Japanese Journal of Political Science 9 (2) 161–182
doi:10.1017/S1468109908002971
Printed in the United Kingdom © Cambridge University Press

Politics of the Falling Birthrate in Japan

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Abstract

This study discusses the pattern of development of child-related policies, particularly in recent years. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lacks interest in public engagement in child-related issues, whereas Komeito, the recent coalition partner of the LDP, has been the driving force of recent developments. The study investigates the historical development of three child-related policies: namely, child allowance, childcare services, and the facilitation of work–life balance of employees, and discusses the role of Komeito in the recent coalition government. An analytical model is provided to explain why Komeito was active in the development of child allowance, but not other policies. On the whole, the participation of Komeito in the coalition government seems to give impetus to the development of child-related polices, but the scope of that party's behavior is constrained, due to its position as a minor partner in the coalition government.

1. Introduction

Japan has faced a seriously falling birthrate (shoshika in Japanese) in recent decades. Since the second baby boom in the mid-1970s, the total fertility rate of Japanese women has been on the decline. The problem has been mentioned from time to time since then, but mostly as a part of the problem of the aging population (koreika), and hence receiving limited focus. The words 'shoshi' and 'shoshika' appeared in Diet discussion in the 1970s, but at this time they were used to describe the falling number of children per household, and it was not until 1988 that the word was first used in the Diet as the falling number of children *in the whole society*.

By 1990, the problem was widely recognized. The previous year, the total fertility rate had dropped to lower than 1.58, which was the lowest recorded in the post-war period.[1] In response, in 1994, the government launched the 'Angel Plan', which received

[1] The record was marked in 1966, the year called 'Hinoe-uma'. 'Hinoe-uma' comes every 60 years, and it was widely believed that those girls born in that year would bring evil to their family. Therefore, many Japanese preferred to avoid childbirth in that particular year.

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the agreement of four ministers and demonstrated the political direction of socially supporting childcare.

Prior to the 1990s, the government had not seemed very interested in solving the problem. In fact, as late as 1996, the Japanese government answered to an international survey that it viewed its population size and growth as 'Satisfactory' and that there was a 'No intervention' policy on population growth.[2] However, since the late 1990s, government commitment to tackle the problem has grown. The Angel Plan was revised and the New Angel Plan established in 1999, with the added commitment of two new ministers. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) published a new plan (shoshika taisaku purasu wan) in 2002, which led to the establishment of the basic law on the measures for society with regard to the falling birthrate (shoshika shakai taisaku kihon ho), and to the formal legal basis for government action to counter the falling birthrate. The law established the Council for the Society of Falling Birthrate, which is chaired by the Prime Minister and is attended by all cabinet members. In 2003, a special minister to tackle the problem was appointed for the first time in the history. Based on the assumption that improvement of public support for childcare should promote childbirth, the level of child allowance was raised and the scope of its beneficiaries extended. The supply of nursery care was increased, and various legal arrangements made to facilitate the work–life balance of parent workers. Despite these efforts, however, the problem has yet to be solved. The total fertility rate has continued to go down, and reached 1.25 in 2005.

The main aim of this study is to discuss the pattern of development of child-related policies, particularly in recent years, as a reason for the lack of effectiveness of governmental effort. It is true that multiple factors inhibit childbirth, and the degree of the contribution by government is intrinsically limited, but the study holds that improvement in public policies should promote childbirth, as assumed by the government. In other words, the government has contributed to the continuously falling birthrate, at least to some extent. The present study does not to conduct an 'economic analysis'; that is, it does not investigate the causal relations between particular policy measures and their outcomes as frequently found in the literature.[3] Rather, the

[2] United Nations, *World Population Policies 2005* (Geneva: United Nations, 2006), p. 264.

[3] Higuchi Yoshio, 'Ikujikyugyo seido no jissho bunseki' [Empirical Analysis of the Childcare Leave System], in Shakaihoshokenkyujo (ed.), *Gendai kazoku to shakai hosho* [Contemporary Family and Social Security] (Tokyo: Tokyodaigaku Shuppankai, 1994), pp. 181–204; Morita Yoko, 'Kosodate ni tomonau disuinsentibuno kanwasaku' [Measures to Relax Disincentives of Childcare], in Higuchi Yoshio and Policy Research Institute of Ministry of Finance (eds), *Shoshika to nihon no keizaishakai* [Falling Birthrate and Japanese Economy and Society] (Tokyo: Nihonhyoronsha, 2006), pp. 49–80; Shigeno Yukiko, 'Shuro to shussan, ikuji no ryoritsu – kigyo no ikuji shien to hoikujo no shusseiritsu kaifuku heno kouka' [Balancing Employment, Childbirth and Childcare – the Effect of Corporate Support and Nursery School on the Recovery of the Birthrate], in Higuchi Yoshio and Policy Research Institute of Ministry of Finance, pp. 81–114; Yukiko Shigeno and Katsumi Matsuura, 'The Effects of Child-Care Leave, Working Hours and Day Nurseries on Fertility in Japan', *Osaka City University Economic Review*, 39: 97–113.

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study complements the literature by introducing an assessment of power-oriented political factors. Specifically, it is argues that the ineffectiveness of governmental effort to counter the falling birthrate in recent years highlights the power structure of the coalition government comprised of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) as the major partner and Komeito[4] as the minor partner, at least to some extent. The LDP, the dominant government party for most of the postwar period, apparently lacks interest in public engagement in child-related issues. Traditionally, child-related policies tended to be used to gain immediate electoral stability, and they often seemed to be superficial, and hence ineffective. It is not a coincidence that the were some developments in child-related policies after Komeito, which regards itself as a 'party of welfare', was invited to form a coalition government. Nevertheless, the party's behavior often seems to be opportunistic. It was very anxious for the development of certain policies, particularly child allowance, but does not seem so regarding other child-related policies, hence leaving their ineffectiveness uncorrected.

Coalition governments have been a popular subject in the literature of political science. A major approach to the subject is to apply game theories to discuss the behavior of political parties, assuming that they make rational choices. The present study follows this approach. While major studies in the literature focus on the formation, composition, and durability of a coalition,[5] this study explores the operation of a coalition government, specifically how Komeito, as a minor coalition partner, behaves in the coalition government. In other words, it is not about bargaining to form a coalition, but bargaining to operate a coalition.

In the literature of Japanese politics, the distribution of power in the policy-making process has been questioned for a long time, namely 'Who governs Japan?'[6] Traditionally, the most heated discussion in this regard has been on the power balance between bureaucrats and the LDP politicians.[7] The literature has also investigated

[4] Komeito once dissolved in 1994 and reunited in 1998. The formal English name of the party after the reunion is New Komeito. To avoid confusion, however, only Komeito is used here. It should be noted that the formal Japanese name is Komeito even after 1998.

[5] William Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); Abram de Swaan, *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973); Michael Laver and Norman Schofield, *Multiparty Government: The Politics of Coalition in Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Carol Mershon, *The Costs of Coalition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[6] Maurice Wright, 'Who Governs Japan? Politicians and Bureaucrats in the Policy-making Processes', *Political Studies*, 47: 939–54.

[7] Chalmers J. Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); Michio Muramatsu and Ellis S. Krauss, 'The Conservative Policy Line and the Development of Patterned Pluralism', in Kozo Yamamura and Yasukichi Yasuda (eds), *The Political Economy of Japan, Volume 1: The Domestic Transformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 516–54; T.J. Pempel, 'The Unbundling of "Japan Inc.": The Changing Dynamics of Japanese Policy Formation', in Kenneth B. Pyle (ed.), *The Trade Crisis: How will Japan Respond?* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1987); Kent Calder, *Crisis and Compensation: Public Policy and Political Stability in Japan 1949–1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); J. Mark Ramseyer and Frances McCall Rosenbluth, *Japan's Political Marketplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Yoshida

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the distribution of power within the LDP, that is between the Prime Minister, factions, and policy specialist groups called zoku.[8] In contrast, little attention has been paid to the power relations within the coalition government. Although a number of studies investigate the operation of the coalition government in Japan,[9] there is considerable room for further development. The present study aims at contributing to that development, approaching the operation of the coalition government from a new point of view, i.e. interpreting the behavior of a minor coalition partner.

The study is organized as follows. In order to understand the level of public engagement in Japan, the next section provides an overview of the recent birthrate and of child-related policies compared with other developed countries. The third and fourth sections discuss the attitudes of the LDP and Komeito to child-related policies respectively. The fifth section observes the development of major child-related policies to aid understanding of the role of the LDP and Komeito in the policy-making process. Following on, the sixth section provides an analytical model to discuss how the behavior of Komeito as a minor coalition partner may be interpreted. This is followed by the concluding section.

2. The falling birthrate and relevant policies in comparison

As noted above, Japan's birthrate in 2005 was the lowest for the postwar period. However, the decline in the birthrate does not only occur in Japan, but also in other developed countries. According to the data of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the average birthrate of its members went down from 1.97 in 1983 to 1.6 in 2002.[10] Only the United States, Mexico, and Turkey exceeded

Kazuo, *Kanryo hokai: Atarashii kanryozo wo motomete* [Bureaucracy Collapse: Seeking a New Image of Bureaucracy] (Tokyo: Nihonhyoronsha, 1997); Francesco Paolo Cerase, 'Japanese Bureaucracy in Transition: Regulating Deregulation', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 68(4: 629–47; Shimizu Masato, *Kantei shudo – Koizumi Junichiro no kakumei* [Leadership by Prime Minister's Office – the Revolution of Junichiro Koizumi] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 2005).

[8] Inoguchi Takashi and Iwai Tomoaki, *Zoku Giin no Kenkyu* [Research on Tribe Diet Members] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 1987); Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Leonard J. Schoppa, 'Zoku Power and LDP Power: A Case Study of the Zoku Role in Education Policy', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 17 (1): 79–106; Shinoda Tomohito, *Kantei no Kenryoku* [Power of the Prime Minister's Office] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho, 1996); Eric C. Browne and Sunwoong Kim, 'Factional Rivals and Electoral Competition in a Dominant Party: Inside Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, 1958–1990', *European Journal of Political Research*, 42: 107–34; Benoit Leduc, 'The Anatomy of the Welfare-Zoku: The Institutional Complementarity of the Party Commissions and the National Reform Councils in LDP Decision Making', *Pacific Affairs*, 76 (4): 569–92; Takayasu Kensuke, 'Prime-Ministerial Power in Japan: A Re-Examination', *Japan Forum*, 17 (1): 163–84.

[9] See, for example, the special issue of *Leviathan* entitled 'Renritsu seiken ka no seitou saihen to seisaku kettei' [Reorganization of Party System and Policy-Making under Coalition Government] (Tokyo: Mokutakusha, 1998); Robert Pekkanen, 'Japan's New Politics: The Case of the NPO Law', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 26 (1): 111–143; Aurelia George Mulgan, 'The Dynamics of Coalition Politics in Japan', *Asia Pacific Review*, 7 (2): 66–85; Shigenobu Tamura, Norio Toyoshima, Yoshito Koeda and Fumio Niwa, *Nihon no renritsu seiken* [Coalition Government in Japan] (Tokyo: Shingaku shuppan, 2005).

[10] OECD, *Society at a Glance: OECD Social Indicators – 2005 Edition* (Paris: OECD, 2005).

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2.0 in 2002, while Japan ranked twenty-first among the OECD members for that year. The demographic structure is more remarkable. In 2000, the share of youth (0–14 years) in the total population was 14.6% in Japan, the second lowest next to Italy (14.3%) among OECD member countries.[11]

All OECD members applied various policy measures to support families with children, although the majority of them think that their policies do not aim at population growth. Those measures are largely divided into three types. The first is income support for families with children through tax benefits and/ or cash transfers. The cost of living is increased when a child is added to a family. Moreover, the care of the child often prevents at least one family member (usually the mother) from working regularly. Therefore, income support is supposed to reduce the reluctance of families to have children. Secondly, many countries provide childcare services, which are funded wholly or partially from public financial resources. This reduces the workload of households, which may improve the physical and mental health of family caretakers. It may also create the possibility for more family members to be engaged in outside work. Finally, certain measures are taken to facilitate work–life balance of employees with children, such as childcare leave, entitlement to part-time/flexitime work, and encouragement of employers to provide their own childcare services for employees.

All those measures exist in Japan now. According to the OECD,[12] child allowance as a percentage of gross earnings of an average production worker was 3.6% in 2003 in Japan. This was much lower than other major Western countries (10.6% in the United States, 14.1% in the United Kingdom, 8.5% in France, 11.4% in Germany), only exceeding Spain (3.2%) and South Korea (0.2%) from the list of the OECD members. With regard to childcare, the share of children below the age of three registered in formal childcare centers was 18% in 2001 in Japan.[13] The figure was not too low, but it was still lower than the average of OECD members (23%). Similarly, the duration of legalized maternity and childcare leave was 58 weeks in 2003 in Japan, which is not extremely low but lower than the OECD average – 80 weeks.[14]

The ratio of child-related public expenditure to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 0.6% in 2001 in Japan, which was far lower than the OECD average (1.9%). The ratio of child-related public expenditure to elderly related public expenditure was 8.2%, which was lower than all other countries except Mexico and Spain. Presumably, this was, at least partly, because the size of young population was relatively small, but it should be noted that the correlation between the demographic structure and the budget structure was not remarkable among OECD members.

[11] United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision Population Database (Geneva: United Nations, 2003).

[12] OECD, *Extending Opportunities: How Active Social Policy Can Benefit Us All* (Paris: OECD, 2005), p. 76.

[13] Herwig Immervoll and David Barber, *Can Parents Afford to Work? Childcare Costs, Tax-Benefit Policies and Work Incentives*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper 31 (Paris: OECD, 2005), p. 13.

[14] OECD, *Society at a Glance.*

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In short, the Japanese government has not been negligent on family matters, but the level of public engagement was, at least several years ago, relatively low compared with other developed countries. In fact, as already states, it was only recently that the Japanese government established a formal legislative framework to act against the falling birthrate. To understand the historical lack of active public engagement, the next section discusses the attitude of the LDP toward child-related policies.

3. The LDP and child-related policies

The LDP has been in the government since 1955 – apart from a short break of only 11 months from 1993 to 1994 – and it is no wonder that the development of the child-related policies in Japan has reflected the attitude of the LDP. Although the LDP has made some engagement, there are many reasons to assume that the party has been until recently little motivated to conduct child-related policies. First of all, the LDP is a conservative party, and although the Japanese conservative government does not recognise the significance of public engagement in welfare policy, it is not motivated by ideology but rather by the need to overcome political crisis.[15] According to Campbell,[16] Japanese social policy, at least until the 1980s, was seen as the product of conflicts among particular actors pursuing particular goals at particular times, lacking a clear-cut, long-term struggle like that found in the labor movement in Europe. This does not only explain why the level of Japanese welfare policy is generally high at least compared with the United States, but also explains why Japanese welfare policy is heavily biased toward the welfare of elderly. The LDP persistently gains more stable support from the elderly than from young people.[17] Voters tend to give more stable support to the LDP as they get older. Furthermore, the voter turnout is much higher among elderly than among young people. For example, voter turnout in a recent election among those in their sixties and seventies was 77%, while that among those in their twenties and thirties was 43%.[18]

As a conservative party, the LDP also seems to be reluctant to undertake policies that threaten the traditional family model in which mothers take care of children at home. The following statement by Masajuro Shiokawa, the education minister of the LDP government in 1987, clearly represents such a sentiment: 'It would be good for ladies to participate in the society when they finish bringing up their children, but I wish they would stay with children as much as possible until then.'[19] More recently,

[15] Kent Calder, *Crisis and Compensation.*

[16] John C. Campbell, *How Policies Change: The Japanese Government and the Aging Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 371.

[17] Maeda Yukio, 'Saikin no jijiseronchosa ni okeru seito shijiritsu to naikaku shijiritsu [Party Support and Cabinet Support in the Recent Opinion Survey]', *Chuochosaho*, 581, Online: http://www.crs.or.jp/58111.htm

[18] The data are for the 43rd election for the House of Representatives, according to the Association for Promoting Fair Elections, *Dai 43 kai shugiin sosenkyo ni okeru nenreibetsu tohyoritsu* [Voter Turnout by Age in the 43rd Election for the House of Representatives] (Tokyo: Association for Promoting Fair Elections, 2004). Online: http://www.akaruisenkyo.or.jp/various/09/index.html

[19] Masajuro Shiokawa, Education committee, House of Representative, 26 May 1987.

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Yoshiro Mori, then chairman of the policy research council for the falling birthrate, argued that 'it is strange to take care of women without any child by tax money when they get old'[20]. While many other LDP members nowadays express a more liberal view on family, the party as a whole still seems to stress the responsibility of family (mostly women) for childcare, minimizing public intervention.

It should also be noted that the LDP is traditionally a very masculine party. The share of female members in the House of Representatives is currently 8.8%. This is lower than most of the other parties, although the figure before the last election was even lower (3.8%) than the current level. It is not clear whether the increase in the last election is a sign of a long-term trend or just a temporary phenomenon. The gender bias is even clearer when the party's appointment of ministers and party leaders is observed. There had been only three female ministers up till 1988, since when the number of female ministers has increased, but before Junichiro Koizumi became the Prime Minister no more than two at the same time. A woman has never been appointed to the leadership of the party, or even to any of the party's three important positions (the chief secretary, the chairman of the Policy Research Council, and the chairman of the General Council), which are regarded as the gateway to the party leader. According to Kanter, a change in the sex ratios may lead to disproportionate awareness of female workers' performance, exaggeration of gender differences, and overemphasis on stereotyped views about women.[21] Similarly, Mikanagi argued that a larger proportion of female Diet members may increase the probability that the policy agenda will reflect more of the interests of women, even though different women make different policy choices for many other reasons.[22] From these perspectives, the small share of female members explains why the LDP often seems to adhere to the traditional family model.

In fact, until very recently, the LDP has been reluctant to include the issue of the falling birthrate in its campaign pledge. The party mentioned the issue for the first time in the election campaign in 2005, but the pledge did not include any specific target as did those of the other parties. Reflecting on the pledge, the Prime Minister stressed the importance of the issue of the falling birthrate in his administrative policy speech in 2006. However, it had previously been reported that the initial draft of the speech had not put much weight on the issue,[23] and the content was changed after concern was expressed about this.

The attitude of the LDP corresponds with that of the party's most important source of supporters: business interests. The falling birthrate is considered as a serious issue in the business world, but it tends to be given low priority. For instance, it was as late as 2005 that Nippon Keidanren, the largest business association in Japan, established a committee to discuss the falling birthrate. As Nobuo Yamaguchi, the chairman of Japan

[20] *Tokyo Shimbun*, 4 July 2003.
[21] Rosabeth M. Kanter, 'Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women', *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (5): 965–90.
[22] Mikanagi Yumiko, *Josei to seiji* [Women and politics] (Tokyo: Shinhyoron, 1999), pp. 88–9.
[23] *Mainichi Shimbun*, 16 January 2006.

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Chamber of Commerce and Industry stated, 'we agreed that the falling birthrate is a most important issue, but it is not to be solved urgently and other issues come first'.[24]

In general, business interests are concerned about two problems caused by the falling birthrate. First, falling birthrate means increasing share of the elderly in the future, which may well increase the burden of social security expenses such as health care, elderly care and pension, and thus discourage domestic consumption. Second, it reduces the supply of domestic human resources. At least theoretically, those two problems can be solved without the raising birthrate, and business leaders often prefer such solutions. The solution most frequently argued for to solve the first problem is the structural reform of the public sector. From this viewpoint, public intervention must be reduced even further rather than increased. As for the second problem, some business leaders, most notably Hiroshi Okuda, often argue for the relaxation of the currently strict immigration policy and the development of information technology to respond to future shortage of human resources.[25]

It is true that more and more companies are becoming active in supporting the work–life balance of their employees as a part of corporate social responsibility, but it is also widely recognized that it is difficult for employees to balance their work and family life in Japan. A recent survey showed that only 30% of those women employed one year before childbirth continued their job after childbirth,[26] which implies that the support of employers was not very effective. Yet many employers do not seem to try to improve the situation on their own. The sentiment of business interests may be summarized by the following comment of Fujio Mitarai, the chairman of Nippon Keidanren from 2006: 'Economic support and working treatment have limited effects on the falling birthrate. It is troublesome to blame society and businesses for everything.'[27]

In short, the falling birthrate is not an issue the LDP is willing to challenge, and the attitude of business interests seems to make the party even more reluctant to give priority to the issue. Other explanations are therefore needed to understand the motives that have led the government to pursue child-related policies in recent years. One explanation is increased public concern about the issue. For instance, a survey of the Cabinet Office in 2004 indicated that 76.7% of the respondents felt a sense of crisis about the falling birthrate,[28] although some observers stressed the benefits from a

[24] *Nikkan Kogyo Shimbun*, 17 May 2006.

[25] For example, see Nippon Keidanren, *Keizai 3 dantai kyosai sinnen shukuga pati go no kyodo kishakaiken ni okersu okuda kaicho hatsugen yoshi* [Summary of the speech of the chairman Okuda at the press conference after the new year celebration party held by thee business associations] (Tokyo: Nippon Keidanren, 2005), Online. http://www.keidanren.or.jp/japanese/speech/kaiken/2005/0105.html

[26] Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *'Shussei zengo no shugyo henka ni kansuru tokei' no gaikyo – Jinko dotai shokugyo sangyo betsu tokei to 21seiki shusseiji judan chosa no rinkeji bunseki* [The Overview of 'The Statistics of the Change in Employment before and after Childbirth' – the Linkage Analysis of the Statistics of Population Dynamics by Work and Industry and the Chronological Survey on Childbirth in the 21st Century] (Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2004).

[27] *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 5 January 2006.

[28] Cabinet Office, *Shoshika taisaku ni kansuru tokubetsu yoron chosa* [Special Survey on the Countermeasures to Falling Birthrate] (Tokyo: Cabinet Office, 2004), Online: http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/tokubetu/h16-syousika.pdf

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reduction in the population.[29] Provided that the impact of public support on the LDP's social policy-making remains as strong as it was in the 1970s[30] , it is possible that public opinion pushes the government to pursue relevant policies. However, high concern alone does not instruct politicians on how to deal with the issue. While recent policy development often appears to follow the experiences of Western developed countries, the above same survey showed that the share of those who thought that 'the policies of Western countries would not be effective in Japan because the birthrate differs according to nationality and the behavior of marriage and childbirth in each country' is nearly as high (32.2%) as the share of those who thought that 'Japan should import the policies of Western countries because they seem to be effective' (33.2%). If the government were swayed by public opinion, its policy output would be different from what it is shown to be in Section 5. Against this background, it is necessary to consider the possibility of another explanation: the demands of Komeito as the coalition partner of the LDP, at least in recent years.

4. Komeito as the 'party of welfare'

Komeito first appeared in the Diet in 1965, with 14 members in the House of Councilors. An important characteristic of the party was that it 'has no roots in the labor movement, and its ideology was grounded on religious principles and not in a theory of class conflict'.[31] The party was largely supported by the members of its founder, Sokagakkai, a sect of Buddhism which mainly consisted of 'urban dwellers who were being left behind in Japan's race for double-digit GNP growth: nonunionized workers in small factories, marginal small businessmen, shop clerks, bar hostesses – uprooted and unfortunate people who were promised health and wealth in this world in return for their faith'.[32] Given such characteristics of its supporters, it is not surprising that the party emphasized the development of social welfare. In fact, the party has promoted 'peace and welfare' as its slogans since its establishment.

The party has a higher number of women members than the LDP. The share is 12.9% in the House of Representatives as of 2006. The corresponding figure in the House of Councilors is even higher (20.8%). Also, it is widely recognized that the female followers of Sokagakkai play a crucial role in organizing electoral support for the party.[33] However, the party leadership has been dominated by male members, with only a few exceptions. The party has so far sent 11 members to the cabinet, but only two of them are women.

The party was not an issue-oriented party like the Greens in European politics, in the sense that it did not gain systematic support from groups representing the interests of social welfare. The profile of 'the party of peace and welfare' is important to Komeito,

[29] Wada Hideki (2006) 'Jinko gensho de hanei ka suibo ka [Will Japan Prosper or Decline with The Population Reduction?]', *Bungeishunju*, 84 (7) (May 2006): 151–54.
[30] John C. Campbell, *How Policies Change*, p. 367.
[31] Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics*, p. 24.
[32] Ibid. p. 25.
[33] *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 23 April 2006.

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presumably because it helps reduce public concern that the party is a means by which Sokagakkai can exert control over the government. While the party has never shed its welfare profile, it has shown great flexibility with regard to the peace profile from time to time. Although the party has often allied itself with the Socialist Party to oppose the security policy of the LDP government until the 1980s, it supported the LDP against the Socialist Party when the government discussed participation in the Gulf War in 1990. This coincided with the announcement of the party leader that he was disappointed with the traditional opposition alliance and considered a new alliance with the LDP.[34] More recently, Komeito agreed to the dispatch of Self Defense Forces to Iraq, although somewhat reluctantly. It also supported the LDP in the plan to develop the Defense Agency into a ministry in 2005. While the agreement to the LDP government does not necessarily mean violation of the peace profile, the party seems to be less consistent and more strategic in its policies than other parties. In light of this, it is not surprising that the party is equally flexible and strategic with regard to welfare.

In fact, Komeito is not always willing to stress its profile as the 'party of welfare'. For instance, the party sent four members to the Hosokawa cabinet in 1993 and six members to the Hata cabinet in 1994, but none of them was the Minister of Health and Welfare. According to Hiromu Nonaka, the then Deputy Secretary General of the LDP, the LDP offered the post of the Health and Welfare Minister to Komeito when the LDP first invited the party to form a coalition government. Nonetheless, the party declined the offer because it wanted to avoid the image that Komeito was only concerned about welfare.[35] The party apparently changed that strategy when Tsutomu Sakaguchi, the only cabinet member from the party, became the Minister of Health, Welfare and Labor from 2000 to 2004. However, it firmly rejected the offer of the same ministery when Sakaguchi was to be replaced, for the position was very tough and not very much rewarding.[36]

This episode also supports the view that Komeito's welfare profile is more strategic than ideological. In that sense, Komeito is similar to the LDP, although it is more anxious for public engagement in social welfare. If this is a correct interpretation, how has it affected the policy-making process with regard to the falling birthrate? To answer this question, the development of relevant policies is explored in the next section.

5. The development of child-related policies

This section follows the development of child-related policies to see how specific policies were developed under the past LDP government, and whether/ how the pattern of development has changed under the recent LDP–Komeito coalition government. Here, the focus is on three policies as the major child-related policies: child allowance, the provision of childcare services, and the facilitation of the work–life balance

[34] Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics*, pp. 263–70.
[35] *Mainichi Shimbun*, 12 October 1999.
[36] *Sankei Shimbun*, 8 September 2004.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109908002971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of employees. This does not mean, however, that other policies are considered unimportant. For example, the promotion of marriage is also recognized as important, since the falling birthrate seems to owe much to recent tendencies of delaying or rejecting marriage among women in their reproductive years.[37] Nonetheless, to avoid further complications, it is not investigated in this paper.

Child allowance

Income support for families with children was already provided in 1920 in the form of a tax benefit for families with dependents, but it was not exclusively for families with children, or for families with low incomes, who did not pay enough tax to gain from the benefit. Against this background, a new support was required to address various socio-economic changes at that time, such as mitigation of the age-based wage curb, high inflation, and the growth in education and living costs.[38] Consequently, child allowance (jidoteate) was introduced in 1972. It should be noted that the falling birthrate was not the motive behind the development at that time. In fact, the number of births was on the increase in the early 1970s, which was labeled as the 'second baby boom'. The total fertility rate from 1970 to 1974 was 2.12, which was higher than that in the previous decade, even without the 'Hinoe-uma' year (2.07).[39]

Apart from socio-economic factors, the LDP needed to introduce welfare policies at that time 'in response to previous moves by progressive local governments and in anticipation of the upcoming national elections where LDP success was problematic'.[40] While free medical care for the aged was the most remarkable benefit in that respect, child allowance can be understood in the same way. In addition, child allowance was regarded as necessary for Japan to complete social security as a developed country, even though it was not adopted in the United States. The annual report of the Ministry of Health and Welfare emphasized that as many as 62 countries had adopted such allowance.[41]

However, the LDP government seemed to be very cautious about the introduction of child allowance. The discussion on child allowance had already started in 1960, but it was not until 1968 that the first proposal was published. It took another three years to get the bill passed in the Diet. Furthermore, policy output reflected the hesitation of the Japanese government in public engagement with child-related policies. Although the

[37] For instance, see Cabinet Office, Shoshika shakai hakusho, Heisei 16 nen ban [White paper on the society of falling birthrate, 2004 edition] (Tokyo: Cabinet Office, 2005), Online: http://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/whitepaper/w-2004/html-h/index.html

[38] Yokoyama Kazuhiko, 'Jido teate seido no seido kaikaku' [The Reform of the Chid Allowance System], in Yokoyama and Tada Hidenori (eds), *Nihon shakai hosho no rekishi* [The History of Social Security in Japan] (Tokyo: Gakubunsha, 1991).

[39] The calculation excludes the 'Hinoe-uma' year. The figure is 2.02 when that year is included.

[40] Kent Calder, *Crisis and Compensation*, p. 372.

[41] Ministry of Health and Welfare, *Koseihakusho* [Annual Report of Health and Welfare] *1971* (Tokyo: Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1972). Online: http://wwwhakusyo.mhlw.go.jp/wpdocs/hpaz197101/body.html

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109908002971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proposal in 1968 envisaged that all families with children should be provided with child allowance, the minister did not adopt the idea and instead proposed that recipients should be limited to families with more than two children. Furthermore, an income limit was added to reduce the number of recipients who qualified for the allowance. With regard to the level of the allowance, it was 3,000 yen per month when the payment started in 1972. The rate was subsequently raised to 5,000 yen in 1975, but it did not seem to have much economic significance from the beginning, given the high inflation in those days.[42] A special rate was set for families with low incomes in 1978, but the rates of child allowance did not increase through the 1980s, when budget deficit and administrative reform were the predominant concerns of the government. It is true that recipients were extended to include families with two children in 1986, but the rate for the second child was half of the normal rate (2,500 yen). The period for payments was subsequently shortened to compensate for the increase in the number qualifying, and hence children in compulsory education no longer qualified after 1988. The reform in 1986 also abolished a special rate for families with low incomes, which had been adopted since 1978.

The LDP government took the initiative for further reform in 1990. As stated at the beginning, the total fertility rate became lower than the previous record in 1989. Another socio-economic factor was high economic growth from the late 1980s, which turned public interest away from economic development to social welfare. The era of budget deficit and administrative reform was over. As the annual report on lifestyle noted, 'now that our income level has risen enough to exceed the United States, we ask the meaning of true affluence'.[43] While such socio-economic factors were important, the political factor seemed to be decisive. The electoral support for the LDP was highly instable at that time, due to the establishment of value added tax and the revelation of large-scale political bribery in previous years. Corresponding to the fact that the LDP's political crisis was not as serious as in the early 1970s, however, policy development at that time was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the scope of recipients was extended to families with one child, and the rates of allowances were now doubled (5,000 yen for the first and second child and 10,000 yen for the third child and more). On the other hand, the period for payments was further reduced and children over the age of two were excluded.

The rates of allowance and the period for payments were left unchanged through the 1990s, despite growing public concern about the falling birthrate. A new initiative was made in 1998, when Komeito reunited and became a potential partner of the LDP. At that time, Komeito proposed the distribution of a purchase voucher. The party originally considered distribution to the whole public as a means to boost domestic consumption, but it was later convinced of focusing on families with children as well as the elderly and low income people. Although the LDP initially regarded it as

[42] Kita Akemi, 'Nihon no jidoteate seido no tenkai to henshitsu: Jo (The Development and Transformation of the Child Benefit System in Japan: Part I)', *Ohara shakaimondai kenkyujo zasshi*, 524, p. 20.

[43] Economic Planning Agency, *Annual report on lifestyle 1990* (Tokyo: Economic Planning Agency, 1990).

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'unworthy to consider',[44] the government eventually carried it out in order to attract the cooperation of Komeito in the Diet. The purchase voucher, however, only lasted six months, apparently because it was highly controversial. Thereafter, Komeito shifted its focus to child allowance. Although the rates of allowance remained the same, the period for payments was extended repeatedly (up to the entrance of compulsory school in 2000, to the third grade in 2004, and to the sixth grade in 2006). The income limit for qualification was raised in 2001 and again 2006. As a result, the number of recipients had increased from 2.4 million in 1999 to 13.1 million by 2006. The total budget expanded 5.4 times (160 billion yen to 860 billion yen) over the period. However, it should be noted that the tax credits that provided benefits to parents with dependent children under age 16 were removed in 2000. Therefore, the net benefit to families with children was offset to that extent.

'Economic support' is usually ranked high as a countermeasure to the falling birthrate in various opinion polls. For example, over 50% of the respondents to the survey of the Cabinet Office viewed the reduction in the economic burden of raising children positively.[45] However, the development of child allowance often encountered fierce criticism. There is considerable skepticism about the effectiveness of child allowance as a countermeasure to the falling birthrate. This was clearly shown by the controversy between Kuniko Inoguchi, the then minister to counter the falling birthrate, and her consultation committee in spring 2006. While she proposed the increase in economic support for families with very small children, most of the committee members (seven out of eight) opposed it.

Furthermore, it is widely recognized that the LDP accepted the reform of the child allowance system simply because Komeito requested it. In fact, the leaders of the LDP suddenly seemed to decide on the recent extensions of the period for payments after they had negotiated with the leaders of Komeito, without any consultation with welfare policy specialists within the party, the so-called Kosei-zoku. When the government decided the extension of the period for payments from 2004, a member of Kosei-zoku complained that 'it is too much service to Komeito'.[46] Likewise, the LDP leaders decided to further extend the period for payments by drawing finance for it from the tax on tobacco, without consulting tax specialists in the Fiscal System Council and the Tax System Council. Because of this, several members of the Fiscal System Council called the reform 'the cost of keeping the coalition'.[47]

Childcare services

Besides child allowance, the provision of childcare services is also an important child-related policy. While childcare services were largely based on voluntary treatment

[44] A comment of Kenzo Muraoka, the Chief Cabinet Secretary in early 1998, quoted from *Sankei Shimbun*, 24 December 1998.
[45] Cabinet Office, *Shoshika taisaku ni kansuru tokubetsu yoron chosa.*
[46] *Mainichi Shimbun*, 21 November 2003.
[47] *Tokyo Shimbun*, 28 December 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109908002971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

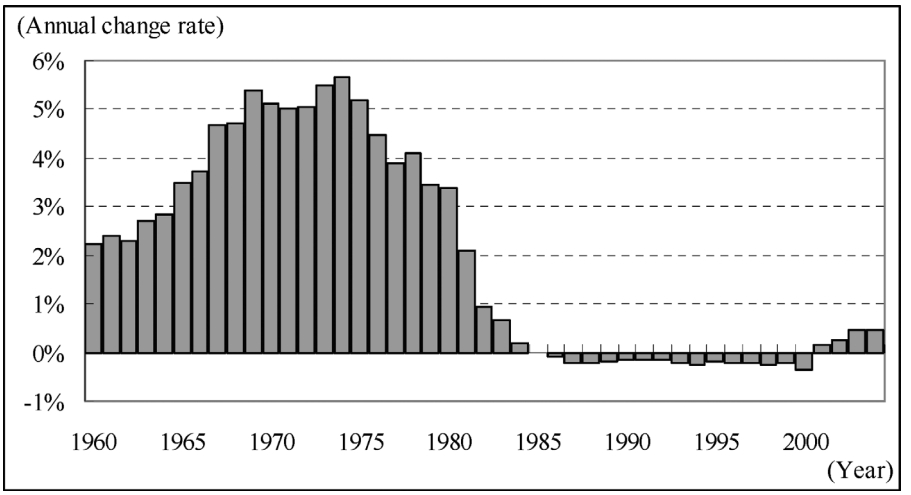

Figure 1 Annual change of the number of public day cares, 1960–2004.
Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Survey of Social Welfare Centers.

of benefactors before the war, day care was publicly institutionalized by Child Welfare Law in 1947 and increased thereafter. As Figure 1 indicates, the development of day care largely parallels that of child allowance shown above. The rate of annual change marked over 5% from the late 1960s to the 1970s, apparently reflecting the instability of the electoral support for the LDP in those days. The positive growth stopped in the 1980s, when the government primarily focused on the budget deficit and administrative reform. While day care kept decreasing in the 1990s, it has increased again in recent years. The reason for this is that the government launched a project to increase the capacity of nursery care in 2002. This 'no waiting children project' (taiki jido zero sakusen) was based on the proposal of Komeito in the previous year.

However, the increase in day care is not the only solution to reducing the number of children waiting for care. The unification of early childhood education and nursery care is also considered helpful. Many kindergartens have extra capacity as the number of pupils has reduced due to the falling birthrate. It would therefore be a good idea to mobilize that capacity as nursery care. Nevertheless, there has been strong resistance to such a development, in particular from the two ministries supervising day care centers (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare)[48] and kindergartens (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology)[49] respectively.

It is true that day care centers and kindergartens target different audiences with different interests. The quality of education is the prime interest of the users of kindergartens, typically fulltime housewives, while the availability of long-term care

[48] Ministry of Health and Welfare before the reorganization of government ministeries in 2001.
[49] Ministry of Education before the reorganization of government ministeries in 2001.

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is also important for the users of day care, typically working mothers. It is therefore understandable that the two ministries stress their differences for the sake of their respective users. However, it also seems that the ministries are motivated to avoid unification in order to preserve their own territories of supervision, which is often considered an important objective of bureaucrats.[50]

The debate on unification of nursery care and early childhood education had already started in the 1960s. However, the ministries made an agreement to confirm the difference between day care centers and kindergartens in 1963, and have kept to it firmly ever since. The Administrative Management Agency conducted an administrative inspection and recommended settling the debate in 1975, but it only led to regular discussions between the ministries, and did not lead to any change.

The Angel Plan in 1994 referred to the development of childcare services as an important policy measure, but it was only concerned with the development of the services provided by day care centers and not by kindergartens. Nevertheless, the demand for unification seemed to have grown. Reflecting the fact that the falling birthrate has been more acute in the countryside, it was the Decentralization Promotion Committee that argued for unification in the context of the falling birthrate for the first time in 1996. This was followed by the second administrative inspection by the Management and Coordination Agency in 1998.

Against that background, the discussion on unification started at the political level in 1999, the year when Komeito entered into the coalition government. The promotion of regulatory reform by the government under Junichiro Koizumi gave further impetus. In 2003, the Council for Regulatory Reform recommended the establishment of childcare centers unifying nursery care and early childhood education. To respond to the recommendation, the two councils belonging to the respective ministries (Social Security Council and Central Education Council) held a common discussion on the issue for the first time in history. The two ministries also made an historic personnel exchange, appointing their own staff in responsible positions to each other's ministries. The pilot project started in 2005, and the Diet passed the relevant law in 2006.

However, it should be noted that the law only allows the establishment of newly accredited child centers (nintei kodomo en) with unified nursery care and education, while it does not make any change to existing day care centers and kindergartens. New child centers are regarded as either a variant of day care or a variant of kindergartens. The two ministries supervise separately, providing their own subsidies, following their own guidelines. It is true that a new law approves the establishment of child centers accredited by local authorities, but it was not clear who takes charge of the supervision of those centers at national level. In short, the fundamental division between the two ministries remains. No incentive is provided for existing day care centers/kindergartens to change into new child centers, at least at national level. It is not clear, at least so far,

[50] For a classic analysis of bureaucratic behavior, see William A. Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Public Economics* (revised edition) (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109908002971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whether this is the first step for true unification, or just the creation of another source of bureaucratic complication.

Facilitation of the work–life balance of employees

To facilitate the work–life balance of employees with children, the Labor Standard Law in 1947 provided maternity leave for female employees, but no further steps were considered for the next 25 years. A development occurred in the early 1970s, when other child-related policies also developed. The Working Women Welfare Law in 1972 referred to childcare leave, suggesting it should be considered by employers for female workers, although employers were not obliged to allow childcare leave when requested. In 1975, the government started to give subsidies to encourage employers to allow childcare leave spontaneously. In the same year, the first law providing obligatory childcare leave was established, although it only concerned female workers at schools, hospitals, and welfare centers.

In parallel with other policies, this policy did not develop further. In 1982 the Socialist Party, the largest opposition party in those days, continuously proposed extending childcare leave and gained support from other opposition parties in 1987. Nonetheless, the proposal never materialized in the 1980s.

It seems that the socio-economic and political factors that drove the reform of child allowance in the early 1990s also promoted the establishment of a general childcare leave system. The Childcare Leave Law in 1991 extended legal entitlement to all female and male workers. The law also provided for the duty of employers to offer such measures as part-time work, flexitime, no overtime, and nursing services to those who do not choose childcare leave and to those who take care of children under three years old. Those firms with 30 employees or less were exempt from the duty at the beginning, but that exemption was removed in 1995. In that year, the Unemployment Insurance Law was reformed so as to compensate a part of salary (currently 40%) for those who take childcare leave.

The law underwent further reforms in 1999, 2002, and 2005, obviously accelerated after the launch of the LDP–Komeito coalition government. Late night work and overtime work by those with preschool children were prohibited in 1999 and 2002 respectively. The reform in 2002 also added the provision that employers should make an effort to help those who take care of preschool children with such measures as additional childcare leave and part-time work. After the reform in 2005, childcare leave was extended to one and a half years on condition that it was not possible to find day care within one year, or that her/his partner, who is expected to take care of children after one year, cannot fulfill his/her task for such reasons as sickness, injury or death. The eligibility for childcare leave was also extended to those temporary employees who had worked for over a year and who are expected to work a year after childbirth. Moreover, employers became obliged to permit temporary leave for taking care of sick or injured child/children five days per year.

The government apparently became more active in promoting the work–life balance after 2001, when the law adopted the provision on the duty of the government

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to take the necessary measures to increase the understanding of employers, workers, and the general public about work–life balance (Article 33). The MHLW published numerical targets for the achievement of childcare leave and other human resource practices supporting work–life balance as a part of its action plan in 2002,[51] which was also included in a more comprehensive plan approved by the cabinet in the following year.[52] According to the targets, it was expected that 10% of male workers and 80% of female workers should take childcare leave and that 25% of employers should offer temporary leave for sick/injured children, as well as undertake other work–life balance measures, such as part-time work for the parents of preschool children. To achieve this, the government offered various subsidization programs to help employers facilitate the work–life balance of their workers. Furthermore, the Next Generation Law in 2003 required all employers with more than 300 workers to establish such a plan. The plan and its achievements must be reported to the local authority, which then gives certification. Consequently, work–life balance arrangements gradually became common. According to a survey on female employment in October 2004,[53] the share female workers taking childcare leave was 70.6%, 6.6 points higher than the result of the previous survey (64.0%) in 2002.

Nevertheless, as stated earlier, we should remember that only 30% of those employed one year before childbirth continued their employment after childbirth. This means that many female workers left their jobs instead of asking for childcare leave. It is also noteworthy that among entitled male workers only 0.56% took childcare leave. The female employment survey also showed that the share of employers who offered work–life balance measures such as part-time work to parents was 41.9%, but only 12.8% covered those workers with children three years and older. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents answered that they had put no such measures in place, even though they were legally obliged to do so, at least for those with children under three years old. Against these backgrounds, it is difficult to say that the recently developed governmental support is very effective, even though it seems to have improved the situation at least to some extent.

6. The strategic behavior of Komeito as a minor partner in the Japanese coalition government

As suggested in the first section, the recent development of child-related policies is interesting when considering the role of a minor coalition partner in the context of Japanese politics. In fact, all of the three cases examined in the last section indicate that child-related policies have developed remarkably since 1999, the year when

[51] Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *Shoshika taisaku purasu wan* [Policies for Falling Birthrate Plus One] (Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2002).

[52] Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *Jisedai ikusei shien ni kansuru tomen no torikumi hoshin* [Current Policies about the Support for the Upbringing of the Next Generation] (Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2003).

[53] Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *Heisei 16 nendo josei koyo kanri kihon chosa* [The Basic Survey on the Labor Management of Women in 2004] (Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005).

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Komeito became a coalition partner. However, only the first case, i.e. child allowance, demonstrated a remarkable contribution of Komeito to policy development. There was apparently no serious conflict between the coalition partners in the other two cases.

It is not clear why Komeito did not initiate further policy development in childcare services and the facilitation of work–life balance, despite various concerns mentioned above. It may be argued that the party was simply satisfied with current achievements, but it may also be argued that the party was unable, or at least reluctant, to cause further changes against the will of the LDP. It is not surprising that Komeito prioritizes participation in the coalition government over the achievement of individual policies, since it may well be highly important as a small party to stay in office for survival, particularly when two large parties are predominant. As discussed in the fourth section, furthermore, Komeito's concern with welfare seems to be more strategic than ideological. Hence the party does not seem to have much difficulty in making compromises.

This argument leads us to focus on the strategic behavior of Komeito as a minor partner in the Japanese coalition government. If Komeito finds a gap between its interests and those of the LDP, it has to consider whether to initiate a new policy debate, assessing how it affects their relationship with the LDP and with the electorate. In order to stay in office successfully, Komeito needs to maintain enough support from the electorate. At the same time, Komeito must sustain a good relation with the LDP as a minor coalition partner, unless the party is certain of gaining enough seats to outnumber the LDP.

When Komeito initiates a policy debate, the tolerance of the LDP may well be inversely proportional to the intensity of the debate. In other words, the more intensely Komeito debates against the LDP, the more intolerant the LDP becomes of having Komeito as its coalition partner. By contrast, the less intense Komeito's debate against the LDP, the less independence Komeito can demonstrate to the electorate, hence reducing electoral support. In order to maintain the tolerance of the LDP and also to gain enough support from the electorate, Komeito needs to adjust the intensity of its debate accordingly.

Figure 2 shows that process. L1 represents the relation between the intensity of Komeito's debate and the tolerance of the LDP, and E1 represents the relation between the intensity of Komeito's debate and the support of the electorate. L1 is downward-sloping, while E1 is upward-sloping. In order to balance the tolerance of the LDP and the support of the electorate, Komeito has to adjust the intensity of its debate to the level of Dp.

If this is the case for child allowance, what about childcare services and the facilitation of the work–life balance? It may be argued that the LDP is less tolerant to the counterargument of Komeito on the issue of childcare services, because it relates to resource allocation between the two ministries. The two ministries, respectively in charge of welfare and education, have their own groups of supporters (zoku) within the LDP. As a result, the issue may destabilize the unity of the party, for it easily causes

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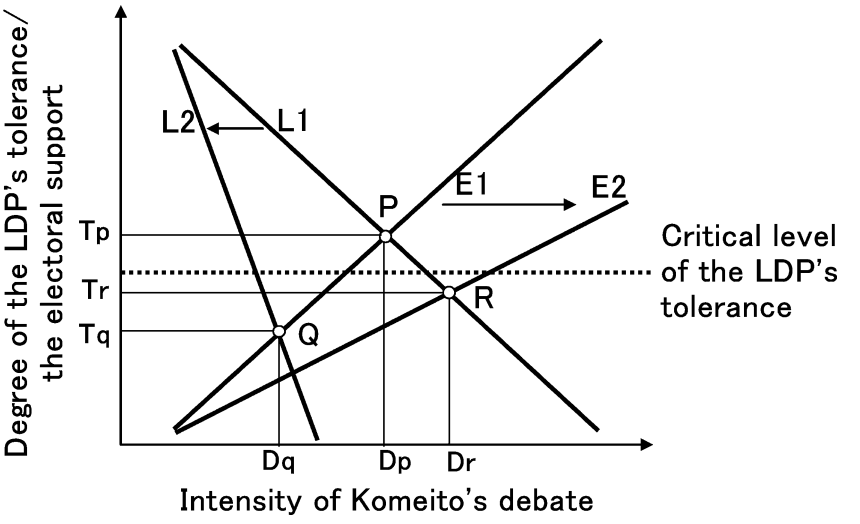

Figure 2 The decision-making model of Komeito as a minor coalition partner.

bitter dispute between those groups. In this case, the slope of intolerance of the LDP may well be steeper – L' instead of L. Then the balance point becomes Q, instead of P. In the case of the facilitation of work–life balance, on the other hand, the support line of the electorate may well be less steep than in the case of child allowance. After all, the facilitation of work–life balance is less visible to the electorate than child allowance. Given that a recent survey showed that the majority of the Japanese population did not support the idea that women should continue to work after childbirth,[54] the electorate as a whole may not appreciate effort to promote development in that policy field as much as effort to arrange financial support, no matter how effective it is at promoting childbirth. In this case, therefore, the balance point is R instead of P.

It is safe for Komeito to refrain from initiating such a debate that would end up with the balance point below the level at which the LDP loses its tolerance. With reference to the three balance points discussed above, such a critical level of tolerance seem to lie between P (Tp) and R (Tr) as shown with the dotted line. After all, Komeito is active only in the case of child allowance and not in the other two cases. To put it another way, child allowance is the most convenient among child-related policies for Komeito to debate on, because it earns enough support from the electorate without making the LDP too intolerant. If Komeito wants to show its engagement in child-related policies to the electorate, it is not surprising that the party picks child allowance, according to the above analysis.

[54] Cabinet Office Japan, *Danjo kyodo sankaku shakai ni kansuru seron chosa* [The Survey on Equal Participation Society] (Tokyo: Cabinet Office Japan, 2005).

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It should be noted that the steepness of the slopes do not only depend on the characteristics of individual policies. The level of electoral support also depends on the degree of attention society pays to a policy, which changes for various socioeconomic reasons, as well as due to media coverage. In light of this, it is not surprising that Komeito started to stress its contribution to child-related policies on its participation in the coalition government, which was at the very time that the falling birthrate became so problematic as to draw much public attention.

With regard to the slope representing the LDP's tolerance, it becomes less steep if Komeito's argument is backed by bureaucrats, and the LDP leaders are convinced. The opposite case may also happen. On top of that, the LDP's tolerance relies on Komeito's electoral cooperation. In the majority voting system, Komeito does not field its own candidate in all constituencies, and often supports a candidate of the LDP instead. The supporters of Komeito are generally very united and loyal to the party (or rather Sokagakkai), so that such voter mobilization is possible and often very effective. The support of Komeito is particularly important in the election of the House of Representatives, which is mainly comprised of single-seat constituencies. In the election in 2005, for example, the winning percentage of the LDP candidates was 79.4% in the constituencies where Komeito gave official support. That is clearly higher than the percentage (56.8%) in the other constituencies, even though the LDP generally gained much popularity in that election.[55] The LDP's support line may also be less steep when the LDP wants to make negotiation on other issues. The LDP may also become more tolerant when it needs Komeito's agreement on other issues. This was particularly the case when Komeito when child allowance was extendedin 2005. It was widely suspected that the LDP approved of Komeito's argument in exchange for Komeito's approval of the promotion of the Defense Agency to a ministry. As Yukio Hatoyama, the chief secretary of the Democratic Party put it, 'the LDP and Komeito bartered child allowance for the promotion of the Defense Agency'.[56]

7. Conclusion

The falling birthrate is problematic because it is difficult to identify how much public policy may contribute. The current study started with the assumption that improvements in support for childcare should promote childbirth, but this could be wrong. The falling birthrate may not be stopped by any policy, and it may be useless to discuss the effectiveness of the policies as countermeasures. Nevertheless, we must be aware that the child-related policies mentioned above should contribute to the welfare of children and their families, whether they prevent the falling birthrate or not. As shown in the second section, the level of public contribution to child-related policies is relatively low in Japan among developed countries. Therefore, it is not surprising for Japan to conduct further development of child-related policies regardless of the

[55] *Tokyo Shimbun*, 4 October 2005.
[56] *Mainichi Shimbun*, 7 December 2005.

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birthrate, although it is debatable whether it is right to adopt the practices of other countries simply because many of them have them.

If the LDP fundamentally lacks interest in public engagement in child-related issues as discussed in the third section, the party may reduce current commitment when the birthrate improves, or when no policy turns out to be effective. It is not clear if Komeito will continue to be a driving force, even if it remains in the government, if that party's welfare profile is more strategic than ideological, as discussed in the fourth section. As examined in the fifth section, all of the currently executed policies have some questionable elements from the viewpoint of effectiveness in terms of not only preventing the falling birthrate, but also in improving the welfare of children and their families.

A basic problem of child-related policies in Japan is the lack of the public interest in child welfare, at least partly reflecting the country's culturally strong gender bias, as typically found in the organizational structure of the two government parties. However, as also shown in the third section, female Diet members have quickly increased in the LDP since the last election. Even if this is a temporary phenomenon caused by the landslide victory of the LDP in the election in 2005, the presence of more female members may well contribute to the atmosphere of the party. Also, younger Diet members, both female and male, seem to have more liberal views on public engagement in family matters. For example, the Study Group on the Countermeasures to The falling birthrate, which was voluntarily organized by young LDP members, proposed such measures as large-scale increase in child allowance, public support of basic income for parents taking childcare leave, and obligatory disclosure of the practices regarding the facilitation of work–life balance by firms.[57]

The participation of Komeito in the policy-making process seems to extend the capacity of policy innovation, which should otherwise be constrained in the traditional circle comprised of the LDP's Kosei-zoku and public officials. Moreover, it makes the policy-making process more transparent. As an independent party, Komeito publishes their commitment, and voters may express their support in the election, which is not the case for Kosei-zoku as an internal organization of the LDP. However, it must be remembered that Komeito is merely a minor partner in the coalition government. Provided that the party takes an opportunistic approach as discussed in the last section, it is difficult see the policy formation which is consistent in the long run. The significance of the policy development should not be totally denied even in that case, but attention should always be paid to the risk of the lack of consistency in policy formation.

Besides tracing the development of child-related policies, this paper presents a model of decision-making by Komeito as a minor coalition partner. The model is very simple, but useful for understanding systematically how the behavior of a minor partner is constrained. It seems to be applicable to other policy cases in other countries, but such a generalization requires further tests by future studies.

[57] *Mainichi Shimbun*, 14 June 2005.

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Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of American Political Science Association in 2006. I thank Kent Calder and all other panel participants for their useful comments. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments to upgrade the paper.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109908002971 Published online by Cambridge University Press