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## **Paternity leave take-up in a segmented labor market:**

### **A cautionary tale of rapid policy expansion in Spain**

**Dani M. Marinova**

Serra Hunter Associate Professor of Political Science  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
[dani.marinova@uab.cat](mailto:dani.marinova@uab.cat)  
[ORCID: 0000-0001-7067-6792](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7067-6792)

**Margarita León**

Professor of Political Science  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
[margarita.leon@uab.cat](mailto:margarita.leon@uab.cat)  
[ORCID: 0000-0001-9457-5822](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9457-5822)

#### **Abstract**

To evaluate the success of paternity leave as a progressive, equal-access policy instrument, it is essential to assess it against the backdrop of preexisting labor market inequalities that condition its use. We investigate the recent and rapid expansion of paternity leave entitlements in Spain where leave was extended from four to sixteen weeks over the course of just three years. Analyses of an original survey administered to cohorts of fathers with leave entitlements of varying lengths show that average take-up surges but does so unevenly. As uptake rates soar among fathers in stable employment, fathers in temporary jobs, the self-employed, and those at the bottom and top of the income distribution maintain lower levels of usage. These results align with the 'Matthew Effect' of social policy, whereby reforms disproportionately benefit well-positioned socioeconomic groups, and imply bleak prospects for the reform's capacity to generate social change across social strata. The results thus tell a cautionary tale of the rapid expansion of paternity leave in a segmented labor market where work culture and gender norms are slower to adjust. With the enforcement of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive in 2019, other European Member States are looking to extend paternity leave swiftly, thus increasing the relevance of these results for policy considerations.

**Key words:** paternity leave uptake; temporary employment; self-employment; labor market inequality; Matthew Effect.

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To support the transition to parenthood and help parents reconcile work and care responsibilities, welfare states across the world have implemented earnings-compensated leave systems, generally during the first year of a child's life. While paid leave for mothers developed early on, over the past decades we have seen the introduction of a diverse set of individual entitlements for fathers. This trend has culminated in the passing of the EU Work-life Balance Directive (WLBD) in 2019 which mandates extending father-specific leave entitlements as a means of fostering a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities within families (De La Porte, Im, Pircher, & Szelewa, 2023). Paternity leave entitlements have the double objective of increasing men's participation in care responsibilities and ameliorating gender inequalities in the labor market (Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Moss & Deven, 2015). Intended as a socially progressive policy instrument, the desirable effects of leave earmarked to fathers nonetheless hinge on its widespread use.

This article examines the use of paternity leave from 2018 to 2022 in Spain, a period marked by a significant expansion of earmarked paternity leave, from four to sixteen weeks. The rapid expansion is expected to influence the decision to use the benefit, in conjunction with fathers' labor market situation. While existing research suggests that the features of the Spanish paternity leave, such as non-transferability to mothers, full wage replacement, and flexibility, should encourage high take-up rates (Haas et al., 2019; Närvi & Salmi, 2019), other studies indicate that work-related demands play a crucial role in fathers' decisions to forgo leave (Escot et al., 2012; Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). We reason that fathers with secure employment are more likely to use the extended leave, while those in vulnerable positions face increased pressure to remain at work, exacerbated by the rapid expansion of the entitlement and limited time for work culture to adjust. Overall, we anticipate widening gaps in paternity leave uptake between securely employed fathers and those in less secure positions under the longer entitlement period.

We draw on an original survey of fathers to children born between 2018 and 2022. To ensure representation, we employ a mixed sampling method, administering the survey both online and in children's playgrounds located in low-income neighborhoods. This approach mitigates the common issue of non-representativeness in online panels and enables us to apply sample weights effectively and examine the heterogeneous effects of labor market situation. Our dataset distinguishes between fathers who were ineligible for leave and those eligible but who chose not to take any, as well as between fathers who fully utilized their entitlement and those who used it partially. This granular approach allows for a more precise assessment of leave uptake compared to previous studies (e.g., Jurado-Guerrero & Muñoz-Comet, 2021).

Results show that the extension of paternity leave has had an overall positive effect on take-up. The probability of using the full entitlement rose from 36 to 64 percent while the probability of using only a portion of the leave dropped from 43 to 15 percent. However, these gains were distributed unevenly. We see persistent gaps in take-up rates driven by income, self-employment, temporary employment, and expressed job insecurity, and said gaps widen under the longer entitlement. While a public-sector employee is predicted to use on average a week more of paternity leave than a self-employed father when available leave was just four weeks, this difference is four weeks under the sixteen-week entitlement. Under the latter, fathers in stable jobs use roughly two weeks more of their paternity leave entitlement than fathers in temporary jobs, and ten weeks more than eligible fathers working without a formal contract. Income and expressed job insecurity show similar patterns.

Results tell a cautionary tale of the swift implementation of generous paternity leave provisions in a segmented labor market and underscore the significance of understanding take-up patterns in Spain in light of the ongoing implementation of the WLBD. While overall use of paternity leave has surged, gains have been distributed unevenly, with potential trickle-down effects for fathers' involvement in childcare. Consistent with the "Matthew effect" (Merton 1968) documented for other social policies (Bonoli et al., 2017; Cantillon 2011), results show that fathers with a secure attachment to the labor market benefit disproportionately from the extension of paternity leave. This finding is significant, as the rapid expansion of paternity leave in Spain contrasts with its gradual evolution in Nordic welfare states. In adopting the WLBD, many Member States will follow Spain's path, naturally raising questions about take-up rates and the potential challenges in adapting cultural norms.

### **When do dads take leave?**

Fathers' decision to use paternity leave depends on a complex combination of factors, with policy design being key (Valentova et al., 2022; Ziegler & Bamieh, 2023). In comparative analyses, non-transferable leave entitlements with 100 percent wage replacement have borne the highest take-up rates (Brandth et al., 2022; Duvander et al., 2021; Patnaik, 2019). Karu and Tremblay's (2018) analysis of leave entitlements in twenty-nine countries shows that reasonably high take-up by fathers is contingent on the presence of earmarked leave for fathers and high wage replacement. The flexibility of the leave – that is, whether leave can be used full-time or part-time, and with a certain degree of choice as to the timing – is also positively associated with take-up (Patnaik, 2019; Ziegler & Bamieh, 2023).

Beyond cross-case variation stemming from differences in policy design, there is significant within-country disparity in paternity leave use, influenced by fathers' socioeconomic status and work conditions. Fathers on the low and high ends of the income distribution are least likely to take leave while fathers in the middle, with steady jobs, are most likely to use it (Brandth et al., 2022; Escot et al., 2012). In Spain, fathers in self-employment, on temporary contracts or who express insecurity about their job stability are less likely to use paternity leave than are fathers in secure employment (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2018; Fernandez-Lozano, 2019; Lapuerta et al., 2011; Jurado-Guerrero & Muñoz-Comet, 2021; Pedro Romero-Balsas, 2022). Public sector employment and company size are also relevant determinants of parental leave use (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Valentova et al., 2022), with those working in the public sector and/or large firms using a greater share of available leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2014; Lapuerta et al., 2011). Take-up is higher when companies offer top-ups to the statutory benefit, generating gaps in take-up across occupations and social classes (Köppe, 2023). Education exerts an independent and positive effect on take-up length, as more highly educated fathers are likely to express gender egalitarian views and are more willing to take time off work to care for infants (Brandth et al., 2022).

The determinants of paternity leave take-up – policy design, socioeconomic status, and workplace characteristics – interact in complex ways to shape fathers' decisions to use leave entitlements. To the extent that well-educated fathers endorse egalitarian values, they are more willing to take time off work; yet if the opportunity costs in employment are high and the workplace culture is not favorable, take-up among highly educated fathers is lower (Haas & Hwang, 2019; Närvi & Salmi, 2019). Due to leave accessibility and work culture, highly educated men in well paid jobs

are less likely to take-up leave, especially when leave entitlements are long, transferable to mothers or only partially reimbursed (Escot et al. 2012).

Finally, the literature points to key differences in men and women's decision to take leave. Fathers are more likely to have to negotiate their leave rights with employers, making their decision to use leave contingent on job stability and work culture (Escot et al., 2012; Närvi & Salmi, 2019; Karu & Tremblay, 2018; Meil et al., 2017). Some of the resistance from work culture is perceived rather than real, however. The worry that time off work will leave a bad impression on employers reduces fathers' chances of taking leave (Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). Overall, job security is more influential for fathers' decision to use leave, making it crucial to consider how labor market segmentation shapes the use of the swiftly implemented and exceptionally generous paternity leave entitlements in Spain.

### **Paternity leave reform in Spain: Theoretical expectations**

Our focus is on paternity leave take-up after the most recent set of reforms that culminated in January of 2021 with equal, non-transferable leave entitlements between parents in Spain. Until 2017, paternity leave in Spain was trivial in length. The 2007 Equality Bill introduced a two-week, non-transferable paternity leave with 100 percent wage replacement. In 2017, paternity leave was extended to four weeks, then to five in April of 2018, eight in July of 2019, twelve in January of 2020 and finally to sixteen weeks in January of 2021. At the time of writing, leave available to fathers is equivalent to leave available to mothers in terms of its length, wage replacement rate and eligibility criteria. While six weeks must be taken immediately after birth on a full-time basis, parents can opt to take the remaining ten weeks on a part-time or full-time basis during the child's first year of life (Koslowski et al., 2022). The reform equalized leave entitlements not only in terms of length but also symbolically, by adopting gender-neutral language. Where previously entitlements were referred to as maternity and paternity leave, the term 'birth leave' was coined, without mention of the words mother or father (now referred to as either the first or second parent). The political justification of the reform – namely, to guarantee gender equality at home and in the labor market – represents a shift in paradigm, both historically in Spain and in comparative perspective (see Meil *et al.* 2022 on a shift in the same direction in Portugal).

The Spanish reform is an interesting case from a comparative social policy perspective for at least two reasons. First, the expansion of paternity leave represents a rapid and a significant path departure of a traditionally familistic welfare state. As in the other Mediterranean countries, Spain has historically featured very weak work-life balance policies with short but well-paid maternity leave, a two-day paternity leave and a relatively long but unpaid parental leave. Since the early 2000s efforts towards welfare state recalibration were particularly visible in the policy domain of work-life balance, though the 2008 economic crisis set back the momentum (León and Pavolini 2014). Since 2017, and especially since 2019 with the left coalition government, childcare expansion and the improvement of paternity leave provision have been clear hallmarks in the strong cross-party political commitment to gender equality (León et al., 2022). This rapid increase of paternity leave from just two weeks until 2017 to sixteen weeks in 2021 raises questions about take-up, as drastic and swift reforms may outpace adaptations in work culture and gender norms compared to the gradual expansion seen in Nordic welfare states. Therefore, the Spanish case can shed light on how the speed of policy change affects take-up, an aspect thus far overlooked

by the specialized literature and the EU WLBD (De La Porte, Im, Pircher, Ramos Martin, et al., 2023).

Second, as previous literature makes clear, differences in income and employment situation are key in shaping fathers' decision to take leave. Spain has one of Europe's most strongly segmented labor markets (Schwander & Häusermann, 2013), and nonstandard employment exposes workers to poverty risk (Marinova, 2022). Successive labor market reforms since the early 1990s have enhanced labor market dualization, meaning that while core workers enjoy good levels of security and protection, more peripheral workers are poorly protected, with highly unstable and badly paid jobs (Polavieja 2005). Moreover, youth unemployment has been historically high in Spain and affects particularly individuals in childbearing age (Fernandez et al., 2018). This process of differentiation between categories of workers with unequal access to social and labor rights is typical of the South European welfare model (Ferrera, 1996), and increasingly prevalent across European states thus making the Spanish case relevant for understanding take-up decisions in the context of segmentation.

We reason that the characteristics of Spain's paternity leave entitlement, along with the rapid policy expansion, are key to understanding fathers' decisions to use the benefit. While the policy's favorable terms should incentivize take-up, work-related demands may also compel fathers to forgo leave, especially when longer absences from work are involved. This suggests two expectations. First, the favorable terms of the policy are likely to incentivize full take-up among fathers with a secure attachment to the labor market. We anticipate that fathers confident in their ability to return to their job after taking considerable leave are more likely to use the full entitlement. Second, work-related pressure to be away for extended periods is likely to deter uptake among fathers in precarious labor market positions. Given the rapid policy expansion, there may be a lag in adapting work culture and gender norms. Consequently, fathers in vulnerable jobs may be more inclined to take only a portion of the available leave or none at all, as the longer leave provision places greater demands on them.

Together, these expectations suggest a widening disparity in paternity leave uptake between securely employed fathers and those in precarious employment under the current leave provision. Assessing these expectations has important implications for understanding the interaction between policy design and existing socioeconomic disparities and aligns with the 'Matthew Effect' (Merton, 1968), whereby social policy reforms disproportionately benefit well-positioned socioeconomic groups (Bonoli et al., 2017; Cantillon, 2011). While the distributional effects of some family policies, such as childcare, have been widely studied (e.g., Van Lancker, 2023), testing the two expectations outlined above will contribute to the limited research on the distributional effects of paternity leave systems (Köppe, 2023; Duvander and Cedstrand, 2022).

### **Research design**

We investigate the variation in paternity leave uptake among fathers of children born between January of 2018 and December of 2022, a period marked by four incremental increases in entitlement: from four to five weeks in April 2018; to eight weeks in July 2019; to twelve weeks in January 2020; and finally to sixteen weeks in January 2021. The bulk of our sample was recruited from an online panel. Recognizing that online samples often consist of individuals with higher education levels than the general population (Tomic et al., 2024), we simultaneously

administered our survey in playgrounds to a sample of parents who (a) did not hold a university degree and (b) lived in low-income neighborhoods in the larger Barcelona metropolitan area. This sub-sample of low-socioeconomic status (SES) parents allows us to weigh the overall sample by educational level meaningfully and to test for the heterogeneous effects of labor market situation and income on paternity leave take-up.

In addition to difficulties in recruiting parents from low-SES backgrounds, we faced challenges in attracting fathers to participate in our survey. Only 35 percent of respondents in our online panel identified as men, a figure that dropped further to 26 percent when we administered the survey at children's playgrounds. Despite our deliberate efforts to prioritize approaching fathers first when present at playgrounds, we were unable to overcome the lower response rate during fieldwork. Nonetheless, we successfully recruited a total of 1,347 fathers.

To tackle these representational challenges, we adopt two strategies. First, we weigh our data based on educational levels to align with population statistics (See Table A2). Second, we supplement our sample of fathers by querying mothers in our survey about their male partners' labor market situations before childbirth and their subsequent uptake of paternity leave. Incorporating information about mothers' male partners significantly increases our sample size, allowing us to analyze data for approximately 3,970 fathers across various cohorts of paternity leave entitlements. To address any potential reporting discrepancies by fathers' female partners, we introduce a binary variable for partner in our analyses.

We rely on two empirical indicators to gauge leave take-up. First, we categorize take-up responses into four groups: not eligible for leave; eligible but took no leave; took some weeks of leave; utilized the full entitlement. This nominal indicator allows us to discern between fathers who had the opportunity for paid leave but opted not to take it and those lacking access to the entitlement. Secondly, we assess the proportion of the leave entitlement utilized. Since the duration of leave entitlements varied over time, comparing the absolute number of weeks used across father cohorts is not meaningful. Instead, this indicator standardizes the proportion of leave taken. We apply the second indicator to analyze how labor market vulnerability influences the proportion of the benefit utilized, excluding ineligible fathers from the analysis (roughly six percent of our sample).

The primary independent variable is the length of paternity leave entitlement at the time of the child's birth. Given the various reforms during the period under study (see Table A1), we create a series of binary indicators to represent its length. However, due to a limited sample size for the brief period when the entitlement was four weeks, we analyze this period jointly with the five-week entitlement. Our primary independent variable thus yields four categories: 4-5 weeks, 8 weeks, 12 weeks, and 16 weeks.

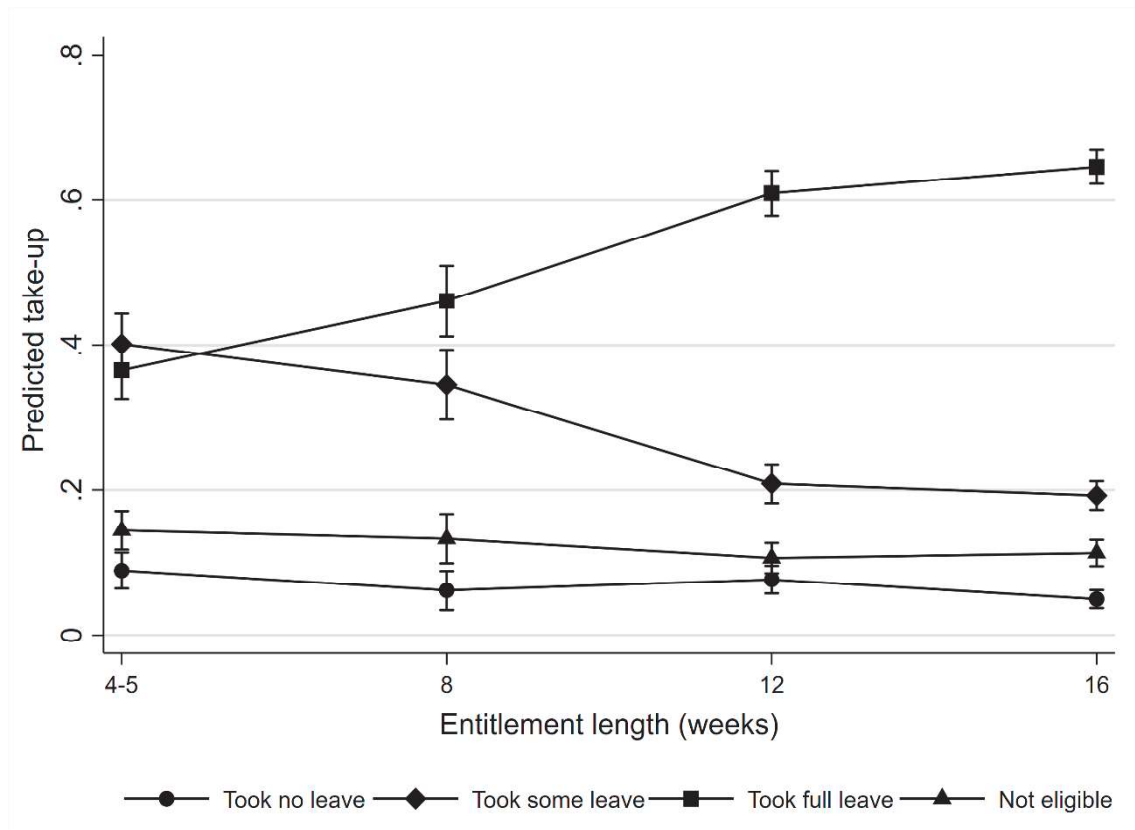
The models incorporate controls for socioeconomic and labor market situations, derived from participants' responses to recall questions regarding their or their partners' economic and employment circumstances before the birth of their child. These controls encompass aspects such as income bracket, contractual agreements, employment status, and professional status. Additionally, we retrospectively inquire about participants' confidence in their ability to return to work after taking paternity leave. Socio-demographic information is collected with reference to the time of the survey, as detailed in the Appendix.

### *Main effects of labor market situation on take-up*

In an initial set of analyses, we investigate the impact of extending paternity leave entitlements on fathers' take-up and eligibility rates. Using a multinomial logistic regression model with controls for educational attainment, unemployment status at childbirth, income bracket, and other relevant characteristics, we analyze the nominal indicator of take-up and eligibility (see Table A5). Figure 1 presents the predicted probabilities of take-up across cohorts of fathers with varying leave entitlement lengths. The average probability of using the full entitlement increased from 0.36 to 0.64 as the entitlement extended from 4 to 16 weeks. Under the shorter entitlement, fathers had equal probabilities of using only part of their leave or the full entitlement. With 16 weeks of leave available, the probability of using the full benefit increased by 28 percentage points, while the probability of using only part of the leave dropped by the same magnitude. The predicted probabilities of non-eligibility and of not utilizing any leave despite eligibility remained stable, consistent with unchanged eligibility criteria.



Figure 1. Predicted take-up by length of paternity leave entitlement

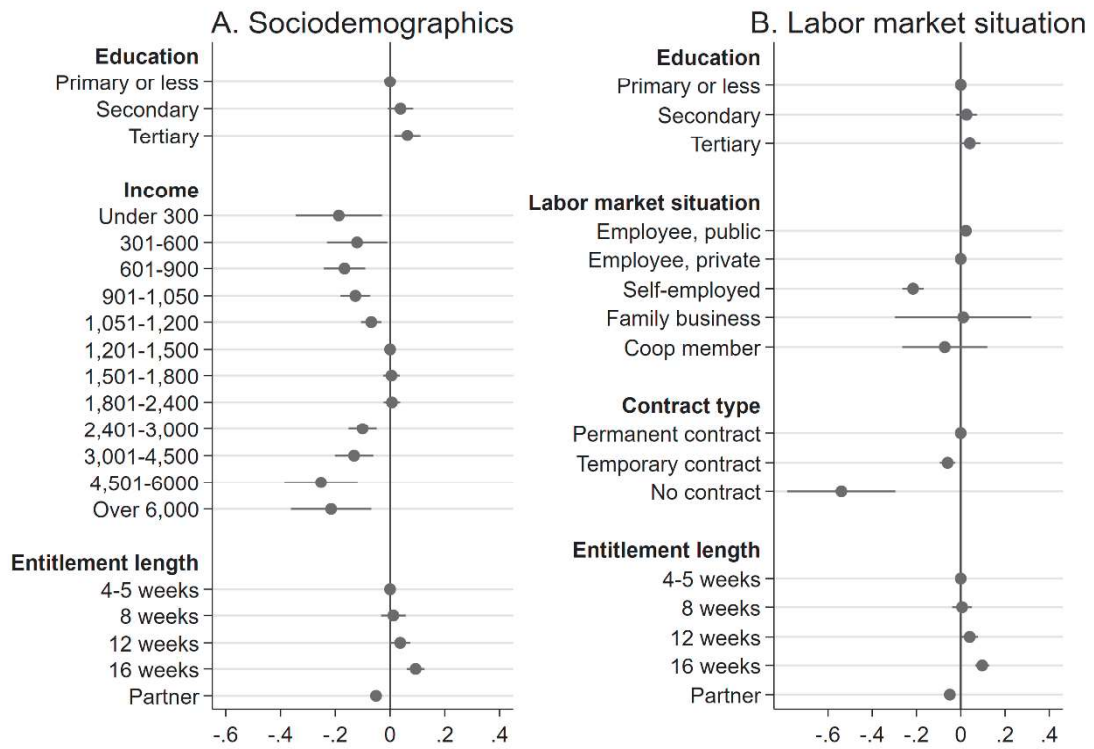


*Note: Predicted probabilities with 95 percent confidence intervals are estimated for each outcome based on a multinomial logit model with controls for relevant socioeconomic and labor market circumstances. N=3,649. See Table A5 for full model estimates.*

The initial analyses suggest promising outcomes for fathers' use of paternity leave, likely influenced by the favorable terms of the entitlement. The expanded policy has increased full-leave uptake while reducing partial use. To better understand the reform's impact across different labor market conditions, we employ linear regression to model the proportion of leave taken by eligible fathers. This approach allows us to more accurately assess how labor market factors and socioeconomic status affect the extent of leave use.

Figure 2 presents the coefficient estimates from these regression models, with panel A focusing on socio-demographics and panel B on labor market conditions. Panel A confirms a u-shaped effect of income, with fathers in both the lowest and highest income brackets tending to utilize only part of their allotted entitlement. Panel B supports previous literature, indicating that self-employment reduces leave duration by 23 percent compared to private-sector employees, while temporary contracts and informal employment arrangements result in 6 percent and 44 percent shorter leave, respectively, compared to permanent contracts.

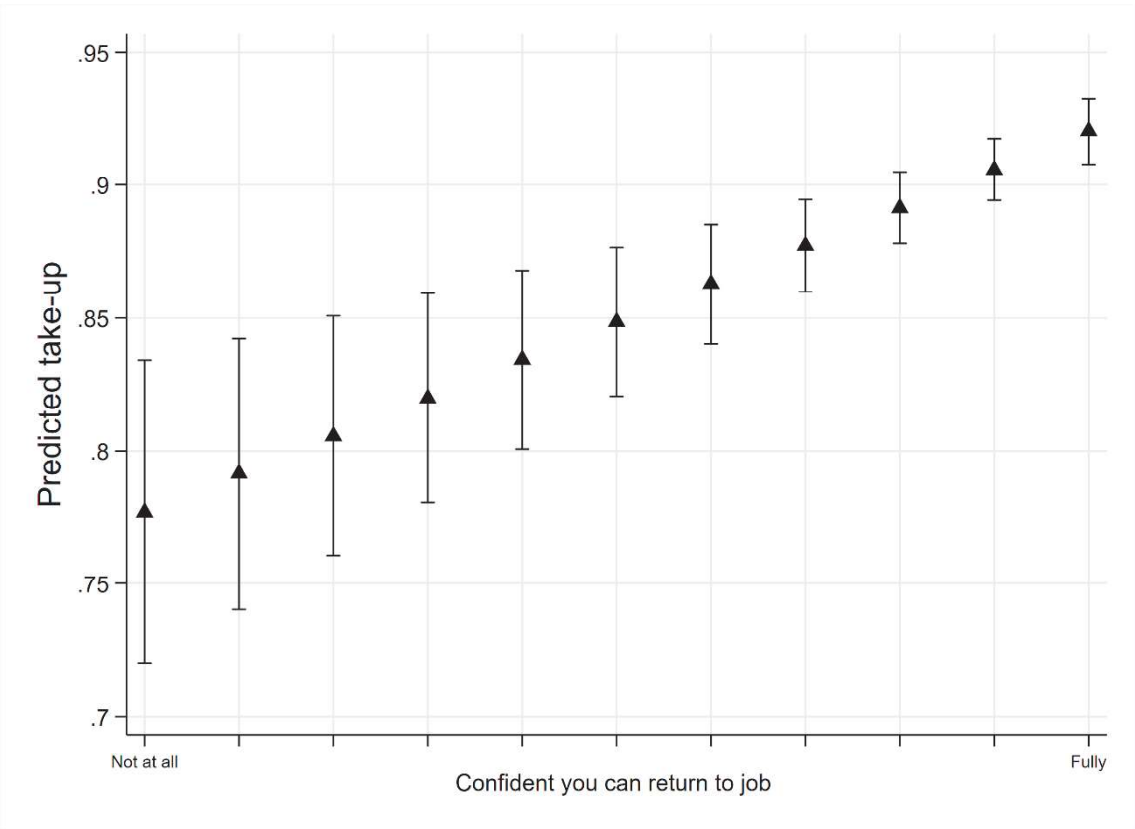
Figure 2. Coefficient plots for paternity leave take-up among eligible fathers



Note: Coefficient estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals are plotted from Model 1 (N=3,316) and Model 2 (N=3,436) in Table A6.

We test whether job security influences further paternity leave take-up while controlling for socio-demographics, income and labor market situation. We incorporate predictors based on fathers' recollections of their confidence in returning to their jobs after taking leave, rated on an 11-point scale from "Not at all" to "Fully." Only fathers employed at the time of birth were asked about job security, reducing the sample to 1,143. Figure 3 shows that reported job security has a significant positive impact on leave uptake, in addition to the effect of income and objective labor market situation. Fathers who expressed full confidence in their job security took 16 percent longer leave than those with the lowest confidence. Together, results highlight persistent disparities in take-up rates across economic and labor market situation. We next disaggregate these main effects by testing whether socioeconomic and labor inequalities in take-up have widened with the rapid expansion of the entitlement.

Figure 3. Predicted take-up rate by job security



*Note: Predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals are estimated based on Model 4 Table A7. Only fathers who held a job at time their child was born were asked about their level of confidence in being able to return to their jobs. N=1,143.*

### *Heterogeneous effects of leave entitlement length*

In a final set of analyses, we assess whether the gaps in take-up driven by labor market segmentation have widened with the rapid expansion of paternity leave entitlements. We test for heterogeneous effects with a series of interaction models for the main socioeconomic and labor market variables, on one hand, and entitlement length, on the other. Given the demanding nature of these tests on our sample size, we adjust the number of categories in a theoretically meaningful way or exclude groups with limited observations as needed.<sup>1</sup> Figure 4 illustrates the predicted take-up rates for each cohort, income and occupational categories, while Figure 5 plots the predicted *gaps* in take-up between pairs of categories of interest (See Table A8).<sup>2</sup>

Panel A of Figure 4 shows how the impact of income has evolved across cohorts of fathers with extended leave provisions. We see again, consistent with previous literature, that fathers in the middle range of the income scale have the highest take-up rate. Panel A makes apparent that this group's take-up rates have been the ones to improve systematically, with a predicted increase in take-up of over 10 percent between the short and long entitlements. As a result, the gaps between middle-income fathers and the rest have widened, as displayed in Figure 5. While the predicted gap in take-up rates between low and middle-income fathers has increased from 2,4 to 8,5 days, the gap between high and middle-income fathers has soared from 3,5 to 14 days, and these differences are precisely estimated.

A comparable pattern emerges when examining fathers' professional situation. While employees, both in the public and private sectors, show a progressive increase in paternity leave take-up in Figure 4, the self-employed continue to utilize it at significantly lower rates, thereby amplifying the disparities as the entitlement expands. Illustrated in Figure 5, the gap in predicted paternity leave usage between a public-sector employee and a self-employed father was one week under the short entitlement, but this gap widened to 4.2 weeks under the current 16-week entitlement. These differences are notable and precisely estimated, providing additional evidence that longer paternity leave provisions have exacerbated disparities in uptake rates across employment situations.

We find further evidence of widening gaps when we examine fathers' contract type (panel C). Under the shorter entitlement, fathers with temporary and permanent contracts had similar take-up rates, as shown in Figure 4. With extended paternity leave, those on permanent contracts have maintained or increased the proportion of leave used while those on temporary contracts have lagged. Figure 5 shows that the predicted gap in take-up was only two days under the short entitlement but increased to two weeks under the 16-week entitlement. With regard to eligible fathers working without a formal contract—a group characterized by high employment instability—a similar pattern of widening gaps in uptake over time is observed (panel C). However, due to the limited subsample size, we are unable to estimate predicted probabilities for all combinations with varying entitlement lengths. Figure 5 suggests that the disparity in uptake

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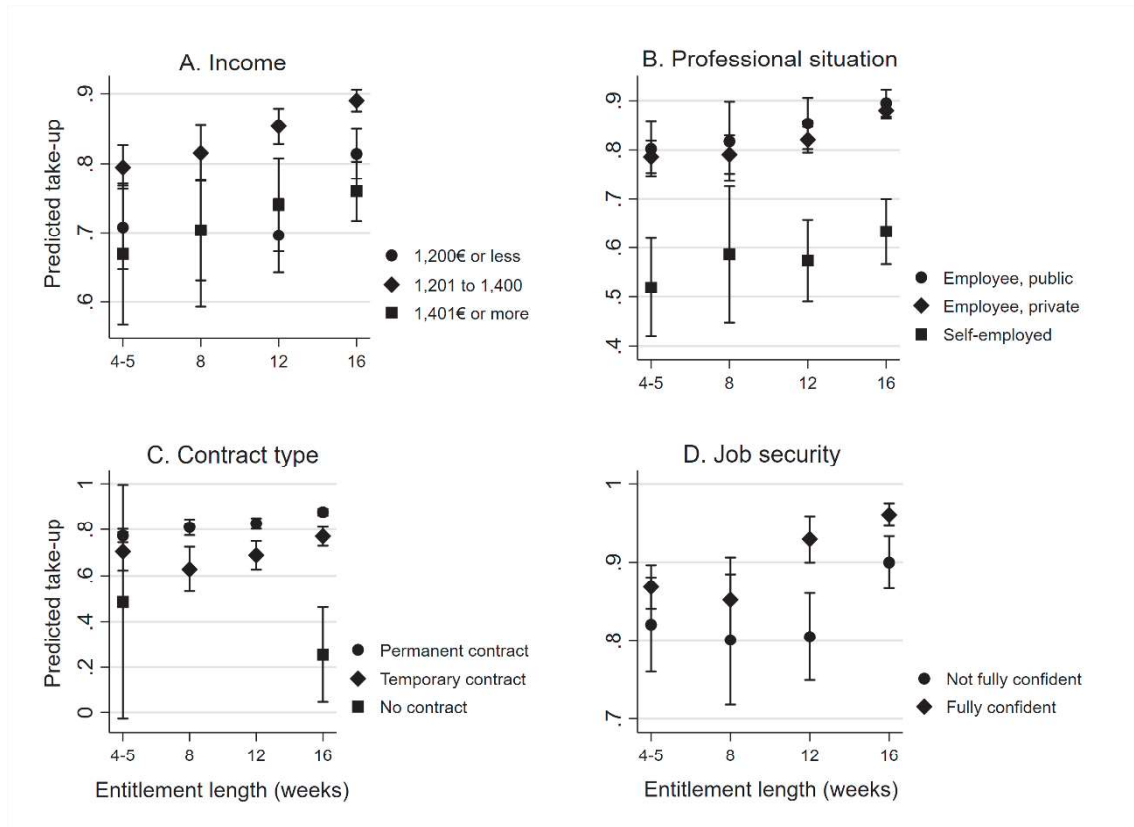
<sup>1</sup> We simplified our income variable into three categories for low income (under 1,200€ monthly earnings), medium (1,201 to 2,400€) and high income (2,401€ or more). For professional situation, we excluded from the model groups with very few observations (e.g., coop members and family business employees). For job security, we modeled the response "Fully confident" as 1 and the rest of responses as 0.

<sup>2</sup> Joint post-estimation tests for the interaction coefficients and their constitutive terms reject the null hypothesis that the interaction effects are zero (in all cases,  $p < 0.001$ ).

between fathers in stable jobs and those without a formal contract has widened from one week to ten weeks, with this difference being precisely estimated.

The final set of estimates in panel D of Figure 4 explores the impact of entitlement length on the relationship between subjective job security and paternity leave uptake. Results indicate that successive cohorts of fathers who felt fully confident about their job return after leave took a larger proportion of available leave: 79% under the shorter entitlement and 93% under the 16-week entitlement, thereby reaffirming the Matthew effects we have also observed with objective labor market measures. When comparing the predicted gaps in uptake between those who felt fully secure and those expressing job insecurity in Figure 5, we observe a modest widening of the gap from 1.4 to 7 days as the entitlement extended from 4-5 weeks to 16 weeks.

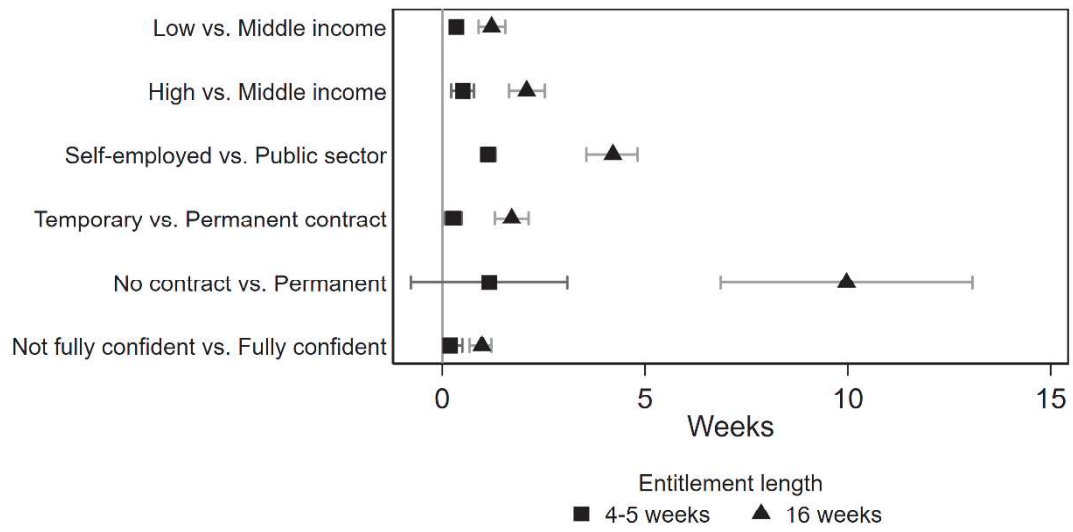
Figure 4. Interaction effects of entitlement length and labor market situation on take-up rate



Note: Estimates based on Models 1-4 in Table A8 with controls for socioeconomic and labor market situation.



Figure 5. Predicted gaps in paternity leave take-up by entitlement length



Note: Gaps in take-up are estimates based on Models 1-4 in Table A8 with controls for socioeconomic and labor market situation.

In summary, results indicate that the average increase in take-up observed in Figure 1 has not been uniformly distributed. Analyses of both objective and subjective measures of labor market insecurity reveal that fathers who fully utilized the expanded paternity leave entitlement tended to occupy positions in the middle of the income distribution with demonstrated secure attachment to the labor market. This pattern aligns with the concept of the Matthew Effect in social policy, wherein structural inequalities within the labor market result in uneven distributional outcomes, even in the presence of ostensibly progressive and redistributive policies such as generous paternity leave entitlements. Moving forward, our discussion and conclusion delves deeper into the implications of these findings and offers insights for policy and future research.

## Discussion and conclusion

Extensive research shows that earmarked, generous, and flexible paternity leave incentives encourage fathers to take leave with their newborns. Our survey of cohorts of Spanish fathers confirms this: when leave is non-transferable to mothers, flexible, and fully reimbursed, uptake rates rise notably. In this sense, the WLB Directive points countries in the right direction. Our results align with other studies that demonstrate how fathers-only leave provisions effectively redistribute care responsibilities within couples, which in turn can help address gender disparities in the labor market.

Our results demonstrate that longer, well-paid, and non-transferable leaves can boost take-up rates *even* in a country with a strong familistic legacy like Spain. This is a notable finding for the comparative literature on parental leave reform and family policy more broadly, as Spain's rapid shift from a male-breadwinner model to a dual-earner system contrasts with slower pace reforms in other countries. In Sweden, for instance, the question of how to involve fathers in childcare has been in the policy agenda since the mid-1970s with several reforms on parental leave provision progressively moving towards more generous entitlements for fathers (Duvander and Johansson 2012; Duvander and Cedstrand 2022). In Spain, this policy shift happened in just three years, yet results show unequivocally that, on average, take-up has increased. Although beyond the remit of our research, this suggests a potential shift in attitudes toward gender equality and fathers' roles in childcare.

Less optimistically, our findings also reveal significant gaps in uptake based on labor market conditions, with fathers in secure employment benefiting disproportionately. Income and employment type strongly influence who takes leave, and these disparities become even more pronounced as entitlements expand. This carries important implications. While the rapid expansion of leave entitlements is progressive in intent, it risks deepening existing socioeconomic inequalities. Fathers in precarious employment face greater challenges, compounded by slow cultural shifts in workplaces and persistent gender norms. Despite the policy's goal of increasing fathers' involvement in childcare and reducing gender gaps in both caregiving and employment, the impact may be uneven—largely benefiting families where fathers have secure jobs. This highlights how redistributive policies, when not designed with socioeconomic inequality in mind, can have uneven effects.

Our study contributes to the growing body of literature in comparative social policy that points to "Matthew effects" in social and employment policies aimed at promoting equality. While

parental leave provisions aim to bridge gender and socioeconomic gaps, they often widen them instead. The unintended outcomes, driven by the interaction between policy design and labor market structures (Van Lancker 2023) underscore the need for greater attention to the redistributive potential of social programs, including leave provisions (Blum, Dobrotic and Koslowski 2022; Cantillon 2011). This is a critical issue across Europe, where labor market segmentation and working poverty persist, threatening to undermine the equalizing potential of reforms. In short, policymakers complying with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive should recognize that without addressing the needs of workers with more peripheral attachment to the labor market, this generous policy instrument is poised to generate uneven social change.

This study contributes to broader debates on the evolution of South European welfare states within comparative social policy. Spain's paternity leave reform at once represents a significant break from 'familialism by default' and highlights divergent trajectories within the region. Unlike Italy and Greece, Spain and Portugal have embraced strong advocacy for gender equality, leading to the de-gendering of family leaves (Madama and Mercuri 2023; Meil et al. 2022). However, as our findings suggest, even the most ambitious reforms can be undermined by entrenched economic inequalities. The persistent dualization of labor markets and the lack of universal family benefits remain defining features of South European welfare states, threatening to dilute the impact of progressive reforms (see also Navarro-Varas & León 2023). Bold, yet isolated, reforms are thus entrenched in the socioeconomic inequalities that characterize the South European model. Rather than signaling a departure from 'familialism by default,' Spain's paternity leave reform should be seen as a step forward, but one still constrained by the lingering grip of familialism.

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