that fathers who had a low income or who earned less than their female partners were especially likely to take a longer period of leave. A non-representative online survey by Pull and Vogt (2010) reported that earnings differences between the father and the mother are a good predictor of whether a father will take leave, but that these differences have no significant impact on the duration of leave. They also found that men who were better educated than their partners were less likely to use parental leave. There are only a few large-scale representative studies for Germany that have examined the effects of workplace characteristics on leave-taking behaviour. Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011), who examined the period before the reform, reported that being in public sector employment increases the likelihood that a father will take leave. This finding is in line with the results of a study by Pfahl and Reuyß (2009) in which they analysed the attitudes and experiences of men who took parental leave. A recent opinion survey has also confirmed that concerns about income loss and career setbacks are still the main barriers to fathers' leave-taking (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2015: 26). Although significant empirical evidence has amassed showing how fathers' education and workplace characteristics influence

fathers' leave-taking, none of the abovementioned studies for Germany has examined how patterns have shifted with the policy reform.

## Data, variables and methods

The data for this analysis come from the German microcensus which is a 1-percent sample of the resident population in Germany. We restricted the analysis to data from the years 1999 to 2012 because earlier microcensuses did not include precise information on the use of parental leave, and later microcensuses are not yet available. We further restricted the analysis to men between the ages of 18 and 55 years who had a child under the age of 3 years who was living in the same family unit. In principle, it is possible to use parental leave until the child's eighth birthday; however, relatively few parents use the leave when the child is older than 3 years. We also excluded unemployed and inactive fathers from our sample. This may be seen as a drawback because the inactive and unemployed fathers are the only ones who did not see an increase in parental leave benefit payments after the reform. However, our focus is on parental leave usage. Under the benefit scheme, unemployed and inactive fathers are eligible to receive parental leave benefit payments, but they are not eligible to take parental leave because they have not been working (either as an employee or as a self-employed individual). In addition, we excluded the small number of single fathers and fathers in same-sex unions from the sample.

The total sample size consisted of 125,100 respondents. Of these respondents, 1205 fathers, or 1 percent of the study population, were on parental leave at the time of the interview. The fraction is higher after the reform (2%) than before the reform (0.5%). This, however, cannot obscure the fact that the values seem to stand in some contrast to the high shares of male parental leave benefit recipients regularly reported by the German Family Ministry. The reason for the seeming mismatch is that one of main indicators that the Statistical Office reports is the proportion of children for whom fathers have received the benefit (28% in 2012; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017a, 2017b). Since our data do not provide retrospective employment information, we

take a snapshot in time and estimate the probability that a father with a child aged 0–2 years is taking leave at the time of the interview. There may be some fathers who have taken leave with a child, but because the time of leave was short, they might have already returned to work when the interview was conducted. Thus, our approach gives a correct account of the probability of being on parental leave at the time of the interview, but fathers with short leave durations are less likely to be captured as 'leave takers' in our analysis.

We use a binary logistic regression to study the probability that a father was on leave at the time of the interview. We are unable to allocate the parental leave usage to a particular child in the family. Here, we assume that the father is on leave with the youngest child in the household. One of the key independent variables in our analysis is the father's education (categorized into no degree (low education), vocational degree (medium education), and university degree (high education)). We, furthermore, generated a variable that measures relative educational levels of the two parents (categorized into both having no degree, both having vocational training, both having university degree, woman more highly educated than partner, man more highly educated than partner). Workplace characteristics are measured with two variables: the type of sector (public or private sector) and the type of contract (temporary, permanent, self-employed). The control variables in the model are age, child's age, number of children, region (eastern or western Germany), citizenship (German or non-German) and partnership status (married or cohabiting). Finally, a binary variable was created that indicates whether the youngest child was born before or after the enactment of the policy reform. The new parental leave benefit system came into force on 1 January 2007. Our data cover the years 1999–2012. The analytical sample includes men with children aged 0–2 years at time of interview. Thus, we distinguish fathers whose youngest child was born in 1996–2006 from fathers whose youngest child was born in 2007–2012 (Table 1).

Our analytical strategy consists of two steps. First, we investigate the determinants of parental leave usage for the entire sample. In a second step, we explore whether the role of education and

workplace characteristics in leave usage have changed over time. In this part of the analysis, we present models in which we interacted our independent variables with a dummy variable that distinguishes between fathers whose children were born before the reform (1996–2006) and the period after the reform (2007–2012). Our key variables of interest are the father's education, the relative education of the partners and the workplace characteristics (type of contract and type of sector).

## Results

Table 2 provides the results of the first part of the analysis. While Model 1 only includes individual characteristics, Model 2 also accounts for relative education. We look first at Model 1 and its control variables. As expected (see *Hypothesis 1*), fathers' uptake of leave increases after the reform. The model also indicates that foreigners are less likely to be on leave than Germans and that eastern Germans are more likely to be on leave than their western German counterparts. The latter finding corresponds to the results of prior research suggesting that eastern German men adhere to more egalitarian gender role ideals than western German men (Blohm and Walter, 2016). The model also finds a positive association between the father's age and leave usage. The child's age and the number of children are, as expected, negatively associated with leave usage. Men in non-marital unions are more likely to be on leave than fathers in marital unions. This finding contradicts the results of prior research for Scandinavian countries (Sundström and Duvander, 2002), but it is in line with findings for Germany that the division of housework is more equal in non-marital than in marital unions (Lois, 2009). In line with our expectations, we find that workplace characteristics relate to fathers' leave-taking behaviour. Men on temporary contracts and the self-employed are less likely to use parental leave, while fathers employed in the public sector have a higher probability of being on leave compared to men working in the private sector. Our key variable of interest is men's level of education. We do not find large differences in leave-taking by level of education. For all educational groups, the predicted probability of being on leave at the time of the interview is around 1 percent.

Model 2 includes the results for 'relative education'. For most groups, the probability of a man being on leave is far below 1 percent. There are two groups that stand out with higher chances of leave usage. On the one hand, this is the small share of men with a partner who had more education than they did. The second group consists of men with a university education who had an equally educated partner.

Our main research question is whether the determinants of leave usage have changed since the introduction of the reform. In order to investigate this question, we estimate models that include an interaction term that distinguishes fathers whose youngest child was born before the reform (years 1996–2006) and those whose youngest child was born after the reform (years 2007–2012). We have chosen a graphical representation to display the results of the interaction models. Figure 1 provides the results for fathers' education. For the period 1996–2006, education and leave usage of fathers were largely unrelated. For all groups, the probability of being on leave at the time of the interview was only around 0.5 percent. After the reform, the probability of leave-taking increases for all groups. The largest effect can, however, be found for the university-educated fathers, for whom the probability increases to 2.2 percent. As a result, we find a positive educational gradient in leave-taking after the reform. These results support the idea that the new parental leave benefit system has encouraged highly educated fathers in particular to take leave (see *Hypothesis 2b*). As such, we must refute *Hypothesis 2a* that has stated that highly educated men would also be less likely to take leave under the new system, because of the large income loss that they incur when on leave.

Figure 2 presents the results for relative education. For both periods, we observe a pattern similar to the one we saw in the initial model, that is, men who are less educated than their female partners are more likely to take leave, while fathers who have more education than their female partners are the least likely to do so. Even after the reform, the latter group continued to be reluctant to take advantage of the leave benefits. However, we can still see that this group has changed their behaviour the most. Men



**Table 1.** Composition of the sample by year of birth of child, column %.

	Year of birth of child		Total
	1996–2006	2007–2012	
Region			
Western Germany	87.5	84.3	86.5
Eastern Germany	12.5	15.7	13.5
Citizenship			
German	86.5	88.2	87.0
Non-German	13.5	11.8	13.0
Age of respondent			
18–25 years	5.0	4.5	4.9
26–30 years	18.7	17.8	18.4
31–35 years	35.3	31.0	34.0
36–40 years	27.6	27.5	27.5
41–45 years	10.1	14.4	11.4
46–55 years	3.4	4.8	3.8
Partnership status			
Married	88.4	82.0	86.4
Cohabiting	11.6	18.0	13.6
Age of youngest child			
0 year	31.1	42.4	34.6
1 year	35.0	33.9	34.7
2 years	33.8	23.7	30.7
Number of children			
1 child	43.8	45.4	44.3
2 children	40.0	38.2	39.4
3 or more children	16.2	16.4	16.3
Education			
No degree	12.4	12.9	12.6
Vocational degree	63.3	60.7	62.5
University	21.0	26.0	22.5
N/a	3.3	0.4	2.4
Type of contract			
Temporary	7.2	8.6	7.7
Permanent	79.6	77.9	79.0
Self-employed	13.0	13.4	13.1
N/a	0.2	0.1	0.2
Sector of employment			
Public	13.0	12.0	12.7
Private	87.0	88.0	87.3
Education and partner's education			
Both having no degree	8.0	7.1	7.7
Both having vocational degree	50.3	46.5	49.1
Both having university degree	10.1	15.3	11.7
Woman has lower education	19.5	18.6	19.3
Woman has higher education	7.7	12.0	9.0
N/a	4.3	0.6	3.2

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

	Year of birth of child		Total
	1996–2006	2007–2012	
Number of cases	86,805	38,295	125,100
Number of fathers on parental leave	449	756	1205

Source: Research Data Centres of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder, Scientific Use File of the German microcensus 1999–2012, own calculations.

who are more highly educated than their female partners are under economic pressure to act as breadwinners. Apparently, the new parental leave regulations have enabled some of these men to temporarily step back from their role as male breadwinner (see *Hypothesis 3*).

Figure 3 provides the results by type of contract. Compared to men on permanent contracts, self-employed men and men on temporary working contracts are less likely to be on parental leave. Although parental leave usage has become more common across all groups, the overall pattern has remained unchanged. Figure 4, which displays the results by type of sector, provides a similar picture. It shows that leave usage is more common among public sector employees, both before as well as after the reform. The relative change is the same for both groups with an increase in the probability of leave-taking by about 200 percent. This means that we have to refute Hypotheses 4 and 5, which had stated that men on permanent contracts and in public sector employment would have been more likely to embrace the opportunities of the new parental leave benefit system.

## Summary and discussion

The aim of this article was to evaluate men's responses to the parental leave benefit reform that was enacted by the German government in 2007. In particular, we examined whether subgroups of men responded to the reform differently. We found that there has been a strong overall increase in fathers' uptake of parental leave since the reform. This finding may not come as a great surprise. However, it is important to note that (West) German family policies

have regularly been typified as familialistic and strongly biased towards the male breadwinner model. The features that led scholars to reach that conclusion are a system of joint taxation that heavily taxes the second earner, a childcare system that provided very limited care for small children and a population that employed the term *Rabenmutter* to emphasize that working women neglect their children. Against this background, some scholars viewed the new parental leave scheme as 'alien' to the German system. Others considered it 'premature', assuming that these policies were being imposed ahead of real behavioural changes (Lewis, 2001: 158; Lewis et al., 2008; Schutter and Zerle-Elsäßer, 2012: 218). It could thus easily be assumed that the parental leave benefit reform would have been completely ineffective in changing behavioural patterns. The finding that parental leave usage increased for all the groups under investigation after the reform provides some evidence to refute this claim. It suggests instead that progressive family policies are also able to change behavioural patterns in conservative welfare state settings.

Our investigations also showed that the increase in parental leave usage was greatest among highly educated fathers. While there was no educational gradient in leave-taking before the reform, a positive gradient emerged afterwards. Furthermore, the increase in parental leave usage was highest among the men who were better educated than their female partners. This finding is at odds with the observation that the opportunity costs of leave-taking are largest for highly educated men, who should thus be less likely to use leave. It is, however, compatible with the observation that highly educated men express more liberal gender role attitudes and a greater commitment to get involved in

**Table 2.** Results from logistic regression model, average predicted probabilities (Av. Pr. Pr.), dependent variable: (1) using parental leave (0) not using parental leave.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Av. Pr. Pr.	95% confidence interval	Av. Pr. Pr.	95% confidence interval
Birth year of child				
1996–2006	0.0055	0.0050–0.0060	0.0056	0.0051–0.0061
2007–2012	0.0175	0.0163–0.0188	0.0168	0.0156–0.0180
Region				
Western Germany	0.0093	0.0087–0.0098	0.0093	0.0087–0.0099
Eastern Germany	0.0118	0.0101–0.0134	0.0115	0.0099–0.0130
Citizenship				
German	0.0100	0.0094–0.0106	0.0100	0.0094–0.0106
Non-German	0.0062	0.0048–0.0076	0.0063	0.0049–0.0077
Age of respondent				
18–25 years	0.0053	0.0036–0.0071	0.0060	0.0040–0.0079
26–30 years	0.0064	0.0054–0.0075	0.0067	0.0057–0.0078
31–35 years	0.0104	0.0094–0.0113	0.0103	0.0093–0.0112
36–40 years	0.0102	0.0090–0.0113	0.0098	0.0088–0.0109
41–45 years	0.0128	0.0109–0.0147	0.0123	0.0105–0.0142
46–55 years	0.0137	0.0103–0.0171	0.0137	0.0103–0.0171
Partnership status				
Married	0.0093	0.0087–0.0099	0.0093	0.0087–0.0099
Cohabiting	0.0113	0.0098–0.0128	0.0113	0.0098–0.0128
Age of youngest child				
0 year	0.0151	0.0140–0.0163	0.0150	0.0139–0.0161
1 year	0.0081	0.0073–0.0090	0.0082	0.0073–0.0090
2 years	0.0043	0.0036–0.0050	0.0043	0.0037–0.0050
Number of children				
1 child	0.0120	0.0111–0.0130	0.0117	0.0108–0.0126
2 children	0.0083	0.0075–0.0091	0.0083	0.0075–0.0092
3 or more children	0.0064	0.0053–0.0075	0.0069	0.0057–0.0080
Education				
No degree	0.0092	0.0074–0.0110	–	–
Vocational degree	0.0091	0.0084–0.0098	–	–
University	0.0111	0.0099–0.0122	–	–
Type of contract				
Temporary	0.0057	0.0042–0.0072	0.0055	0.0041–0.0069
Permanent	0.0107	0.0100–0.0113	0.0108	0.0101–0.0114
Self-employed	0.0059	0.0047–0.0071	0.0056	0.0045–0.0068
Type of sector				
Public	0.0134	0.0116–0.0152	0.0131	0.0113–0.0148
Private	0.0090	0.0085–0.0096	0.0091	0.0085–0.0096
Education and partner's education				
Both having no degree	–	–	0.0054	0.0036–0.0072
Both having vocational degree	–	–	0.0084	0.0077–0.0091

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Av. Pr. Pr.	95% confidence interval	Av. Pr. Pr.	95% confidence interval
Both having university degree	–	–	0.0144	0.0126–0.0162
Woman has lower education	–	–	0.0065	0.0055–0.0075
Woman has higher education	–	–	0.0173	0.0150–0.0196
Model summary				
Log likelihood null model	–6794		–6794	
Log likelihood	–6263		–6193	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.078		0.089	
Number of cases	125,100		125,100	
Number of fathers on parental leave	1205		1205	

Source: Research Data Centres of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder, Scientific Use File of the German microcensus 1999–2012, own calculations.

Controlled for missing values in the variables ‘type of contract’, ‘education’ and ‘education and partner’s education’.

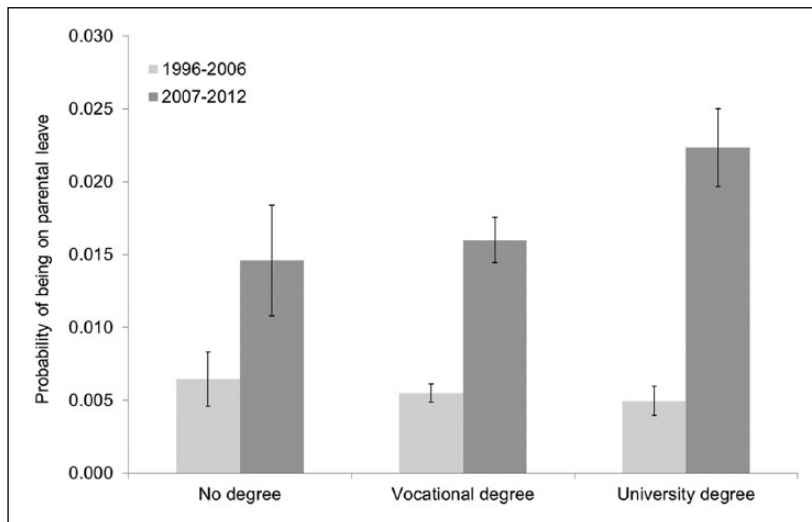
the upbringing of their children. Yet this group of men were previously unable to live up to their ideals because their high earning power pushed them into the role of breadwinners. Although opportunity costs of parental leave usage are still relatively higher for men with high income, the German parental leave benefit reform provides an income replacement that enabled highly educated men to partially live up to their ideals of being an involved father.

Our analysis also supports prior research that showed that workplace characteristics, sector of employment and type of employment contract are important determinants of fathers’ parental leave usage. Public sector employees were more likely than private sector employees to have taken leave before the reform, and this gap persisted after the reform. The same applies to self-employed men and men on temporary working contracts who are still more reluctant than men on permanent contracts to take advantage of parental leave regulations. These results underline that atypical work arrangements remain a strong barrier to leave-taking. The share of employees on temporary contracts has been growing steadily in recent years, but their particular situation is generally not reflected in family policy legislations.

Although our article provides novel evidence on how the parental leave benefit reform altered behavioural patterns in Germany, there are many caveats to be mentioned. One of the main findings is that

highly educated men were those who most strongly expanded their usage of parental leave after the reform. Our interpretation of this finding is that high earnings used to push highly educated men towards the role of male breadwinners. The new system provides them the economic leeway to act according to their pronounced ideals of involved fatherhood. However, the microcensus does not survey attitudes nor does it provide suitable income data. Thus, our interpretation must be speculative as we were unable to carefully carve out the role of income and attitudes in leave-taking behaviour.

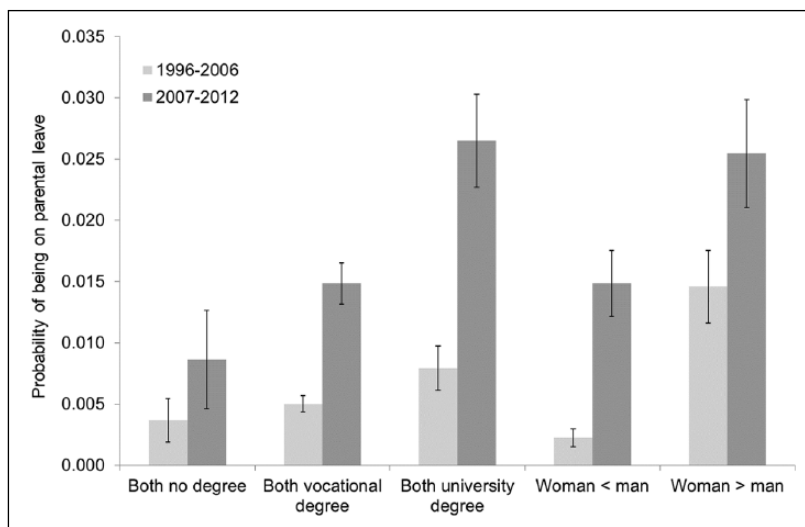
In our analysis, we examined the probability of being on leave at the time of the interview. With our data, we were unable to examine the duration of leave. We also did not investigate whether fathers had previously taken leave. Thus, our approach is rather conservative as it only distinguishes between the men who were on leave and those who were not on leave at the time of the interview. In 2012, 82 percent of fathers who received parental leave benefits used leave for 3 or fewer months (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017a). From these data, it seems that short durations of leave are widely taken advantage of, while fathers refrain from taking long periods of leave. Because the characteristics of fathers who choose short and long durations of leave differ (Trappe, 2013), our results may primarily reflect the characteristics of ‘long leave takers’ who represent a



**Figure 1.** Results from logistic regression model, average predicted probabilities, dependent variable: (1) using parental leave (0) not using parental leave, interaction of child's year of birth and education.

Source: Research Data Centres of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder, Scientific Use File of the German microcensus 1999–2012, own calculations.

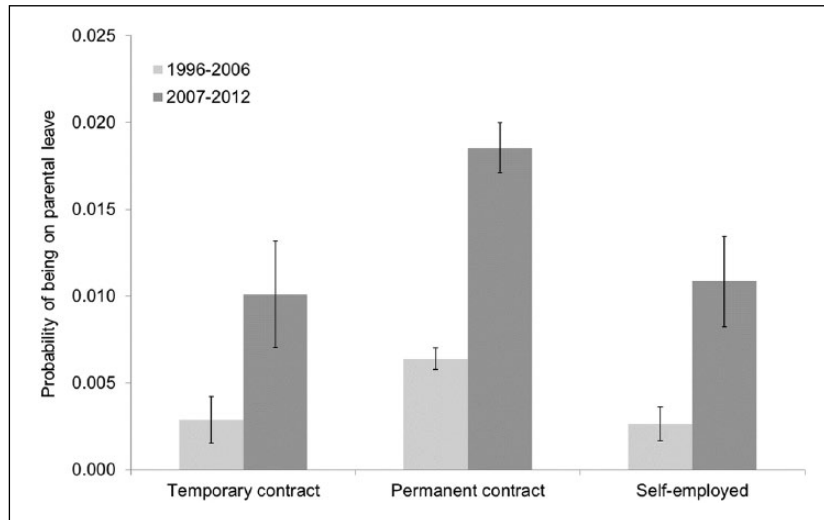
Controlled for: region, citizenship, age of respondent, partnership status, age of youngest child, number of children, type of contract, type of sector.



**Figure 2.** Results from logistic regression model, average predicted probabilities, dependent variable: (1) using parental leave (0) not using parental leave, interaction of child's year of birth and relative education.

Source: Research Data Centres of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder, Scientific Use File of the German microcensus 1999–2012, own calculations.

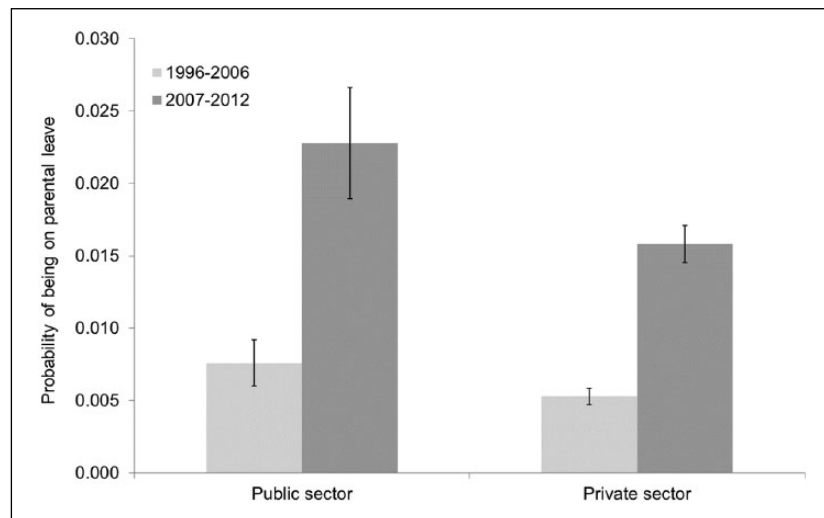
Controlled for: region, citizenship, age of respondent, partnership status, age of youngest child, number of children, type of contract, type of sector.



**Figure 3.** Results from logistic regression model, average predicted probabilities, dependent variable: (1) using parental leave (0) not using parental leave, interaction of child's year of birth and type of contract.

Source: Research Data Centres of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder, Scientific Use File of the German microcensus 1999–2012, own calculations.

Controlled for: region, citizenship, age of respondent, partnership status, age of youngest child, number of children, education and partner's education, type of sector.



**Figure 4.** Results from logistic regression model, average predicted probabilities, dependent variable: (1) using parental leave (0) not using parental leave, interaction of child's year of birth and type of sector.

Source: Research Data Centres of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder, Scientific Use File of the German microcensus 1999–2012, own calculations.

Controlled for: region, citizenship, age of respondent, partnership status, age of youngest child, number of children, education and partner's education, type of contract.

smaller group among all fathers ever having taken leave.

The introduction of the new parental leave benefit system was accompanied by a heated public debate. It is certainly possible that the public discourse triggered a process in which the societal norms that guide parental and gender role behaviour have shifted. Attitudinal surveys indicate that the proportion of people who embrace a more equal division of family responsibilities increased radically in (western) Germany between 2000 and 2012 (Blohm and Walter, 2016: 428). It is also possible that the 'daddy months' have incentivized fathers to take some leave while establishing a normative understanding that only short durations of paternal leave are appropriate. How societal expectations have shifted in response to the family policy reforms and how they tie into men's behavioural changes could not be addressed with our approach. It must be left to future quantitative, and particularly qualitative research, to understand the normative forces that channel fathers into short and long durations of leave-taking.

### Acknowledgements

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions to improve the paper, as well as Ann-Zofie Duvander, Gerda Neyer and Maria Rita Testa for their comments on earlier versions of the paper.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. Since 1952, (West) German policies have included a maternity protection period of 14 weeks. Between 1979 and 1985, paid maternal leave was granted for working mothers for the period of 6 months after birth. During this time, only mothers were entitled to a benefit equivalent to their previous net income (with a ceiling of DM750 until 1983 and DM510 since then). East Germany introduced the *Babyjahr* in 1976 which was a year-long leave with a benefit equal to the level of sickness benefits. East German regulations granted only mothers the right to take the leave. Fathers were only eligible under certain circumstances.

2. Since its introduction in 1986, the amount of *Erziehungsgeld* has remained fixed at a value of DM600 (€307 until 2003, €300 from 2004–2006) per month and has never been adjusted for inflation. In order to put this into perspective: gross monthly earnings of a full-time employed industrial worker were around DM3223 (€1648) in 1986 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 1988: 484). In 2006, monthly earnings for the same group of men were about €2670 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2007: 520).
3. Couples whose annual net income exceeded DM29,400 (€15,032) were only eligible for the first 6 months of the benefit. This regulation was tightened over time. Starting in 2001, for example, couples whose yearly net income exceeded DM100,000 (€51,130) were not eligible at all. Couples whose net income exceeded DM32,200 (€16,464) were only eligible for 6 months. However, if the recipient was not employed during parental leave his or her income was disregarded.
4. In 2011, the replacement rate was reduced on a sliding scale to only 65 percent if the net monthly income exceeds €1200. In addition, people with an individual gross income of €250,000 or an annual household gross income of more than €500,000 are not eligible for parental leave benefits.
5. Parental leave payments are capped at €1800 per month. For low-income earners (below €1000), parental leave benefits are topped up and can reach 100 percent of their prior income. Parents who are not employed (unemployed, not in the labour force, in education) are entitled to a benefit of €300. This was the same monthly payment as prior to the parental leave benefit reform; however, the maximum duration of payment was shortened from 24 to 12 months.
6. Single parents are entitled to 14 months of the benefit.

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## Appendix

**Table 3.** Overview of landmark reforms in the German parental leave and parental leave benefit system.

Year	Duration of leave	Duration of benefit/ amount	Income thresholds	Flexibility
1986	10 months	10 months/flat rate DM600 (€307)	Months 1–6: no threshold. After 6 <sup>th</sup> month: threshold after which payment is reduced on a sliding scale. Threshold levels: DM29,400 (€15,032) for married; DM23,700 (€12,118) for unmarried. Increase of threshold for every additional child by DM4200 (€2147). Income of benefit recipient is not taken into account if he or she is not employed during leave	Parents can take turns in taking leave once, but leave cannot be taken simultaneously by both parents Part-time employment up to 19 hours/week is possible Leave cannot be used if the other partner is inactive in the labour market
1988	12 months	12 months/DM600 (€307)	No major change	Part-time employment up to 18 hours/week is possible
July 1989	15 months	15 months/DM600 (€307)	No major change	Part-time employment up to 19 hours/week is possible
July 1990	18 months	18 months/DM600 (€307)	No major change	No change
1992	36 months	No change	No major change	Non-married fathers without custody are entitled to use leave and receive parental leave benefits (with the mother's approval) Parents can take turns in taking leave three times
1993	No change	24 months/DM600 (€307)	No major change	No change
June 1993	No change	No change	Threshold for unmarried couples is the same as for married couples; the partner's income is now taken into account	No change
1994	No change	No change	Months 1–6: introduction of threshold levels: DM100,000 (€51,129) for couples, DM75,000 (€38,347) for lone parents. After 6 <sup>th</sup> month: no major change	No change

**Table 3.** (Continued)

Year	Duration of leave	Duration of benefit/amount	Income thresholds	Flexibility
2001	No change	12 months/DM900 (since 2002: €460) 24 months/DM600 (since 2002: €307)	Months 1–6: DM100,000 (€51,129) for couples, DM75,000 (€38,347) for lone parents. After 6 <sup>th</sup> month: DM32,200 (€16,464) for couples, DM26,400 (€13,498) for lone parents. Increase of threshold for every additional child by DM4800 (€2454)	12 months of parental leave may be taken up to child's 8 <sup>th</sup> birthday (employer has to agree). Parental leave and part-time employment (up to 30 hours) may be combined. Parental leave may be taken simultaneously by both parents. Leave can now also be taken if the other partner is inactive in the labour market
2004	No change	12 months/€450 24 months/€300	Decrease of threshold levels: Month 1–6: €30,000 for couples, €23,000 for lone parents (benefit option of €300/2 years). Months 1–6 (benefit option of €450/1 year): 22,086 for couples, €19,086 for lone parents. After 6 <sup>th</sup> month: €16,500 for couples, €13,500 for lone parents Maximum amount: €1800	No change
2007 (births from 1 January)	No change	14 months (2 months are reserved for each parent)/67% of prior net income for previously employed, €300 for previously not employed		Parental leave may be taken up to the child's 8 <sup>th</sup> birthday; however, parental leave benefits are provided up to 14 months after childbirth only
2011	No change	Change in amount: 65%–67% of prior net income for previously employed, depending on level of income	Persons with an individual gross income of €250,000 and couples with a household income of more than €500,000 are not eligible	No change

Source: BErzGG 6 December 1985; BErzGG 25 July 1989; Zweites Gesetz zur Änderung des Bundeserziehungsgeldgesetzes und anderer Vorschriften 6 December 1991; BErzGG 21 January 1992; FKPG 23 June 1993; Neufassung des BErzGG 31 January 1994; Drittes Gesetz zur Änderung des BErzGG 12 October 2000; HBeglG 2004 29 December 2003; BEEG 5 December 2006; HBeglG 2011 9 December 2010.  
The official exchange rate of Deutsche Mark (DM) to euros (€) was set at 1.95583.