

Partisan fertility response in the wake of the Great Recession in Sweden

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Short Abstract

Fertility in Sweden has been in constant but moderate decline since 2010. The timing of the onset of decline suggests a link to the economic crisis that hit advanced economies in 2008 although macroeconomic indicators seem not able to explain continued fertility declines. The Great Recession in Europe and beyond, however, was accompanied by other events that might influence fertility. In our study we focus on the declining trust in social systems that is reflected in growing political support for right-wing populist parties. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats (SD) increased their vote share from 2.9% in the 2006 elections to 17.5% in 2018. Our study addresses whether differential exposure to populist sentiments is related to fertility change during and after the Great Recession. Any negative sentiments triggered by the events in 2008 may be more strongly at play in municipalities with higher support for the SD, which in turn may be related to childbearing outcomes. We use Swedish register data to construct complete individual-level fertility histories of all Swedish women. We link each woman to the share of votes obtained by the SD in her municipality of residence in three elections (2006, 2010, 2014). We use a multilevel model to estimate how changes in the support for Sweden Democrats (SD) over time and across municipalities influence fertility behavior, net of observed individual-level and municipality characteristics.

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Long Abstract

As in the other Nordic countries, fertility in Sweden has been in constant decline since 2010, with Total fertility Rates going from about two children per woman to 1.75 in 2018 (SCB). The timing of the onset of decline suggests a link to the economic crisis that hit advanced economies in 2008. The Great Recession, in fact, has been shown to have a negative effect on fertility in most western economies (Adsera 2011; Cherlin et al 2013; Comolli and Bernardi 2015; Goldstein et al. 2013; Kreyenfeld et al. 2012; Schneider 2015; Sobotka 2011). However, more recent (positive) developments of macroeconomic indicators, especially in the Nordic countries and within them in Sweden, seem not able to explain continued fertility declines of the more recent years, at least not in isolation (Comolli et al. 2019).

The Great Recession in Europe and beyond, in fact, was accompanied and followed by other events that might also influence fertility and people's willingness to have children. The global crisis affected Europeans' lives beyond the issues directly related to the labor market (Ayllon 2019; Matsudaira 2016; Moya and Fiske 2017) and generated consequences in terms of inequality, social cohesion, intergeneration tensions and anti-immigrant opinions (Cronin 2013). Income inequality is a predictor of psychological outcomes such as loneliness, short-sightedness, risk-taking and low trust (Haushofer 2013). Although less frequently studied as a consequence of economic crises, social relationships between groups and individuals are likely to be altered by long-lasting periods of lower opportunities. A possible mechanism explaining the link between recessions, inequality and low generalized trust relates to people's sense of control. Economic crises threaten individuals' sense of control over their own financial and working opportunities, and societies appear more divided, which psychologically leads to a decline in generalized trust. At the same time, as a coping mechanism, to compensate for one's own loss of control, group-based (social class, citizenship) control increases and fosters in-group trust as a collective response to the crisis and the threat to personal control (Fritsche et al. 2017).

In this study we focus on the declining trust in social systems that is reflected in growing political support for right-wing populist parties and we link this declining trust to the above-mentioned fertility decline. In the case of Sweden, this movement is represented by the Sweden Democrats (SD), which increased their vote share from 2.9% of votes in the 2006 elections to 17.5% in 2018 (Fig. 1). Our argument is that political sentiments, as indicator of social (in)cohesion and (declining) generalized trust, interact with macroeconomic conditions in influencing families' investments in the future, in our case, childbearing. We are aware of only one existing study addressing this topic by Morgan and coauthors (2011) who show that in the US after the 2008 election of Obama, the association between unemployment rates and TFR decline was lower in states where the support for Obama was larger. They interpret this result as evidence that partisan perceptions regarding the severity of the crisis influenced fertility decisions (Morgan et al. 2011, pp10).

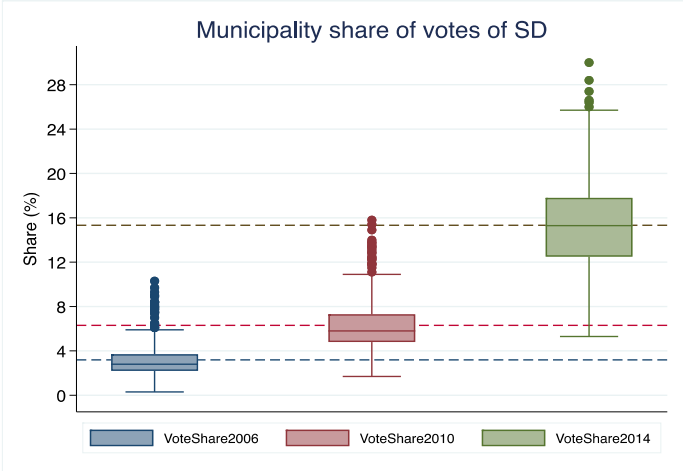
Our study addresses whether individuals' a greater exposure to partisan activism and populist sentiments is associated to a lower childbearing risk during the economic downturn of 2008. Secondly, we investigate whether this great exposure interacts with labor market conditions in explaining the decline in fertility in Sweden after 2010. We argue that any negative sentiments triggered by the events in 2008 may be more strongly at play in municipalities with higher support for the SD, which in turn may be related to childbearing outcomes. We thus compare fertility outcomes in different municipalities of Sweden. In addition, different socio-demographic

groups of people may have differed in their reactions so we compare women’s fertility developments across educational groups and migrant background.

We use Swedish register data 2006-2016 to construct complete individual-level fertility histories of all Swedish women in the reproductive age range 15-49 (N=2102554). Swedish registers report annual information on educational attainment, individual and family disposable income, employment status and type of occupation, civil status, and fertility. We first link each woman to the share of votes obtained by the Sweden Democrats (SD) in her municipality (N=290) of residence in three elections, 2006, 2010 and 2014 (Statistic Sweden). We further link women to the non-employment rate in their labor market area (N=73) of residence (Statistic Sweden). Non-employment rates are based on income registers: if no income is reported in a given year, the person is considered not working. As a robustness check we also consider regional unemployment rates (Eurostat) and unemployment rates from job seeker registers and active policy registers (available for the years 2008-2016 only). Finally, since we are interested in the effect of lower trust beyond that of income inequality, we calculate from the income registers the Gini income inequality index of the same area and we control for that in our models. We use a multilevel model to estimate how changes in the support for Sweden Democrats (SD) over and time across municipalities influence fertility behavior, net of observed individual-level and municipality characteristics. We consider two dependent variables: the total number of children women have and the probability to have a(nother) child. Finally, we study how partisan support for Sweden Democrats (SD) interacts with local unemployment rates and income inequality in affecting childbearing.

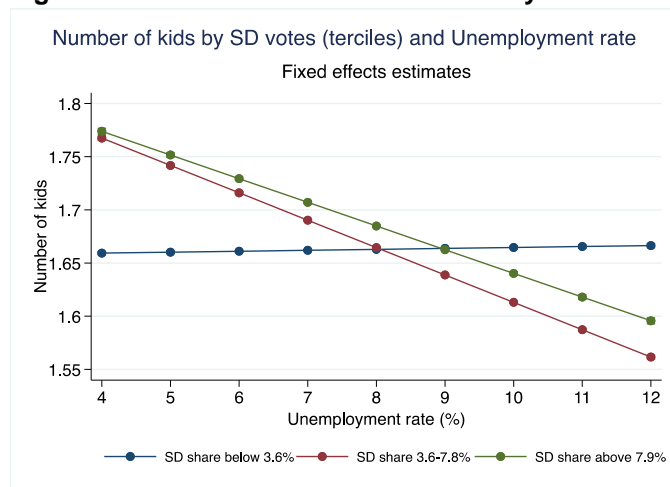
Preliminary results suggest that in municipalities with low support for the party of the Sweden Democrats (SD) the association between rising local unemployment rates and the total number of children is only mildly positive (Fig. 2). On the contrary, in municipalities with medium or high support for the Sweden Democrats (SD), in increase in local unemployment rates is associated to a steep decline in the number of children women have in Sweden. More refined analyses will show the robustness of these findings and the role played by income inequality in the relationship between partisan support, weakening labor market and childbearing decisions.

Figure 1: Municipality share of votes for Sweden Democrats in 2006, 2010 and 2014 elections



Source: elaboration of the authors based on Statistics Sweden data.

Figure 2: Predicted number of children by SD vote share and local unemployment



Source: elaboration of the authors based on Statistics Sweden and Swedish register data.

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