# Is There Hope for Low Fertility?

## *"Demographic Rearmament" in Southern Europe*

*By Lyman Stone and Erin Wingerter* | *May 2024*

*Institute for* **Family** Studies

## TABLE OF CONTENTS



View Digital appendix here »

## Executive Summary

Plummeting fertility rates in southern Europe have led governments across the region to begin considering pronatal policy.[1] Italian Prime Minister Meloni recently spoke alongside Pope Francis about the importance of boosting Italian fertility,[2] Spain's fertility rate is at record lows, and even tiny Malta's Parliament has called low birth rates an "existential challenge."[3] Most recently, France—which, as this report discusses, has historically experienced high birth rates—has begun to see declining fertility, leading French Premier Emmanuel Macron to call for "demographic rearmament."[4]

This report undertakes the task of assessing where fertility in southern Europe is headed, what factors are driving its decline, and whether anything can be done. In brief, we find that there are reasons for hope: pronatalism has worked where it has been seriously undertaken, and sources of demographic underperformance are readily identifiable in many countries.

That said, in this report, we do not attempt to provide a blueprint for pronatal policy, for the simple reason that no such blueprint will look the same in any two countries. Despite some broad similarities, the challenges facing Spain are not the same as those facing Italy, and similar headline fertility rates often mask quite large underlying differences. Policies implemented in one context cannot be expected to have the same effects in other contexts, where underlying economic structures and cultural norms may be different.

### Key Findings:

- **Fertility rates within marriage remain fairly high in much of southern Europe, and only Spain has seen a major decline in married fertility in the last 40 years. However, marriage rates have fallen sharply in all countries. As a result, most of the decline in fertility can be directly attributed to decreasing exposure to marriage.**
- **Differences in nonmarital fertility alone do not account for cross-national differences in overall fertility: high fertility societies have high rates of childbearing within marriage.**
- **Fertility differences around Europe are not primarily due to differences in prevalence or sources of immigration, but rather to differences among native-born women in each country. For example, high immigration is not the source of France's high fertility.**
- **Desired family size is relatively low in southern Europe, perhaps due to adverse economic conditions leading young people to reduce their family ambitions. Examples of adverse economic conditions could include extended coresidence with parents, lack of independent household formation by young men, and low prevalence of stable, formal employment for young adults.**
- **France's pronatal policies undertaken between 1920 and 1950, and expanded in subsequent decades, have caused French fertility to remain durably elevated (0.1 to 0.3 more children per woman) throughout the last century. This has led to France's population being several million people higher today than it otherwise would have been.**
- **Because the exact dynamics of marriage, housing, and work vary considerably across countries, the best path forward for governments interested in pronatal policy is a harmonized multinational data collection effort entirely focused on assessing factors shaping fertility and marriage, similar to the country-specific surveys fielded in Spain and Portugal in the late 2010s.**

[1] In this report, "pronatal policy" or "pronatalism" refers to efforts by governments to increase birth rates.
[2] Nicole Winfield and Paonlo Santa Lucia, "Pope joins Meloni is urging Italians to have more kids, not pets," *Associated Press*, 5/12/23.
[3] "Maltese Parliament and Malta Employers' Association publish book about Malta's low birth rate," *The Malta Independent*, 2/5/24.
[4] Solene Cordier, "'Demographic rearmament': Macron plans to reform parental leave and fight infertility," *Le Monde*, 1/17/24.

## The Problem

In recent years, fertility rates in much of southern Europe have fallen to extraordinarily low levels: 1.4 children per woman in Portugal, 1.33 in Greece, 1.24 in Italy, 1.16 in Spain, 1.1 in Malta, and a shockingly low 0.97 in Andorra. Even French fertility, relatively higher at 1.7 children per woman, is now falling, leading French Premier Emmanuel Macron to call for new policies to stimulate "demographic rearmament." Although the extremely low birth rates of Korea, Japan, or other east Asian countries are widely remarked upon, the similarly low birth rates of much of southern Europe are less well known and understood.

This report describes current family and fertility dynamics in the large low-fertility countries of southern Europe, Portugal, Spain, and Italy, with comparisons—where relevant—to other areas, especially France. It identifies social, cultural, and economic factors influencing fertility trends and contributing to low birth rates. These three countries are the primary focus, as they are large, demographically important countries for which relatively complete and comprehensive data is available. However, comparative data from other countries is included where available, and conclusions may be relevant for those countries as well.

Low birth rates may create many societal problems—troubled finances for social insurance programs, increasing elder-care demands for young people, reduced innovation and entrepreneurship, shifts in demographic and thus geopolitical balances, and the rise of family disappointment across society. There are many reasons policymakers may be concerned about low fertility, and this report is not primarily concerned with exploring those possible problems. Rather, this report is primarily concerned with a diagnostic question: why is fertility low in southern Europe, and is there anything that can be done to boost it?

To begin, we look at France, one of the great exception cases for low fertility in southwestern Europe. France's unique demographic history is an important starting point because it clarifies the importance of supportive family policy for boosting birth rates above the current lowest-low levels observed in other countries.

After exploring how France managed to avoid the sharp fertility decline observed in so many of its neighbors in the latter 20th century, we then turn more directly to Portugal, Spain, and Italy, identifying what factors may be related to their presently low fertility.

## Data and Methods

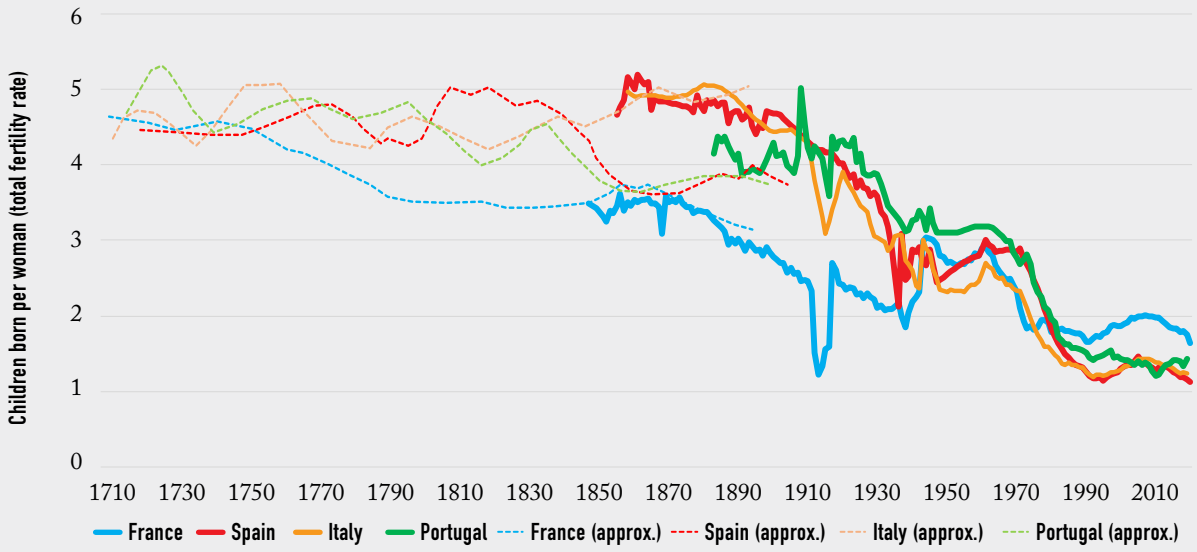
This report uses data from numerous sources. Where possible, statistics on birth rates and completed fertility from the Human Fertility Database were utilized. Where not available, we relied upon data from national vital statistics offices. In many cases, census data was most readily computed using the IPUMS International database. Regardless, all data in this report comes from one of three underlying data-generating processes: vital statistics registers, censuses, or social surveys. Social surveys are mostly used for discussions of fertility preferences; the vast majority of the data in this report comes from vital statistics registers and censuses. Because each figure uses variable data sources, more detailed data and method notes are provided with each figure.

Throughout the report, colors used in figures for countries in southern Europe will be kept consistent: France will always be blue, Portugal green, Italy orange, Spain red, etc. In figures where southwestern European countries are compared to countries in other regions, the countries of key interest may be color-coded by these standard colors to make them easier to spot.

## The Example of France

France has a long history of family policies intended to shape fertility. In 1666, concerns about low birth rates motivated King Louis XIV to offer tax exemptions for fathers with 10 or more children, although these were repealed in the 1680s after they became a source of tax fraud and abuse. But as French fertility fell in the 1700s, pronatal subsidies were reinstituted from 1760-1789, just on the eve of revolution.[5] There is not much evidence that either of these policies succeeded; indeed, French birth rates fell precipitously from the 1720s until the early 1800s, driven by the rising tide of secularism sweeping the country in the 18th century. This decline is evident in Figure 1 and is not replicated in mid-18th-century Spain, Portugal, or Italy.[6]

### Figure 1. Historic Fertility Rates in France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal




*Source: Non-approximate values from national vital statistical offices, Human Fertility Database, or Human Fertility Collection. Approximate values derived from crowdsourced genealogical reconstructions as reported in the online appendix to Blanc (2024)*

France's geographic proximity to the southern European countries, shared Catholic history, and Romance linguistic background all make it a reasonable starting point for comparison. Reaching back 4,000 years or more, France shares with Italy and Spain a historic linkage to the archaeological "Bell Beaker" culture rather than the contemporary "Corded Ware" culture of northern Europe, and so can reasonably be compared to the countries of southern Europe.[7] Moreover, France's high fertility rates, specifically among native-born French women, driven by both higher marital

[5] L. Tuttle, *Conceiving the Old Regime: Pronatalism and the Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern France*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

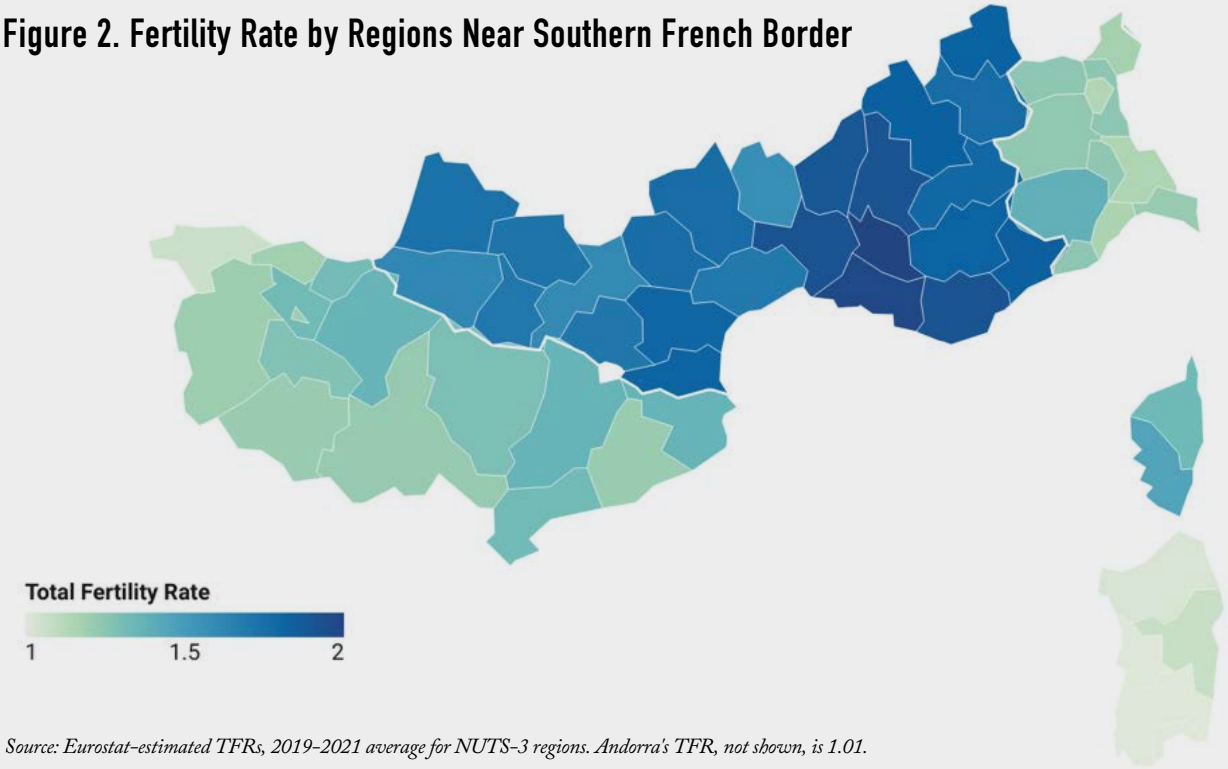
[6] G. Blanc, "The Cultural Origins of the Demographic Transition in France," *SSRN*, 1/29/24.

[7] These two archaeological cultures approximately correspond to different degrees of historic exposure to a major migration event from the Eurasian steppe on the cusp of the Bronze Age which radically altered the culture and genetics of the region. Even more approximately, the more westerly "Bell Beaker" culture can be approximately associated with Y-chromosomal haplogroup R1b, while the more easterly "Corded Ware" culture is more associated with Y-chromosomal haplogroup R1a. Details can be found in McColl et al (2024), "Steppe Ancestry in western Eurasia and the spread of the Germanic Languages." *bioRxiv* preprint. This historic detail is shared only to emphasize that France shares with Spain, Portugal, and Italy quite deep historic and cultural roots that make it a reasonable point of comparison.

and nonmarital fertility, have led French women to experience relatively stable rates of family formation amid sharp declines in other countries. All of this makes France a uniquely *interesting* comparison. What is it about France that has led to higher fertility rates?

To begin with, it is worth emphasizing the stark differences in fertility between France and its immediate neighbors. By comparing fertility on either side of the French border in regions where various cultural-linguistic groups straddle both sides of that border, it is possible to gain greater confidence that something about the legal and policy environment in France may influence fertility. In particular, Figure 2 compares fertility rates in NUTS-3 regions (similar to U.S. counties in geographic size) on France's southern borders.

**Figure 2. Fertility Rate by Regions Near Southern French Border**

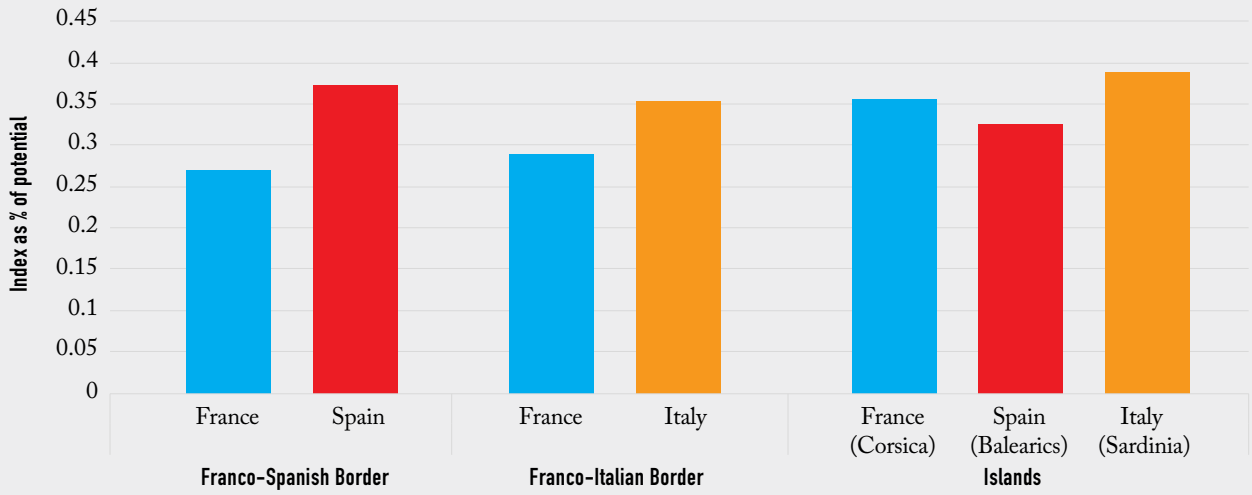



*Source: Eurostat-estimated TFRs, 2019-2021 average for NUTS-3 regions. Andorra's TFR, not shown, is 1.01.*

French Corsica has higher fertility than Italian Sardinia; the French side of the Franco-Italian border has sharply higher fertility, as does the French side of the Franco-Spanish or even Franco-Andorran border. These discontinuities could have longstanding cultural or historical explanations, but in some cases, the argument for a policy explanation is compelling. For example, Basque-speakers form a meaningful cultural minority (and sometimes local majority) on both sides of the western edge of the Franco-Spanish border, and yet there's still a large fertility difference. In that case, there are strong cultural similarities on both sides of the border, yet the French side has noticeably higher fertility.

Nor do these contemporary fertility differences arise from deep historic roots. Using data from the Princeton European Fertility Project, fertility in the 1880s can be compared in these same border regions, as in Figure 3. This period is chosen as it came after industrialization had commenced in all relevant regions, but before any of these countries had implemented generous welfare states; thus, it is the most plausible benchmark period for assessing deeper historic roots of higher fertility.

## Figure 3. Index of Fertility, 1880s




*Source: Princeton European Fertility Project Index of Fertility*

In the 1880s, fertility was considerably lower on the French side of the Franco-Spanish border than the Spanish side. Likewise, French border regions had lower fertility than Italian border regions. Comparing the Mediterranean island provinces of each country, French Corsica had higher fertility than the Spanish Balearics, but lower than Italian Sardinia. In other words, before the 20th century, the French side of the border in most cases had lower, not higher, fertility.

The Princeton data can be used to see when the relationship reversed and the French side of the border experienced higher fertility. Comparing the two sides of Basque country as the cleanest comparison, French-side fertility may have first exceeded Spanish-side fertility in the 1930s or 1940s, but as late as the 1970s, fertility rates on either side of the border were fairly similar. In other words, France's fertility advantage emerges sometime between the 1920s and the 1980s, with exact timing varying somewhat by region and the measure used.

This time period has attracted extensive prior academic research because the 1920s and especially the 1930s saw the French government respond to the population losses of World War I (and their anticipation of a future war with

Germany) by launching a concerted pronatal policy campaign.[8] French policymakers were acutely aware of the fact that France's demographic heft within Europe, and especially relative to Germany, had declined throughout the modern period, and World War I threw that decline into sharp relief. As a result, France adopted a wide range of pronatal policies, which have been expanded over time.

Prior academic research has found that these pronatal financial benefits, which began to be rolled out in the 1920s and especially 1930s, may have increased French fertility by as much as 0.3 children per woman.[9] The most famous of these policies is the French tax quotient system, wherein tax brackets and benefits approximately *multiply* with family size, providing extremely large benefits for having kids, especially for higher earners. Historic "bachelor taxes" have also been shown to be important. The approximately 0.3 child increase in fertility attributed to these policies by academic research is similar in size to the modern cross-border 0.1-0.3 child difference between France and Spain or Italy shown in Figure 2. In other words, the observed cross-border difference in fertility in France emerged over the course of the 20th century, a period where prior academic research has shown that explicit pronatal policies had a large role in shaping French fertility behaviors. Because these policies benefited married and unmarried women alike, they may account for France's higher fertility both within and outside of marriage, which will be discussed in much greater detail in a subsequent section of this report. Thus, France is a clear case in which nearly a century of consistent pronatal policy has yielded durably higher fertility, on a scale which has dramatically reshaped French demography.

[8] Marie Monique-Huss, "Pronatalism in the interwar period in France," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990): 39-68. Also: Elisa Camiscioli, "Producing citizens, reproducing the French race: immigration, demography, and pronatalism in 20th-century France," *Gender & History* 13, no. 3 (Nov. 2001): 593-621. Also: Andreas Horacio Reggiani, "Procreating France: the politics of demography, 1919-1945," *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 3 (spring 1996): 725-754.

[9] Daniel L. Chen, "Can countries reverse fertility decline? Evidence from France's marriage and baby bonuses, 1929-1981," *International Tax and Public Finance* 18 (2011): 243-271. Also: Guy Laroque, "Does fertility respond to financial incentives?" *CESifo Working Paper Series* No. 2339, SSRN, June 2008.

## SPOTLIGHT 1: French Pronatal Policy

Given the emphasis placed on the French experience in this report, it is important to outline what France actually did. In the appendix, we provide a detailed timeline of fiscal pronatal policies in France and Spain. But here, we offer just a summary of that history.

France introduced maternity leave in 1909, but it was unpaid and limited until 1946, when a new law granted six weeks of leave before birth of the child and eight weeks after. The first family benefits were intrinsically linked to employment, and in most cases male employment; from 1920 to 1932, the number of employees covered by these allowances rose from 50,000 to 1.4 million. After a 1932 reform, this system was universalized, and private employers were obligated to provide a cash-allowance to employees with family dependents.

The family cash-allowance for workers' families was transformed into a universal benefit through a 1938 decree applying to both workers and nonworkers, with its value increasing with the number or children in the household, and in the event of a non-working spouse. Then, since 1945, France has enforced a generous tax scheme known as the "Quotient System," effectively dividing income by the number of household integrants (first and second child count for 0.5; however, subsequent children count for 1) to determine the taxable income base. In 1946, France established the regulatory framework for family allowances in the Social Security system, including universal benefits for families with 2 or more children, a family income supplement for single-earner families, maternity leave for eight weeks after birth, and a pre-birth grant.

Furthermore, additional cash-benefits for children with disabilities (1963), for children with a deceased parent (1970), for low-income families at the start of the school year (1974), and for single-parent homes (1976) were expanded over the next 35 years, reflecting social protection objectives and a shift away from solely horizontal distribution (from non-childbearing to childbearing families) to a vertical distribution as well (from wealthier workers to less fortunate families). This shift included the introduction of means-testing for several policies from the 1970s onwards. Importantly, although these policies addressed a more equitable distribution, this was a complementary and additional arm to family policy rather than a replacement for universal coverage.

In the 1980s and 1990s, France, like other industrialized countries, turned attention to work-family life balance and gender equality. France was also one of the 41 ratifying countries in the ILO Convention 156, committing itself to protecting workers with family responsibilities and fostering conciliation. Firing women on the basis of pregnancy was outlawed in 1980, parental leave (unpaid) was extended up to three years with job protection by Act 86-1307, maternity leave was extended to 18 weeks in the case of third children, and the first allowances for hiring child care professionals were put in place.

French family policy today is divided into three main blocks: basic maintenance benefits, support for the birth and early years of the child broadly known as the PAJE program, and support for special

family circumstances. The basic maintenance benefits include four monthly benefits to support the maintenance of children until they reach the age of 20: one is a universal benefit with no employment requirement; two are means-tested policies for families with three or more children; and the last is in place in the event of low child support from one of the parents. The second block is focused on remediating the costs associated with childbirth and early childhood until the child is three years old. Finally, the third block is focused on children in special circumstances—policies related to disabilities, grave illnesses, death, and precarious employment.

## SPOTLIGHT 2: Spanish Pronatal Policy

As a contrast to the French experience, here we offer a description of Spain's policy history, which was an early adopter of family policy. In 1900, maternity leave was institutionalized yet remained unpaid until the establishment of the Royal Decree on Maternity Insurance in 1929, which created a nationally regulated insurance scheme in order to provide six weeks of paid (fixed) maternity leave through a publicly managed mutual fund. Furthermore, the National Fund for Family Subsidies, created in 1938, provided an annual cash allowance for all families with two or more children under 14 years old, regardless of income. This was followed in 1945 by the creation of the "points system" known as the "Plus de Cargas Familiares" in which 5% of workers' salaries was contributed to a mutual fund and subsequently distributed based on the number of points an individual had. Male workers with nonworking wives were attributed five points, the first child would sum 6 points, the second child 7 points, etc. Importantly, the original language of the legislation highlighted the objective of the law to "return mothers to the home." These early measures focused on subsidizing the provision of female care in the home, and in the years following, family benefits were relatively stable.

Between 1962 and 1966, Spain rolled out a new set of family benefits under the Social Security System. This change aimed to streamline and simplify family policy and adapt to modern circumstances, so the previous "points system" and other cash allowances were combined into one comprehensive policy for family benefits. Marriage was no longer a requisite for beneficiaries, as single social security contributors with dependents would be eligible for the same family protection. Both marriage and the birth of a child would be recognized with a one-time cash-allowance, and a national prize for fertility was institutionalized. Furthermore, monthly cash-allowances were granted to families with dependent children under 16 years of age, which would later be extended to 18 years of age in 1968.

Spain's economic family protection expanded through the 1960s in the form of cash benefits. However, these policies were continually rooted in a male breadwinner, female carer model. This is evidenced by measures such as in the Order on Family Protection Benefits within the General Regime of the Social

Security (1966) in which allowances would be received by working male beneficiaries with nonworking wives. At the same time, the Social Security Act of 1972 granted pensions to "sisters or daughters" who had cared for contributing workers, reflecting the general tendency for males to be formally employed while females were more often occupied with informal caring responsibilities.

Starting in the 1980s, Spain's approach to family policy shifted towards a redistribution mechanism to accomplish specific equity goals set out by legislators. Starting with the Worker's Statute Act in 1980, family policy moved away from subsidizing maternal care in the home, towards a social protection measure benefiting the most economically vulnerable. However, maternity leave remained a universal benefit to all working mothers and was extended to 14 weeks under the Act, which would be expanded to the current day length of 16 weeks in 1989. In 1985, means-testing was enforced regarding the 1966 family allowances, ensuring only those earning below a certain threshold of income would receive the cash benefits. Unpaid voluntary leave was permitted, and job positions were protected while on leave until the (youngest) child reached the age of three years old. However, paradoxically, under the Worker's Statue Act, women could be fired due to pregnancy.

In 1985, Spain ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention 156: Workers with family responsibilities, vowing to outlaw discrimination based on one's family responsibilities. Furthermore, ratifying countries committed to implementing policy and incentives to create flexible labor conditions, facilitate child care, and protect working mothers and father's employment. By 1999, Spanish family policy recognized the growing need to institutionalize work-family conciliation measures, protect parental employment, and promote egalitarian norms. Under the Act on Reconciling Work and Family Life, contract termination based on pregnancy or family conditions was outlawed. Furthermore, the right to reduce the workday to care for family members, as well as 15 days of paid leave during the lactation period, were established to improve conciliation efforts. Additionally, the 1998 tax reform took into account dependents and established family minimum incomes for tax purposes.

In the 21st century, family cash benefits have remained subject to means-testing. Only one cash-benefit, granted in the case of multiple births (today a one-time lump sum of 1000€), is not means-tested. However, rights to leave schemes are generally universal regardless of income and include special protection such as for dependents with grave illnesses or disabilities. Furthermore, tax benefits in the form of deductions and a minimum income based on the number of dependent children have been in place since the 1998 tax reform, and were expanded in 2002 and 2006.

Finally, one of the broadest and fastest expansions in the 21st century has been on the development of paternity leave. In the Act on Effective Equity of Women and Men in 2007, Spain introduced the first 13-day paternity leave; in 2009, there were efforts to extend the length to four weeks; however, this did not occur until 2017. Subsequently, in 2019, paternity leave was doubled to 8 weeks followed by a 2020 extension to 12 weeks, and in 2021, paternity leave matched maternity leave, reaching 16 weeks. In the 2023 Law of Family, legislators claim this is an important advancement promoting the co-responsibility of parenting.

France and Spain's family policies reflect distinct approaches to supporting families. France emphasizes universal support for parents, viewing children as a social investment and offering a range of benefits and programs to alleviate the cost of child-rearing. In contrast, Spain's family policies have traditionally been more targeted either just to dependents of male breadwinners, or to the economically needy, with recent efforts to provide broader support still lagging France in terms of comprehensiveness, generosity, and flexibility. The differences in policy reflect broader societal values and priorities regarding family and child care, with France's policies more forthrightly pronatal (rather than anti-poverty or promoting traditional gender roles), and thus offering greater agency and choice to parents in managing work and family life.

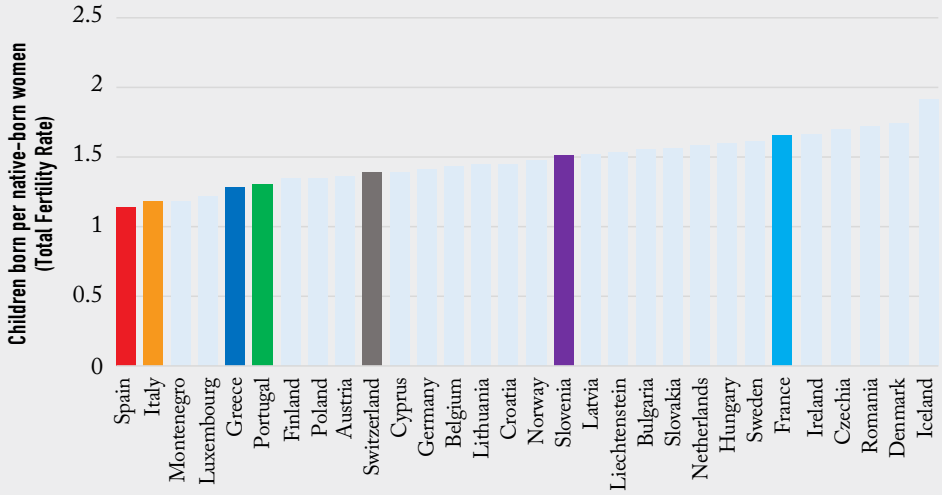
The diversity and universality of the support parents receive to subsidize early care reflect a social value placed on child rearing. After 1990, French parents who hired private care for children were exempt from social security contributions for the contract. After 2003, birth and early childhood benefits in France were expanded and unified, establishing what is known as the "Prestation d'accueil du jeune enfant" or PAJE. Under this program, there are four key policies: a means-tested one-time birth/adoption grant, a monthly means-tested stipend for needy families, paid parental leave PreParE (open to all but adjusted based on income) for parents who wish to care for children under three years of age, and finally, a supplement for free choice of child care, CMG, also open to all but income adjusted to offset child care costs for families hiring professional workers, or to use at small day care centers. This is all in addition to the quotient system, which is most generous for higher-earning households. While Spain provides means-tested, one-time birth grants and monthly stipends for the extremely economically disadvantaged, there are no policies in place comparable to PreParE and CMG, or especially the quotient system. In Spain, workers with young children have little agency when combining paid work with child care in the early years. Public nurseries have limited seats, parental leave is unpaid, and there are no subsidies for private child care or professional childminders. Unlike the French case, parents' options are more limited, especially for middle-class families who are ineligible for means-tested cash-allowances and who face higher tax burdens.

## SPOTLIGHT 3: Immigrant Women and Fertility

France's high fertility has been widely remarked upon in the past, and some commentators have suggested it may be related to high birth rates among predominantly Muslim migrants in France. If true, this could imply that high fertility rates cannot be obtained through pronatal policy, but only by recruiting high fertility immigrants, who may not share the same cultural and political norms and values as native-born citizens.

But this hypothesis turns out to be wrong. France's high fertility is *not* primarily caused by immigrants. In 2020, almost 11% of Spain's population was composed of non-EU immigrants, versus just 7% for France, suggesting that, if anything, France may receive *fewer* non-EU migrants than many southern European countries. Moreover, academic research has shown that native-born French women have among the highest fertility of native-born women in Europe; indeed, national-level fertility trends are overwhelmingly explained by differences among the native-born populations, not immigrants.[10]

### Figure S3.1. Total Fertility Rates for Native-Born Women



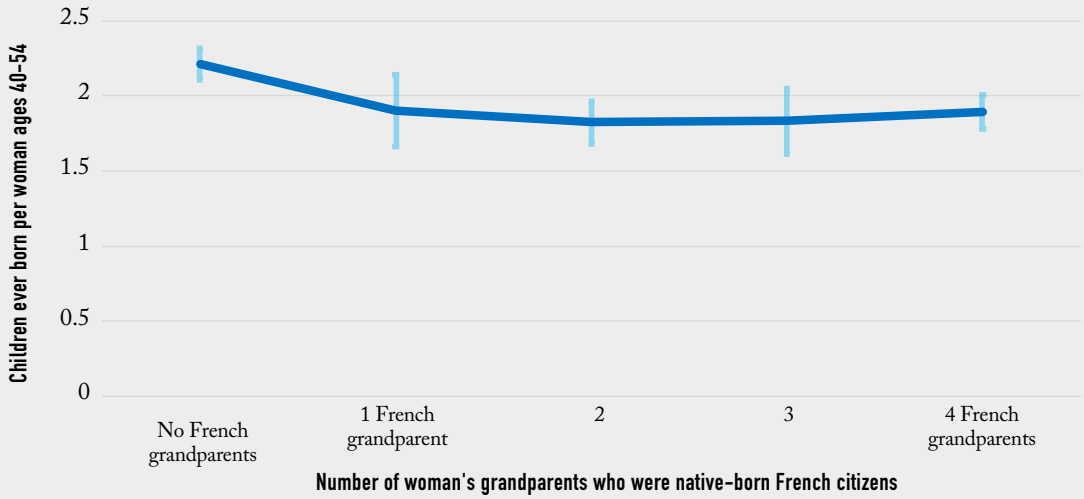

*Source: Eurostat births and population by age and country of birth, author's calculations.*

Thus, the differences observed across countries are not a product of differential exposure to immigration, but due to factors impacting even native-born women in each country.

[10] Sabrina Volant, et al., "French fertility is the highest in Europe: Because of its immigrants?" *Population & Societies* 568, no. 7 (2019): 1-4. Also: Hill Kulu, et al., "A comparative study on fertility among descendants of immigrants in Europe," *Families and Societies Working Paper Series* 40 (2015).

Within France, the 2019-20 Trajectories and Origins Survey can be used to assess fertility in much greater detail, looking not just at immigrants but also their descendants.

**Figure S3.2. Completed Fertility Rates for French Residents by Ancestry**




*Source: Trajectories and Origins Survey, 2019-20. Children ever born to 5,196 women ages 40-54, i.e. women born 1965-1980. Their grandparents would have been born in 1890-1940.*

As can be seen, while women with no French grandparents do have somewhat higher fertility, native-born French women with 100% French ancestry as of the pre-WWII period have completed fertility rates just slightly below 2 children per woman, appreciably higher than is observed in other European countries. Thus, France's high fertility is not driven by immigrants, nor is it even driven primarily by the *descendants* of immigrants, but rather is driven by high birth rates among women whose families have been in France since the early 20th century or longer.

As a result of these policies, the long-run strategic goals of French policymakers in the 1920s have in fact begun to reap results. After long stability at around 16-19% of Europe's population around and before 1700 AD, France's share of the European population fell to just over 7% by the 1940s and early 1950s. The ratio of French-to-German population fell from 1.5 around 1800, to just 0.56 in 1943. But since then, France has risen back to account for almost 9% of the European population today, and its population is now equal to 77% of Germany's. Fueled partly by immigration, but also by France's above-average fertility for a European country, century-old French ambitions of reclaiming the country's place as the demographic center of Western Europe are well underway, and headed in the direction French policymakers of a century ago would have liked to see. This is an extraordinarily well-documented case of pronatalism implemented for a specific policy goal. While it has taken time to bear fruit in France, pronatal policy is clearly working.

### Key Point:

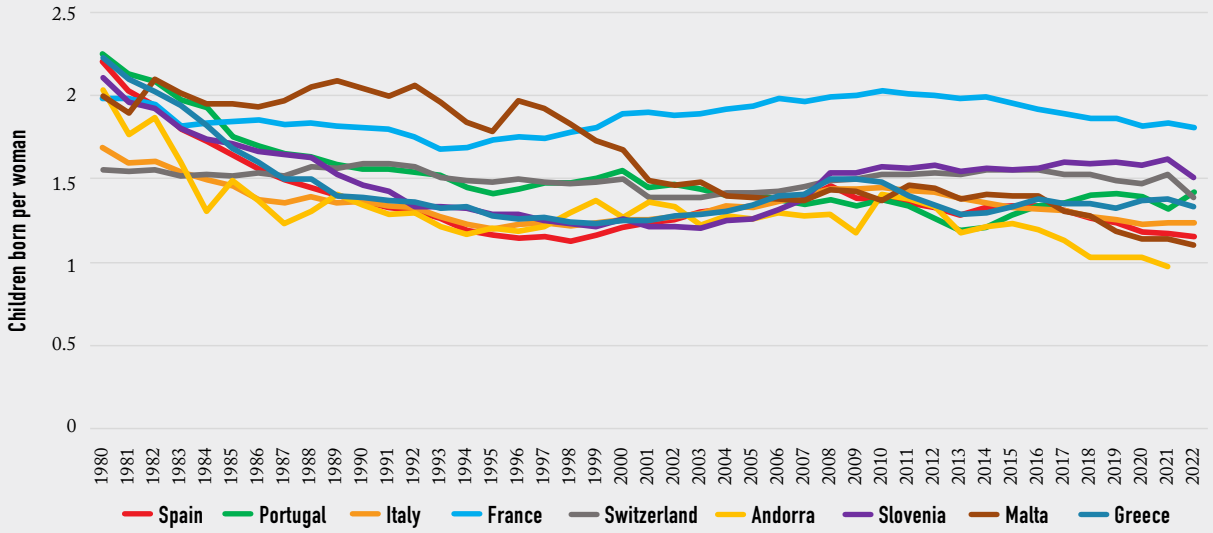
Today, France has unusually high fertility compared to its southern neighbors. This was not always the case: before World War I, France had markedly lower birth rates. Today, France's higher fertility is a product of a consistently pronatal policy environment since the 1930s. This can be seen in cross-border data and in rigorously controlled academic studies. Thus, at least in the French case, pronatalism can work. As a result, there are several million extra French residents thanks to pronatal policies in force between 1920 and 2024.

**There are several million extra French residents thanks to pronatal policies in force between 1920 and 2024.**

## Understanding Past Fertility Trends

Since 1980, fertility rates in southwestern Europe have followed a unique trend in different countries, but in every country shown other than France, fertility rates are now at or below 1.5 children per woman. In Andorra, birth rates are below one child per woman. For every country, birth rates declined between 1980 and the mid-1990s. Since then, birth rates rose for many countries, at least through the late-2000s. But since 2010, fertility rates have fallen for most countries, Portugal and Slovenia notably excepted.

### Figure 4. Recent Total Fertility Rates in Southern Europe




*Source: National vital statistics offices of respective countries*

Today, southwestern Europe is a region of overwhelmingly low fertility rates, though within that general low level, there is considerable heterogeneity.

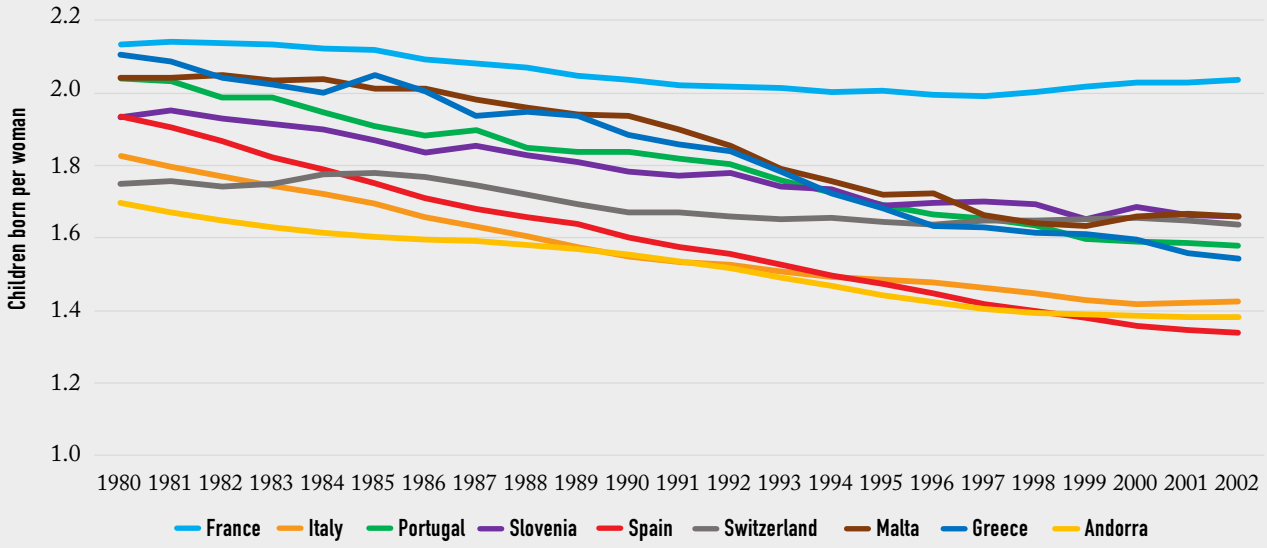
Yet these figures refer only to what is known as "period fertility," meaning the current fertility rates of currently reproductive-age women. These rates can be highly volatile and even biased if the normative timing of fertility is changing.[11] Because fertility in most of these countries has shifted later in life even as people continue to desire children, these estimates are likely to be biased. It's also possible to estimate a modified measure of period fertility, which corrects for this timing bias, estimating fertility rates with controls for the timing of births of each live birth order.[12] This measure estimates how many children women are likely to have if current birth rates are stable over the course of their life, but also accounts for ongoing changes in the timing of births and the pace at which women proceed on to each subsequent birth.

[11] John Bongaarts and Griffith Feeney, "On the quantam and tempo of fertility," *Population and Development Review* 24, no. 2 (June 1998): 271-291.
[12] John Bongaarts, "A demographic explanation for the recent rise in European fertility," *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 1 (March 2012): 83-120.

Because adjusted fertility rates are more data-intensive to calculate, they are available for fewer countries and years. In fact, this adjusted fertility measure has never before been calculated for France due to data constraints; we use large sample surveys from 1975 to 2011 and detailed vital statistics data from 1998 to 2021 to estimate it for the first time. The full data is available in the appendix, but the key takeaway is simple: most of the fertility "rebounds" since the mid-1990s in Figure 4 are illusions. Women did not actually shift towards having bigger families, they just shifted the timing of when they started having children. The one notable exception is, as usual, France: France's tempo- and parity-adjusted fertility rate rose from a low ebb of 1.83 in 2003, to 1.96 in 2012, the last year for which we can calculate it.

Finally, instead of using period indicators, fertility can be measured using cohort indicators, that is, measures of actual lifetime fertility for women now ending their reproductive years. These indicators are not informative about very recent fertility trends, but they can provide useful information about historic trends. Figure 5 below shows completed fertility for women who were in their mid-40s, arranged by the year those women turned 25 (i.e. when they were approximately around peak childbearing years).

## Figure 5. Cohort Completed Fertility by Country




*Source: Human Fertility Database*

The general impression of Figure 5 reaffirms the notion that *only France* saw a real fertility rebound after the 1990s. French fertility has become persistently higher than fertility in the other countries, while Spain's fertility has plummeted to striking lows, along with Italy's.[13]

### Key Point:

Fertility is dropping rapidly in much of southern Europe, and this is likely to yield smaller completed family sizes for women in childbearing years right now. This sharp collapse in fertility rates implies that each subsequent generation born in Spain, Italy, or Portugal, as well as smaller countries in southern Europe, is 30%, 40%, or even 50% or more smaller than the prior generation. France has managed to avoid this sharp decline so far.

## Marriage and Fertility

Demographers have long recognized that marriage is a key element in the fertility process, and recent research has confirmed the continuing importance of marriage in shaping fertility outcomes even in modern, Western contexts where nonmarital childbearing is common.[14] This conclusion is often counterintuitive to modern policymakers, steeped as they are in the notion that nonmarital childbearing is now a widespread social phenomenon. This report section will untangle these threads and outline how it can be that marriage remains a decisive factor shaping fertility, even as nonmarital fertility has grown in prevalence. In turn, it will point to the vital role of marriage-related policies in shaping fertility trajectories.

In every country of southern Europe, births to unmarried women have risen as a share of all births, as shown in Figure 6. This has led many commentators to suppose that marriage and fertility have become untethered; yet nothing could be further from the truth. Around the world, marital status remains highly predictive of fertility.[15] Nor is it the case that low fertility is necessarily a product of social stigma against nonmarital births: while high-fertility France has many nonmarital births, low-fertility Portugal has similar rates of births out of wedlock; and the lowest-fertility country in the region, Andorra, is middle-of-the-pack when it comes to the share of births to unmarried mothers. Higher-fertility countries don't achieve that fertility simply via nonmarital births, and lower-fertility countries don't have low fertility simply because of some constraint on nonmarital births.

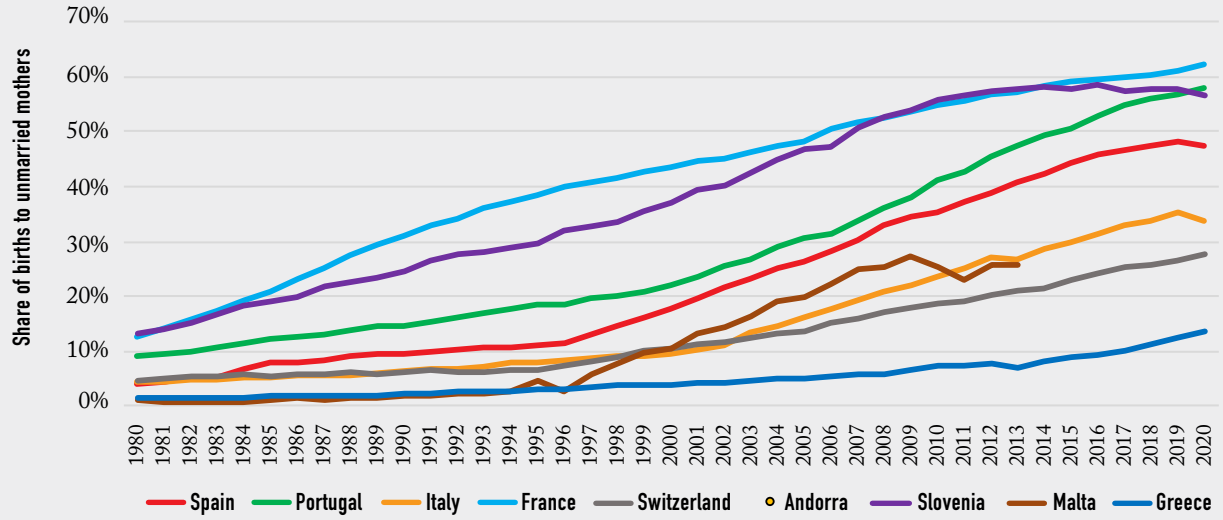
To understand this dynamic, it's helpful to separate the rise of nonmarital births into two underlying driving forces: first, the nonmarital birth rate (that is, *the probability that an unmarried woman of a given age will have a child*), and second, the prevalence of marriage (that is, *the probability that a woman of a given age will be married or unmarried*).

[13] Appendix Figures 1a, b, c, and d show the total fertility rate, tempo- and parity-adjusted fertility rate, and cohort completed fertility (arranged by years a cohort turned 25) for Spain, Italy, Portugal, and France, for easy comparison of these values, while Appendix Figure 2 shows tempo- and parity-adjusted fertility rates for a range of southwestern European countries.

[14] Lyman Stone and Spencer James, *Marriage Still Matters: Demonstrating the link between marriage and fertility in the 21st Century*, Institute for Family Studies, 2022.

[15] Ibid.

## Figure 6. Share of Births to Unmarried Mothers

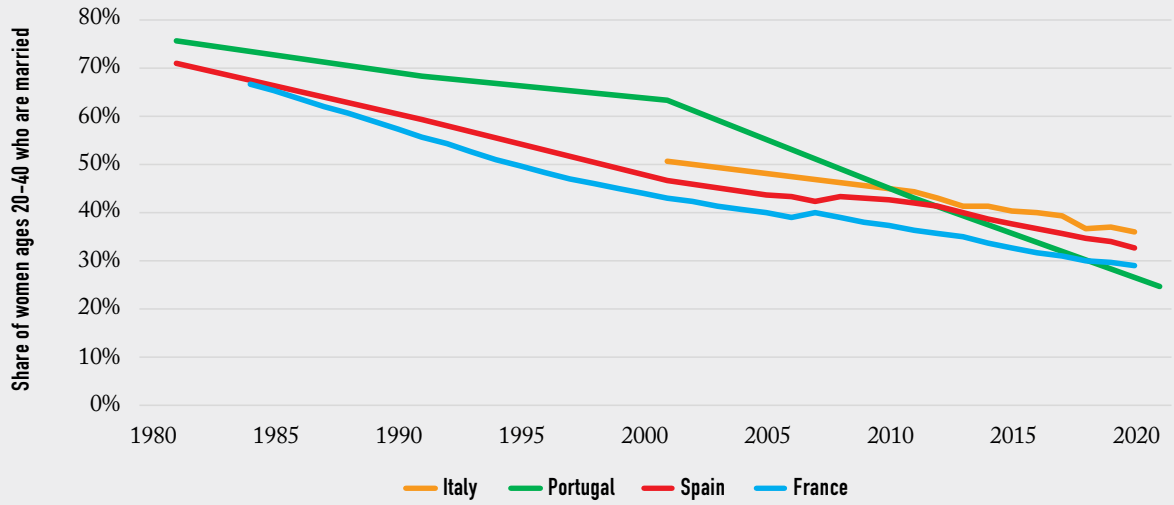



*Source: OECD Family Database and national statistical offices*

Many policymakers observe rising nonmarital births as a share of births and assume that the nonmarital birth *rate* is rising, without considering the influence of the prevalence of marriage itself.

As we show below, more births are occurring to unmarried women *not only* because nonmarital birth rates have risen (and they have risen somewhat over the last few decades), but also—and perhaps primarily—because rising marriage ages have led to a dramatic increase in the number of reproductive-age unmarried women in most societies, as shown in Figure 7.

## Figure 7. Married Share of Women Ages 20–40

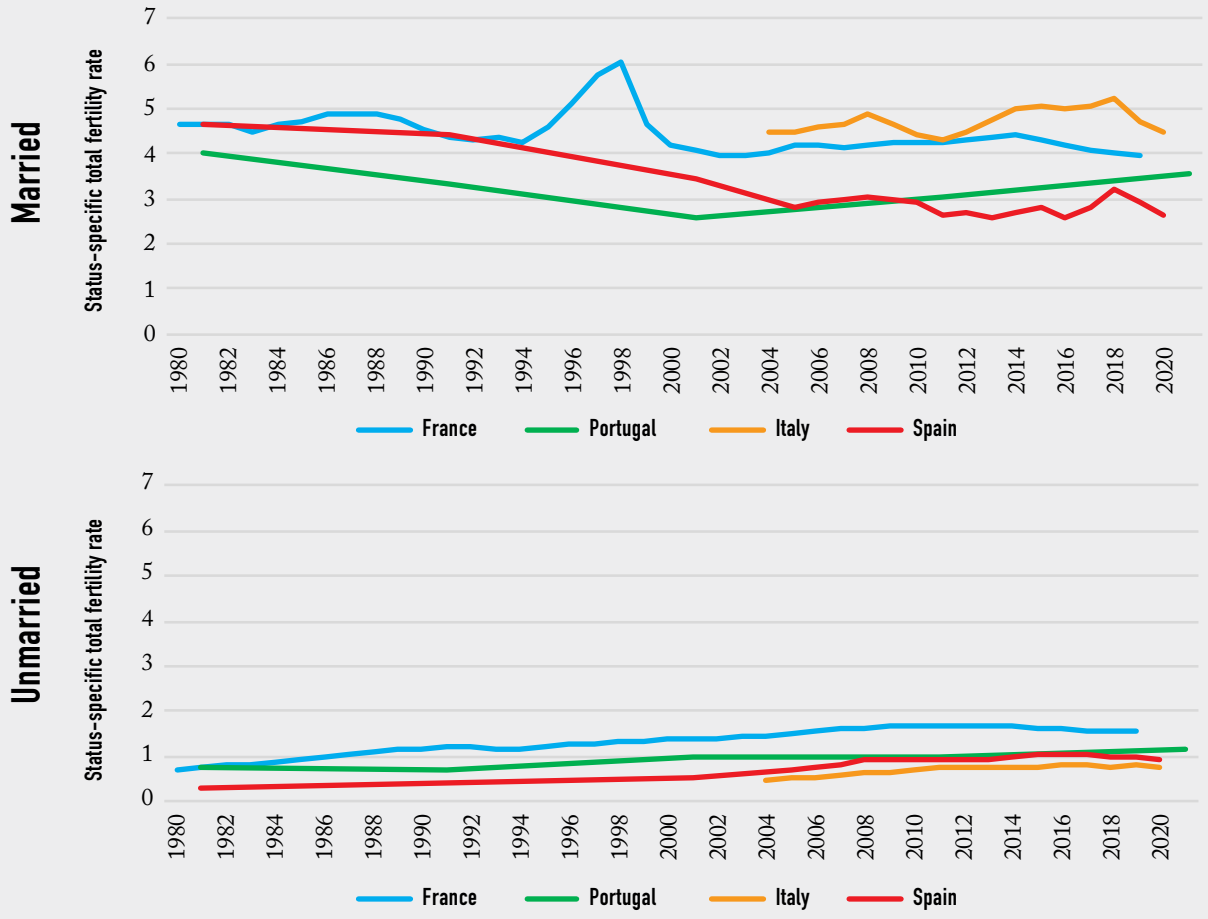



*Source: National statistical office population estimates and censuses*

Whereas in the 1980s, considerable majorities of women ages 20 to 40 were married in all the large countries of southwest Europe, about a third or less of this age group is married today. Even if nonmarital birth rates had been totally unchanged (that is, if the age-specific rates at which unmarried women had children had been stable over time), the number of births to unmarried mothers would have about doubled, while the number of births to married mothers would have fallen sharply. Thus, even if married women have *vastly* higher fertility rates, a mere compositional change in marital status can drive a huge increase in nonmarital births alongside a sharp decline in society-wide fertility.

Data on fertility by marital status strongly confirms the ongoing importance of marriage for fertility. Figures 8a and 8b show fertility rates for married and unmarried women in Spain, Italy, Portugal, and France. These rates are constructed by taking the number of births to women of a given age *and marital status* and dividing it by the number of women of that age and status, then summing these age-and-status-specific rates across all ages for a given status. Because women enter and exit various marital statuses over the life course, these figures represent abstract indicators of status-specific fertility rates, not true predictions or measures of actual completed family size by marital status.

## Figure 8. Status-Specific Total Fertility Rates Over Time




*Source: Author's calculations from Eurostat and national vital statistics office estimates of births by age and marital status, and national statistical office estimates of population by age, sex, and marital status*

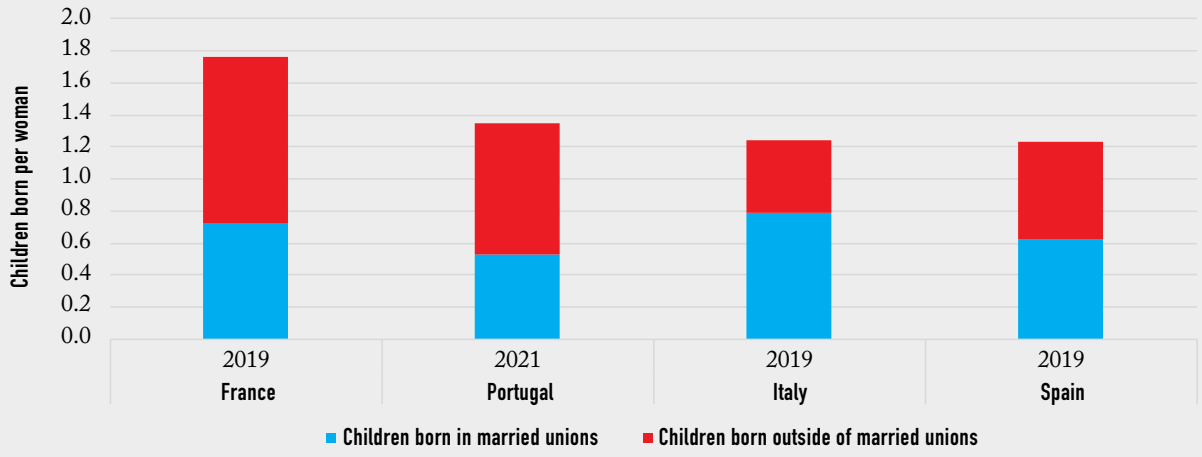
In all four countries, women of a given age are vastly more likely to have children when they are married. The ratio is lowest in France (3.96 for married women and 1.54 for unmarried, a ratio of 2.6) and highest in Italy (marital fertility is almost six times nonmarital fertility), but in every case, married women are far more likely to have children.

These marital fertility rates, of course, are also not fixed over time. From 1980 to the early 2000s, marital fertility fell sharply in both Spain and Portugal, while remaining stable in France and possibly Italy as well. But since the early 2000s, marital fertility has actually risen by a large amount in Portugal, while it has been generally stable in the other three countries. Figure 9 shows non-marital fertility indices: they have generally risen over time but remain far lower than marital fertility indices.

For Portugal, Spain, and France, the ratio of marital to nonmarital fertility has stabilized around three: women of a given age are about three times as likely to have a child as unmarried women of the same age. In Italy, this ratio has stabilized around six. On the whole, this suggests that Italy's nonmarital fertility may be unusually low compared to its marital fertility; but for the other countries, there is no reason to imagine nonmarital fertility can serve as a major source of higher fertility. That's because nonmarital fertility is already quite high compared to marital fertility.

Accounting for the actual years that women in each of these countries spend in married unions, Figure 9 shows the number of children that women in each country can expect to have within and outside of married unions.

## Figure 9. Children Ever Born, by Maternal Marital Status at Time of Birth



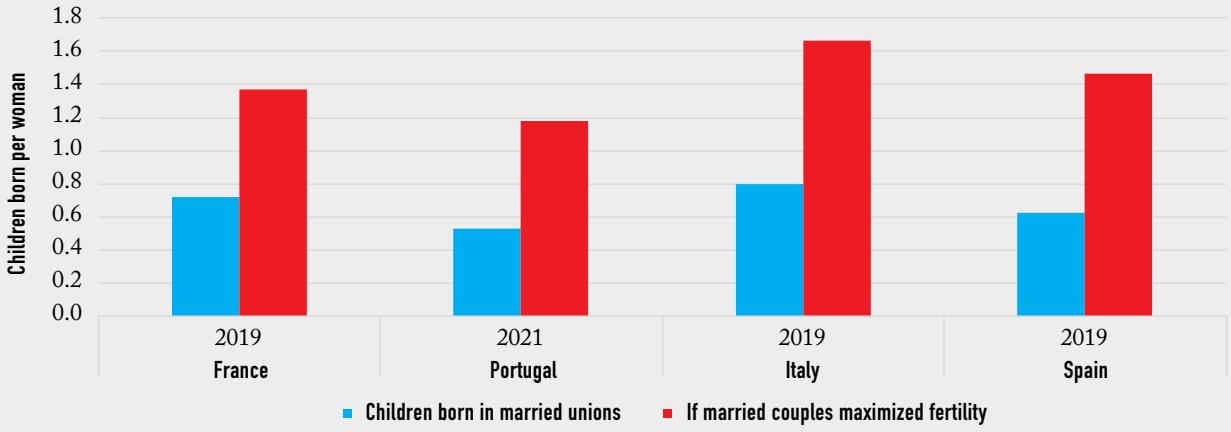

*Source: Author's calculations from Eurostat and national vital statistics office estimates of births by age and marital status, and national statistical office estimates of population by age, sex, and marital status*

In France, the average woman will have one child outside of a married relationship, and 0.7 children inside a married relationship. France's very high nonmarital fertility rates are striking, but it should also be noted that French women have more children *within* marriage than Portuguese or Spanish women (though not Italian women). French women

have higher fertility than women in much of southern Europe regardless of marital status, and so France's higher fertility cannot be attributed simply to higher nonmarital births. In other words, even if Spain or Portugal had the same environment for, and low stigmas around, nonmarital fertility as France, both countries would still have appreciably lower fertility.

Furthermore, the dynamics of low fertility vary considerably between Spain, Italy, and Portugal. A useful exercise is to calculate hypothetical fertility rates if every married couple in each of these countries were experiencing natural fertility for their age, meaning, birth odds consistent with frequent intercourse, short breastfeeding duration, and no use of contraceptives. In general, if a woman experiences these coupling behaviors throughout her whole life, she will tend to have approximately 8 to 14 children, on average. Figure 10 compares actual births in married unions (taken from Figure 9) to what births in married unions *would have been* if the country's marital *prevalence* was unchanged but marital fertility *rates* rose to the age-specific rates implied by natural fertility.

## Figure 10. Actual Marital Births vs. Maximum Currently Possible Marital Births

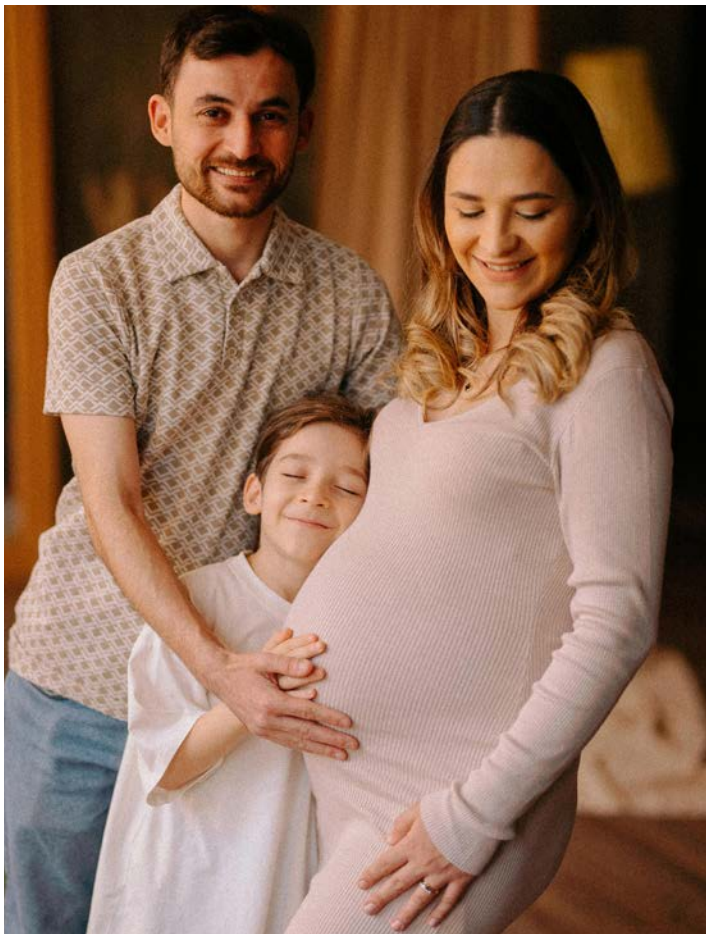



*Source: Author's calculations from Eurostat and national vital statistics office estimates of births by age and marital status, and national statistical office estimates of population by age, sex, and marital status*

As can be seen, even if every married woman in France, Portugal, Italy, or Spain bore children at the "natural" fertility rate for a woman of her age, marriage rates are nonetheless *so low* that overall fertility from married couples would remain below 1.7 children per woman in every country. Differences in marital composition alone explain approximately 75% of the gap between pre-modern natural fertility rates and observed fertility rates. Among married couples in each country, their fertility relative to natural fertility varies: Spanish married women have unusually low fertility within marriage, while Italian and French women have fairly high fertility within marriage.

Thus, it is effectively impossible for any of these countries to boost their birth rates over 2 children per woman simply by getting married women to have more children. As discussed above, it is also unlikely that unmarried fertility can durably make up gaps. Rather, to boost fertility in the long run, the share of women who are married at any given age must increase.

Nor is the effect of marriage diminished if cohort data is used instead of period data. At the end of their reproductive years, ever-married women have had far more children than never-married women in every country in Europe, according to data from the European Values Survey.[16] In Portugal and Slovenia, ever-married women have 0.6 children more than never-married women; in France, 1 more; in Italy, 1.4; in Spain, 1.6; in Switzerland, 1.7; in Malta, 2.2.[17] Data from a large Spanish fertility survey conducted in 2018 confirm the impression of a large gap: never-married women in that survey had only 0.5 children on average by their late-40s, while ever-married women had 1.6 children.[18]



**At the end of their reproductive years, ever-married women have had far more children than never-married women in every country in Europe.**

[16] Op. Cit., Stone and James, IFS.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *Instituto National de Estadistica*, "Fertility Survey: Year 2018. Final Data," Press Release, 4/19/19.

## SPOTLIGHT 4: Cohabitation and Fatherlessness

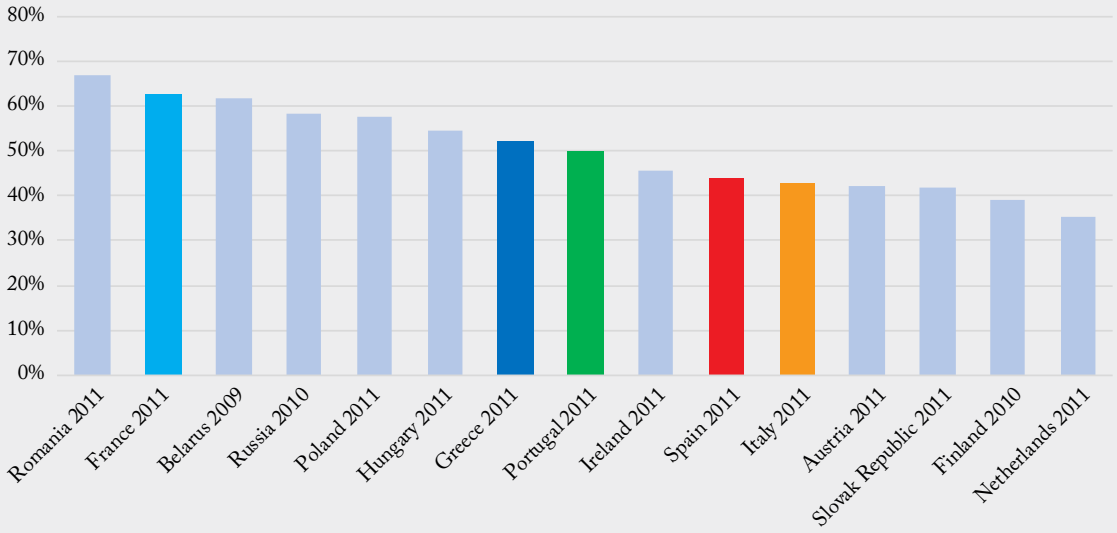
It should be noted that many nonmarital births, nonetheless, occur in publicly and sometimes legally recognized couples. This is famously the case in the Nordic countries, where very large shares of births to unmarried parents occur in stable, coresidential, and often legally registered cohabiting couples. Countries vary in their legal treatment of cohabiting couples, and in many cases, regardless of how they are treated legally, some couples who are not legally married still form durable, committed relationships and act as coparents of shared children, sometimes for their entire lives (though on average, cohabiting relationships are less stable than married relationships, even in countries that afford them legal protections). The legal definition of marriage is not always synonymous with socially-enforceable couple status and coparenting. Thus, it is also helpful to assess the prevalence of *coresidential* coupling rather than just marriage. Figure S4.1 does just that, using the 2009-2011 census rounds for European countries with available data to estimate the share of women who are *either* 1) married, 2) formally cohabiting, or 3) report coresidence in sequential census line numbers with a similar-age, opposite-sex individual who is not reported as a family member. This approach gets around issues of differential reporting standards across countries.

While coupling prevalence is not uniformly associated with fertility (Finland in 2010 had relatively high fertility but low coupling, but Romania had relatively low fertility but high coupling), within southern Europe, the association is clear. France's high birth rate is associated with high rates of coupling; and Greece, which has the next highest coupling rate among southern European countries, did have higher fertility at the time than Portugal, Spain, or Italy.

Another way to assess the prevalence of coupled unions and to better understand nonmarital fertility is to measure what share of children have no reported paternity details on birth registrations. Figure S4.2 shows the share of births without paternity details listed on birth registration documents (i.e. the children lacked legal paternity at the time of birth registration), in selected countries for which data is available.

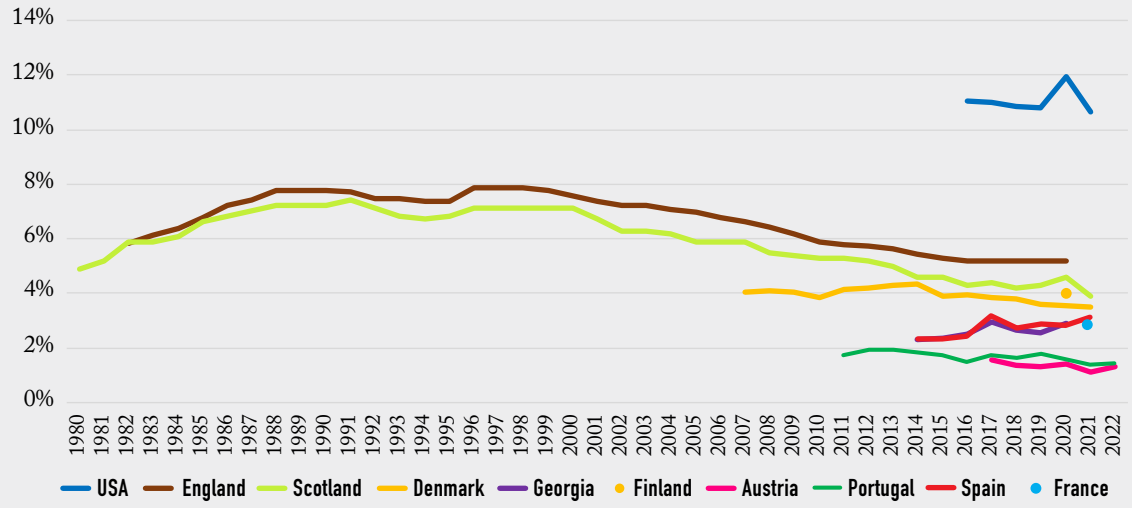
Thus, even though women in France are unlikely to be married, they are very likely to be cohabiting with a partner. As a result, in France, only 2.8% of children lack a registered father, despite 60% of children being born out of wedlock. Although a considerably smaller 48% of Spanish children are born to unmarried mothers, a greater share, 3.1% of children, lack a registered father, consistent with fewer Spanish women living with a partner. In the United States, where still fewer children are born to unmarried mothers (about 40%), nonetheless, about 11% of births have no registered father. In other words, while marriage is important for fertility behavior, the extent to which marriage actually creates unique guarantees, and the extent to which nonmarriage implies true solo-parenting, varies across countries.

## Figure S4.1. Share of Women 20–40 in a Coresidential Relationship




*Source: Author's calculations from Eurostat and national vital statistics office estimates of births by age and marital status, and national statistical office estimates of population by age, sex, and marital status*

## Figure S4.2. Share of Births with No Registered Paternity




*Source: Author's calculations from Eurostat and national vital statistics office estimates of births by age and marital status, and national statistical office estimates of population by age, sex, and marital status*

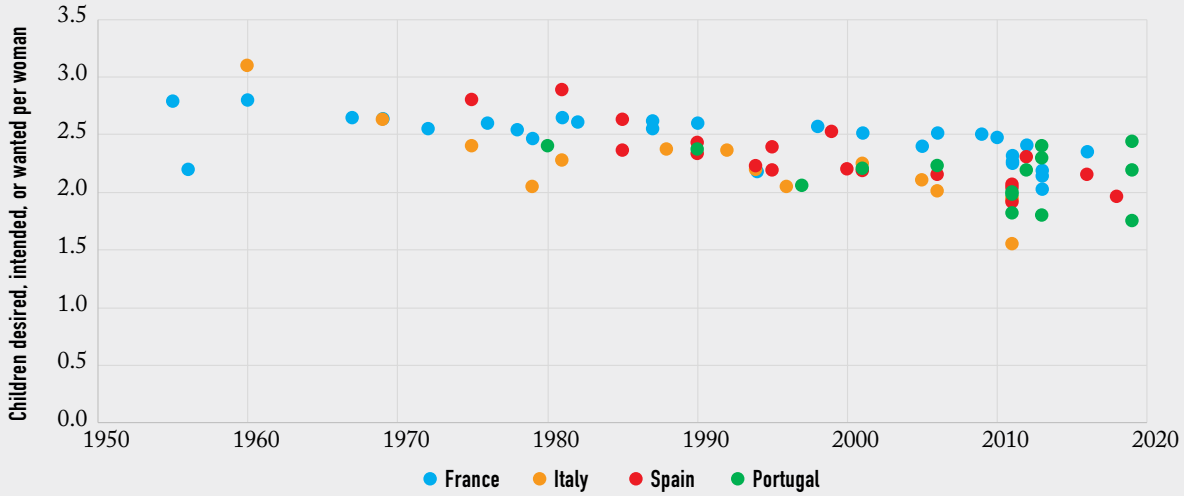
## Key Point:

Throughout southwestern Europe, marriage remains vitally important for fertility. Married women have more children overall, and women are likelier to have children in years in which they are married. The vast majority of long-run fertility decline is compositionally accounted for by declining marriage rates, and, likewise, much of the rise in nonmarital fertility is simply related to the growing number of unmarried women of reproductive age, not necessarily a rising propensity for those women to have children outside of marriage. There is considerable cross-country variation in the relationship between marriage and fertility: French women have higher marital and nonmarital fertility than other women, while Italian women have high marital fertility but low nonmarital fertility. Spanish women, on the other hand, have strikingly low marital and nonmarital fertility. Thus, the life-history sources of low fertility vary widely across southwestern Europe, and higher fertility in France arises from multiple different sources. Moreover, although France's nonmarital fertility rate is higher than most other countries, its share of children born without a legally registered father is not unusually high, suggesting that France's high fertility does not, in fact, come paired with unusually high rates of absentee fathers.

## Attitudes Toward Fertility

Besides union status and coupling behavior, another key element of family formation can be measured using survey data on attitudes towards fertility, or fertility preferences. Surveys of fertility preferences ask respondents questions about their desired, intended, wanted, wished for, or ideal ultimate family sizes. These questions do not all produce identical responses, as will be shown in Figure 11. France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal have all had unique surveys conducted in different years measuring fertility preferences in specific ways. The only recent harmonized survey across all four countries was the 2011 Eurobarometer survey. Recent detailed fertility surveys have been conducted in Spain (2018) and Portugal (2019), but in Italy and France, very little data is available since the early 2010s. Nonetheless, even the sporadic available data makes clear that women in France have generally desired larger families than women in Spain, Italy, or Portugal in recent years.

### Figure 11. Stated Fertility Preferences in Surveys

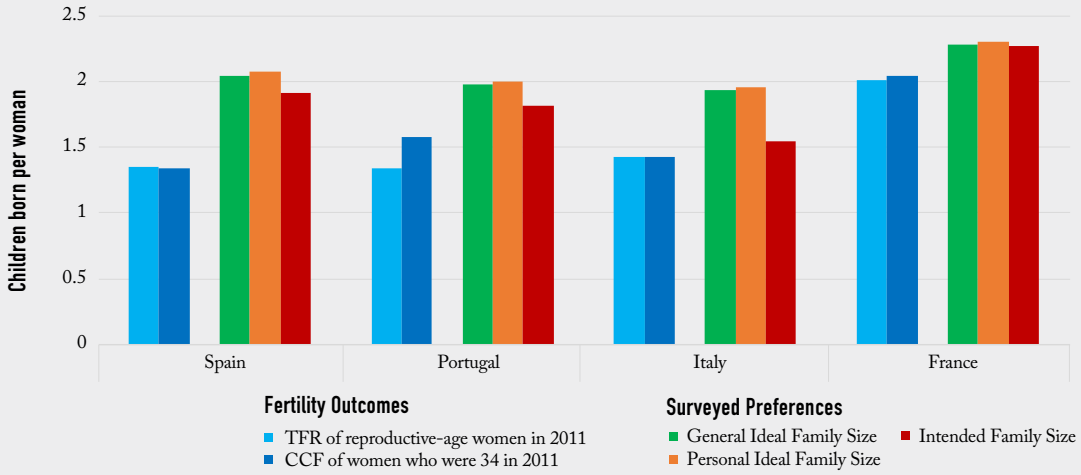



*Source: Lyman Stone, The Global Fertility Gap, Institute for Family Studies, 2/25/2019.*

Since 2000, the lowest fertility preference reported by French women was intended fertility in 2013, at 2.03 children per woman. But since 2000, there are numerous surveys yielding fertility preferences below 2 children per woman in other countries: Spanish women in 2018 reported only desiring 1.96 children, Italian women in 2011 desired only 1.95 and intended just 1.55. Portuguese women's intentions were below 2 in 2011, 2013, and 2019, as were Spanish women's intentions in 2011. Thus, a core part of the French difference is not simply a difference in fertility realizations but fertility goals. French women want bigger families than their southern neighbors.

French women not only want more children, but they have more children. In fact, the gap between their wants and their outcomes are smaller than for women in the other three countries. In 2011, the gap between what reproductive-age French women said was their personal ideal family size and their actual total fertility rate was 0.3 children; but in Italy the gap was 0.5, in Portugal 0.6, and in Spain 0.7, as shown in Figure 12.

## Figure 12. Fertility Preferences and Outcomes




*Source: Eurobarometer 2011, Human Fertility Database*

France's gap is about 0.2 to 0.4 children smaller than the gap observed in Spain, Portugal, or Italy. This is about the same size as the 0.1 to 0.3 child increase this report previously attributed to France's pronatal policies. Thus, it is plausible that the reason French women's fertility more closely approximates their desires is that the French policy environment is more supportive of family formation.

In all four countries, women's "general ideals" (what they said was best for a family in *the abstract*) closely mirrored their "personal ideals" (what they said was best for them *personally*), and both measures of ideals tended to exceed intentions. Intentions, in turn, generally exceeded actual fertility outcomes, whether measured by TFR in 2011, or the ultimate completed fertility of women who were 34 in 2011 (the youngest group for which completed fertility

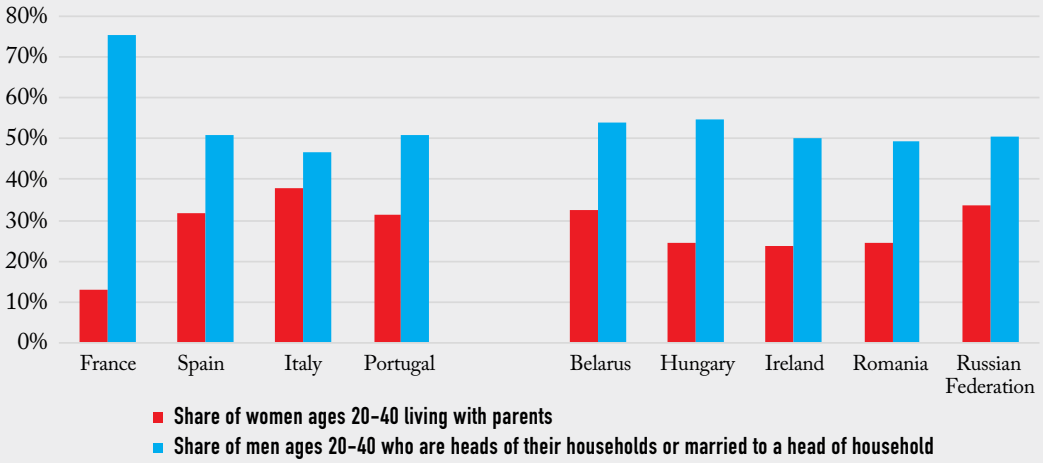
can be approximated). By far, French women had the smallest gap between personal desires and fertility outcomes, though Italian women had very small gaps between intentions and outcomes due to the large gap between what Italian women report wanting and what they, in fact, deem realistically achievable. In Spain on the other hand, there is a sharp gap between intentions and outcomes, suggesting many Spanish women are not only failing to achieve their fertility desires but also are facing recurrent negative surprises in terms of their inability to achieve even their more reasonable intentions.

Why do French women desire more children? One answer may be France's unique pronatal policy environment: strong social support for childbearing may lead young people to adopt more optimistic views of their family futures, a factor discussed at great length in a later section of this report. Another could be the more favorable environment for coupling discussed above, or the better housing environment discussed below.

## SPOTLIGHT 5: Housing

Only 13% of French women ages 20 to 40 coreside with their parents, whereas over 30% of women in Spain, Italy, and Portugal live with their parents. Figure S5.1 shows the share of women ages 20-40 who were living with at least one parent during the 2011 European census round, for all countries for which that data was publicly available. It also shows the share of men ages 20-40 in each country who were either the "Reference person" for a household (conventionally referred to as a "head of household") or else married to the reference person. This is another measure of independent household formation.

### Figure S5.1. Housing and Residence Circumstances for Reproductive-Age People




*Source: National censuses, queried in IPUMS International*

Not only are women in France uniquely unlikely to live with parents but men in France are uniquely likely to live independently. Italian women have the highest observed rates of parental coresidence, while Italian men have the lowest observed rates of being the head of an independent household. In other words, there are large differences in housing conditions across countries.

Extensive prior academic research has pointed to housing conditions as key determinants of fertility.[19] The contrast between France and the rest of Europe, and especially the large southern European countries, could not make it any clearer that enormous differences in parental coresidence contribute to dramatic fertility differences.[20] In all four countries, women who coreside with parents have lower fertility, and prior academic research supports the idea that living with parents reduces fertility intentions in southern Europe.[21] More generally, while parents benefit from living close to their children's grandparents and so increase their fertility intentions, nonparents who live closer to family have much lower intentions to have a first child. Since a large amount of the fertility difference between France and its southern neighbors is, in fact, driven by childlessness, this suggests that low fertility in Spain, Portugal, and Italy may be closely related to the large number of reproductive-age women who still live in their parent's house, or are their immediate neighbors. This close proximity can imply heavy elder-care duties and may arise from poorly functioning markets for homeownership and renting.

The key intuition here is not that fertility is increased by families living far apart per se, but rather that to establish their own families, young people generally need their own space. Moreover, high coresidence with parents can be a symptom of deeper economic problems and youth underemployment. Finally, perceived crowding in housing or in cities can have serious negative consequences for fertility intentions.[22]

[19] Sarah Brauner-Otto, "Housing and fertility: a macro-level, multi-country investigation, 1993-2017," *Housing Studies* 38, no. 4 (2023): 569-596. Also: Kristin Makszin and Dorothy Bohle, "Housing as a fertility trap: the inability of states, markets, or families to provide adequate housing in East Central Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 34, no 4 (2020). Also: Clara Mulder and Francesco Billari, "Home ownership regimes and low fertility," *Housing Studies* 25, no 4 (2010): 527-541; Also: Daniele Vignoli, et al., "A home to plan the first child? Fertility intentions and housing conditions in Italy," *Population, Space, and Place* 19, no 1 (Jan/Feb 2013): 60-71. Also: Kadir Atalay, et al., "Housing, wealth, fertility intentions, and fertility," *Journal of Housing Economics* 54 (2021). William A.V. Clark, et al., Do housing prices affect fertility behavior in China? An empirical examination," 43, no 5 (2020). Richard Florida et al., "Housing costs, self employment, and fertility," *Population, Space, and Place* 27, no 3 (April 2021): e2413.

[20] Across the five European countries with parental residence data and childbearing history data, women ages 35 to 39 who coresided with a parent had 30-70% fewer children than women of the same age who did not coreside with a parent.

[21] Bastian Monkediek and Hilde Bras, "Family systems and fertility intentions: exploring the pathways of influence," *European Journal of Population* 34, no. 1 (Feb. 2018): 33-57.

[22] Jose C. Yong, et al., "When social status gets in the way of reproduction in modern settings: An evolutionary mismatch perspective, 2023," *Culture and Evolution*, April 2023. Also: Rotella, A., Varnum, et al., "Increasing population densities predict decreasing fertility rates over time: A 174-nation investigation." *American Psychologist* 76, no. 6 (2021): 933–946.

**Key Point:**

Women in Spain, Italy, and Portugal appear to desire and intend smaller families than women in France, establishing an upper limit on what pronatal policy could achieve in the short run. However, low fertility desires may in some part be related to major structural differences in housing and extended family dynamics. While parents of small children benefit from grandparental help with kids, in general, young people who reside with their parents or are otherwise unable to form independent households are less likely to marry, desire fewer children, and have fewer children.

## Conclusion

Fertility in Portugal, Spain, and Italy (as well as Andorra, Malta, and other countries in the area) is at very low levels, which is giving rise to rapidly shrinking family sizes throughout southwestern Europe. These low levels arise largely from low marriage rates: even if married women had children near the maximum biologically possible rates, fertility would still be below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman, given how late and rare marriage has become. Marriage and fertility behaviors are jointly influenced by low fertility preferences and varying country-level economic and housing conditions. But throughout the region, women are spending fewer of their reproductive years in a stable, mutually supportive, legally protected union of the sort that could create the prospective confidence and security necessary to motivate childbearing.

However, even among married couples, fertility rates have fallen over the last few decades in much of southern Europe. A key factor shaping low fertility in Spain, Portugal, and Italy is the generally low desired family size in the region: women in southern Europe not only face obstacles to having children, they also simply desire fewer children than their more northerly peers.

By comparing Spain, Portugal, and Italy to France, a country with comparatively high fertility, several factors stand out.

1. **French fertility rose above its southern neighbors in the period in which France adopted a systematic pronatal policy with generous financial transfers, especially via France's tax structure that greatly favors marriage and family formation.**
2. **The scale of the fertility gap between France and its neighbors is similar to the estimated effect size of many pronatal policies.**
3. **French fertility is higher for both married and unmarried women, and is connected to higher fertility desires, and is not driven by fertility among immigrants.**
4. **French women are far more likely to live independently, apart from their parents, than women in Spain, Portugal, or Italy.**

[23] T.T. Zhang, et al. "The effect of family fertility support policies on fertility, their contribution, and policy pathways to fertility improvement in OECD countries." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 6 (2023).

[24] Mary C. Brinton and Dong-Ju Lee, "Gender role ideology, labor market institutions, and post-industrial fertility," *Population and Development Review* 42, no.3 (Sept. 2016): 405-433.

But while France's uniquely pronatal policy environment and more successful housing institutions may increase its birth rates, this line of reasoning does not produce a direct blueprint for successful pronatal policy in southern Europe. France's example shows that pronatal policies can work, but it does not therefore follow that France's *exact* policies can be transplanted to Spain or Italy or elsewhere, not least because policies implemented *after* major fertility declines may not be as effective as those implemented *before* such declines.[23] Moreover, there may be important links to other factors not classically considered to be part of family policy. Perhaps France's pronatal incentives worked because France managed housing supply better than its neighbors, so that families could spend more on having children and less on housing than their counterparts. The same policies applied to a society with a different housing or labor market might not yield identical outcomes. This report has discussed some major fertility drivers but has not explored others, most notably the structure of labor markets in southern Europe, which prior research suggests may also be important.[24]

Each country's fertility environment is meaningfully different, and the barriers facing women that shape their fertility preferences and behavior may vary as well. Portugal and Spain have recently conducted large, but non-standardized, fertility surveys; France and Italy have not, to say nothing of the smaller countries in the region like Andorra, Malta, Cyprus, or Greece. In order to develop effective policies to facilitate higher fertility, policymakers throughout southern Europe need a harmonized, large-sample-size fertility survey program conducted across the region to compare and contrast various factors influencing fertility. While governments undoubtedly would prefer to hear that there is some policy that can be enacted tomorrow to reliably increase birth rates, this is simply not the case. Only once better data is available to identify the unique factors influencing fertility around southern Europe can governments effectively respond, addressing the various needs families have with respect to child care, housing, union stability, work, finances, and other domains.

## About the Authors

**Lyman Stone** is a research fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, the director of research of the consulting firm Demographic Intelligence, and a PhD candidate at McGill University. His work has been covered in the *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Vox,* and *The Federalist*, as well as numerous local outlets. He formerly worked as an international economist for USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service.

**Erin Wingerter** is a researcher at the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Navarra. She has worked in higher education creating and fostering strategic institutional partnerships and mentoring students on career outcomes and international exchange. Her research explores the intersection of career aspirations and family priorities, fertility, and parenthood.