

The politics of demography

Objective estimation amidst political partisanship? Three tales from a statistical monastery

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Attempts to provide objective estimates of demographic indicators may be challenged as flawed when they lead to outcomes viewed as undesirable by political actors. I present three case studies from my career at the International Programs area of the US Census Bureau in which seemingly straightforward questions of measurement encountered partisan perspectives from various stakeholders – national governments, ethno-regional authorities, and other interest groups, including fellow population specialists. The first involved efforts to determine the population of an ethnic group that boycotted the 2011 census of Serbia. Estimates of that population by Serbia's National Statistical Office differed widely from that of local authorities – I describe a contentious field visit as part of a team entrusted with arbitrating between them. The second concerned successive attempts to estimate and project the populations of Israel, West Bank, and Gaza. Such tasks required specification of religious groups residing within current and future borders of envisioned states (as suggested by the US State Department). The implications of such remain volatile. The third involved measuring the demographic impact of China's half century campaign to limit its population – the most determined anti-natal program in human history. A hostile reaction from fellow demographers to larger-than-expected estimates (derived from their own model) narrowed attention back to "the one-child policy" – a misnomer denoting a single feature of the broader compulsory program – to deny government claims about outcomes viewed as immoral. In fact, the program's key outcomes – population reduction and missing daughters – were due far more to two-child limits and other provisions.

Pronatalist gendered discourses in the context of fertility decline: Evidence from Poland

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Fertility rates in high-income countries have declined to historically low levels, prompting increasing concern among political actors. In response, political discourse has framed the fertility decline as a demographic crisis requiring intervention. While a growing body of research examines pronatalist policies, less attention has been paid to the discursive construction of gender in political communication around fertility decline. By systematically analyzing how fertility decline is framed in political discourse, this paper aims to contribute to research on reproductive politics, gender norms, and demographic narratives.

The idea of this paper is to investigate how political actors and larger commentariat construct the causes and solutions to fertility decline in contemporary political discourse. In particular, it asks whether pronatalist narratives disproportionately frame women as responsible for declining fertility, while men are largely absent from the discussion. Prior research suggests that pronatalist ideologies place responsibility for social reproduction on women, positioning women's reproductive choices and life trajectories as both the problem and the solution to fertility decline. Such narratives may reinforce traditional gender norms that associate reproduction and caregiving with women while leaving men's roles in family formation and care work relatively invisible. At the same time, demographic debates about fertility decline frequently invoke moralized or normative expectations regarding family formation and gender roles.

Empirically, the paper focuses on Poland and analyzes discourse from a wide range of sources across the political spectrum, including major Polish political podcasts, Reddit threads, and articles in the main newspapers. The analysis combines qualitative discourse analysis with computational text analysis such as topic modeling. These methods allow us to identify patterns in how fertility decline is framed, whose responsibility is emphasized, and how gender is implicitly or explicitly invoked in pronatalist narratives.

Fertility change and crisis narratives: Sentiment analysis of news titles in the U.S. media

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Combining demographic methods of estimating changes in fertility with sentiment analysis, this study examines how and when fertility declines (including both the magnitude of decline and the speed of decline) generate "crisis" narratives in public media. We use ACS and data to calculate monthly age-specific-fertility rates (ASFRs) by race and ethnicity at the county and state level in the U.S. We combine these rates, as well as their rate of change, with sentiment analysis of article titles from conservative, neutral, and progressive national media outlets drawn from the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) from January

2017 to December 2024. We focus our article requests within four pre-defined GDELT themes linked to potential pronatalist discourse: "fertility rate," "population and demographic change," "aging population," and "reproductive and maternal health." We then employ computational linguistics, namely sentiment and text analysis, to identify and qualify the affective nature of statements made in the titles of these articles. We then use these affective characterizations as outcomes and explore whether and how the lag (in months), magnitude of decrease, and speed of decrease of ASFR is associated with subsequent narratives of population crisis and pronatalism as a response. These findings will help scientists and policy makers understand how much pronatalist responses to fertility decline are a matter of pressures exerted by political climate, population change or responses to policy needs.

Legal gender recognition and crime: From heated rhetoric to population-level evidence

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Legal recognition of self-declared gender identity has, together with other issues concerning transgender rights, become one of the most heated policy issues in Europe and North America, yet rarely rests on empirical foundations. Claims that such policies, aimed at legally recognising transgender citizens, may be exploited by male perpetrators seeking access to female-only spaces have blocked or reversed legislation in several countries and US states, based on anecdotal and speculative evidence. As a consequence, most transgender citizens worldwide are denied legal recognition that may be instrumental in reducing exposure to discrimination and which may protect this at-risk group against further victimisation. We argue that population scholars have to grapple with such heavily politicised topics by bringing rigorous evidence to bear on heated debates. As such, we provide the first population-level evidence on the intersection of legal gender recognition and crime, examining whether legal sex change is associated with changes in (1) criminal offending and (2) criminal victimisation. Denmark offers a unique setting for this analysis, as legal sex change has been available since 2014 based solely on self-declaration, without any medical gatekeeping. We use Danish administrative data covering all arrests and convictions from 1995–2024, linked to the full population, including individuals who have changed their legal sex. We employ an event-study design to examine changes in offending and victimisation in the years before and after legal sex change, separately for registered women and men. Preliminary results show no evidence that legal sex change is associated with increased criminal offending. Victimisation analyses are ongoing; all results will be finalised ahead of BSPS 2026.

Why I am no longer talking to policymakers about fertility rates

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Although this might seem antithetical coming from a demographer, I've recently decided that I will no longer talk to policymakers – or the wider public for that matter -about fertility rates. In this contribution, I will explain and reflect on my rationale which is informed by my commitment to the reproductive justice (RJ) framework. I don't think it is possible to talk about fertility rates and trends without positioning them as a legitimate object policy intervention, and without positioning women's bodies and reproductive intentions as "targets" for change.

This is incompatible with RJ which foregrounds the wider political, economic, and racialised conditions, framing reproduction as a matter of social conditions rather than individual choice. Conversations organised around targets, incentives or demographic "crises" make it almost impossible to hold this broader framing. I don't know how to talk to policymakers about fertility rates in a way that is not, on some level, complicit with a problematic politics that instrumentalises people's capacities to have, not have, and raise children. When reproductive possibilities are understood as policy levers rather than matters of rights or social justice, it becomes possible to ask not just whether but whose reproductive possibilities should be prioritised. In contrast, reproductive justice reorients attention to whether social, economic and institutional conditions enable people to exercise reproductive autonomy. I'm no longer talking to policymakers about fertility rates and trends because doing so narrows the scope of policy debate and constrains the possibilities for rights based and justice oriented approaches to reproduction.

