

Radicalized political climate and fertility

Chiara L. Comolli (Corresponding author), University of Bologna, chiara.comolli@unibo.it

K. Gunnar Andersson, Stockholm University Demography Unit

Oskar Lindstrom, Stockholm University Demography Unit

Gerda Neyer, Stockholm University Demography Unit

Abstract

The timing of fertility declines in developed societies during the last decade prompted scholars to associate it with the Great Recession of 2008. However, the persistence of fertility declines during the 2010s suggests that other developments, maybe triggered or intensified by the crisis, may have influenced fertility behavior. Here, we investigate if and how the polarization of the local political climate and growing support for right-wing populist parties in the community may have affected childbearing trends. Our analysis focuses on Sweden, where the vote share of the radical right party, the Sweden Democrats, increased sixfold between 2006 and 2018, while fertility rates have declined by more than 20 percent between 2006 and 2024. We use the 2003-2024 population register data to construct complete individual-level fertility histories and link women to the Sweden Democrats' share of votes in their municipality of residence in the elections that were held in 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018. We estimate discrete-time event history models for first, second, and third childbirth risks, controlling for individual-level demographic and socioeconomic known determinants of fertility behavior, and for municipality characteristics. Preliminary results demonstrate that the role of voter support for the Sweden Democrats is fairly weak, but that immigrants who live in municipalities with greater support for the Sweden Democrats have an elevated risk of having a(nother) child.

Keywords: fertility, political climate, polarization, Sweden, inequality

Introduction and Background

In many high-income countries, Total Fertility Rates (TFR) have been declining persistently during the last decade, with countries as diverse as Finland, the UK, Switzerland, Norway, and the United States reporting all-time low TFRs in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Similarly, fertility in Sweden has been in constant decline since 2010, with a TFR going from close to two children per woman in that year to 1.48 in 2024 (SCB). Recent research suggests that, at least in Europe, these declines are not merely temporary drops due to accelerating postponement of childbearing (*tempo effects*), but rather a sign of what may produce a more permanent decrease (*quantum effects*) in cohort fertility (Bongaarts and Feeney, 1998; Hellstrand et al., 2020).

The simultaneous onset of such widespread fertility declines can convincingly be linked to the triggering event of the Great Recession that hit the U.S. in the fall of 2007 and Europe a few months later (Adsera, 2011; Sobotka et al., 2011; Comolli and Bernardi, 2015; Schneider, 2015; Comolli, 2017, 2021). When incomes drop and unemployment rises, long-term commitments such as investments in housing, marriages, and decisions to have a child tend to be postponed to financially more lenient times. The initial declines in TFRs during the early 2010s were thus not surprising as births were postponed to a future with better economic prospects. However, despite the economic recovery later on in the 2010s, a situation with recuperated fertility failed to materialize, and TFRs continued their descent. In Sweden, as elsewhere, macroeconomic indicators alone seem not able to explain the continued and accelerated fertility declines during the 2010s (Comolli et al., 2021).

While individuals' economic prospects represent a strong driving force in childbearing decisions, objective economic conditions are not the unique rationale for childbearing. First, the subjective perception of those conditions may lead to other evaluations of current and future prospects in relation to childbearing opportunities (Vignoli et al., 2020a, b). Part of the persistent fertility decline in Europe has, in fact, been linked to enduring *economic uncertainty* that causes a re-evaluation of future prospects and the postponement of commitments like having children (Comolli and Vignoli, 2021). Second, the Great Recession in Europe and beyond was accompanied and followed by other social developments, beyond those of labor market deterioration and income drops, that might as well have influenced people's willingness to have children. Such developments include different aspects of growing social inequalities, lower social cohesion, mounting intergenerational tensions, and anti-immigrant opinions (Cronin, 2013; Comolli, 2023). Studies have shown that these aspects have contributed to the rise of right-wing parties in Europe and that their election successes have accelerated since 2010 (Rydgren 2007; Shayo 2009; Uslaner 2002; Georgiadou et al. 2018; Giustzzi and Gangl 2021). Research has furthermore found that socio-economic conditions of insecurity have been particularly relevant for the increases in right-wing vote shares at the regional level (Georgiadou et al. 2018).

In this study, we therefore focus on the rising support for Radical Right Parties (RRP) and we investigate how this may be related to childbearing trends in Sweden, considering regional aspects of socio-economic conditions and RRP voting outcomes.

Data and Method

We use Swedish register data and Event History Analysis (piecewise exponential hazard model) to construct complete individual-level fertility histories of all women in the reproductive age range of 16-45 years that were resident in Sweden in the period 2003-2024 (N=20,076,508). Swedish registers bring annual information on educational attainment, individual and family disposable income, employment status, and type of occupation, civil status, fertility, and other demographic characteristics. Our dependent variable is the risk of having a first, second, or third child during the observed period. Our observations are censored at the date of death, the date of first emigration, or 12 months before the first twin birth; otherwise, on January 1st of the year following the last year observed. For second- and third births, observations are also censored 108 months after the last child (9 years after the decision). Individuals are also left-censored if they have experienced the event before 2002.

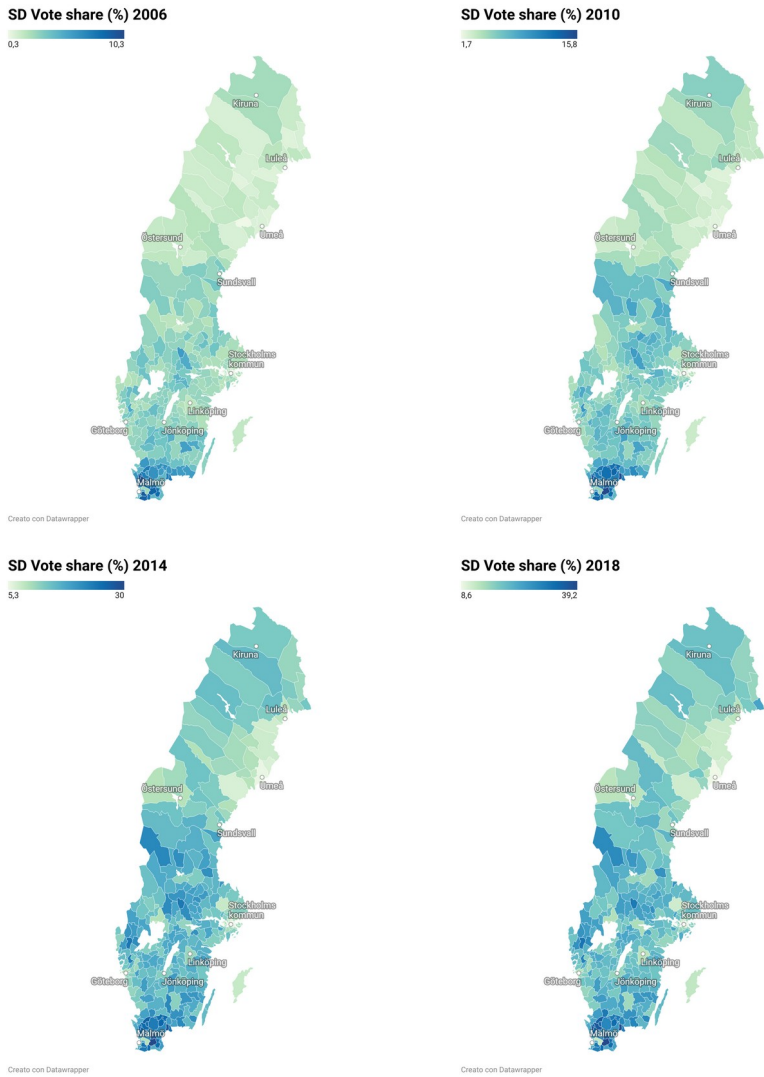
Our main explanatory variable is the share of votes obtained by the Sweden Democrats (SD) in a woman's municipality of residence (we have no information on her own voting behavior), obtained linking each woman to the share of votes obtained by the Sweden Democrats (SD) in her municipality of residence (N=290) in the five election years 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018 (Statistics Sweden). Figure 1 shows the territorial heterogeneity in the share of votes for the SD by municipalities in the last four elections. The original support for SD was concentrated in the Skåne region in southern Sweden, while over time the support spread to other municipalities in southern and central Sweden. In our current analyses, we categorized SD support into terciles by election (low, middle, and high support).

We analyze how the hazard of childbirths varies across municipalities and years with different terciles of support for the SD, net of individual-level and municipality-level characteristics that may influence both the likelihood of having a(nother) child and of SD success in that municipality. At the individual-level, we control for age (dummies in first births models, age groups in second and third births models in which we additionally control for age of the first child), women's educational attainment (primary or lower secondary, upper secondary, tertiary, in education, or missing), employment status (employed, self-employed, not employed), social origin (Swedish born with Swedish parents, Swedish born with at least one foreign parent, foreign born). We do not control for civil status because

marriage in Sweden tends to follow childbirth rather than the other way around (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020).

We additionally control for time-varying municipality characteristics that might affect both the rise in SD votes and fertility decisions: population size and the share of foreign-born population (calculated from the register data at hand). We control for the broader political sentiment in the municipality as reflected by conservative ideology using the share of votes for the traditional conservative parties (Moderate Party and Christian Democrats). Additionally, we control for the Gini income inequality index (calculated from the income data in available registers) and the share of manufacturing jobs in the municipality as a measure of job polarization. We further control for municipalities' unemployment rate (Statistics Sweden). All explanatory and control variables are lagged one year so that they are measured at the time the decision to have a child was taken.

Figure 1: Share of votes for Sweden Democrats in 2006-2018 elections by Municipality.



Preliminary Results

Table 1 shows that the risk of having a first child is higher in the municipalities in the upper tercile of support for the Swedish Democrats (SD) relative to the middle and low terciles of vote share for the SD. The association holds net of women's observed sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics (Model 2, Table 1), but, is reduced when controlling for observed municipality characteristics (Model 3, Table 1). One of the reasons for this is that people in larger cities generally have lower voter support for the SD but later entries into becoming a parent. Compared to Swedish-born women, first-birth risks are elevated for foreign-born women, and controlling for municipal characteristics does not reduce their first-birth risks.

Results for the second childbirth are shown in Table 2. Here, we find a reversed association, with a slightly lower risk of having a second child in municipalities with higher support for the Swedish Democrats (SD). The association with second birth risk is little reduced when individual-level characteristics are included (Model 2, Table 2), and is not mediated by municipality characteristics (Model 3, Table 2).

Table 1. Results from piecewise exponential hazard models of transitions to first birth

VARIABLES	Main effects models		
	Hazard ratios		
	1	2	3
SD vote share terciles (REF: Middle)			
Bottom	0.880*** (0.00218)	0.874*** (0.00217)	0.966*** (0.00279)
Upper	1.099*** (0.00288)	1.098*** (0.00288)	1.045*** (0.00295)
Education (REF: Upper Secondary education)			
Primary or Lower Secondary education		1.206*** (0.00554)	1.203*** (0.00553)
Tertiary education		1.181*** (0.00299)	1.234*** (0.00315)
In education		0.606*** (0.00200)	0.631*** (0.00209)
Missing education		1.009 (0.00673)	1.032*** (0.00689)
Employment status (REF: Employed)			
Self-Employed		0.951*** (0.00637)	0.959*** (0.00642)
Not employed		0.611*** (0.00174)	0.611*** (0.00175)
Migration background (REF: Swedish-born with Swedish parents)			
Swedish-born with foreign-born parent		0.894*** (0.00286)	0.920*** (0.00297)
Foreign-born		1.307*** (0.00354)	1.344*** (0.00370)
Unemployment rate (%)			0.990*** (0.000393)
Population municipality (in ten thousands)			0.999*** (6.00e-05)
Share of foreign-born population (%)			1.059** (0.0250)
Gini index			0.914* (0.0486)
Manufacturing share (% of workers)			1.015*** (0.000275)
M+KD vote share (%)			1.000 (0.000296)
Year dummies	YES	YES	YES
Age dummies	YES	YES	YES
Constant	0.0133*** (7.67e-05)	0.0137*** (8.18e-05)	0.0135*** (0.000225)
Observations	20,076,508	20,076,508	20,076,508

Source: elaboration of the authors based on Statistics Sweden. Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 2. Results from piecewise exponential hazard models of transitions to second birth

VARIABLES	Main effects models		
	Hazard ratios		
	1	2	3
SD vote share terciles (REF: Middle)			
Bottom	1.005*	0.999	1.005
	(0.00278)	(0.00277)	(0.00317)
Upper	0.979***	0.982***	0.982***
	(0.00277)	(0.00278)	(0.00299)
Education (REF: Upper Secondary education)			
Primary or Lower Secondary education		0.930***	0.931***
		(0.00455)	(0.00456)
Tertiary education		1.298***	1.302***
		(0.00356)	(0.00359)
In education		0.861***	0.864***
		(0.00347)	(0.00349)
Missing education		1.057***	1.060***
		(0.00899)	(0.00903)
Employment status (REF: Employed)			
Self-Employed		0.935***	0.934***
		(0.00651)	(0.00651)
Not employed		0.820***	0.825***
		(0.00267)	(0.00269)
Migration background (REF: Swedish-born with Swedish parents)			
Swedish-born with foreign-born parent		0.941***	0.944***
		(0.00344)	(0.00349)
Foreign-born		0.892***	0.896***
		(0.00274)	(0.00282)
Unemployment rate (%)			0.994***
			(0.000432)
Population municipality (in ten thousands)			0.999***
			(6.79e-05)
Share of foreign-born population (%)			1.001
			(0.0255)
Gini index			1.715***
			(0.0979)
Manufacturing share (% of workers)			1.003***
			(0.000295)
M+KD vote share (%)			1.003***
			(0.000318)
Year dummies	YES	YES	YES
Age groups	YES	YES	YES
Age of last child	YES	YES	YES
Constant	0.994***	0.998	0.998
	(0.000432)	(0.00118)	(0.00118)
Observations	9,687,315	9,687,315	9,687,315

Source: elaboration of the authors based on Statistics Sweden. Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

References

- Adsera, A. (2011). Where are the babies? Labor market conditions and fertility in Europe. *European Journal of Population/Revue européenne de Démographie*, 27(1), 1-32.
- Bongaarts, J., and Feeney, G. (1998). On the quantum and tempo of fertility. *Population and development review*, 271-291.
- Comolli, C. L., and Bernardi, F. (2015). The causal effect of the great recession on childlessness of white American women. *IZA Journal of Labor Economics*, 4(1), 21.
- Comolli, C. L., Neyer, G., Andersson, G., Dommermuth, L., Fallesen, P., Jalovaara, M., ... and Lappegård, T. (2021). Beyond the economic gaze: Childbearing during and after recessions in the Nordic countries. *European Journal of Population*, 37(2), 473-520.
- Comolli, C.L. (2017). The fertility response to the Great Recession in Europe and the United States. Structural economic conditions and perceived economic uncertainty. *Demographic Research*, 36(51): 1549-1600. DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2017.36.51.
- Comolli, C.L. (2021). Resources, aspirations and first births during the Great Recession. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 100405, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2021.100405>.
- Comolli, C.L. and Vignoli, D. (2021). Spreading uncertainty, shrinking birth rates. *European Sociological Review*. jcab001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcab001>.
- Comolli, C. L. (2023). Social Climate, Uncertainty and Fertility Intentions: from the Great Recession to the Covid-19 Crisis. *European Journal of Population*, 39(1), 35.
- Cronin, B. (2013). Some 95% of 2009 –2012 income gains went to wealthiest 1% [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2013/09/10/some-95-of-2009-2012-income-gains-went-to-wealthiest-1/>
- Eurostat, (2024). Fertility indicators. Available: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_find/default/table?lang=en Last accessed 24 October 2025.
- Georgiadou, V., Lampiri, R., and Roumanias, C. (2018). Mapping the European far right in the 21st century: A meso-level analysis. *Electoral Studies* 54, 103-115. doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.05.004.
- Giustozzi, C., and Gangl, M. (2021). Unemployment and political trust across 24 Western democracies: Evidence on a welfare state paradox. *Acta Sociologica*. April 2021. doi:10.1177/00016993211008501.
- Hellstrand, J., Nisén, J., and Myrskylä, M. (2020). All-time low period fertility in Finland: Demographic drivers, tempo effects, and cohort implications. *Population studies*, 74(3), 315-329.
- Ohlsson-Wijk, S., Turunen, J., and Andersson, G. (2020). “Family forerunners? An overview of family demographic change in Sweden”. In: Farris, N., and Bourque, A., Eds., *International Handbook on the Demography of Marriage and the Family*: 65-77. International Handbooks of Population 7. Springer Nature Switzerland AG. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-35079-6_5.
- Rydgren, J. (2007). The sociology of the radical right. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.*, 33, 241-262.
- Schneider, D. (2015). The great recession, fertility, and uncertainty: Evidence from the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(5), 1144-1156.
- Shayo, M. (2009). A model of social identity with an application to political economy: Nation, class, and redistribution. *American Political science review*, 147-174.
- Sobotka, T., Skirbekk, V., and Philipov, D. (2011). Economic recession and fertility in the developed world. *Population and development review*, 37(2), 267-306.
- Uslaner, E. M. (2002). *The moral foundations of trust*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vignoli, D., Bazzani, G., Guetto, R., Minello, A., and Pirani, E. (2020a). Uncertainty and Narratives of the Future: A Theoretical Framework for Contemporary Fertility. In *Analyzing contemporary fertility* (pp. 25-47). Springer.
- Vignoli, D., Guetto, R., Bazzani, G., Pirani, E., and Minello, A. (2020b). A reflection on economic uncertainty and fertility in Europe: The Narrative Framework. *Genus*, 76(1), 1-27.