The Relationship Between Political Orientation and Childbearing in Western Europe

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Abstract

In recent years, prominent politicians and commentators have attributed low and decreasing fertility to values associated with the political left, such as social liberalism, feminism, and secularism. However, there is very little research on the relationship between an individual's political orientation and childbearing behavior. Exploring this relationship may help us understand the role of values in low and declining fertility. This study uses data from round 9 of the European Social Survey (collected in 2018-2020) to examine the relationship between several dimensions of political orientation and number of children in 16 Western European countries. A significant positive association between fertility and self-placement further to the right on the left/right scale exists in Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Spain, whereas the association is non-significant in the other 12 countries. Social conservatism is positively associated with fertility in most countries, whereas the associations between economic egalitarianism, immigrant hostility, pro-environmentalism, and fertility vary in direction between countries and are in most cases non-significant. In Finland and Spain, voters for right-wing parties tend to have more children than voters for left-wing parties. Voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties have a significantly higher number of children than voters from at least one leftist or liberal/centrist party family in half of the countries. However, in several countries, there are no significant differences in fertility quantum by party preference. This study contributes new knowledge on cross-country variation in the relationship between political orientation and fertility and on differences in effect size and direction between different measures of political orientation.

Keywords: political preferences, fertility, value orientation, social conservatism, nationalism, climate change, environment, European Social Survey

1. Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between an individual's political orientation and their childbearing behavior has received growing attention in the political discourse and news media. Prominent nationalist and conservative politicians and commentators have attributed low and decreasing fertility to values associated with the political left, such as social liberalism, feminism, and secularism (Lindquist, 2021; Toynbee, 2023). Yet, research on the relationship between political orientation and fertility remains limited (cf. Arpino & Mogi, 2024; Fieder & Huber, 2018; Lönnqvist & Ilmarinen, 2023).

This research gaps exists although there are several reasons to expect an association between political orientation and childbearing. First, lifestyle preferences and personality differ by political orientation (Chan, 2019; Rogers, 2020; Sasahara, 2019; Talaifar et al., 2025). Individuals with socially conservative political preferences tend to live socially conservative lives, with an orientation towards family and traditional gender roles (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Cunningham, 2008: Lietzmann & Frodermann, 2021). Second, there are ideological reasons to have and not to have children. Environmentalists may avoid childbearing due to the negative environmental impacts of human population growth (Bastianelli, 2024: Puglisi et al., 2025; Rackin et al., 2023). Nationalists may want to increase their childbearing to improve the numerical strength of the in-group relative to out-groups (Anson & Meir 1996; Okun 2016). Third, political orientation is correlated with a wide range of factors that also correlate with childbearing behavior, such as socioeconomic status, urban/rural residence, and immigration background (Balbo et al., 2013; Goerres et al., 2021; Oesch, 2008; Rickardsson, 2021).

Understanding the relationship between political preferences and fertility is important for three reasons. First, such research can contribute to our understanding of the steep fertility decline experienced by many developed countries since 2010. The decline has puzzled demographers since it cannot easily be explained by economic factors, family policy, or other structural factors (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). Thus, it is important to investigate alternative explanatory factors, such as the role of individual value orientations. Second, if sustained over time, fertility differences by political orientation could contribute to long-term shifts in society's composition of political attitudes. Political preferences are known to be transmitted from parents to children (Aggeborn & Nyman 2021; Dawes & Weinschenk, 2020; Durmuşoğlu et al. 2023; Van Ditmars 2023). In the United States, it has been estimated that higher fertility among social conservatives has contributed to a shift in public opinion towards more conservative attitudes on abortion and same-sex marriage (Vogl & Freese, 2020). Third, given the considerable attention that the relationship between political orientation and fertility has recently received by high-level political leaders, demographic research has a responsibility to examine the issue, to contribute to a more fact-based public discussion.

This study uses data from round 9 of the European Social Survey to examine how the total number of children among men and women aged 40-79 at interview varies by different indicators of political orientation in 16 Western European countries. The study makes two important contributions to research on the relationship between political orientation and fertility quantum.

First, the study examines multiple dimensions of political preference. Earlier studies on political orientation and number of children have relied on a single scale: either the left/right

scale or liberalism/conservatism (Fieder & Huber, 2018). The left/right scale is an aggregate measure of political orientation that combines multiple dimensions of political preferences that do not necessarily overlap, primarily economic and social issues but also environmentalism and nationalism (Malka et al., 2019; Nilsson et al., 2020). Step I of the present paper's analysis examines the association between left/right orientation and fertility. To explore which specific value dimensions drive the association, the analysis includes variables measuring attitudes on economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism. Analytical step II uses political party preference to measure political orientation. Party preference captures dimensions of political orientation that do not fit well into the left/right scale, primarily environmentalism and nationalism.

The study's second main contribution is that it analyzes the relationship between political orientation and fertility for 16 European countries separately. Earlier studies have either focused on the United States or aggregated a large number of European countries (Arpino & Mogi, 2024; Fieder & Huber, 2018; Lönnqvist & Ilmarinen, 2023). Since political cultures vary considerably between countries, aggregate patterns or findings from the United States cannot necessarily be generalized to individual European countries.

By recognizing the multidimensionality of political preferences in modern democracies and exploring cross-country heterogeneity, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between political orientation and fertility.

2. Earlier research on political orientation and fertility

Earlier research has shown that right-wing political preferences are often positively associated with both fertility behavior and fertility preferences. Fieder and Huber (2018) use various data sources (World Values Survey, waves 1-6, collected in 1981-2014; Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement for Europe (SHARE), wave 5, collected in 2013; the American General Social Survey, collected in 1972-2014) to show that individuals positioning themselves to the right on the left/right scale or towards the conservative pole on the liberal/conservative scale tend to have a higher number of children. Differences in the number of children at age 45 by placement on the left/right scale are smaller in Europe (SHARE data) than in the United States (GSS) and worldwide (WVS). In Europe, individuals who place themselves at 7 or higher on the 0-10 scale (where 0 is the most leftist position and 10 is the most rightist position) have on average about 2.25-2.30 children whereas individuals who place themselves at 6 or lower have on average about 2.05-2.15 children. Averages are relatively similar both within the 7-or-higher group and within the 6-or-lower group, meaning the association between left-right orientation and fertility quantum is not linear.

Lönnqvist and Ilmarinen (2023) use data on 20 European countries from the European Social Survey (round 7, collected in 2014) to analyze the relationship between childlessness and characteristics of the political party that the respondent voted for. Childless individuals were more likely to vote for parties positioned at the Green-Alternative-Libertarian pole of the GAL-TAN scale (TAN = Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist). However, the childless vote did not vary by other party characteristics, such as the party's left/right placement and a wide range of other policy positions. Among individual value orientation variables, only religiosity was associated with childlessness, whereas orientation on the left/right scale and variables

measuring economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, and immigrant hostility were not significantly associated with childlessness.

Political orientation has also been shown to be related with fertility preferences. Using European Social Survey data from 27 European countries (rounds 2 and 5, collected in 2004/2005 and 2010/2011), Arpino and Mogi (2024) find that individuals who place themselves at 7 or higher and especially at 9 or higher on the 0-10 left/right scale are significantly more likely than other individuals to report a "definitely yes" short-term fertility intention. Differences between left-leaning and centrist individuals were small and not statistically significant. Another study from Hong Kong showed that support for democracy was associated with lower fertility preferences (Cheung & Lui, 2024).

3. Possible explanations for the relationship between political orientation and fertility

An individual's political orientation reflects their broader value orientations, personality, lifestyle preferences, and other factors. Research has found behavioral differences by political orientation in a wide range of life domains, including health behaviors, leisure activities, and food and popular culture consumption (Chan, 2019; Rogers, 2020; Sasahara, 2019; Talaifar et al., 2025). Political orientation and childbearing behavior have many shared correlates, such as socioeconomic status, urban/rural residence, and immigration background (Balbo et al., 2013; Goerres et al., 2021; Oesch, 2008; Rickardsson, 2021). Disentangling the causal ordering between value orientation, lifestyle choices, socio-demographic characteristics, and fertility is difficult and beyond the scope of the present study. This section provides a brief overview of some possible mechanisms that may explain the relationship between political orientation and fertility.

3.1. Social conservatism and fertility

According to the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory, fertility decline in West European countries since the second world war can be explained by value shifts towards individualism, secularism, gender equality, and an increased openness to non-traditional family forms (Lesthaeghe, 2014). Thus, it is reasonable to expect social progressives to be forerunners and social conservatives to be laggards in fertility decline. The positive association between religiosity and fertility is well-established in demographic research (Adsera 2006; Berghammer 2012; Carlsson, 2024; Hayford & Morgan 2008; Philipov & Berghammer 2007). Social conservatives may be more likely than social progressives to prioritize family formation and to embrace traditional gender roles that facilitate childbearing. Studies have shown that women with conservative gender role attitudes have a lower labor market participation than women with egalitarian gender role attitudes (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Cunningham, 2008: Lietzmann & Frodermann, 2021).

In Western European party systems, both nationalist right parties and mainstream conservative and Christian democratic parties tend to be relatively socially conservative, whereas leftist, green, and liberal parties tend to be more socially progressive (Stein 2023; Wagner &

Meyer 2017). However, practicing Christians tend to vote for Christian democratic or conservative parties rather than the nationalist right (Immerzeel et al., 2013; Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2022; Xia, 2021).

3.2. Environmentalism and fertility

Human populations put severe stress on the environment, through climate change, pollution, overfishing, deforestation, etc. (de Sherbinin et al. 2007). Individuals concerned with environmental degradation may choose to limit childbearing to reduce the pressure human populations exert on the environment. It has been claimed that the far most effective lifestyle choice an individual can make to mitigate climate change is to have fewer children (Wynes & Nicholas 2017). Among supporters of environmentalist causes, there is a strong tradition of political action through lifestyle choices, such as choosing organic and vegetarian food, avoiding car and air transportation, and reducing overall consumption (de Moor, 2017). Choosing to limit childbearing out of concern for the environment fits well with the logic underlying such behavioral patterns. Yet, population control remains a controversial strategy for addressing environmental problems (Klancher Merchant 2021). Major environmentalist organizations, such as Greenpeace, do not advocate for population control (Greenpeace 2022), indicating that antinatalism lacks universal support among environmentalists.

Findings on the relationship between environmental or climate change concerns and fertility preferences and behaviors are mixed. While several studies have found a negative association between environmental concerns and fertility preferences or behavior (Bastianelli, 2024: Powdthavee et al., 2024; Puglisi et al., 2025; Rackin et al., 2023), others find null or inconsistent results (De Rose & Testa, 2013; Jylhä et al., 2024; Peters et al., 2023; Szczuka, 2022).

In Western European party systems, green parties are the primary advocates of environmentalism. However, environmentalism also correlates with the left/right dimension, with left-wing parties and voters tending to be more pro-environmentalist (Dalton 2009; McCright et al., 2015).

3.3. Nationalism and fertility

Nationalists are concerned with the strength of the nation and one source of strength is strength in numbers. Thus, nationalists may feel motivated to increase their childbearing to contribute to strengthening the nation. It has been suggested that strong nationalist sentiments among both Jews and Palestinians in Israel contribute to the country's high fertility rate, as individuals choose to increase their childbearing to improve the in-group's numerical strength relative to the out-group (Anson & Meir 1996; Okun 2016). Similarly, in Europe, the nationalist right has long expressed concern over the perceived demographic threat posed by growing ethnic and religious minority populations (Bracke & Hernández-Aguilar 2020). Nationalist leaders have increasingly adopted pronatalist rhetoric and policies. This growing focus on pronatalism within the nationalist movement may motivate nationalist-minded individuals to contribute to the nationalist cause by increasing their childbearing.

Whereas nationalism may have support across the political spectrum, ethnicity-based nationalism can be considered the defining characteristic of the radical right party family (Bar-

On, 2018). Voters for radical right parties in Europe are more likely than other individuals to have nationalistic attitudes, to perceive immigrants as a threat, and to feel socially distant to Muslims (Lubbers & Coenders 2016).

4. Research design

4.1. Data and analytical sample

This study uses data from round 9 of the European Social Survey (ESS9). The analyses use data from 16 Western European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The national samples were randomly drawn from target populations consisting of citizens and non-citizens 15 years or older who resided in private households. Response rates varied between 28 % in Germany and 62 % in Ireland (ESS 2020a). Data collection took place between late 2018 and early 2020. The so-called "analysis weights", calculated by the ESS team, are applied throughout the analyses, both because sampling strategies involving unequal selection probabilities were used in several of the ESS9 countries and due to low response rates in all countries (Kaminska 2020).

For the analysis of the relationship between left/right orientation and fertility, the total analytical sample for all 16 countries consists of 16,045 respondents, ranging from 501 in Iceland to 1,477 in Austria. 1,951 individuals were excluded due to missing information on key variables (left/right orientation, number of children, economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism).

For the analysis of the relationship between party preference and fertility, the total analytical sample for all 16 countries consists of 12,561 respondents, ranging from 395 in Iceland to 1,187 in Austria. Individuals who either did not vote (due to ineligibility or abstention), refused to state the party they voted for, or did not know the party they voted for made up 28.4 % of the respondents (5,116 individuals) who would otherwise fit the inclusion criteria. A further 319 respondents were excluded because they voted for parties that either could not be categorized into a party family (282 individuals) or belonged to a party family that 10 or fewer respondents voted for in the individual country (37 individuals). To avoid further reduction of the sample, 344 respondents with missing information on continuous variables (i.e., economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism) had their values replaced by the national median within the analytical sample. See Appendix Table 1 for the number of respondents in each country.

The analyses are conducted only on data from ESS round 9 because this round is the latest to include a question that allows the respondent's own children to be separated from step children. Except for round 9, this question has only been included in round 3, collected in 2006-2007. As the latest round that includes the more appropriate fertility question, round 9 is the best option for this study.

The analytical sample is restricted to individuals in ages 40-79. The lower age limit is set to 40 years because an individual's total number of children at age 40 equals their final number of children for a great majority of individuals. For example, in Sweden, 5 % of children born in 2021 had a mother 40 years or older at the time of birth whereas 15 % of children born in

2021 had a father 40 years or older at the time of birth (Statistics Sweden, personal communication, 14 November 2022). However, it should be noted that the prevalence of late childbearing may vary by political orientation, meaning differentials in the number of children at ages 40-79 may not fully match differentials in the completed number of children.

4.2. Variables

4.2.1. Number of children

The dependent variable is the respondent's total number of children at interview. Respondents were first asked "Have you ever given birth to/fathered a child?". Those who answered yes were then asked "How many children have you ever given birth to/fathered?" and instructed to "include all children born alive".

4.2.2. Left/right scale

For self-placement on the left/right scale, respondents were provided with the following instructions: "In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?" The variable is treated as a continuous variable in the analyses.

4.2.3. Party preference

The individual's political party preference is measured as the party that the respondent voted for in the last national election. Respondents were first asked "Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?". Respondents who answered yes to this question were asked "Which party did you vote for in that election?" and were presented with a country-specific list of parties to choose from.

To facilitate cross-country comparisons, the individual parties were grouped into six main party families: "Left socialist", "Social democratic", "Ecologist", "Liberal or Centrist", "Conservative or Christian democratic", and "Nationalist right". Not all of the six main party families are present in all countries. Some large parties and party families outside the six main party families were added to the analyses: "Regionalist center-left" parties (Spain and the UK), "Independent candidates" (Ireland), and the "Five Star Movement" (Italy). The categorization of parties into party families is based primarily on the Manifesto Project's classification and secondarily on the party's affiliation in the European Parliament (Lehmann et al., 2023). The Manifesto Project is an international project that analyzes the manifestos of political parties for comparative research purposes (Merz et al., 2016).

This study's categorization of parties deviates from the Manifesto Project's classification in the following ways. First, the Manifesto Project's two categories "Conservative" and "Christian democratic" are merged into one category in this study. Second, the party systems of Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden contain a large centrist agrarian-origin party (i.e., the Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish Center Parties and the Icelandic Progressive Party) that does not have an equivalent in other West European countries. While these parties are classified by the Manifesto Project as agrarian, the present study group them together with the liberal parties in

the "Liberal or Centrist" category. Third, the number of respondents voting for parties classified as "ethno-regionalist" by the Manifesto Project is higher in Spain and the UK than in other countries. Many of these parties have a center-left profile. Therefore, the study adds an additional party family for "Regionalist center-left" parties in Spain and the UK for ethno-regionalist parties that belonged to the social democratic or green groups when represented in the European Parliament. Fourth, parties classified by the Manifesto Project as "ethno-regionalist" in other countries than Spain and the UK or as "special issue" or "other" in any country or that remain unclassified by the Manifesto Project but have been represented in the European Parliament at any time are categorized into the one of the six main party families that fits with their European Parliament affiliation.

As mentioned in section 4.1, 282 respondents were excluded because they voted for parties whose party family cannot be identified either through the Manifesto Project classification or the European Parliament affiliation. A further 37 respondents were excluded because they voted for a party that belonged to a party family that 10 or fewer respondents voted for in their country. See Appendix Table 1 for the number of respondents in each party family, separately for the 16 countries.

In addition to being asked which party they voted for in the last national election, respondents were also asked if there was a particular party that they felt closer to than other parties and, if so, which one. In all countries, the share of valid responses was lower for the closeness variable than for the actual vote variable. To maintain statistical power, the actual vote variable was therefore chosen as the indicator of political party preference instead of the closeness variable.

4.2.4. Economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism

The indicator for economic egalitarianism is based on the question "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels." The response alternatives were "agree strongly", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", and "disagree strongly".

The indicator for social conservatism measures the importance of tradition. Respondents first received the following instruction: "Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you." One of the items were "Tradition is important to him/her. He/she tries to follow the customs handed down by her religion or her family." The response alternatives were "very much like me", "like me", "somewhat like me", "a little like me", "not like me", "not like me at all". The indicator was reverse-coded to make higher values mean more socially conservative attitudes.

The pro-environmentalism question had the same introduction and response alternatives as the question on the importance of traditions and customs. Thus, respondents were asked how much the following description describes them: "He/she strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to him." The indicator was reverse-coded to make higher values mean more pro-environmental attitudes.

Regarding immigrant hostility, respondents were first asked "To what extent do you think [country] should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most [country]'s people to come and live here? They were then asked "How about people of a different race or ethnic

group from most [country] people?" The study's immigrant hostility variable is based on the second question. The response alternatives were "allow many to come and live here", "allow some", allow a few", and "allow none".

Alternative indicators were tested for economic egalitarianism (A society is fair when income and wealth are equally distributed among all people), social conservatism (Gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples), and immigrant hostility (Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?). The indicators selected for the analyses had either a similar or stronger association to fertility than these alternative indicators (see Appendix Tables 2a-c).

All indicators are treated as continuous variables in the analyses, with higher values indicating more socially conservative, more egalitarian, more immigrant-hostile, and more pro-environmental attitudes.

4.2.5. Other variables

The following control variables are used in the analyses: age at interview, gender, income (lower three within-country deciles; middle four within-country deciles; upper three within-country deciles; missing), educational attainment (lower secondary or less; upper secondary; post-secondary without bachelor degree; bachelor degree or more), immigrant status (foreign-born or not), and urban/rural settlement (big city including suburbs; town or small city; village or countryside).

4.3. Analytical approach

The associations between the different political orientation measures and the total number of children are analyzed using Poisson regression. Regressions are run separately for each country.

Control variables are added stepwise to the regression models, following the same logic for both analytical step 1 (left/right orientation) and step 2 (party preference). The baseline Model 1 includes basic control variables: gender and age at interview. Model 2 adds four socioeconomic and demographic variables that may contribute to explaining the relationship between political orientation and fertility: income, educational attainment, immigrant status, and urban/rural settlement. Model 3 adds variables measuring specific dimensions of political orientation, to examine if these variables contribute to explaining the association between left/right orientation or party preference and fertility.

Results are displayed as average marginal effects (AMEs) for step 1 and as predicted values for step 2. For step 2, results are presented graphically with 84 % confidence intervals. For pair-wise comparisons of a group of means, 84 % confidence intervals mean that non-overlap between intervals indicate that the difference between the means is statistically significant at the 5 % significance level (Goldstein & Healy, 1995; Payton et al., 2003).

5. Results

5.1. Self-placement on the left/right scale and fertility

In 13 of the 16 countries, self-placement further to the right on the left/right scale is associated with a higher number of children (see Table 1, Model 1). This association is strongest in Iceland, the Netherlands, Spain, and Finland. In these countries, the AME for moving one step further to the right on the left/right scale is 0.045 or higher. For example, in the Netherlands, the AME is 0.068, meaning an individual who places themself furthest to the right on the 0-10 scale can be expected to have almost 0.68 children more than an individual who places themself furthest to the left on the left/right scale. Given that the mean number of children of Dutch respondents is 1.88, the strength of the association between self-placement on the left/right scale and number of children must be considered substantial. The AME is statistically significant at the 1 % significance level in Finland, the Netherlands, and Spain, at the 5 % level in Iceland, and at the 10 % level in Italy.

In all countries where the AME for left/right orientation in Model 1 is statistically significant, controlling for income, educational attainment, urban/rural settlement, and immigrant status in Model 2 reduces the AME to some extent. Yet, the AME is still significant at the 1 % level in the Netherlands, 5 % level in Finland and Spain, and 10 % level in Iceland. Controlling for economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism in Model 3 further reduces the AMEs for left/right orientation in the four countries where results were statistically significant in Models 1 and 2. In Iceland and Spain, the AME for left/right orientation is no longer statistically significant in Model 3, whereas it is still significant at the 5 % level in the Netherlands and at the 10 % level in Finland.

Among the four attitude variables added in Model 3, social conservatism has the strongest relationship with fertility. Social conservatism is positively associated with fertility quantum in 15 of the 16 countries and this association is statistically significant at least at the 5 % level in seven of these countries and at the 10 % level in a further four countries. Results are more mixed for the other three dimensions, as the sign of the AMEs vary considerably between countries. In most countries, economic egalitarianism is not significantly associated with fertility, although a significant negative association exists in Iceland, Norway, and Portugal, while a significant positive association is observed in the UK. Immigrant hostility has an even weaker relationship with fertility, with the association being non-significant in almost all countries. However, Portugal stands out from the other countries with a very strong association between immigrant hostility and fertility quantum, which is also statistically significant at the 1 % level. The AMEs for pro-environmentalism are also non-significant for most countries. However, against expectations, pro-environmentalism has a strong positive association with fertility quantum in some countries. In the United Kingdom, this positive association is statistically significant at the 5 % level, while it is significant at the 10 % level in France and Iceland.

Appendix Tables 2a-c show results from models that only include indicators for economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism one at a time, also excluding the left/right scale. Not surprisingly, AMEs are larger and more often statistically significant in these additional models compared to results presented in Model 3 of Table 1.

Table 1. Average marginal effects (AMEs) of positioning on the left/right scale on the total number of children, separate Poisson regressions for each country (weighted: "analysis weight"), men and women aged 40-79 years. Statistically significant AMEs in bold font.

Country	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3					n
	Left/right scale	Left/right scale	Left/right scale	Economic egalitarian-ism	Immigrant hostility	Social conservatism	Pro-environ-mentalism	
Austria	.025	-.014	-.011	.061	.001	.070	.026	1,477
Belgium	-.012	.000	-.000	.056	.017	**.092***	-.006	954
Denmark	-.007	-.012	-.023	-.005	.006	**.078***	-.056	900
Finland	**.045****	**.035***	.026†	-.006	-.042	**.110*****	-.004	1,061
France	-.018	-.018	-.034	.041	.081	.062†	-.088†	1,112
Germany	.017	.012	.008	.000	-.030	**.065***	.005	1,384
Iceland	**.071***	.050†	.030	**-.088***	-.009	.055	-.093†	501
Ireland	.030	.029	.026	.039	-.018	.067†	.068	1,256
Italy	.022†	.019	.016	.002	-.010	**.102****	-.036	1,252
Netherlands	**.068****	**.058****	**.049***	-.044	.007	.035	.062	956
Norway	.004	.005	-.008	**-.118***	-.039	.046	.065	804
Portugal	.021	.015	.005	**-.114***	**.206****	-.025	-.005	621
Spain	**.053****	**.043***	.027	-.009	.054	.065†	.007	795
Sweden	.006	-.002	-.004	.005	-.098	.064†	-.044	946
Switzerland	.020	.014	.016	.035	-.104†	**.103****	.002	791
United Kingdom	.008	.007	.007	**.118***	.045	**.081***	**-.134***	1,235

Note: Model 1 controls for age and gender. Model 2 adds educational attainment, income, urban/rural settlement, and immigrant status. Model 3 adds four attitude variables: economic egalitarianism, immigrant hostility, social conservatism, and pro-environmentalism. †p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations

5.2. Party preference and fertility

Figures 1a-d show the relationship between political party preference and number of children in the 16 Western European countries. The vertical dotted line represents the national mean number of children in the ESS sample, including respondents who are excluded from the final analytical sample, mostly due to missing information on party preference. It should be noted that the range of the X-axis varies between countries.

Similar to the previous step of the analysis, Finland, the Netherlands, and Spain display clear differences between party families. In Finland, voters for liberal or centrist parties tend to have the highest number of children, significantly more than voters for left socialist, social democratic, and green parties in Model 1. Voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties also have a mean number of children significantly higher than voters for all three left-leaning party families in Model 1. Controlling for socio-demographic factors and attitudes in Model 2 and 3 reduces the differences between the party families. In Model 3, the only significant difference that remains is that between voters for liberal or centrist parties and voters for social democratic parties.

In the Netherlands, voters for the conservative protestant Reformed Political Party were kept separate from the conservative/Christian democratic party family because they stand out very clearly from voters for all other parties examined in this study. In Model 1, their mean number of children is above 4, more than double the national average in the sample. Voters for other conservative or Christian democratic parties also have a mean number of children significantly higher than voters for liberal or centrist parties and especially compared to voters for left socialist parties. In contrast to Finland, estimates change little when controlling for socio-demographic and attitude variables in Models 2 and 3.

In Spain, the number of children is highest among voters for nationalist right parties, whose mean is significantly above that of voters for left socialist, social democratic, and regionalist center-left parties. Voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties have a significantly higher mean number of children than voters for both left socialist and regionalist center-left parties, whereas voters for liberal or centrist parties have a significantly higher mean number of children than voters for regionalist center-left parties. Similar to the Netherlands, the estimates are robust to controlling for the socio-demographic and attitude variables.

In Switzerland, voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties have a significantly higher mean number of children than voters for social democratic, green, and liberal or centrist parties. In Austria, Germany, and Italy, voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties have a significantly higher mean number of children than voters for social democratic parties in Model 1. In all three countries, these differences are somewhat reduced and no longer statistically significant when controlling for socio-demographic factors in Model 2. In Portugal, voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties have a significantly higher mean number of children than voters for left-socialist voters.

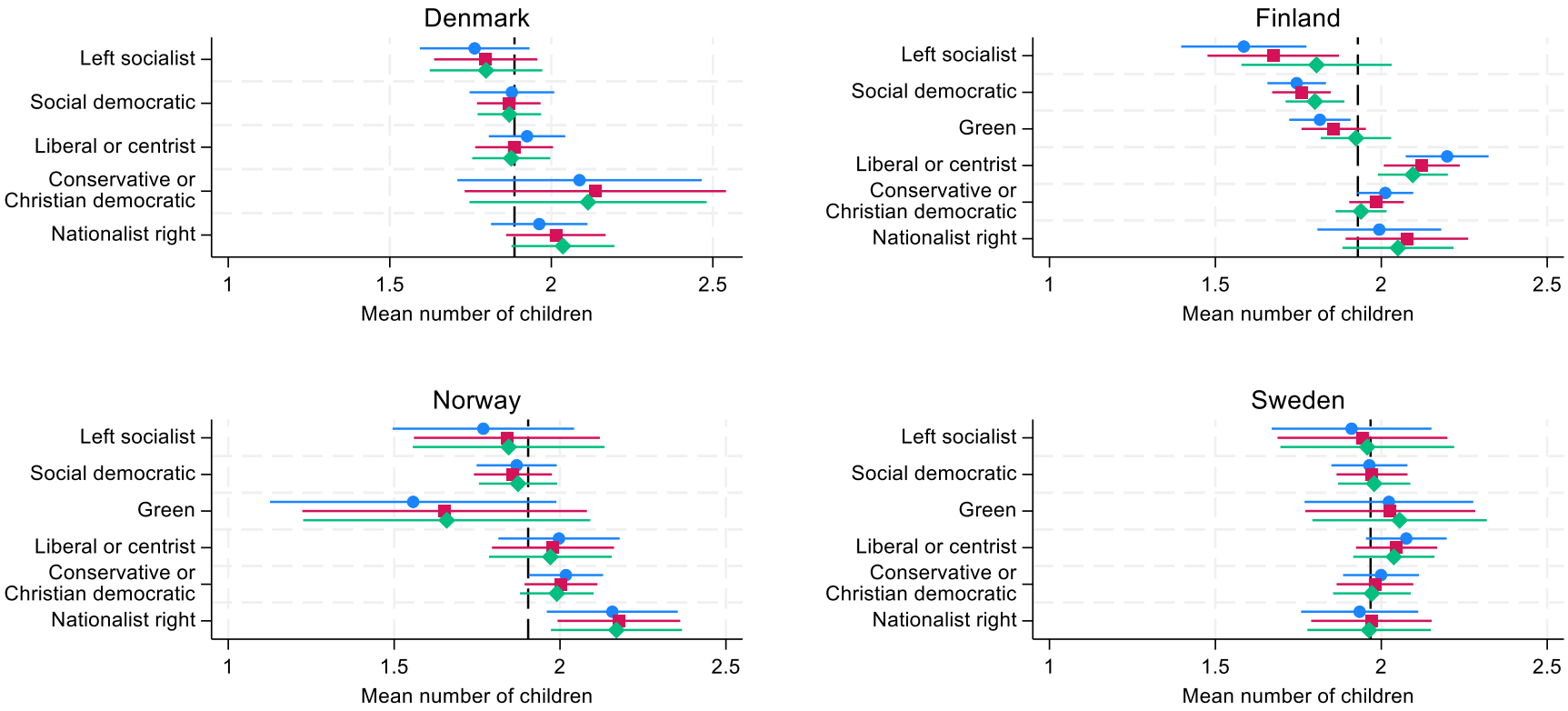
Findings in some of the countries stand out. In Belgium, voters for the left-socialist parties have a much lower mean number of children than voters for all other party families, who are all relatively close around the national mean. The difference between left-socialist and social democratic voters is statistically significant. However, the left-socialist group is only represented by 20 respondents, meaning the result should be interpreted with caution.

In Ireland, voters for the left socialist display the highest mean number of children. The difference between left-socialist and conservative/Christian democratic voters is even statistically significant. A possible explanation for this outlier finding is that voters for left-socialist parties in Ireland are primarily made up of voters for Sinn Féin, which is not entirely comparable to other major left-socialist parties in Europe, since it combines left-wing socialism with Irish nationalism.

In Iceland, voters for green parties stand out from other voters by having a significantly lower number of children than voters for social democratic, liberal or centrist, and conservative or Christian democratic parties. In Iceland, the green party family is made up of voters for the Left-Green Movement, which combines environmentalism with left-wing socialism, meaning is not entirely comparable to major green parties in other European countries.

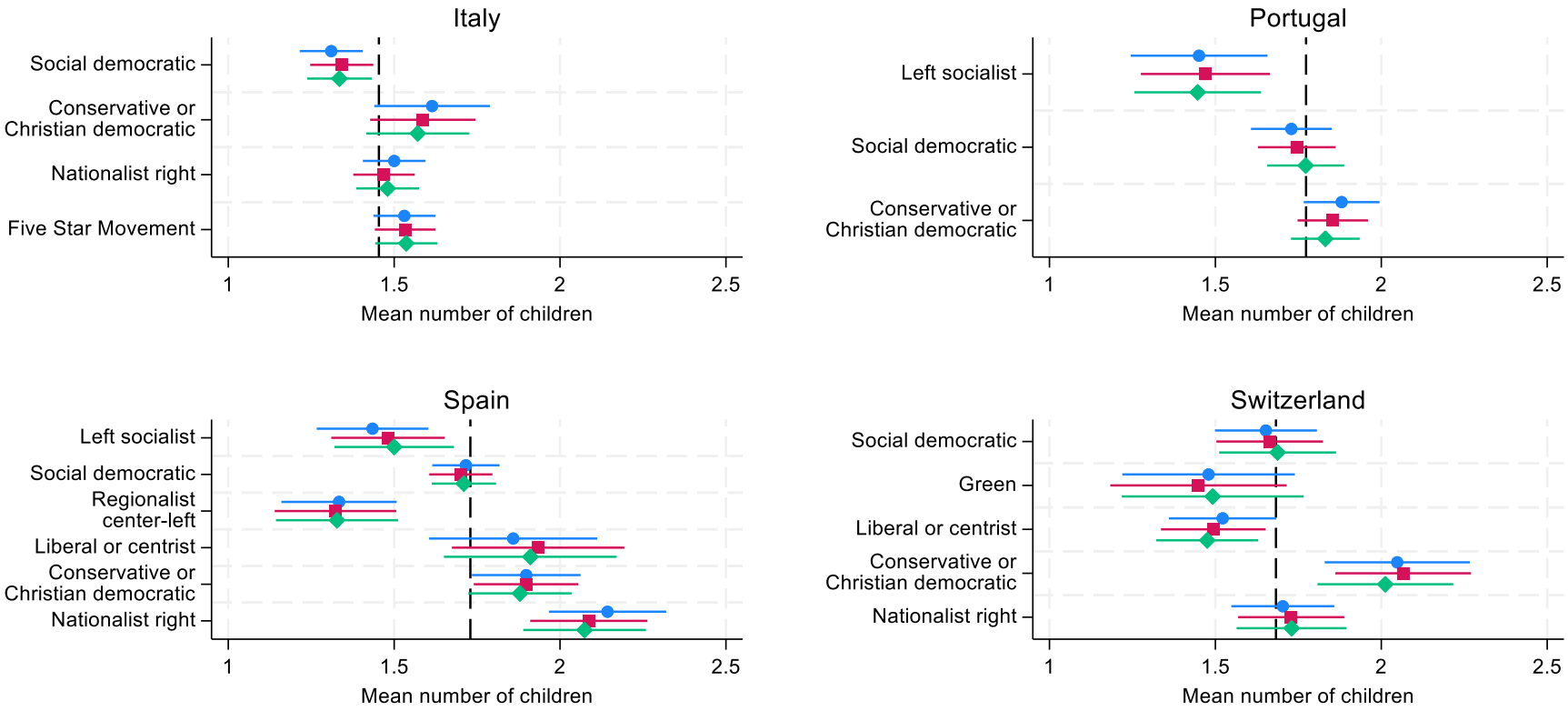
In some Northern and Western European countries – namely, Denmark, France, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – the mean number of children does not vary significantly between any of the party families.

Graph 1a. Number of children by political party preference



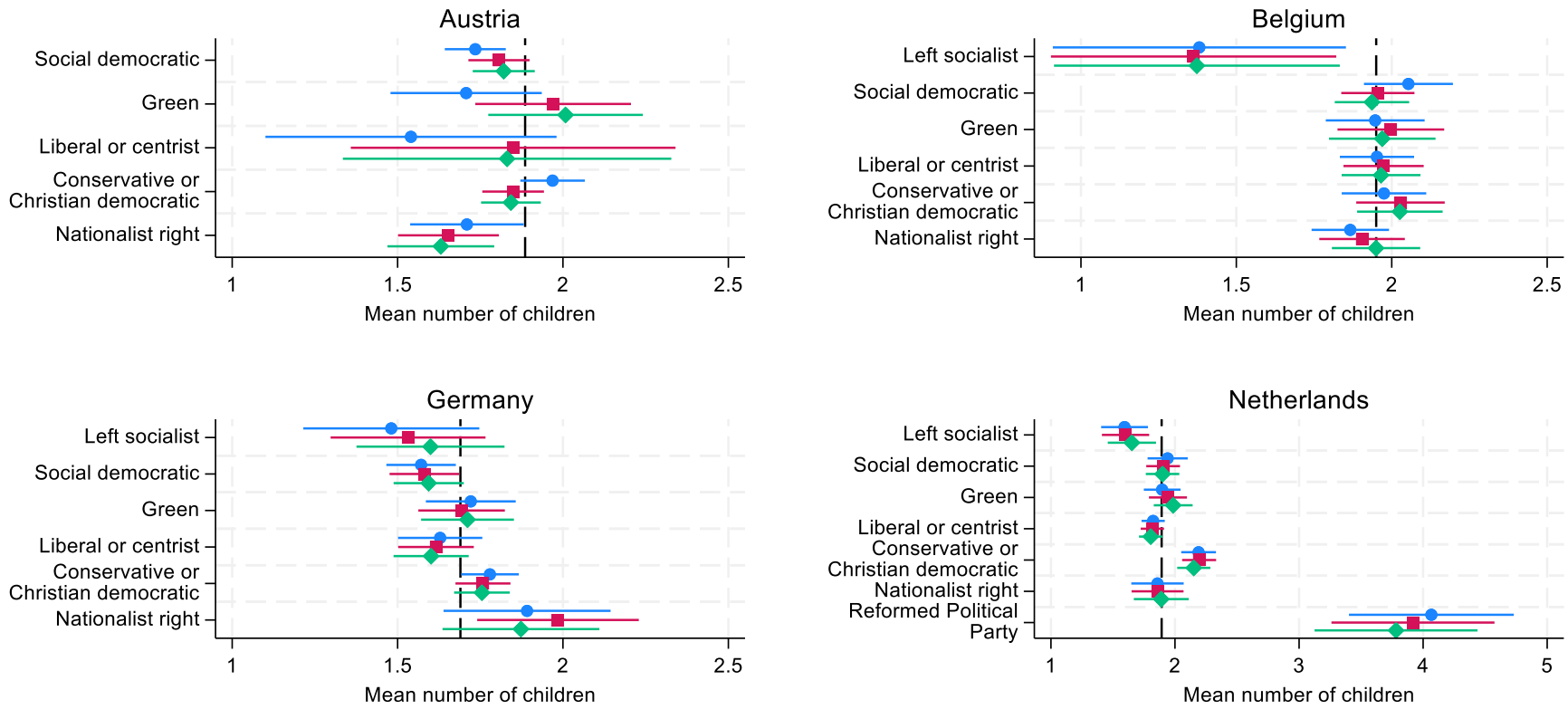
Note: The vertical dotted line represents the national mean number of children in the ESS sample, including respondents who are excluded from the final analytical sample, mostly due to missing information on party preference. 84 % confidence intervals. Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations.

Graph 1b. Number of children by political party preference



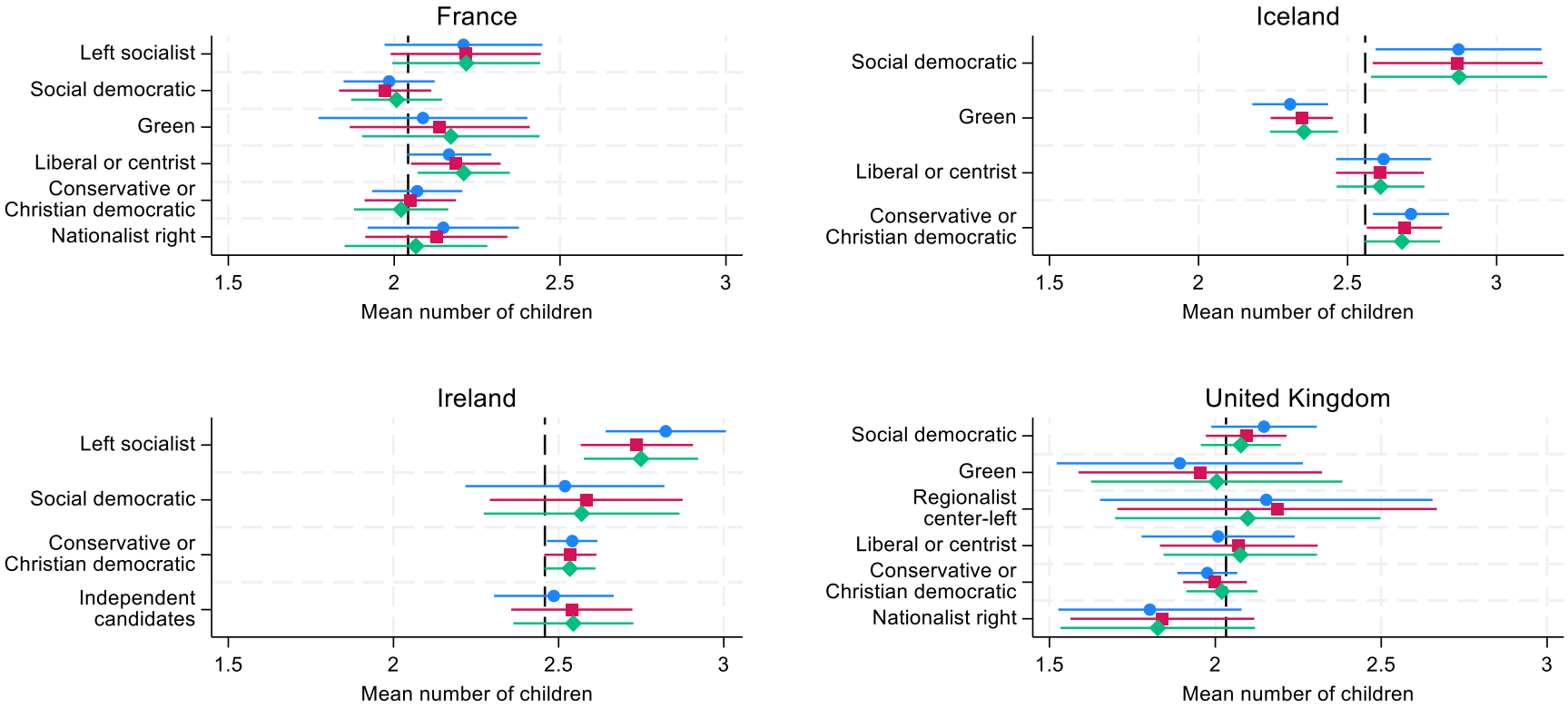
Note: The vertical dotted line represents the national mean number of children in the ESS sample, including respondents who are excluded from the final analytical sample, mostly due to missing information on party preference. 84 % confidence intervals. Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations.

Graph 1c. Number of children by political party preference



Note: The vertical dotted line represents the national mean number of children in the ESS sample, including respondents who are excluded from the final analytical sample, mostly due to missing information on party preference. 84 % confidence intervals. Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations.

Graph 1d. Number of children by political party preference



Note: The vertical dotted line represents the national mean number of children in the ESS sample, including respondents who are excluded from the final analytical sample, mostly due to missing information on party preference. 84 % confidence intervals. Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations.

6. Discussion

This study used data from round 9 of the European Social Survey (collected in 2018-2020) to examine the relationship between political orientation and fertility in 16 Western European countries. In line with earlier research (Arpino & Mogi, 2024; Fieder & Huber, 2018), results show that self-placement to the right on the left/right scale is positively associated with fertility quantum in some of the countries, namely Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Spain. However, in other countries, the association between left/right orientation and fertility is not statistically significant. Results also show that voters for conservative or Christian democratic parties have a significantly higher mean number of children than voters for left-wing and/or liberal/centrist parties in half of the countries, but not in the other half. The associations between fertility and the four attitude variables economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism also vary by country. Such variation between European countries was largely obscured in earlier research, which has either focused on the United States or aggregated European countries (Arpino & Mogi, 2024; Fieder & Huber, 2018; Lönnqvist & Ilmarinen, 2023).

This study also contributes new knowledge to research on the relationship between political orientation and fertility by examining multiple dimensions of political orientation. Results indicate that the association between left/right orientation and fertility observed in some countries can largely be explained by fertility differences along the social liberalism/conservatism dimension. When left/right orientation, economic egalitarianism, social conservatism, immigrant hostility, and pro-environmentalism are entered in the same regression model, social conservatism is positively associated with fertility quantum in 15 of the 16 countries (statistically significant in seven of the countries). Results for the other dimensions are mostly non-significant, indicating that they matter less for fertility behavior. However, these dimensions are still significantly associated with fertility quantum in one or more countries, again highlighting the need to consider cross-country heterogeneity in analyses of the relationship between political orientation and fertility.

Some important limitations of the study should be noted. First, this study uses cross-sectional data where political orientation is measured at interview while childbearing took place before interview, meaning that the direction of causality between political orientation and fertility cannot be determined. While it is plausible that political orientation can influence fertility behavior, it is also plausible that childbearing can alter political preferences. However, longitudinal data show that an individual's political orientation tends to remain stable across adulthood (Peterson et al., 2020; Sears & Funk, 1999). Yet, future research on the association between political preferences and fertility would benefit from longitudinal data or experimental setups, to allow the time ordering to be established. Another option that would allow researchers to better establish the time ordering is to study how political orientation at interview relates to fertility preferences for the future rather than actual childbearing that has taken place before interview (Arpino & Mogi, 2024; Cheung & Lui, 2024).

Second, the small sample size reduced statistical power, which is especially evident in the party preference step of the analysis. However, the results of this study underline the importance of cross-country comparisons. The ESS data offer a rare possibility for such comparisons.

Third, for the analysis of the relationship between party preference and fertility, cross-country comparability is limited by the fact that the structure of party systems differs between countries. In nine of the examined 16 countries, at least one of the six main party families is missing from the analysis since few or no respondents reported voting for parties belonging to the family. Moreover, it is important to note that there are considerable differences between individual parties within the same party family. For example, nationalist right parties differ considerably regarding economic policies, with some advocating economic liberalism and downsizing in public services while others have adopted a welfare chauvinist position (Backes 2018; Widfeldt 2018). There is also considerable variation within party families regarding the role that parties occupy within their respective party systems. For example, social democratic parties attract a large share of voters in most Western European countries, whereas social democratic parties were relatively small in Iceland, Ireland, and the Netherlands at the time of data collection. Rates of non-participation in national elections also vary considerably across Western European countries. Thus, individual parties within the same party family partly represent different voter groups, which is likely to affect the relationship between party preference and fertility.

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Appendix Table 1. Number of respondents in each party family, separately by country

	Left social-ist	Social dem-ocrat	Green	Regionalist center-left	Liberal or centrist	Conserva-tive or Christian democratic	Nationalist right	Other	Total
Austria	-	415	95	-	27	442	208	-	1,187
Belgium	20	188	71	-	154	138	160	-	731
Denmark	132	246	-	-	291	51	120	-	840
Finland	36	166	115	-	190	232	95	-	834
France	90	114	58	-	177	157	72	-	668
Germany	73	264	189	-	106	392	84	-	1,108
Iceland	-	61	104	-	86	144	-	-	395
Ireland	112	69	-	-	-	705	-	160	1,046
Italy	-	235	-	-	-	96	203	319	853
Netherlands	93	80	109	-	289	152	70	17	810
Norway	74	222	18	-	96	246	69	-	725
Portugal	50	203	-	-	-	158	-	-	411
Spain	76	220		53	48	134	67	-	598
Sweden	59	284	49	-	158	217	99	-	866
Switzerland	-	118	37	-	111	54	111	-	431
UK	-	382	24	49	94	473	36	-	1,058

Note: The other category is made up of independents in Ireland, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and the Reformed Political Party in the Netherlands.

Appendix Table 2a. Average marginal effects (AMEs) of two economic egalitarianism indicators on number of children, separate Poisson regressions for each indicator and country (weighted: "analysis weight"), men and women aged 40-79 years. Statistically significant AMEs in bold font.

	A society is fair when income and wealth are equally distributed among all people		The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels	
Country	Base model	Extended model	Base model	Extended model
Austria	**.076***	-.013	**.085***	.052
Belgium	.054	.026	.010	.014
Denmark	-.026	-.028	-.025	.004
Finland	**-.052**†	-.018	-.059	-.016
France	-.000	-.019	.036	.027
Germany	-.029	-.015	-.016	-.003
Iceland	-.021	-.021	**-.099***	-.072†
Ireland	-.010	-.018	.042	.046
Italy	**.078****	**.066***	.055	.033
Netherlands	**-.085***	-.074†	**-.097***	-.073†
Norway	-.034	-.062	**-.143****	**-.122***
Portugal	**-.101***	**-.108***	-.083†	**-.109***
Spain	-.053	**-.076***	-.062	-.058
Sweden	-.023	-.006	-.031	.014
Switzerland	-.055	-.044	.007	.029
UK	**.119***	.082†	**.094***	**.083***

Note: Model 1 controls for age and gender. Model 2 adds educational attainment, income, urban/rural settlement, and immigrant status. †p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations

Appendix Table 2b. Average marginal effects (AMEs) of two social conservatism indicators on number of children, separate Poisson regressions for each indicator and country (weighted: "analysis weight"), men and women aged 40-79 years. Statistically significant AMEs in bold font.

	Gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples		Tell me how much this person is or is not like you: Tradition is important to him/her. He/she tries to follow the customs handed down by her religion or her family.	
Country	Base model	Extended model	Base model	Extended model
Austria	**.188*** **	**.120*** **	**.161*** **	.063†
Belgium	**.109** **	.041	**.113** **	**.099** **
Denmark	.045	.029	.061	.061†
Finland	**.125*** **	**.122*** **	**.119*** **	**.108*** **
France	.067†	.056	.054	.036
Germany	**.106** **	**.091** **	**.088** **	**.077** **
Iceland	.053	.095	.070†	.063
Ireland	-.002	-.008	**.094** **	**.093** **
Italy	**.081*** **	**.057* **	**.128*** **	**.117*** **
Netherlands	**.163*** **	**.153*** **	.039	.028
Norway	.067†	.068†	.064	.057
Portugal	.032	.017	.014	.003
Spain	**.074* **	.063†	**.098*** **	**.079** **
Sweden	.011	.003	**.080* **	**.081* **
Switzerland	**.084** **	**.085** **	**.116*** **	**.113*** **
UK	.062	.032	**.083* **	.058†

Note: Model 1 controls for age and gender. Model 2 adds educational attainment, income, urban/rural settlement, and immigrant status. †p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations

Appendix Table 2c. Average marginal effects (AMEs) of two immigrant hostility indicators on number of children, separate Poisson regressions for each indicator and country (weighted: "analysis weight"), men and women aged 40-79 years. Statistically significant AMEs in bold font.

	Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?		To what extent do you think [country] should allow people of a different race or ethnic group as most [country]'s people to come and live here?	
Country	Base model	Extended model	Base model	Extended model
Austria	-.003	-.016	**.137***	.010
Belgium	-.037†	-.025	.005	.030
Denmark	-.019	-.005	-.019	-.016
Finland	.003	.007	-.004	-.009
France	.017	.016	.070	.063
Germany	.019	.025	-.027	-.032
Iceland	.035	.045	.070	.064
Ireland	.023	.012	.061	.022
Italy	.015	.009	.001	-.017
Netherlands	-.028	-.021	.029	.036
Norway	-.003	.004	-.008	-.015
Portugal	**.048***	**.061****	**.213****	**.022****
Spain	.022	.025†	**.116****	**.096***
Sweden	-.030	-.019	-.101	-.089
Switzerland	-.019	-.022	-.093†	**-.112***
UK	.012	.013	.063	.047

Note: Model 1 controls for age and gender. Model 2 adds educational attainment, income, urban/rural settlement, and immigrant status. †p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations

Appendix Table 2d. Average marginal effects (AMEs) of pro-environmentalism on number of children, separate Poisson regressions for each country (weighted: "analysis weight"), men and women aged 40-79 years. Statistically significant AMEs in bold font.

	Tell me how much this person is or is not like you: He/she strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to him	
Country	Base model	Extended model
Austria	.032	.064
Belgium	-.026	-.005
Denmark	-.004	-.025
Finland	.029	.038
France	-.067	-.057
Germany	.006	.014
Iceland	**-.102***	**-.112***
Ireland	.085†	**.106***
Italy	.038	**.056***
Netherlands	-.041	-.015
Norway	.052	.039
Portugal	-.044	-.034
Spain	-.052	-.042
Sweden	-.024	-.028
Switzerland	-.007	-.013
UK	**-.107***	**-.102***

Note: Model 1 controls for age and gender. Model 2 adds educational attainment, income, urban/rural settlement, and immigrant status. †p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Source: European Social Survey, round 9, own calculations