

# The role of social dialogue in the gendered transformation of work and welfare:

The discursive struggle towards consensus in Belgian social dialogue since 1950

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1988 – sectoral social dialogue (FOD WASO)



2021 – intersectoral social dialogue [www.vbo.be](http://www.vbo.be)

# Overview

## 1. Theoretical framework:

- Gender equality in social dialogue
- Gendered employment relations: the significance of social reproduction

## 2. Case study of Belgian social dialogue

- National Labour Council – opinions from 1953 to date
- Data and methodology
- Preliminary Results: process + content

## 3. Discussion

# Gender equality in social dialogue

IR and social dialogue institutions:

- Generally **positive effect** on gender equality:
  - Lower (gender) pay gap (coordinated collective bargaining)
  - Encompassing welfare services and WLB-provisions

But:

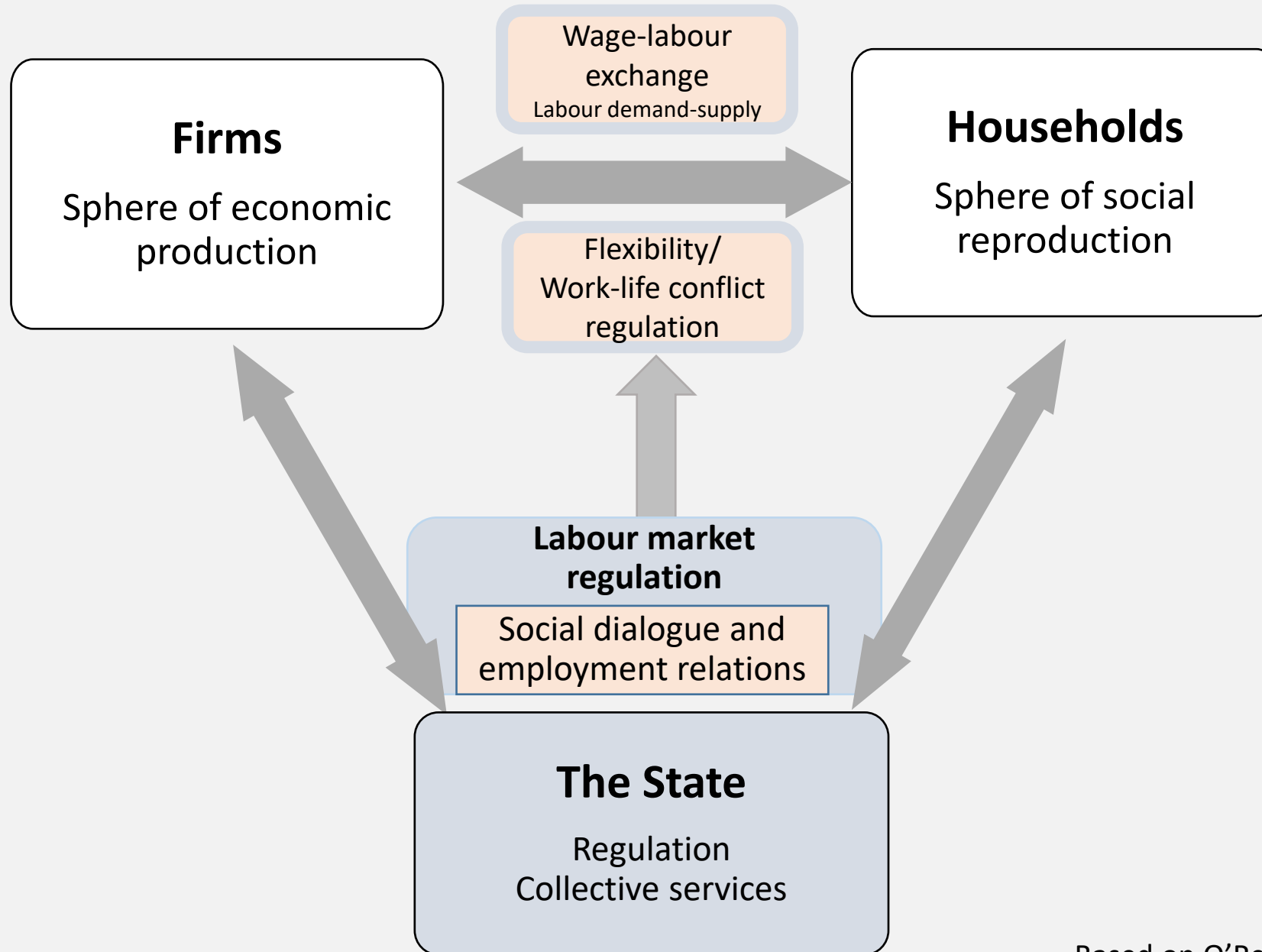
- Consensus in social partnership may also **hinder radical institutional change** towards gender equality (Erikson 2021, Koskinen Sandberg & Saari 2019)
  - Egalitarian inequality (Wagner & Teigen 2021)

Which process of **incremental** (institutional) change (Streeck & Thelen 2005) in social dialogue?

**Process towards consensus:** Which discursive struggle between social partners and the State on gender equality?

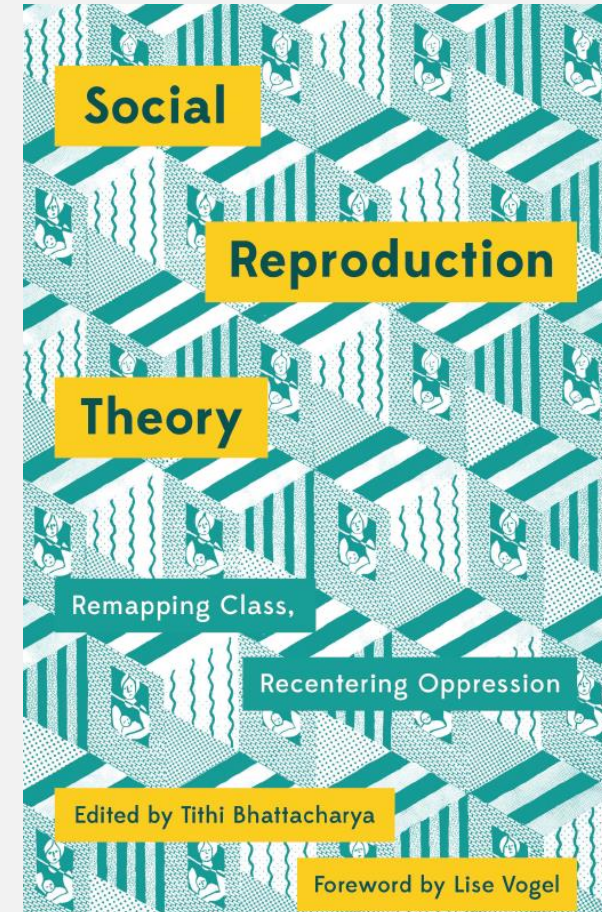
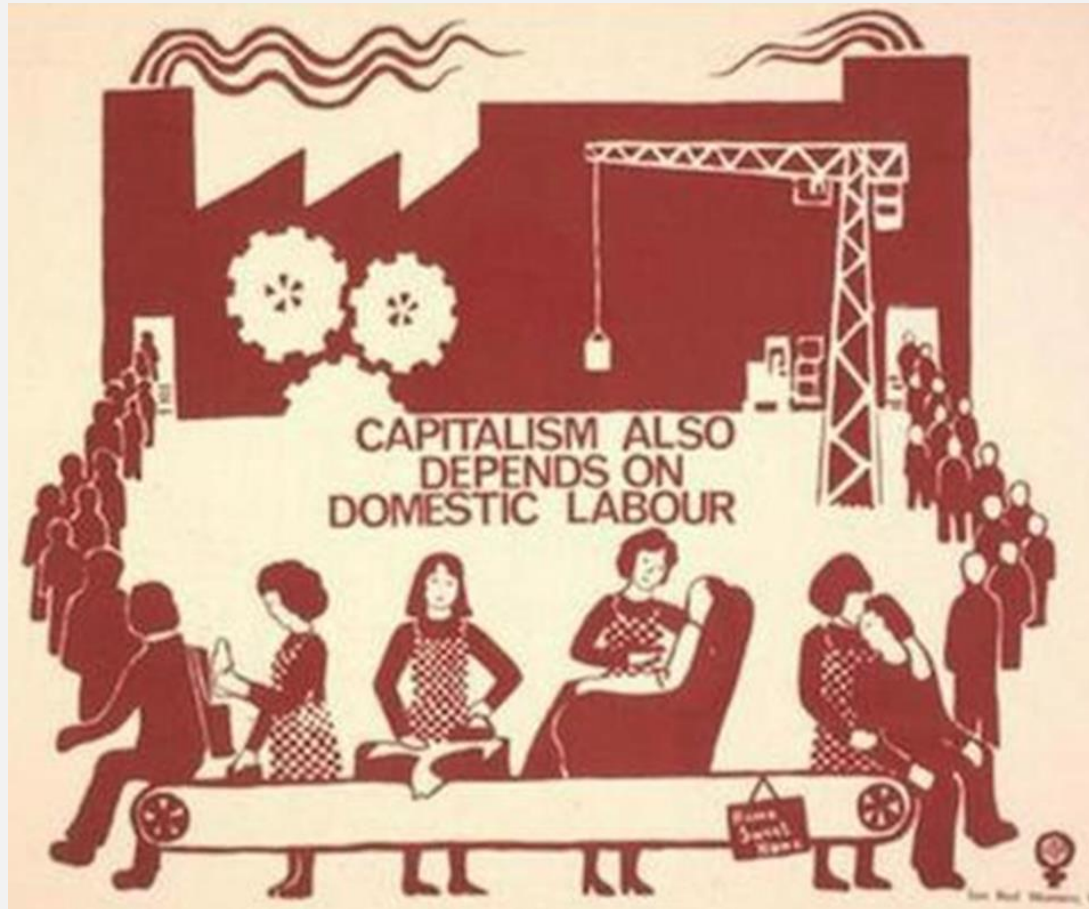


# Gendered employment relations





# Women's unpaid & underpaid labour



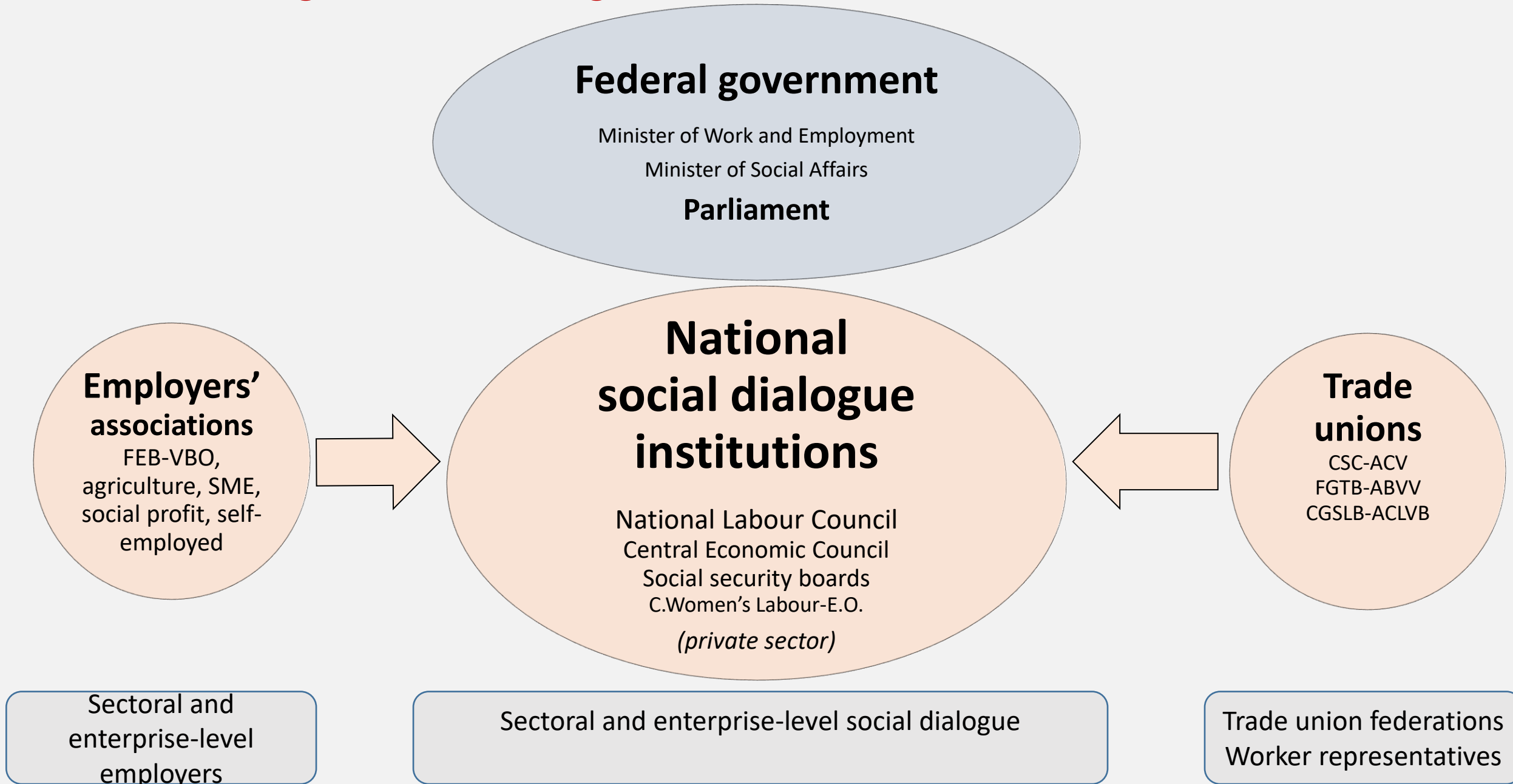
## *Research questions:*

- How is consensus between the social partners actually reached in relation to gender equality/ social reproduction?
- How does consensus evolve over a longer time leading to institutional change?

➔ Case study of Belgian social dialogue institutions at national, intersectoral level

Time frame: 1953-present

# Structure of Belgian social dialogue



# National Labour Council

## Bipartite composition:

- Employers' representatives:  
federation of enterprises, agriculture, SME,  
social profit, self-employed entrepreneurs
- Workers' representatives:  
FGTB-ABVV, CSC-ACV, CGSLB-ACLVB

## Private sector

### On social questions

(labour law, social security, social dialogue,...)

- Opinions
- Intersectoral collective agreements (Law of 1968)



## Since 1953: 2.311 opinions

- At the request of a Minister or Parliament
- On own initiative
- *83,4% unanimous – 16,6% divided*  
(NAR 2021)

**Since 1970:** 160 intersectoral collective agreements

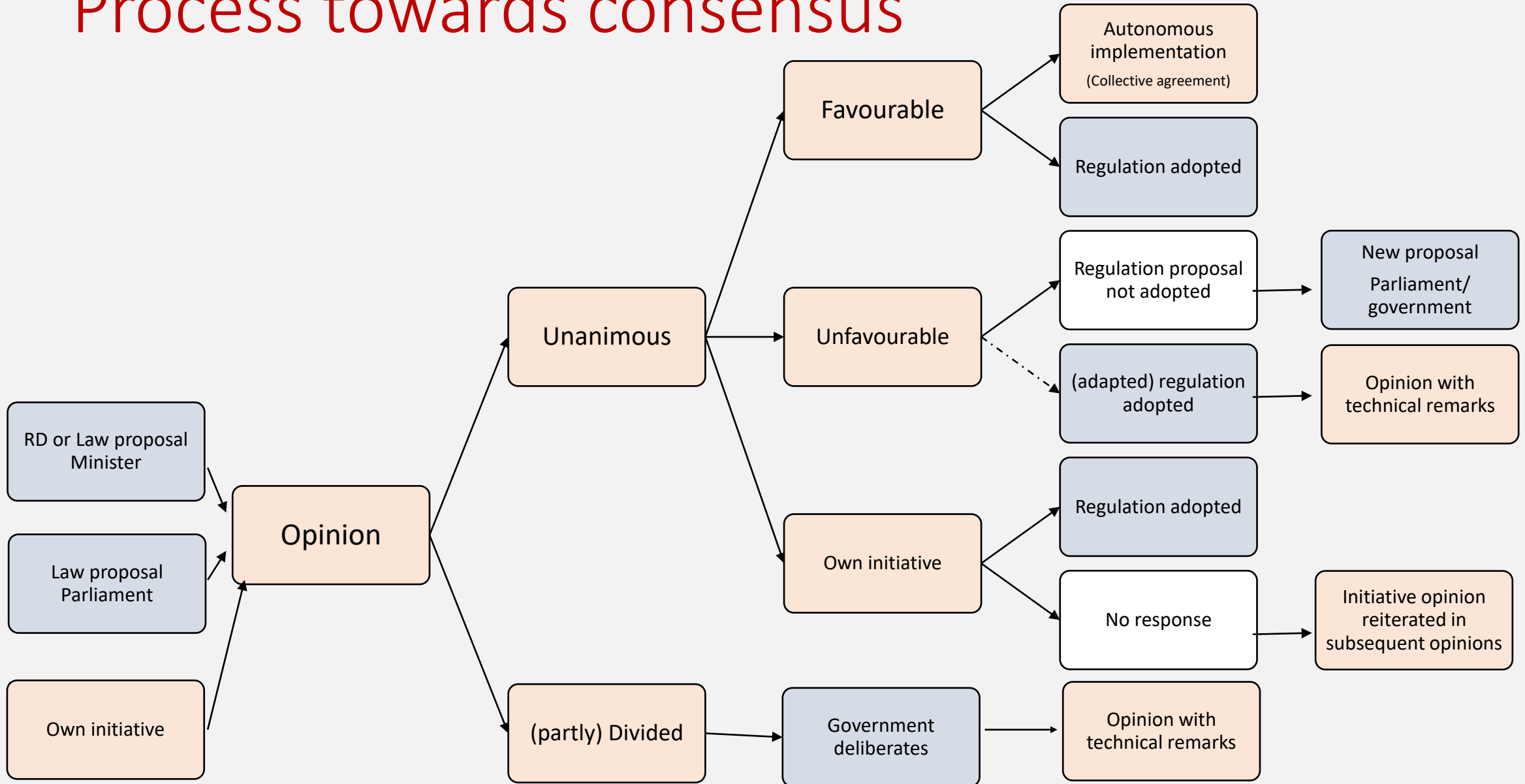


# Data & methodology

1. 17 expert interviews
2. Selection of opinions of National Labour Council  
period 1953 - 2022
  - women's work (pregnancy, motherhood,... ),
  - gender equality (equal pay, equal treatment, parenthood),
  - work-life, family, care & domestic work

➡ First selection: +-208 documents
3. Discursive analysis of arguments
  - Divided: employers vs workers
  - Unanimous

# Process towards consensus



# Process towards consensus: discursive-procedural techniques

## **Consensual** ('autonomy of social partners'):

- Limitation of problem to certain (technical) issues
- Broadening of problem, general principles  
(including related topics, larger group of workers,...)
- Overview study of regulation (report)

## **With deliberation by the state:**

- **Divided opinion with distinct arguments** of social partners (mostly capital/ labour)
- Followed by consensual opinions on specific (technical) issues

# Women's labour force (1960s-mid1970s)

- Retention of **women** - integration of **mothers** in economic production
  - No promotion but acceptance of **part-time work** as convenient for mothers
- Women's labour rights (law 1968): equal pay, maternity protection & leave
- Focus on **biological reproductive** labour (pro-creation):
  - Pregnancy protection, pre- and postpartum leave for working mothers
  - Anti-discrimination linked to 'physical condition'
  - Unpaid leave and career break for mothers
  - Refusal of other 'care' leaves

# Changing discourse on (the value of) social reproduction work (1970s-1980s)

- Separate spheres of the economy & family: employers' responsibility limited to sphere of (*for profit*) production (until 1970s)
- Maintain equality between workers, no discrimination based on family situation; prevent discrimination of women (1970s-)
- Social security budget deficits and international competition based on labour costs ➡ negotiate new entitlements only during biannual negotiations (1980s-)



# Collectivisation of social reproductive labour: childcare infrastructure (1960s-1990s)

- **1960s: Children's playground supervisors:** extra income for widows with survivor's pension
  - 1990s: extra income for unemployed workers
- **1970s: Childcare infrastructure fund** (social security family allowances)
  - 1990s: additional fund, but no structural funding & administrative difficulties
- **1970s: Childminders:** only expenses, no employment statute (derived rights through marriage)
  - 1990s-2010s: partial social security coverage & employment statute

# Individual solutions to social reproduction needs (after 1980)

## **Part-time work:**

- 1960s: extra income for family well-being
- 1980s: solution to unemployment, working-time reorganisation

## **Parental leave, adoption leave, family leave,...**

- Debates whether leaves are :
  - Paid, with social security allocation, unpaid
  - Assimilation as working time for social security entitlements

**Social security budget deficits and international competition based on labour costs** ➔ negotiate new entitlements only during biannual negotiations (1980s-)

# Discussion - process

- **Workers' representatives:**

Extension of entitlements to new needs, but only when 'strategic'

- **Employers' representatives:**

Preserving the boundaries as much as possible (but open to societal evolutions)

## **The state:**

- arbitrator and executor of compromise
- Pressure of transnational level (ILO, EU)

# Discussion - content

**Incremental discursive process with gradual extension of domain of social dialogue** to include women's work, care work, work-life conflicts,...

**Recognition of social reproduction:**

- **Collective** : from semi-voluntary or atypical employment statutes to more standard employment contracts

*But:* low paid, often part-time, and insufficient quantity

- **Individual solutions to workers' work-life conflicts and reproductive needs:**

- Paid leaves for family events: birth, marriage, death,...
- Leaves with allocation for informal care work: parental leave, adoption,...
- Unpaid: part-time work, housewives
- In poverty: single parents

**Social reproduction work remains gender segregated, mostly unpaid, underpaid or underfinanced** (*gender employment and gender pay gap*)