



Degree Program in Policy Making and Governance in Europe

Course of DEMOGRAPHY, SOCIETY AND POLICY IN EUROPE

# Families Without Births: Conservative Familism, Demographic Anxiety, and Persistent Low Fertility in Italy within the SDT Landscape

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Academic Year 2024/2025

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<b>Families Without Births: Conservative Familism, Demographic Anxiety, and Persistent Low Fertility in Italy within the SDT Landscape.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 The Italian Paradox.....	4
1.2 Aim, Contribution and Scope.....	6
1.3 Methodological Overview and Data Transparency.....	7
1.4 Dissertation Structure.....	8
<b>2. The Second Demographic Transition and European Low Fertility.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 SDT as an Interpretative Framework.....	11
2.1.1 Empirical Markers of the Second Demographic Transition.....	13
2.2 European Fertility Decline.....	15
2.3 SDT, low fertility and separation of ideals, intentions and realised births.....	16
2.4 Italy as a case study within the SDT landscape.....	18
<b>3. Conservatism.....</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1 Multiple Trajectories Within the Second Demographic Transition.....	24
3.1.1 The Italian Pathway Within Multiple Trajectories.....	26
3.2 Conservative Orientations and Fertility Ideals and Intentions.....	28
3.2.1 Conservatism in the Italian Context.....	29
3.3 From Ideals and Intentions to Births.....	31
3.3.1 Gender Norms.....	32
3.4 Demographic Anxiety and Pronatalist Discourse.....	33
3.5 Conclusion.....	35
<b>4. Methodology and Data Sources.....</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1 Approach.....	37
4.2 Key Concepts.....	39
4.3 EU Low Fertility Trends.....	40
4.3.1 Timing and Postponement: Low Fertility Within SDT.....	44
4.3.2 SDT Marker Beyond Fertility.....	46
4.4 Operationalising ‘Conservative Orientations’ in Comparative Survey.....	49
4.4.1 Religiosity.....	49
4.4.2 Attitudes to Childlessness.....	50
4.4.3 Political Ideology.....	51
4.4.4 Norms and Perceived Expectations.....	52
4.5 Italian Focus.....	52
4.5.1 Desires and Expectations Among Young Italians.....	53
4.5.2 Uncertainty Shocks.....	54
4.5.3 Familism and Uneven Pluralisation.....	55
4.6 Conclusion.....	56

<b>5. Discussion and Implications.....</b>	<b>58</b>
5.1 Emergence of Multiple Trajectories.....	61
5.2 The Italian Configuration.....	63
5.3 Political and Societal Implications.....	65
5.4 Limitations.....	68
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>70</b>
6.1 Contribution.....	72
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>74</b>
Table 1a: Core Data Sources.....	74
Table 1b. Evidence map: key studies/reports used and contribution.....	76
<b>Reference List.....</b>	<b>84</b>

## **1. Introduction**

The world and its demographic composition have suffered many changes throughout the years. In Europe, families have undergone profound structural and normative transformations since the mid-twentieth century. Across post-industrial societies, fertility has fallen below replacement level, partnership patterns have diversified and transitions to adulthood have lengthened. The second Demographic Transition (SDT) remains one of the most influential frameworks for interpreting these intersecting shifts (referring to the decrease in total fertility rate (TFR) after the Second World War) by linking demographic change since the 1960s to a broader reconfiguration of norms and life-course expectations (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; Van de Kaa, 2002). Rather than treating fertility decline as a purely economic response, SDT emphasises that childbearing and partnership formation have increasingly become intentional, conditional and plural, shaped by evolving values, new expectations regarding self-realisation and weakening institutional authority over private life (Van de Kaa, 2002).

Italy occupies a particularly revealing position within this landscape. It has been one of Europe's emblematic persistent 'lowest-low' fertility cases since the 1960s (Kohler, Billari and Ortega, 2002). Yet it is simultaneously characterised as familistic, culturally conservative and anchored by strong religious ties and enduring moral reference points in public life (Luciano, et al., 2012). Compounding this, fertility decline has become politically salient: conservative actors increasingly frame the 'birth rate crisis' as a national emergency requiring the defence of the traditional family (De Zordo, Marre and Smietana, 2022; Luciano, et al., 2012). The question arises not only regarding Italian low fertility, but why it persists at such

levels in a context where family retains high symbolic value and where public actors explicitly invoke pro-family pro-natalist narratives.

A common assumption in public debate (and sometimes in simplified interpretations of SDT) is that traditional values should correlate with higher fertility, while ‘modern’ values should align with lower fertility. Some comparative research does find that conservative orientations can correlate with more pronatalist ideals or intentions (Arpino & Mogi, 2024). Yet, the Italian case compels a more precise analytical approach. It suggests a careful conceptual separation between three distinct but interconnected outcomes: (1) normative orientations toward family and children; (2) fertility intentions and expectations; and (3) realised births, which may be shaped by postponement and by the perceived feasibility of family formation within late-modern structural conditions. This dissertation, therefore, treats fertility not only as a demographic outcome but as a configuration whose social meaning and consequences can be interpreted and are bound up with the presence of traditional values alongside the systematic non-realisation of those values in demographic behaviour.

### **1.1 The Italian Paradox**

In this dissertation, the ‘Italian paradox’ refers to a specific demographic development configuration rather than a logical contradiction. It captures the coexistence of three analytically distinct features of the country: (1) Persistent very low fertility over multiple decades; (2) A cultural context widely described as familistic and relatively conservative; and (3) a political environment that places demography and the ‘traditional family’ at the centre of public discourse. Familism and familistic orientations refer to strong perceived family cohesion and the strong perceived obligations towards extended kin, encompassing both the symbolic importance attached to family life and the expectation that family networks will

provide welfare and support. (Geersten & Gray, 1970). The paradox is therefore best understood as a mismatch between family-centred ideals and demographic outcomes: the family retains high symbolic value, yet births remain persistently low.

The Italian case is especially revealing because it shares Europe's long-term fertility trend of later parenthood and below-replacement fertility, while historically differing from many Northern and Western European societies in the timing and form of family change. Where SDT accounts often emphasise the rapid diffusion of cohabitation, non-marital childbearing and diverse family forms, Italy has combined pronounced postponement with a comparatively slower pluralisation of some family behaviours, yet without producing a recovery to moderate fertility (Caltabiano & Rosina, 2018). This makes Italy's evaluation a strategic case for examining whether conservative family values can coexist with SDT-type low fertility, and for identifying the mechanism through which this coexistence is sustained over time.

Recent demographic research supports the view that low fertility in Italy cannot be reduced to individual preference alone, without reference to macro-level and structural factors. Comolli and Vignoli (2021) demonstrate through a natural-experiment design focusing on Italy's sovereign debt crisis that macro-level uncertainty translates into measurable fertility decline, consistent with an interpretation of heightened economic unpredictability driving postponement and suppressing birth realisation. At the same time, evidence suggests that preferences may also be shifting at the margins: Luppi, Bellani and Rosina (2025) suggest that preferences might also be shifting among younger generations: they document an increasing share of Italian young adults reporting that they do not desire children, or do not expect to have them over their life course. Together, these findings point to

a dynamic picture in which the Italian paradox involves both the structural non-realisation of intention and a more recent, gradual recalibration of ideals among younger generations.

Italy, in particular, is a useful case for evaluating SDT because it challenges a linear reading of the theory and the evolution of fertility trends in Europe. Its trajectory features SDT consistent fertility postponement and sustained sub-replacement levels, but historically slower diffusion of some family-form components, notably cohabitation and non-marital childbearing compared to Northern Europe (Surkyn & Letheaghe, 2024). This asymmetry between fertility outcomes and behavioural pluralisation makes Italy a strategic point of study from which to examine the multiple pathways through which low fertility can emerge and persist. Finally, Italy's demographic configuration has political resonance. De Zordo, Marre & Smietana (2022) describe how fertility decline generates 'demographic anxieties' that conservative political actors can mobilise through narratives of national survival, the defence of the 'traditional family' and the regulation of reproduction. This broad European pattern aligns with the rise of national conservative politics that emphasise sovereignty hierarchies of belonging, and the family as a moral institution (Altinors and Chryssogelos, 2024), tendencies closely aligned with the broader European rise of national conservative politics.

## **1.2 Aim, Contribution and Scope**

This dissertation employs SDT as its central interpretive framework to examine how conservative and familistic orientations relate to fertility ideals, intentions and realised births, and to situate Italy's demographic trajectory within the wider landscape of European variation. Its contribution is primarily comparative and interpretative: rather than producing original statistical models, the dissertation constructs an original argument through a transparent synthesis of published analyses and public demographic indicators. The focus

rests on what Italy's particular configuration reveals about the diversity of SDT trajectories and about the social and political significance of persistent low fertility in a family-oriented context. This dissertation is organised around three research questions (RQs):

RQ1 asks how conservative family-related value orientations are associated with fertility ideals, intentions and realised fertility within the broader SDT pattern of family change.

RQ2 asks why Italy's trajectory since the 1990s exemplifies a distinctive 'familistic low-fertility' pathway within SDT and what it reveals about the mechanisms of 'multiple trajectories' within SDT.

RQ3 asks how the coexistence of persistent low fertility and conservative familism in Italy generates demographic anxiety, and what this reveals about the political and social consequences of the SDT-type translation gap in conservative contexts.

### **1.3 Methodological Overview and Data Transparency**

This dissertation adopts a comparative narrative synthesis design, relying on secondary analysis of high-quality published research and public demography indicators. This approach follows a logic of 'controlled compilation': building an original analytical argument through the explicit mobilisation of existing findings while maintaining transparency about data sources and measurement strategies.

The evidence base draws on three main families of material. First, comparative demographic indicators and trend syntheses, including European Commission reviews of fertility change and postponement (Bignami, et al., 2024; United Nations, 2025). Second, cross-national survey evidence on values, norms and intentions, drawing particularly on

studies that utilise EES, GGS and EVS-type data (Liefbroer, Merz, & Testa, 2014; Lappegård, Neyer & Vignoli, 2021; Arpino & Mogi, 2024). Third, Italy focused research identifying both distinctive structural constraints and shifts in preference formation (Comolli & Vignoli, 2021; Luppi, Bellani & Rosina, 2025; Bellani & Arpino, 2022; Aasve et al., 2024). Throughout, empirical claims are anchored to identifiable sources, datasets and time windows, and the analysis remains interpretive rather than causal-estimating. This methodological strategy enables a Europe-wide perspective while keeping Italy as the analytical focus, ensuring that the ‘Italian paradox’ is interpreted within a wider European SDT landscape rather than as an isolated case.

#### **1.4 Dissertation Structure**

Chapter 2 establishes the Second Demographic Transition as the core interpretive framework and reviews the European low-fertility patterns most relevant to this study (particularly postponement dynamics, the intention-behaviour gap and cross-national variation). Chapter 3 conceptualises conservatism for demographic research and examines how conservative orientations relate to fertility ideals, intentions and outcomes, with SDT providing the overarching theoretical frame. Chapter 4 provides the empirical core throughout data synthesis of published analyses and public statistics, positioning Italy within European trends in fertility, timing and family-change markers. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the observed configuration for interpreting SDT trajectories and for understanding the social and political meaning of persistent low fertility in a familistic context. Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of findings and a statement of the dissertation’s contributions.

## **2. The Second Demographic Transition and European Low Fertility**

The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) is one of the most influential macro-level frameworks for understanding fertility decline and changing family norms in post-industrial societies. Developed by Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk J. van de Kaa from the mid-1980s, SDT argues that demographic change in Europe since the 1960s cannot be explained only in economic terms (through economic modernisation); they must also be interpreted as the outcome on ideational transformation: shifts in norms, aspirations, and value systems that collectively reshape how individuals approach partnership and childbearing (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). SDT accounts for a broad movement away from a standardised family model and toward a more pluralised set of behaviours, encompassing later and less universal marriage, postponed parenthood, separation of marriage and childbearing and sustained sub-replacement fertility. A pivotal catalyst for this theoretical development was the ‘sudden’ fertility shift experienced by many European countries from relatively high fertility towards sustained below-replacement levels in the 1960s (van de Kaa, 2002). SDT therefore does not theorise fertility decline in isolation but situates it within a wider transformation of family life: it links fertility trends to shifts in values, union formation, gender relations and life-course trajectories.

Contraceptive technology and expanded access to abortion services matter as mechanisms that enable such behavioural shifts. Van de Kaa (2002) describes this development as a ‘second contraceptive revolution’, not merely because of the availability of new reproductive technologies, but their widespread adoption, social normalisation and integration into life planning. Thus, expansion of what van de Kaa terms ‘fertility freedom’ (the increased individual capacity to control reproduction) facilitated the decoupling of

sexuality from reproduction, supported the normalisation of postponement and made both limited family size and childlessness practically achievable and socially legitimate. Critically, however, van de Kaa's account insists that (contraceptive) technology alone cannot explain the observed behavioural changes; these enabling conditions interact with and are shaped by broader ideational shifts. Because this dissertation's empirical chapter relies on published research, it does not treat abortion or contraceptive prevalence as core SDT markers on their own, but it recognises them as enabling conditions that can interact with conservative politics (via moral regulation of reproduction) and with SDT-era conditionality (via expanded capacity to plan, delay or avoid births).

The ideational core of SDT draws partly on Ronald Inglehart's (1990) account of post-materialist value change: in accounts linked to post war development, rising material security and educational expansion facilitate the emergence of what Inglehart calls 'high order needs' and an increase of 'post materialist values', prioritising self-expression autonomy and personal fulfilment over conformity to inherited institutional norms such as universal parenthood. Van de Kaa (2002) maps this into a broader cultural movement from a conservative orientation (privileging continuity, tradition and institutional authority) toward a more individualistic orientation that embraces personal choice and plurality. This ideational shift redefines the meaning of partnership, parenthood and adult success: having children becomes less a social obligation and more a reflective lifestyle decision, judged against competing personal projects. This emphasis is clear in Ariès' cultural diagnosis of fertility decline, where he argues that children increasingly lost their centrality within life priorities. As Ariès writes: "The days of the child-king are over...The under-forty generation is leading us to a new epoch, one where the child...occupies a smaller space" (Ariès, 1980: 649), signalling a cultural demotion of children from the centre of adult life.

Still, SDT is not presented as a uniform path that all European societies follow identically. Van de Kaa (2002) explicitly distances himself from his earlier formulations describing SDT as a ‘cyclone moving across Europe’, opting instead for an approach that foregrounds national traditions, institutional contexts and demographic heritage. Countries differ markedly in the speed with which changing attitudes are translated into changes in behaviour. Some societies display clear SDT markers (high cohabitation, divorce and non-marital births) while others experience deep fertility decline without equivalent family-form transformation. Italy exemplifies the latter pattern: frequently described as a ‘strong family context’ (Reher, 2024), it is characterised by strong intergenerational ties, prolonged co-residence and the continued institutional importance of marriage which may constrain the public expression of non-traditional family behaviours even as underlying values shift (Luciano et al., 2012; Reher, 2024; Van de Kaa, 2002). This unevenness is central to this dissertation’s argument: Italy can be understood as a strategic case for demonstrating that SDT’s demographic outcomes (and very low fertility in particular) can emerge through pathways in which conservative orientations and family centrality persist, rather than being displaced by them.

## **2.1 SDT as an Interpretative Framework**

The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) was introduced to capture a distinct phase of demographic and family change in post-industrial societies, starting in Western Europe and North America from the late 1960s and diffusing unevenly thereafter (Lesthaeche & Neels, 2002; van de Kaa, 2002). This dissertation focuses empirically on the post-1990 period, when Italy entered and consolidated its persistent low-fertility regime and when cross-national survey evidence enables meaningful comparison of fertility attitudes, intentions and outcomes

across European contexts. At a descriptive level, SDT is associated with a cluster of interrelated behaviours: later marriage, rising cohabitation, higher rates of union dissolution, increasing childlessness, more births outside marriage, and the pluralisation of family formation alongside sustained fertility below-replacement. At the explanatory level, SDT foregrounds ideational change: it connects these behavioural shifts to increasing individual autonomy, declining deference to traditional institutional authorities and the primacy of self-realisation as a life-course value (van de Kaa, 2002.; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004).

The framework was chosen as the primary theoretical lens for this dissertation because it offers the most analytically productive account of the central empirical puzzle. If family change is partly driven by value pluralisation and individualisation, conservative value orientations do not necessarily disappear under SDT conditions; instead, they may become one orientation among many in a more diverse and contested normative landscape. Notably, SDT is not just descriptive but it is explicitly tied to a theory of ideational change, linking demographic behaviours to post-materialist and most-modernist orientations: individual autonomy, self-realisation, gender egalitarianism and reduced institutional authority, including religious authority (Van de Kaa, 2002). This theoretical grounding supports a focus on variation and sequencing: countries can arrive at low fertility through different pathways, depending on how ideational change interacts with institutions, labour markets and welfare systems (Zaidi & Morgan, 2027; Aasve, et al., 2024; Bignami, et al., 2024).

Recent Italy-focused evidence directly supports treating SDT as a diffusion process rather than a uniform transformation. Using nationally representative survey data, Aasve et al. (2024) demonstrate that Italian family behaviour has moved rapidly in the SDT direction in younger cohorts, with substantial increases in cohabitation, union dissolution and

nonmarital fertility, while also remaining socially and geographically uneven (with clear gradients by education and region, and with change occurring, albeit at a different pace, even in the South). This strengthens the dissertation's premise that national context and institutional heritage shape how SDT markers unfold, and that Italy should be analysed as a distinct but clear SDT case rather than an anomaly that the framework fails to accommodate.

Building on this, this dissertation treats low fertility not simply as an aggregate outcome but as part of a wider transformation in family formation, life-course, and the cultural meaning of parenthood. SDT's concept of conditionality is crucial for interpreting the Italian case: parenthood increasingly becomes contingent on individual self-perceived readiness, relational stability and self-assessed life-course feasibility, rather than being driven by social expectation. Italy retains strong familistic attachment and relatively conservative orientations, yet fertility remains persistently low, suggesting a widening gap between what is culturally affirmed versus what is demographically realised. This thesis adopts a comparative SDT lens to locate Italy within broader European patterns and to assess how Italy represents a distinctive SDT trajectory in which conservative ideals persist alongside postponement.

### ***2.1.1 Empirical Markers of the Second Demographic Transition***

Beyond the theory, in empirical research, the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) is typically identified not by a single indicator but by a cluster of interrelated shifts in fertility, partnership formation, and household arrangements. SDT theorists originally used this bundle of shifts to distinguish post-1960s family change from earlier demographic transitions (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; van de Kaa, 2002). In this dissertation, SDT markers refer to the following recurring empirical patterns:

1. Postponement of family orientation: rising ages at first union, marriage and first birth alongside delayed transition to adulthood and prolonged time in education (van de Kaa, 2002);
2. sustained sub-replacement fertility: fertility levels below replacement periods, often compounded by timing shifts (ibid.);
3. growth of cohabitation and weakening of marriage institution: increased prevalence and social acceptance of co-residential partnership outside marriage (ibid.);
4. rising non-marital childbearing: a loosening of the link between marriage and parenthood, with births increasingly occurring in cohabitation or outside stable partnerships (ibid.);
5. higher union instability and divorce: greater rates of separation and re-partnering, contributing to more diverse family formation (ibid);
6. increased childlessness and greater acceptance of childfree outcomes: whether through postponement leading to non-realisation or shifting preferences (Ariès, 1980; Sobotka & Testa, 2008);
7. pluralisation of family forms: expansion of legitimate family trajectories beyond the standard sequences of marriage to parenthood and stable nuclear family (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; van de Kaa, 2002);
8. and rising family complexity: disrupted, blended and re-partnered family structure (Aassve et al., 2024).

These markers do not move uniformly across countries. In particular, ‘strong family system’ contexts may experience prolonged postponement and very low fertility while showing slower diffusion of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing (Reher, 2024; van de

Kaa, 2002). Italy illustrates this unevenness: SDT-consistent shifts in cohabitation, union dissolution and non-marital fertility are now well-documented in recent cohort evidence, yet their diffusion remains socially and regionally stratified. This confirms that SDT markers can advance at different speeds and in different combinations, a central premise of the multiple-trajectories argument developed throughout this dissertation.

## **2.2 European Fertility Decline**

Across the European Union, fertility remained below replacement for roughly half a century and is expected to remain low, even as country trajectories diverge (Bignami, et al., 2024). A substantial component of contemporary fertility change reflects postponement: the transition to first birth has shifted to later ages, rising mean ages at childbearing, and concentrating the competition of intended family size at older ages. At the aggregate level, this generates a temporal dynamic that can decrease period fertility measures even when cohort family size does not fall proportionately.

The distinction between tempo and quantum effects is analytically important for interpreting Italy. Period fertility can decline sharply when first births are delayed, even if individuals still intend to have children later in life. Some scholars argue that apparent period-fertility decline reflects a timing shift that will self-correct as birth cohorts complete their family formation (Jang, Jun & Lee, 2017). The attitudinal dimension of timing change is equally relevant. Using two rounds of the European Social Survey, Lazzari, Compans and Beaujouan (2024) show that European societies maintain a strong normative sense of an ‘appropriate’ age window for childbearing, but that this window has shifted in favour of later parenthood across recent decades. These changes appear partly compositional, driven by education and social structure, but also reflect broader cultural shifts in the meaning and

expectations attached to parenthood. Within the SDT framework the normalisation of later parenthood indicates that postponement is not merely a response to external constraints but has itself become a socially institutionalised life-course expectation

However, postponement is not always recuperated at older ages. Under conditions of unstable employment, constrained housing, and relational uncertainty, delay can effectively become permanent: intended births might never materialise. This is particularly relevant in the Italian context. Luppi, Bellani and Rosina (2025) in a study conducted between 2012 and 2022 documented a growing tendency among Italian young adults not to desire children and not to expect them over the life course. This implies that the most relevant outcome for interpreting low fertility settings is not only low period fertility, but the persistence of low generational fertility due to non-realisation of earlier intentions.

### **2.3 SDT, low fertility and separation of ideals, intentions and realised births**

A central analytical strategy of this dissertation is to treat fertility outcomes not only as behavioural events but as the culmination of a sequence encompassing ideals, intentions and realised births. This distinction is fundamental within SDT because change across these levels is often uneven: parenthood may remain culturally valued or normatively endorsed while the conditions required to realise it (internal or external) become more demanding, more conditional or less achievable. Persistent low fertility, therefore, does not automatically imply the erosion of family orientation or a widespread rejection of parenthood; it can equally reflect a growing difficulty in translating culturally or personally endorsed ideals into feasible plans and ultimately into births.

This separation is well documented in European research on childlessness and fertility intentions. Using IPPAS data across thirteen European societies, Sobotka and Testa (2008) demonstrate substantial cross-country variation in attitudes towards childlessness, with a notable share of young adults either intending to remain childless or reporting uncertainty about parenthood. This supports an SDT-consistent reading of low fertility as part of a broader reorganisation of the meanings, expectations and perceived consequences attached to parenthood and to adult life-course sequencing, rather than a mere shift in behavioural preferences.

Intentions are analytically useful in two related respects. First, they provide a proximate indicator of likely demographic behaviour, even if intentions do not lead directly to outcomes. Evidence from Pew surveys in the United States illustrates that stated plans shift with age and with perceptions of feasibility, and that intentions should not be treated as deterministic predictors of completed fertility (Hays, 2025). Second, the intentions capture the conditionality of contemporary family formation: individuals may endorse parenthood as desirable in principle while postponing or foregoing childbearing when relevant conditions (employment security, housing, relational stability) are judged to be insufficient. Comparative European work confirms that the association between attitudes and fertility intentions varies across countries and depends on how attitudes are operationalised, underlining that intentions are shaped by both values and context (Lappegård, Neyer & Vignoli, 2021). For this dissertation, the intention-realisation gap functions as an SDT-relevant indicator of the conditions under which the translation from ideals into births weakens.

## **2.4 Italy as a case study within the SDT landscape**

Italy was selected as the empirical focus of this dissertation because it brings together features that do not follow the most intuitive paths of family orientations and fertility. First, Italy is widely described as culturally familistic and strongly family-oriented. Second, it has experienced a prolonged period of very low fertility, making it one of Europe's most persistent low-fertility contexts. Third, conservative and national-conservative political actors have increasingly placed fertility and family at the centre of public discourse, framing demographic declines as a societal and national challenge (Kourou, 2020). Italy exhibits classic SDT-style fertility postponement and sub-replacement levels, yet historically displaces the slower diffusion of several family-form pluralisation markers, notably cohabitation and non-marital childbearing, relative to Northern Europe. The juxtaposition of these features produces what this dissertation terms the 'Italian paradox': a culturally family-oriented society, with visible conservative currents, sustaining very low fertility over decades.

Within Southern Europe, Italy is frequently presented as a challenging case for a simple linear SDT sequence in which ideational liberalisation and diversification of family behaviours travel together. As part of a Mediterranean/strong-family configuration (often described as combining weak social protection with strong kin ties) Italy has been classified as relatively traditional in value orientations, with Catholic influence frequently highlighted in explanations of slow behavioural change. Cohabitation, non-marital childbearing and other pluralised family forms may diffuse later or remain less widespread than in Northern and Western Europe (Aassve, et al., 2024). The apparent anomaly is fertility: despite these traditional features, Italy has experienced roughly four decades of very low fertility, reaching the 'lowest-low' category and exhibiting pronounced postponement of childbearing (Kohler, Billari & Ortega, 2002). This combination (traditional orientations and slow pluralisation

alongside sustained lowest-low fertility) makes Italy a strategic case for examining how SDT outcomes can emerge through a distinct pathway in which timing, feasibility constraints and institutional context weaken the translation from family ideals into births.

Recent cohort evidence challenges any static characterisation of Italy as a ‘latecomer’. Aassve et al. (2024) explicitly frame Italy as a ‘last bastion’ in which SDT-type behaviours have recently accelerated, documenting strong cohort shifts in union formation and dissolution alongside non-marital childbearing, with clear educational and regional gradients. A key contribution of Aassve et al. (2024) is to connect Italy’s macro shift in family behaviours to the SDT debate about diffusion and convergence. This is consistent with the dissertation’s emphasis on uneven diffusion: SDT markers may advance quickly once diffusion extends beyond early ‘forerunners’, even while family centrality and conservative orientations remain culturally salient. Using both aggregated ISTAT indicators and retrospective life-history survey data, the authors show that marriage has declined sharply, cohabitation has expanded, nonmarital childbearing has increased, and union instability has risen, trends that accelerated after the late 2000s, leading the authors to characterise Italy as moving towards SDT-type behavioural patterns rather than stalling in a strong-family equilibrium (ibid.).

Brinton and Lee (2016) provide a cross-nationally grounded explanation for why strongly family-oriented societies can nonetheless sustain very low fertility. Their framework links low fertility to a mismatch between expanded opportunities for women in education and employment and the persistence of traditional caregiving expectations. Where institutional cultural norms continue to assign childcare responsibilities primarily to women while failing to provide adequate work-family reconciliation support, the opportunity costs of parenthood

remain high. While this dissertation does not centre gender as its primary explanatory lens, Brinton and Lee's conclusions are directly relevant to SDT: demographic outcomes depend not only on values, but on the institutional and life-course conditions under which these can be realised. Italy exemplifies this pattern: the institutional and normative environment has not adjusted sufficiently to absorb the consequences of women's educational labour market integration, leaving parenthood an increasingly demanding and uncertain undertaking.

Structural uncertainty further constrains the feasibility of family formation. Comolli and Vignoli (2021) demonstrate through a regression discontinuity design that Italy's sovereign debt crisis (2011-2012) produced a measurable decline in births, concentrated among younger adults and first births, consistent with the interpretation that macro-level uncertainty (beyond standard labour market indicators) can depress birth rates and intensify postponement. Brinton, et al. (2018), using data from the Gender and Generation Survey (GGS), additionally found that Italian respondents (alongside those in other very-low fertility contexts) are more likely to perceive multiple conditions as decisive prerequisites for childbearing than respondents in countries where fertility is comparatively higher. Together, these findings reinforce that Italy's low fertility reflects not an absence of family orientation but the systematic accumulation of feasibility barriers and perceived prerequisites that prevent the translation of intentions into births.

While SDT provides a macro explanation of fertility declines as part of a broader ideational and behavioural transformation since the 1960s, the Italian case underscores the necessity of attending to the multiple pathways through which that transformation can occur. Chapter 3 sets out the comparative European context for SDT change and locates Italy within

it, with particular attention to the role of conservative orientations and how they interact with mechanisms connecting ideals and intentions to realised births.

### **3. Conservatism**

In this dissertation, ‘conservatism’ refers to value orientations that prioritise continuity, moral order and established hierarchies, particularly in domains that structure family life. It encompasses a set of related dispositions, including traditionalism, deference to authority, attachment to national or religious identity, and scepticism toward rapid change, which are commonly expressed through attitudes towards gender roles, sexuality, partnership norms and the moral boundaries of legitimate parenthood (Bryant & Farrell, 2024). Also, Altinors and Chrysosgelos (2024) describe national conservatism as a transnational political family that combines support for a more interventionist economic state with traditional values and a sovereignty-oriented political stance, a configuration increasingly relevant to how demographic decline is narrated and politicised.

Because conservatism is a broad and contested concept, this dissertation operationalises it through three complementary empirical handles. The first is political ideology, typically measured by left-right placement or party affiliation. The second is religiosity, encompassing affiliation, subjective importance of religion and frequency of practice. The third is a set of attitudinal items capturing traditionalist or pluralist orientations, the domains of family and gender norms. Each ‘handle’ is analytically distinct and may relate differently to fertility ideals, intentions and realised births. The aim is not to treat conservatism as a fixed ideological label, but as an empirically observable cluster of orientations that can be measured in surveys and traced in public discourse.

This multidimensional operationalisation matters because the components of conservatism can coexist in mixed or inconsistent configurations. Demographic research

explicitly warns against treating gender ideology as a single continuum from traditionalism to egalitarianism, because attitudes towards women's public roles, maternal roles within the family and paternal responsibilities at home may shift at different speeds and carry different implications for fertility (Lappergård, Neyer & Vignoli, 2021). An individual may simultaneously support women's employment and endorse the view that mothers should be primary caregivers, or may publicly support liberal stances while adhering to more traditional ones in the household. This dissertation therefore treats conservatism as a multidimensional background orientation that shapes fertility motivations and norms, while recognising that its behavioural consequences are context dependent.

The comparative significance of conservatism also varies across European contexts. Arpino and Mogi (2024) caution that the substantive content of left-right self-placement differs across national settings, while Philipov and Berghammer (2007) show that distinct dimensions of religiosity (attendance versus affiliation) carry different fertility associations in different contexts. This dissertation, hence, avoids clustering comparative literature into a single operational definition and instead interprets findings in terms of the indicators used in each study. Crucially, conservatism is treated as potentially coexisting with demographic change rather than preventing it: Aassve et al. (2024) document rising cohabitation, non-marital births and marital disruption in Italy, directly undermining any deterministic reading in which conservative values and ties to the Catholic church straightforwardly produce stable traditional family behaviours. This supports an analytical model in which normative and political familism can coexist with behavioural pluralisation, generating precisely the kind of gap between symbolic family centrality and lived demographic trajectories that this dissertation aims to explain.

Finally, this dissertation separates between three outcomes in the value-fertility relationship: fertility ideals (broadly endorsed normative positions on family size and childlessness), fertility intentions and expectations (short-term plans and perceived likelihood of parenthood), and realised fertility. This separation is essential for interpreting the Italian paradox. A society can remain family-positive at the ideological level while displaying low realised fertility if intentions are systematically postponed, revised or deemed unfeasible by structural constraints. Chapters 4 and 5 build on this by interpreting conservatism as a potential sharper of ideals and intentions, while treating the translation into births as contingent on timing, uncertainty and institutional context.

### **3.1 Multiple Trajectories Within the Second Demographic Transition**

The SDT is most commonly associated with a recognisable cluster of long-run changes in family formation and fertility in post industrial societies: delayed marriage and parenthood, rising cohabitation, increased partnership instability, growing acceptance of non-traditional family norms and sub-replacement fertility (Aasve, et al., 2024; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; van de Kaa, 2002). Underlying these behavioural shifts is an ideational movement toward individualisation and self-realisation, a reconfiguration of the life course away from institutional scripts and toward individually constructed pathways. Such tendencies seem intuitively against a traditional conservatism where “religious teachings advocate life in a sound traditional family with many children and take an adverse stand to non-marital sex and thus to cohabitation” (Philipov & Berghammer, 2007:272). However, a defining feature of SDT theory is that the transition is not expected to unfold identically across all national contexts; it follows context-dependent ‘multiple trajectories’ in which the value change and demographic outcomes are shaped by national histories, institutional contexts, religious legacies and patterns of intergenerational dependence (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004),

Within this framework, the relationship between conservatism and SDT can be read in two compatible ways. One interpretation treats conservatism as a moderating force on certain SDT markers (notably pluralisation of family forms) because traditionalist values resist cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, divorce, or acceptance of family diversification. A second and more analytically productive interpretation treats conservatism as a cultural formation that can be reconfigured under SDT conditions: conservative contexts can adapt to post-industrial constraints and shifting gender and labour market realities, producing new combinations of attitudes in which family-centred ideals persist while demographic behaviour shifts because feasibility conditions and timing pressures intensify. This dissertation argues for the second interpretation, particularly with respect to Italy.

This unevenness is further illuminated by the observation that ideational and economic explanations of demographic change are not mutually exclusive. Jang, Jun & Lee (2017) argue that ideational shifts complement rather than replace economic approaches to understanding fertility: individuals do not respond mechanically to material incentives because values and moral rationalities shape what is considered as desirable or legitimate life-choices. Supporting this, Liefbroer, Merz, & Testa (2014) document that norms surrounding childbearing timing and family formation vary substantially across Europe and continue to shape demographic decision-making even when they no longer operate as rigid social obligations. Together, these contributions suggest that conservative norms can remain powerful in defining the cultural meaning of family life while proving insufficient to stabilise fertility behaviour, particularly when structural conditions make the conditions for ‘appropriate’ parenthood increasingly difficult to satisfy.

### ***3.1.1 The Italian Pathway Within Multiple Trajectories***

Italy illustrates these multiple-trajectories dimensions of SDT clearly. Italian family change shows several SDT-consistent shifts, including delayed marriage and increased partnership instability and a gradual rise in non-marital forms, yet the transition toward broader family pluralisation has historically been described as slower and more normatively contested than in parts of Northern and Western Europe (Luciano, 2012; Ioverno et al., 2019). This implies that very low fertility can coexist with enduring conservative boundaries and persistent, if evolving, traditional family forms.

Luciano et al. (2012) describe Italy as characterised by strong family ties and mutual aid, while documenting substantial demographic change over recent decades: decreasing and later marriage, reduced birth rates, rising births outside marriage, increasing separation, and growth in single-person households, childless couples, and other non-traditional household formations. Importantly, they argue that this transition has unfolded more slowly than in comparable European societies, plausibly reflecting the continuing influence of Catholic ideology (ibid.). This sequencing makes Italy analytically valuable: it motivates an empirical focus on how conservative and familistic orientations coexist with very low fertility, particularly through the widening gap between ideals and intentions and realised births. Recent Italy-focused SDT research challenges the portrait of Italy as a static case. Aassve et al. (2024) demonstrate that the rise of ‘new family’ behaviours is no longer confined to an early social vanguard: indicators of cohabitation, dissolution, and nonmarital fertility have spread widely, though gradients by education and region persist. Together, these studies reinforce the dissertation’s argument that Italy’s SDT pathway is best read as familistic but increasingly pluralised, with uneven diffusion across social groups and regions.

Two conceptual distinctions clarify why Italy can appear simultaneously ‘family-centred’ and persistently low-fertility. First, it is necessary to separate conservatism analytically from ‘familism’. The latter refers to the normative centrality of family and the expectations of kin to provide support and care (Geersten & Gray, 1970); it can overlap with conservatism but is not identical to it. A familistic society may support intergenerational ties while holding more liberal views on gender equality or family pluralisation. Second, conservatism operates at both the micro level (as an individual self-perception) and macro-political level (a set of projects through which parties mobilise family values, demography and national identity). Altinors and Chryssogelos (2024) conceptualise national conservatism as providing a symbolic language through which demographic decline can be interpreted as a moral or national concern, adding a political-discursive dimension to the analysis of low fertility. A further contextual element reinforcing the durability of traditional institutional frameworks is Italy’s distinctive political history: as Lomazzi (2017) observes, the Christian Democratic Party dominated national government virtually without interruption until 1993, a pattern that plausibly shaped institutional transmissions of family and gender role models, which may remain embedded in institutions even as behaviour changes

Taken together, Italy’s trajectory exposes a limitation in simplified readings of SDT. If SDT is interpreted as an integrated package in which ideational liberalisation, pluralisation of family forms, and fertility decline necessarily move in unison, the Italian case appears anomalous. But if SDT is understood as a broader framework describing shifts toward conditional parenthood, individualised life-course decision-making and the weakening of universal family scripts, Italy can be read as a variation where conditional parenthood and postponement intensify even when pluralisation remains culturally contested, and the family retains strong symbolic centrality. This dissertation uses Italy to illustrate this distinction and

to argue that SDT is best approached as a framework for understanding multiple trajectories rather than a single convergent pathway.

### **3.2 Conservative Orientations and Fertility Ideals and Intentions**

A consistent finding in European demographic scholarship is that conservative orientations are more reliably associated with fertility ideals and intentions than with realised fertility. Religiosity in particular stands out as a consistent correlate. Philipov and Berghammer (2007) show that multiple measures of religiosity (affiliation, self-assessed religiosity, and especially service attendance) are generally related to a higher ideal family size and higher odds of intending to have another child across European countries. Notably, their findings indicate that the association is more pronounced for ideals than for intentions, already pointing to a translation gap in which religiously informed pro-family norms are not straightforwardly converted into concrete childbearing plans.

Political ideology also carries relevance to short-term reproductive planning. Arpino and Mogi (2024), using European Social Survey rounds including a three-year fertility intention measure, report that individuals self-located on the extreme right tend to express higher intentions to have a child, even after accounting for religiosity and other value measures. Their interpretation is appropriately cautious: differences in intention do not directly translate into completed fertility and may partly reflect timing effects rather than higher lifetime family size (*ibid.*). This caution is central for the dissertation's analytical approach, which treats intentions as meaningful indicators of perceived feasibility and normative orientation, without equating them with births.

Norms also operate through social environments and perceived expectations rather than individual attitudes alone. Liefbroer, Merz, & Testa (2014) show, using European survey data on childbearing timing norms, that perceived expectations from relevant others (partners, family, friends) vary across societies and can guide demographic decision-making in significant ways. In familistic settings, such norms may not only endorse parenthood as desirable but can simultaneously raise the threshold for ‘proper’ parenthood, encouraging postponement until conditions are judged adequate rather than promoting early childbearing. Brinton et al. (2018), focusing on highly educated young adults in several countries, similarly emphasise that fertility intentions reflect perceived conditions (job security, housing stability, access to childcare, partner support) that must be met before intentions can be acted upon. This condition-focused reasoning is directly relevant to the Italian paradox: it illuminates how profamily values can remain culturally endorsed while births remain systematically postponed. This dissertation, therefore, treats survey-reported ideals and norms primarily as evidence about cultural meaning, not as direct predictors of behaviour. As stated ideals can remain family-positive even when near-term plans become cautious or indefinitely deferred.

### ***3.2.1 Conservatism in the Italian Context***

Italy figures prominently in the literature as a critical case for understanding the persistence of low fertility within a family-oriented traditionalist setting. This dissertation characterises Italy as a “conservative-low-fertility” configuration defined by three elements: the strong symbolic centrality of family and conservative currents around family pluralisation; persistently very low fertility; and a significant divergence between fertility ideals and intentions on one hand and realised births on the other.

At the level of family structure and pluralisation, Luciano et al. (2012) document both continuity and transformation: Italy retains strong family ties and mutual aid networks, while undergoing demographic shifts consistent with SDT markers, fewer and later marriages, rising non-marital births and increasing marital instability, alongside growth in non-traditional household forms. They further argue that this transition has unfolded more slowly than in comparable countries, plausibly an ongoing reflection of Catholic influence. This account is valuable because it situates the SDT process in Italy as present but sequentially distinctive, with markers advancing more slowly and in a different combination from the ‘early’ SDT trajectories associated with Northern Europe.

At the level of contested pluralisation, Ioverno, et al. (2019) demonstrate that family diversification in Italy is not only a behavioural matter but also a matter of social legitimacy. Using a large survey of heterosexual respondents and structural equation modelling, they find that traditional beliefs about femininity and masculinity are directly associated with more negative attitudes toward same-sex parenting, with homonegativity partially mediating the effects of both religiosity and political conservatism (ibid.). For this dissertation, this study illustrates that in Italy, certain SDT markers may advance behaviourally while the legitimacy of broader family pluralisation remains morally and politically contested, a configuration that is characteristic of an uneven SDT trajectory.

At the level of fertility desires and expectations, Luppi, Bellani and Rosina (2025) document significant changes in young adults’ reported desire for children and expectations of becoming parents between 2012 and 2022. Their findings are important for the paradox framing: persistent structural constraints may not only stop the realisation of intentions but can also reshape aspirations over time, even in a familistic context (ibid.). The political

meaning of fertility decline provides a further interpretative layer. Scholarship on Italian politics demonstrates that family and births are symbolically central within contemporary right-wing narratives (Forti, 2022; Varriale, 2025), with fertility decline mobilised as a cultural and national concern in ways that reinforce the dissertation's claim that the Italian paradox is as discursive as it is demographic.

### **3.3 From Ideals and Intentions to Births**

A core contribution of the literature reviewed in this chapter is the recognition that fertility ideals, intentions and realised births are analytically and empirically distinct outcomes governed by different mechanisms. Ideals reflect culturally shaped conditions of the 'right' number of children; intentions reflect short-term planning under current circumstances (usually operationalised as plans within three years); and realised births reflect the intersections of plans, biology, partnership trajectories and external constraints. Under SDT conditions, the relative importance of timing, uncertainty and perceived readiness increases, making the failure of translation from ideals into births a central object of analysis.

Brinton, et al. (2018) offer a useful framework for interpreting this translation failure. Across low-fertility contexts, they find that stable employment, housing security and partnership instability are frequently treated as prerequisites for parenthood, conditions which individuals expect to satisfy before childbearing can begin. This logic maps directly onto the Italian paradox: parenthood can remain culturally valued and personally desired, yet births are delayed or foregone because the conditions for 'proper' parenthood are judged insufficient.

Macro-level uncertainty can further amplify postponement and contribute to non-realisation. Comolli and Vignoli (2021) analysis of Italy around the sovereign debt crisis

period identified a decline in births associated with increased uncertainty, consistent with an SDT conditionality model in which future unpredictability intensifies postponement. The tempo-quantum distinction adds further precision: in some contexts, low fertility largely reflects births delayed but eventually recuperated, whereas in others, postponement is only partially recovered and completed fertility declines. Conservative orientations may generate stronger family positive ideals and shape short-term planning horizons, yet they do not automatically produce higher completed fertility when life-course feasibility constraints accumulate and become difficult to overcome. So, what appears as higher intentions among conservative individuals may therefore coexist with weak cohort outcomes when postponement repeatedly defers the conditions required for childbearing.

### ***3.3.1 Gender Norms***

Although gender is not the dissertation's central focus, the literature on gender norms and institutional mismatch provides an important mechanism through which the translation from ideals into births can break down. Brinton and Lee (2016) argue that some of the lowest fertility levels globally appear in societies that are simultaneously strongly family-oriented, including Spain, Japan and Italy. Their analysis suggests that 'traditional' norms do not raise fertility in such contexts; rather they can heighten the opportunity costs and organisational burdens of parenthood when women's education and employment have expanded, but caregiving expectations remain asymmetrically gendered (ibid.). Where traditional role expectations persist in this unbalanced form, postponement becomes a practical response to incompatible institutional demands.

Lappegård, Neyer and Vignoli, (2021) deepen this analysis by examining the multi-dimensional character of gender attitudes and their relationship to fertility intentions.

Using comparative European survey evidence, they show that attitudes about gender equality in the public sphere and within the family can diverge substantially, and that their relationship to fertility intentions varies by dimension, parity and national context (ibid.). For this dissertation, the interpretive implication is that conservative contexts can contain internally mixed configurations: support for women's employment alongside a persistent moral and political expectation of intensive motherhood. Such configuration can widen the intention-realisation gap, especially for women who face competing and largely unresolved structural demands.

Arpino, Esping-Andersen and Pessin (2015) add a macro-comparative dimension by documenting a curvilinear U-shaped association between the diffusion of gender-equality attitudes and fertility, suggesting that fertility may initially decline as societies drift from traditional gender roles but may subsequently stabilise or recover as norms and institutions converge on a more egalitarian arrangement. This reinforces the multiple-trajectories reading of SDT: ideational change and behavioural outcomes interact with institutional conditions in ways that can produce distinct and non-linear long-term fertility configurations

### **3.4 Demographic Anxiety and Pronatalist Discourse**

Because this dissertation prioritises implications and interpretation over causal attribution, the literature on political demography and demographic anxiety is used to understand how low fertility is narrated, moralised, and politicised in conservative contexts. De Zordo, Marre and Smietana (2022) show that in Europe and North America, fertility decline is frequently framed by conservative actors as a societal threat, linked to narratives of mortal crisis, national declines and the defence of a Christian 'traditional family'. These 'demographic anxieties' frequently intersect with migration politics, contrasting the low

fertility of native populations with the attributed higher fertility among minority groups, thereby intensifying identity-based and exclusionary narratives (ibid.) . In conservative settings, low fertility can generate intensified boundaries around reproduction and the moralisation of childbearing, even when the demographic mechanisms are structural, slow-moving and linked to the same feasibility constraints that affect the broader population.

The concept of national-conservatism helps understand why these demographic narratives have gained political traction. Korou (2020) analyses how right-wing populist actors and anti-gender movements converge around ‘family mainstreaming’ strategies, mobilising reproduction and the regulation of women’s bodies as national questions. Altinors and Chrysosgelos (2024) argue that national conservatism, strengthened in response to perceived failures of neoliberal globalisation, is characterised by a sovereignty-oriented stance, renewed emphasis on traditional hierarchies (including religion) and greater willingness to deploy state power in defence to those hierarchies (ibid.). Within such projects, demographic decline provides legitimacy for state intervention in social reproduction, but the terms of that intervention are framed in traditionalist ways rather than gender-egalitarian ways (restoring family order rather than expanding work-family reconciliation or childcare provision). Here, the ‘family’ functions as both a moral symbol and a site of interventions, as pronatalist policy can be presented as a tool to restore national strength and social order. This is supported by Colatone and Stanig’s 2019 analysis of economic nationalism, which identifies the convergence of conservative economic preferences with nationalist positions on immigration and sovereignty, a context in which demographic decline can be integrated into broader narratives of national continuity and cultural threat. Thus, demographic decline can be invoked to legitimise intervention in social reproduction, even where the practical levers for raising fertility are constrained or contested.

Italy-specific analyses illustrate the domestic articulation of these political frames. Forti (2022) traces ideological continuity and change among Italian far-right actors, while Varriale (2025) characterises Fratelli d'Italia as a predominantly conservative party in which family and births occupy a prominent pragmatic position. The narrative surrounding fertility has also been present in the media. Jones (2023) documents how low fertility has been discussed in conservative Italian media alongside anxieties about youth prospects, women's roles and demographic 'replacement' with explicitly 'Christian values' rhetoric, circulating alongside anti-migration narratives in conservative printed media. For this dissertation, the key implication is interpretative: conservative low fertility contexts can develop a configuration in which strong symbolic emphasis on the family coexists with persistently weak demographic outcomes, generating incentives for moralised and exclusionary political narratives that treat demographic decline as a cultural crisis rather than a structural phenomenon.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has clarified how conservatism is conceptualised and operationalised for this dissertation and situated it within SDT's multiple-trajectories framework. Conservative orientations are treated as multidimensional (ideology, religiosity and family and gender attitudes) and interpreted in relation to the specific indicators employed across studies. The SDT framework helps explain why conservative values do not necessarily stop demographic change: trajectories can be uneven, with some markers advancing faster than others while fertility outcomes are shaped by conditional parenthood and postponement. The chapter's central finding, which directly addresses RQ1, is that conservatism is reliably associated with family-positive ideals, and in some contexts with stronger intentions, but that the translation into births is contingent on timing, uncertainty and perceived feasibility. For RQ2, Italy is

selected as a critical case because it embodies this ‘familistic low fertility’ configuration: persistent very low fertility alongside a comparatively conservative environment, uneven diffusion of SDT markers and contested legitimacy of family pluralisation. The chapter also established the interpretative frame for RQ3 by introducing the demographic anxiety literature, which explains why this configuration carries measurable political and social consequences. Chapters 4 and 5 build on this by mapping Italy’s position within broader European patterns and interpreting what the Italian configuration implies for SDT theory and the meanings attached to persistent low fertility.

## **4. Methodology and Data Sources**

This chapter provides the dissertation's empirical core through a comparative synthesis of published analyses and public demographic statistics. It compiles and interprets second-hand evidence to answer the dissertation's questions: how conservative value orientations relate to fertility ideals, intentions and realised fertility in contemporary Europe; where Italy stands within EU fertility and SDT-marker trajectories and what the Italian configuration suggests about variations within the SDT. The chapter treats selected public demographic figures as primary descriptive evidence and uses the academic literature mainly to contextualise and interpret patterns rather than to substitute for analysis. The central empirical task is interpretive reading of reported statistical visualisations and harmonised survey summaries, focusing on what the distributions and trajectories reveal about SDT markers and Italy's relative position.

Because this chapter relies on secondary evidence, it follows traceable sourcing practices. This is particularly relevant for claims about SDT markers such as marriage rates, non-marital births, divorce, or household composition, where cross-national comparability depends on consistent measurement; hence it privileges sources that clearly document provenance, dataset and time window.

### **4.1 Approach**

The method relies on controlled compilation. Across each section, the same sequential logic is followed: state the type of evidence; identify the relevant dataset; summarise analytical claims; locate Italy comparatively; and relate the observed pattern to the SDT framing. The selection of data and research privileges sources that allow cross-national

comparison and that establish an explicit connection between fertility or SDT-relevant attitudes (fertility ideals, intended childlessness, norms on family diversity, religiosity or political ideology). The baseline time window is from the 1990s onwards, because this is when harmonised cross-national value data and comparative EU fertility series became consistently available, thus maximising comparability across Eurostat fertility data and repeated cross-national surveys (ESS,EVS,WVS) while capturing the period in which Italy's very low fertility regime was consolidated and became politically salient (Bignami, et al., 2024). When a cited study uses a narrower window, that window will be reported explicitly.

Because this dissertation relies on secondary synthesis, evidence selection is crucial. Sources are therefore prioritised according to two criteria: they must enable cross-national comparison within Europe or credible positioning of Italy relative to other European countries, and they must allow evidence to be traced clearly to an identifiable dataset. While cited research provides results, this dissertation identifies what each source of analyses and uses its findings to support the interpretative argument rather than to substitute for original estimation.

To increase robustness, the chapter triangulates across different kinds of evidence rather than relying on a single data set of the author. Using patterns suggested by other studies on the relationship between conservatism and intention, the chapter controls whether related work using different samples, measures or time windows reports a comparative interpretation (for example, religiosity and ideals; attitudes to childlessness; Italy-specific evidence on declining expectations). The output is therefore not a new estimate of effects but comparative evidence-based that supports the following claim: Italy exemplifies a 'constraint-heavy and

familistic low fertility' SDT trajectory in which family positive orientations coexist with weak transitions into births.

A key interpretative limitation concerns the tempo-quantum distinction. Period indicators such as the TFR can decline when births are postponed to later ages, even if completed family size does not fall, because period rates are sensitive to tempo effects. The European Commission review explicitly identifies postponement as a central driver of contemporary low fertility and stresses that trends should be read in relation to timing change (Bignami et al., 2024). Accordingly, the chapter's empirical aim is to map configurations (low fertility+postponement+household/family markers) rather than to infer completed cohort fertility, which would require generational measures and harmonised longitudinal design beyond the scope of this synthesis.

The comparative strategy in the chapter is therefore not through statistical testing but triangulation across evidence types, as documented in Table 1a and Table 1b in the Appendix. The chapter moves from trend evidence to attitudinal intentions and intentions evidence, and finally to Italy-focused synthesis, covering uncertainty shocks, shifting expectations and the mismatch between pro-family norms and low realised fertility. This sequencing is designed to preserve the central analytical question: Italy's persistent low fertility is interpreted not as a simple lack of family orientation but as a mismatch between the symbolic centrality of family and the lived feasibility of childbearing.

## **4.2 Key Concepts**

This section will distinguish between three conceptual foundations. First, it distinguishes between fertility behaviour (realised births), fertility intentions (near-term plans)

and fertility ideals/attitudes (normative evaluations of parenthood). There are related but not interchangeable: in low fertility contexts, ideals may remain higher than births, and intentions may be only partially acted upon (Sobotka & Testa, 2008). Second, because SDT emphasises postponement, fertility levels are interpreted alongside timing. Period TFR can fall mechanically when births are shifted to later ages (tempo effect); timing indicators are therefore treated as necessary companions to fertility levels, rather than supplementary information (Bignami et al., 2024). Third, ‘conservatism’ is treated as multidimensional; across the evidence base, conservative orientations are operationalised via:

1. Religiosity: (affiliation, attendance, self-assessed religiosity).
2. Family and childlessness attitudes, such as whether childlessness is socially accepted or whether family life is positively valued.
3. Gender-role orientations, which can refer either to public-sphere egalitarianism or private sphere roles.
4. Political ideology, usually measured through self-placement on a left-right scale, captures broader attitudes toward social order, change and tradition.

These dimensions overlap but are not identical and do not consistently map onto one another across European contexts.

### **4.3 EU Low Fertility Trends**

Across the European Union, fertility has remained below replacement and is expected to remain low, even as national trajectories diverge considerably (Bignami, et al., 2024). The relevant empirical point for this dissertation is not a single European average but the distribution: some countries sustain closer-to-replacement fertility, others experience pronounced troughs and several show renewed declines after earlier partial recoveries. Within

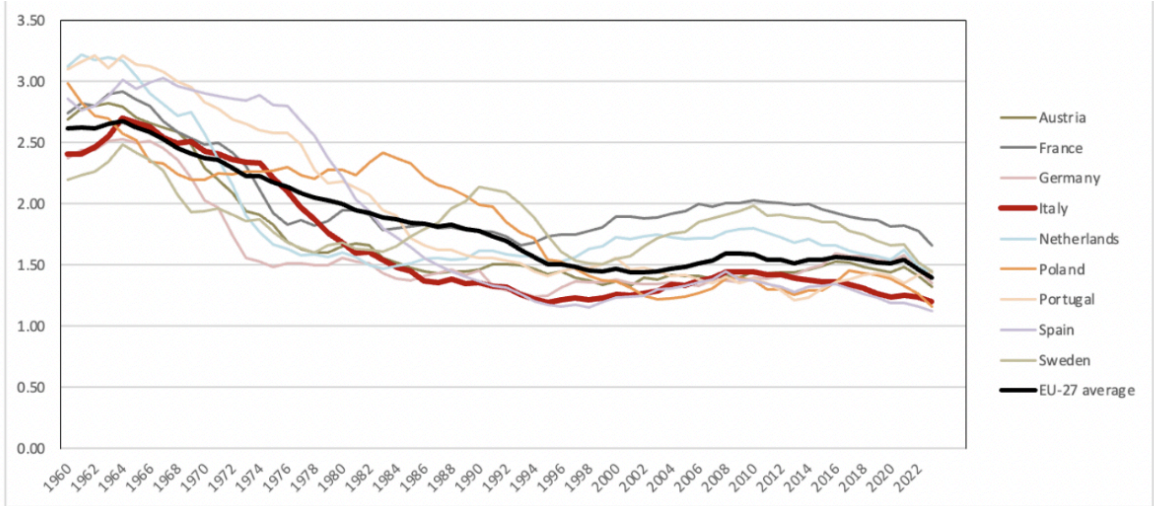
an SDT framework, such variability is expected; SDT describes a broad family-change regime whose markers diffuse unevenly and can align differently with institutional contexts. The empirical strategy is to position Italy within this distribution and then interpret what its configuration reveals about SDT variation.

Bignami et al. (2024) show that the household context of women 20-34 has shifted in ways consistent with SDT-style de-standardisation of the life course. Between 2006 and 2022 the share of households with at least one woman aged 20-49 that have no children rose in every EU macro-region. Partner-and-children households declined across regions, indicating that the ‘default’ household type among prime reproductive ages has become less uniformly centred on resident children (ibid.). Read through an SDT lens, this EU-wide shift is not only about fertility levels but about the household structures: childbearing has become more conditional and less universal, an empirical SDT marker that contextualises Italy’s low fertility within broader European family change.

Disaggregating childlessness patterns, Bignami et al. (2024) show in Northern and Western Europe, a larger share of women aged live alone or with a partner. Meanwhile, in Southern and Eastern Europe women (aged 29-34) without children show a notably larger share living with parents and this remains substantial in 2022. This difference is significant for SDT interpretation: in Southern Europe, postponement and non-parenthood are more often embedded in a ‘familistic’ sequencing in which delayed family formation coincides with prolonged intergenerational co-residence. Italy’s low fertility is therefore not simply ‘later births’ but part of a distinctive delayed transition regime in which co-residence and the avoidance of choices that openly clash with parental values shape the timing and sequencing

of union formation and childbearing (Bignami, et al., 2024; Rosina & Fraboni, 2004; Aassve, et al., 2024).

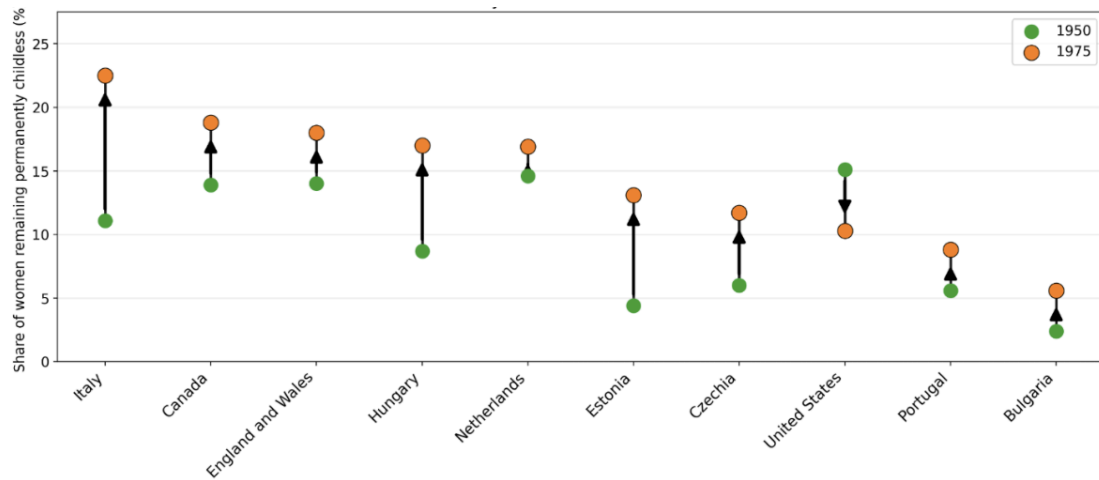
**Figure 1**



From: OECD

Figure 1 shows fertility over time through the number of children per woman. The graph shows a comparison between Italy and EU-selected countries as well as a eu-average. It places Italy within the broader EU fertility trajectory and shows that Italy sits persistently at the low end of the distribution across the post 1990s period rather than reflecting short-term fluctuation. This supports this dissertation's justifications for treating Italy as an emblematic very low fertility case and for interpreting it as a stable regime rather than a temporary shock (Bignami, et al., 2024). Furthermore, it shows the unique pathway taken by Italy after the SDT in the 1960s and then its low persistence throughout the decades. This further supports the critical analysis of Italy's demographic path: even after being framed in familistic and culturally conservative terms, fertility remains low, further supporting the gap in translation in births under late-modern constraints (Luciano, et al. 2012; Philipov & Berghammer, 2007; Caltabiano, Castiglioni & Rosina, 2009).

**Figure 2**



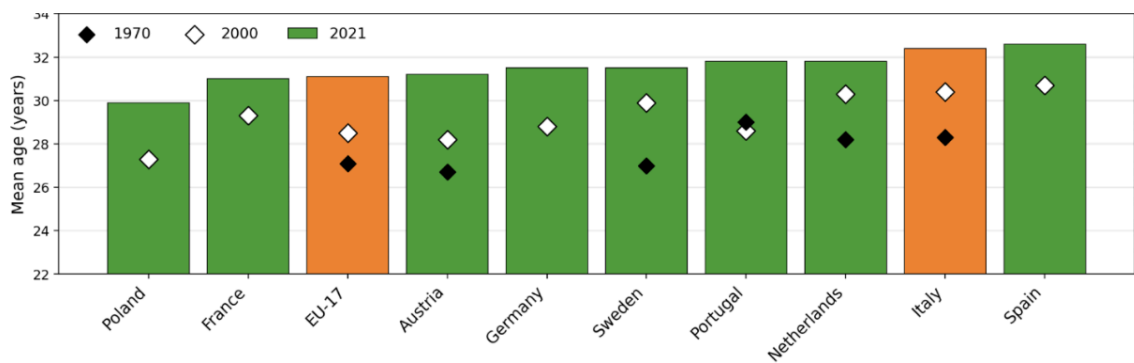
From: OECD

Figure 2 shows a clear rise in cohort permanent childlessness between the 1950 and 1975 cohorts across multiple countries; Italy is the cases in which this increase is especially pronounced. This figure supports the dissertation’s SDT theoretical framing by illustrating one of the markers explicitly listed in is “increase childlessness and greater acceptance of childfree outcomes” and by showing that the outcome can emerge through postponement that turns into non-realisation weather than only through value change (van de Kaa, 2002; Lesthaeghe & Neels; Aries, 1980; Sobotka & Testa, 2008; Sobotka, Matysiak & Brzozowska, 2020). The graph fits the ‘Italian Paradox’ argument because it empirically anchors the claim that a society can remain symbolically family-centred while still producing childlessness at the cohort level (Luciano et al., 2012). In these dissertation terms, this pattern is consistent with the ‘translation gap’ between family ideals, intentions and realised births, given that once childbearing becomes conditional on stable sequencing, delays can accumulate until intended births fail to occur (Brinton, et al., 2018; Sobotka, Matysiak & Brzozowska, 2020).

### 4.3.1 Timing and Postponement: Low Fertility Within SDT

Postponement is central to SDT accounts of contemporary family change. When first births and subsequent births occur at progressively later ages, period measures of fertility can fall even when completed family size remains stable, because births are shifted forward in time rather than foregone entirely. The European Commission review highlights postponement as a defining feature of contemporary low fertility and stresses the importance of interpreting levels alongside timing trends (Bignami et al., 2024). Complementing this, Lazzari, Compans and Beaujouan (2024) using two rounds of the ESS (2006-07 and 2018-9), document attitudinal shifts in norms about reproductive timing: European societies continue to perceive a socially appropriate window for parenthood, but that this window has shifted toward later ages, alongside stronger normative recognition of biological age limits, even among men. For this dissertation’s SDT framing, this demonstrates that timing change is not merely a response to external constraint but has become a normalised expectation of the contemporary life course.

*Figure 3*

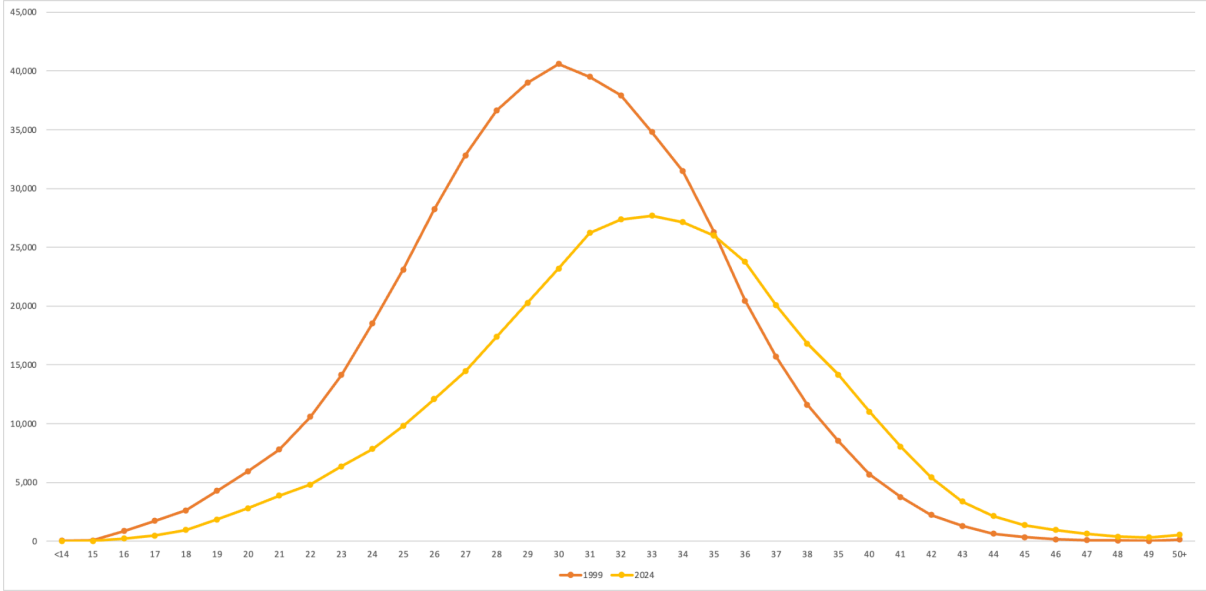


From: OECD

Figure 3 shows the mean age at childbearing, a comparison between 1970, 2000 and 2021 in selected EU countries. EU-17 and Italy highlighted. This graph shows how age at

childbirth has risen across countries over time; Italy appears among the highest values in 2021. This figure supports an SDT interpretation by providing a clean timing indicator that complements low fertility levels. This dissertation argues that TFR alone can be misleading under postponement, and that timing measures are necessary for interpreting low fertility contexts (Sobotka, Matysiak & Brzozowska, 2020; Bignami, et al., 2024). This further supports the argument that norms around timing have shifted toward later parenthood (Lazzari, Compans & Beajouan, 2024), but later timing increases exposure to mechanisms that produce non-realisation, which in turn helps explain rising childlessness and persistent low fertility (Comoli & Vignoli, 2021; Brinton et al., 2018). This graph supports the core ‘Italian paradox’ of this dissertation by showing that Italy’s question regards not only the value of family but the feasibility of childbearing within the life course, and whether that timing is recoverable.

**Figure 4**



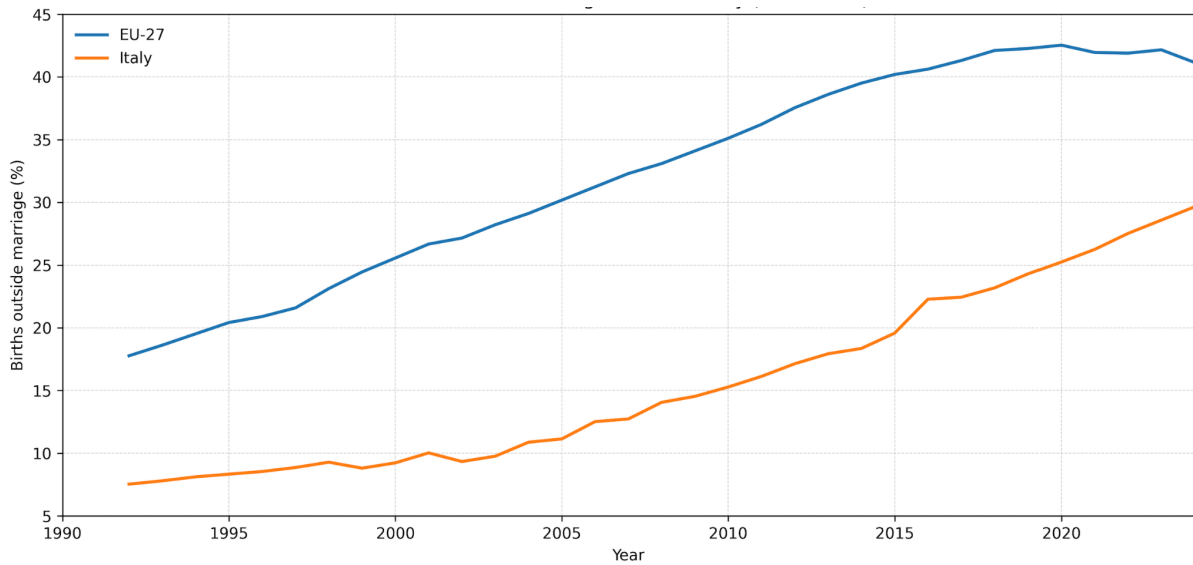
From: ISTAT

Figure 4 shows age specific fertility rate in Italy. It shows a marked shift toward both lower fertility and fertility at older ages: compared to 1999, the 2024 age-specific pattern visibly shifted right, with lower rates at younger ages and a greater concentration of births at later ages. This figure supports this dissertation's central SDT claim that postponement is a defining feature of contemporary low fertility and that fertility levels must be interpreted alongside timing (Sobotka, Matysiak & Brzozowska, 2020; Bignami, et al., 2024). The graph also shows the normalisation of a later age window for childbearing; however, it also underpins a mechanism central for the 'Italian paradox': postponement is not always fully recuperated. Under conditions of uncertainty (employment stability, housing constraints, relationship insecurity), delay can become permanent, contributing to non-realisation and higher cohort childlessness.

#### ***4.3.2 SDT Marker Beyond Fertility***

Italy's recent family-change trajectory can be documented clearly thanks to ISTAT long-run aggregated indicators and a retrospective micro-survey data. Using aggregated ISTAT data for 1993–2021, recent research by Aassve et al. (2024) shows that marriage remains important but has declined sharply since the late 2000s; cohabitation has risen; out-of-wedlock births have increased strongly; and marital disruption has become more common. These trends collectively indicate that Italy's SDT-related behaviours have been advancing rapidly over the past quarter-century, reinforcing the “uneven but advancing” SDT characterisation employed in this dissertation (ISTAT aggregated series 1993–2021; in Aassve, et al., 2024). The persistence of very low fertility alongside this pluralisation of behaviours (seen in Figures 4 and 5) directly supports the dissertation's central argument: SDT markers can advance without producing a fertility rebound, and very low fertility is not reducible to the persistence of traditional family forms alone.

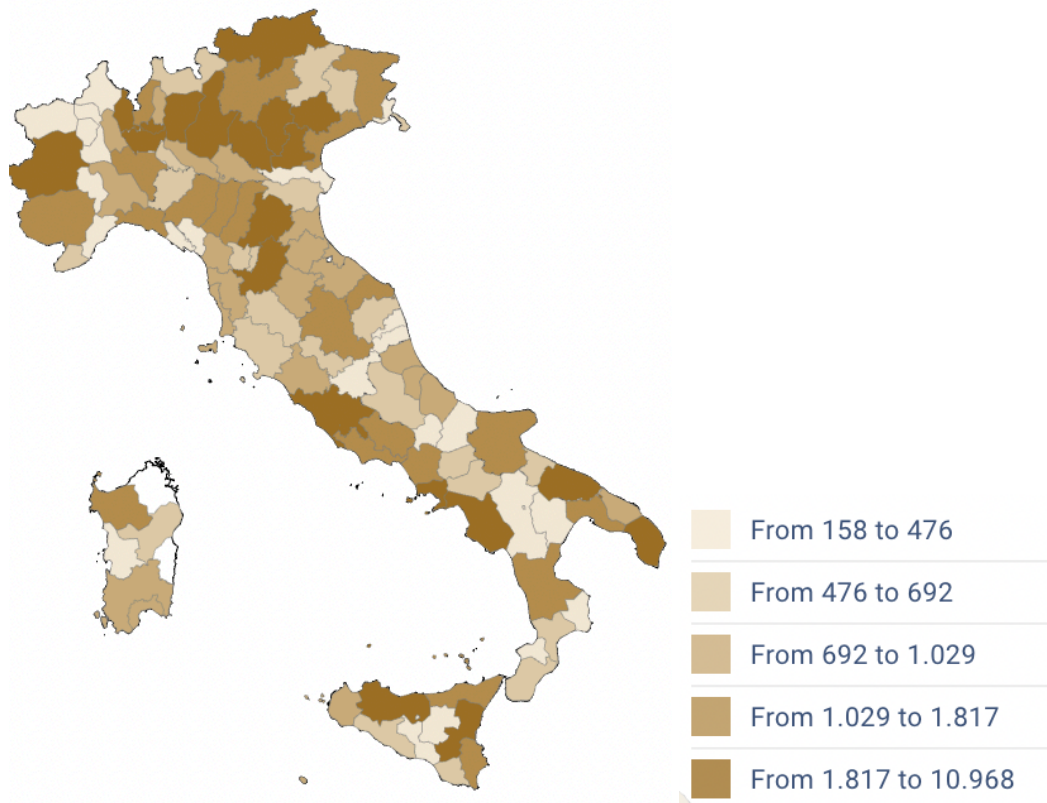
**Figure 5**



From: OECD

Figure 5 shows a comparison of the percentage of births outside marriage between EU-27 and Italy as of 2025, showing a pronounced closure in this gap. Through an SDT framework, rising non-marital childbearing is a core behavioural marker because it indicates a weakening institutional monopoly of marriage over parenthood and a wider range of ‘legitimate’ family pathways (van de Kaa, 2002; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). The trends support this dissertation’s argument of Italy plurality in demographic terms: recent evidence by Aassve et al. (2024) further documents a strong increase in cohabitation and non-marital births alongside declining marriage, suggesting that SDT markers have been diffusing quickly in some areas in Italy over recent cohorts.

**Figure 6**



From: ISTAT

Figure 6 shows the number of live births outside of wedlock with both parents never married. It shows substantial regional heterogeneity in the share of births occurring outside marriage within Italy in 2024. This dispersion supports the argument of SDT multiple pathway framing and shows how SDT behavioural markers do not diffuse uniformly and can follow uneven regional patterns even within a single country. Moreover, it shows how diverse pluralisation indicators (including non-marital) childbearing have become more visible in recent decades, but not in a single homogenous national pattern, reinforcing the argument that Italian family change is advancing while remaining internally differentiated. While a further analysis of Italy's heterogeneity in SDT markers goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, Figure 6 shows how non-marital childbearing (as an example for SDT markers) is not evenly distributed across the country, suggesting uneven diffusion of SDT behaviours, indicating that

the translation of broader demographic change into observed behaviour likely differs across countries.

#### **4.4 Operationalising ‘Conservative Orientations’ in Comparative Survey**

Cross-national surveys provide the main comparative evidence on values. ESS and EVS/WVS include repeated measures of religiosity and political self-placement, as well as selected items on family and gender norms. The GGS provides more detailed indicators of fertility intentions and partnership histories across a set of European countries, and IPPAS, as used by Sobotka and Testa (2008), offers direct measures of attitudes towards childlessness in thirteen European societies. The ISTAT provides relevant demographic data within Italy, including fertility rates and data regarding SDT markers. The synthesis tracks how different conservative proxies relate to distinct fertility outcomes, allowing the dissertation to address its central question: not whether conservatism causes fertility, but whether and where conservative orientations align with pronatalist ideals, stronger intentions and realised fertility.

##### ***4.4.1 Religiosity***

Philipov & Berghammer (2007) provide a foundational comparative analysis of religiosity (religious affiliation, service attendance and self-assessment) and distinguish analytically between fertility ideals, intentions and realised births. They show that religiosity is generally associated with a higher ideal number of children and higher chances of intending another child. Their findings identify religious practice (particularly attendance) as the most salient dimension, and suggest that religiosity maps most consistently onto normative

orientations rather than guaranteed behaviours. For this dissertation, this pattern supports an SDT-consistent translation gap: conservative markers can sustain pronatalist ideals and family positive norms even when births remain low due to postponement and increased conditionality of parenthood. In SDT terms, this helps explain how low fertility can persist in settings where traditional moral frameworks remain publicly salient.

This is particularly salient in contexts where religion retains political resonance. De Zordo, Marre and Smietana (2022) document how, since the 2000s, in European countries where the Catholic Church retains strong political ties (including Italy and Poland), mobilisation around abortion and ‘family values’ has become morally and politically contested even when demographic outcomes remain constrained. Surkyn and Lesthaeghe (2004) further underline that Southern European countries, including Italy, often exhibited early marriage and parenthood postponement before widespread diffusion of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing, reinforcing the multiple trajectories view that SDT dynamics are present but their sequencing and social legitimacy differ from Northern European patterns.

#### ***4.4.2 Attitudes to Childlessness***

A substantial minority of young adults report intended childlessness or uncertainty about whether they will become parents, reinforcing that contemporary low fertility is also shaped by uncertainty and feasibility rather than conditions over timing alone. Sobotka and Testa (2008), using IPAAS data for 13 European countries (including Italy) show that attitudes towards childlessness vary substantially across countries, and that a notable share of young adults either intend to remain childless or express uncertainty about parenthood. This aligns with more recent, broader evidence from demographic reviews. In UNFPA’s 2020 report, the authors stress that in low fertility settings, individuals “typically desire to have two

children [yet] very low fertility rates signal that there is a wide gap between fertility aspirations and actual family size” (Sobotka, Matysiak & Brozowska, 2020: 5). The authors find that reproductive decisions are heavily impacted by personal constraints such as economic uncertainty, as is the case in Italy (ibid.). Due to social and institutional arrangements in the country, fertility attitudes and behaviours are unlikely to change, even when family-friendly policies are set in place. These findings associate intended childlessness with less traditional living arrangements, while positive evaluations of family life are strongly related to family intentions. Two implications follow for this dissertation: low fertility settings should not be described simplistically as ‘anti-family’, since positive family-orientations can coexist with uncertainty or non-parenthood; and the existence of intended childlessness and uncertainty makes it important to track not only fertility levels but changing ideals and intentions., precisely the bridge needed for interpreting Italy’s paradox within SDT.

#### ***4.4.3 Political Ideology***

Bruno Arpino and Ryohei Mogi (2024) address a question regarding fertility intentions and political self-placement. Using ESS rounds that include a short-term fertility intention question (intention of having a child within three years), they show that individuals at the extreme right of the ideological scale are more likely to report definite intentions to have a child, even when controlling for socio-demographic characteristics and correlated values such as religiosity and gender attitudes. They simultaneously emphasise heterogeneity: the association is clearest among younger respondents and varies across European regions. This reinforces the dissertation’s non-reductionist SDT interpretation, as conservative ideologies can align with stronger intentions, but this does not imply straightforward country-level relationships between conservative/right climates and higher fertility. Instead, it underscores

the importance of identifying where intentions fail to translate into births and how that translation varies across contexts.

#### ***4.4.4 Norms and Perceived Expectations***

Liefbroer, Merz, and Testa (2014) add a complementary lens by analysing fertility-related norms and expectations across Europe. Rather than treating norms as absent from contemporary decision-making, they use an ESS module on life-course timing to show that perceived expectations around childbearing timing differ meaningfully across countries and social groups and continue to influence what individuals believe significant others expect of them. This is relevant for this research because it reframes conservative choices beyond individual attitudes: they can be characterised by stronger or more prescriptive normative climates. In SDT terms, conservative or familistic normative climates may therefore be characterised by stronger and more prescriptive expectations around family formation, potentially intensifying the consequences of postponement when those expectations cannot be met, and reinforcing the gap between culturally endorsed ideals and structurally constrained outcomes.

### **4.5 Italian Focus**

Italy's defining macro-demographic characteristic is its persistent low fertility. As documented in the European Commission review, Italy remains among the countries with sustained sub-replacement fertility across long stretches of the post-1990s period (Bignami, et al., 2024). From an SDT perspective, persistence is analytically significant because it signals a stable low-fertility regime in which postponement, partnership uncertainty and the sequencing of life transitions might become self-reinforcing. However, an aggregate persistence can coexist with shifting micro-level orientations, and the following sections

bring in Italy-specific evidence on desires and expectations, uncertainty and the normative legitimacy of family pluralisation.

**4.5.1 Desires and Expectations Among Young Italians**

Luppi, Bellani and Rosina (2025) provide direct evidence on Italy by analysing trends in fertility desires and expectations among young adults from 2012-2022. They document an increase in the shares of respondents reporting that they do not desire children and do not expect to have children across the life course, with particularly notable increases among women across younger cohorts. This suggests Italy is not only a case of postponed births and non-realisation under constraints; it may also reflect preference or expectation revision among younger cohorts. Within the SDT framework, this is consistent with later-stage SDT dynamics, greater acceptance of childlessness and redefinition of life-course priorities, even where 'family' remains culturally central.

**Figure 7**

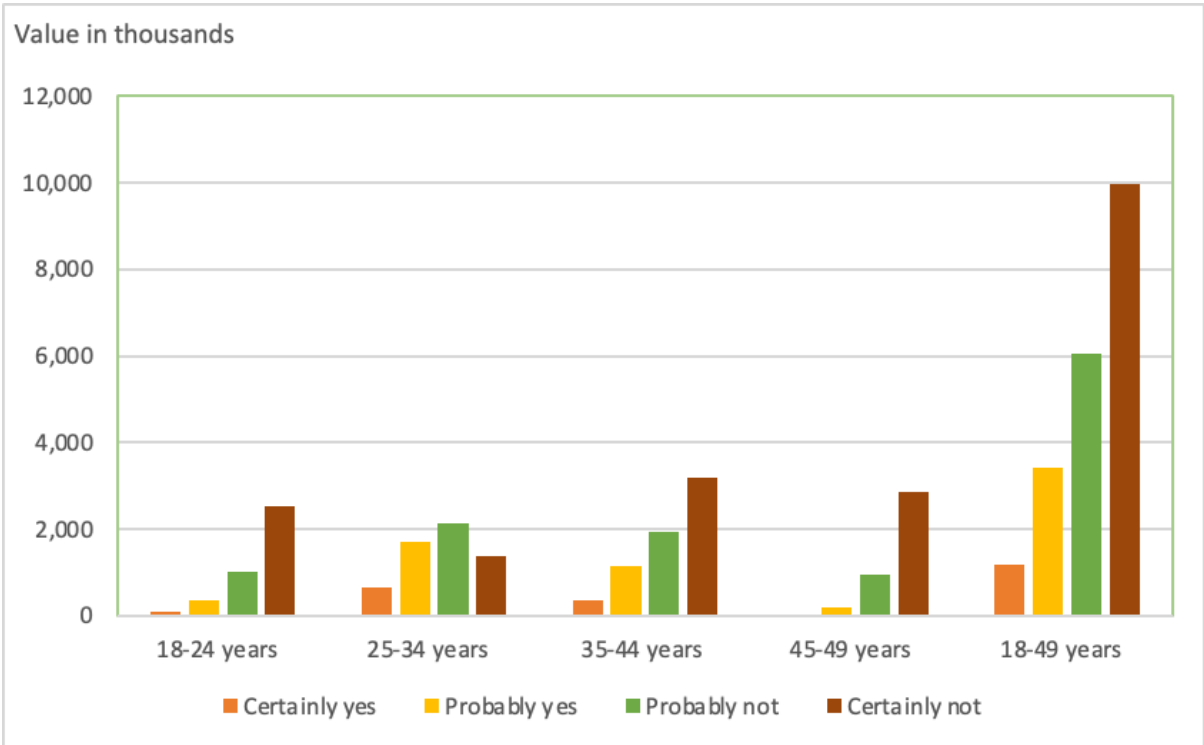


Figure 7 shows Fertility intentions within 3 years in Italy in 2024, across age groups, the distribution is skewed towards a rejection of childbearing within three years. This figure directly supports the dissertation's analytic separation of ideals and attitudes, ideals, and births: it demonstrates that low fertility contexts should not be interpreted only as idealised outcomes, because the weakening of near-term intentions is itself an indicator of conditional parenthood (Sobotka & Testa, 2008; Lappegård, Neyer & Vignoli, 2021). It also fits the argument that conservative orientations often align more with ideals than actual demographic behaviour: even if some groups hold family-positive norms, fertility intentions can still be suppressed by feasibility constraints (Philipov & Berghammer, 2007).

#### ***4.5.2 Uncertainty Shocks***

Comolli and Vignoli (2021) provide a particularly compelling piece of Italy-focused evidence that helps interpret evidence regarding the translation gap. Treating Italy's 2011-2012 sovereign debt crisis as a natural experiment and using a regression discontinuity in time design, they estimate a decline in birth rates associated with the uncertainty shock, concentrated among younger women and first births. Read descriptively, this supports the dissertation's feasibility interpretation: in a context of already delayed transitions, heightened economic uncertainty can push first births further into the future, increasing the risk of permanent non-realisation. It also shows demonstrates that the conditions intensifying postponement can have immediate and measurable demographic consequences, thus increasing the relevance of postponement.

### ***4.5.3 Familism and Uneven Pluralisation***

Italy's distinctiveness for this dissertation lies in how demographic change advances alongside persistent family centrality. Luciano et al. (2012) describe Italy as characterised by strong family ties and mutual aid, while documenting substantial family structure shifts over recent decades: fewer and later marriages (including growth in civil ceremonies), reduced birth rates, rising births outside marriage, increased marital instability, and growth in single-parent households, childless couples and single-parent families. Crucially, they argue that this tradition unfolded more slowly than elsewhere and suggest the continued influence of Catholic ideology in shaping the legitimacy of family diversification. Rosina and Fraboni (2004) offer an important complementary reading: Italy's delayed diffusion of cohabitation was linked less to limited youth interest than to the social convenience of avoiding choices that openly clash with parental values, a sequencing strategy shaped by intergenerational relations. Cohabitation could spread while marriage retained its symbolic role, partly because young adults had incentives to avoid choices that would lead to confrontation. This strengthens the dissertation's reading of Italy as a family-embedded trajectory in which behaviour changes can advance without a full displacement of the conjugal basis of family life, and where the legitimacy and uptake of pluralised forms may remain patterned by the wider familistic context.

Emerging indicators of family complexity are now empirically visible even within Italy's strong family context. Recent ISTAT-based evidence substantially shows the shifted Italian family landscape. Aggregated ISTAT trends since the 1990s indicate a marked decline in marriage, accelerating after 2008; a large increase in civil marriage ceremonies over recent decades, consistent with weakening institutional-religious monopoly over family formation; a pronounced rise in cohabitation; a strong increase in non-marital childbearing; and rising

marital separation (ISTAT aggregated data 1993–2021 in Aassve, et al., 2024). Italy's 'slow pluralisation' characterisation is thus outdated: behaviour has been changing rapidly when while fertility remains persistently low, strengthening the case that SDT markers can advance at different speeds without producing a fertility rebound. This supports the dissertation's interpretation of Italian pluralisation as advancing in socially uneven ways that remain compatible with persistent familistic attachments and continued low realised fertility.

The contested legitimacy of pluralisation is further documented by Ioverno et al. (2019), whose structural equation model toward same-sex parenting in Italy demonstrates that religiosity, political conservatism and traditional gender ideology are associated with more negative attitudes towards both two-mother and two-father parenting. Although this study does not bear directly on fertility levels, it is analytically relevant to the SDT framework: pluralisation is not only a behavioural phenomenon, but also a question of social legitimacy, and Italy may represent a configuration in which certain markers advance behaviourally while the normative legitimacy of some family diversification remains actively contested.

Lomazzi's (2017) observation about Italy's long period of Christian Democratic political dominance until the early 1990s adds institutional context, suggesting that familistic expectations and certain 'traditional family' frameworks remain institutionally embedded even as demographic behaviour evolves.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

Taken together, the evidence base supports a configuration-level interpretation of the Italian 'paradox'. At the macro level, Italy sits persistently at the low of the EU fertility

distribution (Bignami et al., 2024) and the European normative climate has shifted toward later parenthood (Lazzari, Compans & Beaujouan, 2024), consistent with SDT postponement dynamics. At the micro level, comparative studies indicate that conservative markers (especially religiosity) tend to align most strongly with fertility ideals and somewhat less with behaviour (Philipov & Berghammer, 2007), while attitudes to childlessness reveal significant intended childlessness or uncertainty across Europe (Sobotka & Testa, 2008). Italy-specific documents both the structural dimensions of the paradox (young Italians increasingly report not desiring or expecting children) (Luppi, Bellani and Rosina, 2025) and uncertainty shocks appear to depress first births (Comolli & Vignoli, 2021); and its normative dimensions: familistic orientations and the legitimacy of pluralised family forms remain contested (Luciano et al., 2012; Ioverno et al., 2019), with institutional legacies reinforcing traditional frames (Lomazzi, 2017). The meaning of this pattern within SDT is that Italy exemplifies a ‘constraint- heavy, familistic low-fertility’ trajectory where symbolic commitment to family coexists with delayed and conditional parenthood, progressively widening the gap between ideal intentions and realised births.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

This dissertation began from the question of the ‘Italian-paradox’: the coexistence of very low fertility with a cultural repertoire that continues to privilege the family as moral and social anchor. This central analytical task has been to interpret Italy’s low fertility within the broader post-1960s transformation of family life in Europe, using the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) as the primary framework. Rather than treating Italy as a European exception, this thesis positions it as a distinctive trajectory within a broader SDT landscape, one that reveals the framework’s capacity to accommodate conservative settings alongside demographic outcomes more commonly associated with individualistic value changes.

Three recurring patterns structure the discussion. First, conservative orientations are more consistently associated with fertility ideals and family-positive attitudes than with realised fertility, and the gradient from ideals to intentions to births is where the analytical core of this dissertation relies. Second, the translation from ideals and intentions to births is increasingly conditional on perceived feasibility, and on demanding sequencing norms, structural conditions that operate independently of family values. Third, SDT is compatible with multiple trajectories, and Italy’s configuration exemplifies one that has received insufficient analytical attention: the familistic low-fertility pathway.

RQ1 asked how conservative value orientations are associated with fertility ideals, intentions and realised fertility within contemporary Europe, and where the translation from values to births breaks down. The evidence supports a differentiated answer structured by outcome level. Conservative orientations (especially religiosity) are most robustly linked to fertility ideals. Philipov and Berghammer (2007) find that religiosity measures constantly

relate to higher ideal family size, with the association for ideals than for intentions. Sobotka and Testa (2008) complement this by showing that family-positive attitudes align with stronger intentions, while less traditional arrangements are associated with greater intended childlessness. However, the link between conservatism and realised fertility is substantially weaker and context dependent. The translation breaks down at the intention-to-birth step, where feasibility conditions take over: Brinton et al. (2018) and Sobotka, Matysiak and Brzozowska (2020) show that individuals across low-fertility contexts treat employment security, housing and relational stability as prerequisites before intentions can be acted upon, and Arpino and Mogi (2024) demonstrate that even where conservative ideology is associated with stronger intentions, these may reflect timing preferences rather than higher completed family size. The finding is therefore clear: conservative orientations sustain pronatalist norms at the ideational level but cannot ensure their demographic realisation when structural conditions work against the feasibility of parenthood. The wider European pattern is therefore not simply showing declining family orientation, but an increasingly conditional parenthood and a widening intention-behavioru gap.

RQ2 asked how Italy's demographic trajectory exemplifies a distinctive familistic low-fertility pathway within SDT, and what this reveals about the mechanisms widening the gap between family-positive orientations and realised births. Italy's trajectory since the 1990s is defined by three interlocking characteristics that together constitute this pathway. First, persistent sub-replacement fertility (Italy sits consistently at the low end of the EU distribution with no sustained recovery (Bignami et al., 2024)) combined with pronounced postponement: by 2021 Italy has one of the highest mean ages at first birth in Europe (Figure 3), and cohort permanent childlessness has risen markedly between the 1950 and 1975 birth cohorts (Figure 2). Second, the familistic cultural environment that continues to endorse

parenthood as a central life goal while simultaneously raising the threshold for 'appropriate' parenthood through strong sequencing norms, prolonged co-residence and high expectations of private family support (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004; Liefbroer, Merz & Testa, 2014). Third, the structural conditions (labour market insecurity, constrained housing, and episodic macro-level shocks such as the 2011–2012 sovereign debt crisis (Comolli & Vignoli, 2021)) that repeatedly defer the moment when those conditions are judged sufficient for childbearing. What this reveals about the mechanisms of the translation gap is that in familistic contexts, the gap is not primarily driven by eroding family values, as a simplified SDT reading might suggest, but by the intensification of the conditions attached to parenthood as well as the ability to achieve them, feasibility that varies across societies. Conservative familism can raise the normative bar for 'proper' parenthood (stable job, owned home, supportive partner) in ways that, under post-industrial structural conditions, systematically produce postponement and non-realisation even among those who remain strongly family-oriented. Luppi, Bellani and Rosina's (2025) evidence that younger Italian cohorts are beginning to revise their desires downward suggests that this structural non-realisation, sustained long enough, eventually feeds back into ideals themselves.

RQ3 asked how the coexistence of persistent low fertility and conservative familism in Italy generates demographic anxieties. The answer operates at two distinct but interlocking levels. Socially, the translation gap produces a form of lived tension: individuals are embedded in a culture that endorses the family as the primary site of belonging and fulfilment yet find themselves unable to realise the family life that culture prescribes. This tension is not evenly distributed. For young adults, it manifests as prolonged dependence on the family of origin, the very institution that defines their aspirations, creating a paradox in which familism simultaneously supports and oppresses (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004; Brinton et al., 2018). For

women, it is compounded by the asymmetric institutional environment: as Brinton and Lee (2016) and Lappegård, Neyer and Vignoli (2021) show, the persistence of gendered caregiving expectations without adequate work-family reconciliation support makes the opportunity costs of motherhood disproportionately high in precisely the contexts (like Italy) where family values are most prominent. As constraint-driven non-realisation accumulates across cohorts, the social consequence may be a quiet downward revision of aspirations: what begins as a deferred intention becomes, for a growing share of young Italians, an absence of desire (Luppi, Bellani & Rosina, 2025), as shown in Figure 7. Politically, the same gap creates conditions in which conservative actors are incentivised to narrate the translation gap as moral or cultural failure rather than structural constraint. Where low fertility and visible family-form pluralisation coexist, as they now do in Italy, where non-marital births have risen sharply (Figure 5), conservative political discourse can frame both as evidence of cultural erosion, generating the demographic anxieties documented by De Zordo, Marre and Smietana (2022) and Jones (2023). The consequence is a pronatalist politics that targets behaviour and norms rather than the feasibility conditions that actually drive postponement: Fratelli d'Italia's family-centred programme (Varriale, 2025), the circulation of 'Italy without Italians' narratives (Jones, 2023) and the mobilisation of Christian values rhetoric around fertility all exemplify a pattern in which the SDT-type translation gap is politically legible as crisis but analytically misread as cause.

### **5.1 Emergence of Multiple Trajectories**

The evidence reviewed supports the SDT's heterogeneous reading: as institutional authority over partnership and parenthood weakens, the life course becomes less standardised and a wider range of behaviours becomes socially possible. In such contexts, conservative and progressive orientations coexist and their behavioural implications depend on constraints,

sequencing norms and institutional supports (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004; van de Kaa, 2002).

Figure 1 shows that Italy remains persistently at the lower end of the WU fertility distribution across the post-1990s period rather than displaying a short-term fluctuation. This supports treating Italy as a stable low-fertility regime rather than a temporary shock case (Bignami et al., 2024). At the same time, Figure 5 shows sustained growth in births outside marriage in the EU-27 and a pronounced catch-up trend in Italy, indicating that key SDT behavioural markers have been diffusing even in a context often described as familistic and conservative (van de Kaa, 2002; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; Aassve et al., 2024). Taken together, these two patterns reinforce the argument that SDT markers can advance at different speeds and in different combinations: Italy can become more behaviourally pluralised while remaining persistently very low in fertility.

The comparative evidence fits this pluralisation argument. Philipov and Berhammer (2007) confirm that religiosity continues to be related to fertility ideals and, more weakly, to intentions across European countries. Sobotka and Testa (2008) document wide cross-country differentiation in attitudes toward childlessness and a substantial share of young adults who are uncertain about parenthood. Arpino and Mogi (2024) show heterogeneous results across sub-groups and country clusters, and suggest that observed intention differences may partly reflect timing effects rather than stable differences in completed family size, reinforcing the dissertation's emphasis on distinguishing ideals, intentions and realised outcomes.

Institutional context conditions how orientations translate into demographic outcomes. Brinton & Lee (2016) argue that persistently very low fertility is sustained where gender

essentialist norms interact with labour-market institutions and economic conditions in ways that hinder the realisation of fertility intentions, particularly under conditions of insecure employment and insecure housing. Without using gender as a theoretical lens, this literature supports the broader claim that conservative or familistic norms can coexist with very low fertility when institutional conditions make family formation difficult to realise at the preferred time.

## **5.2 The Italian Configuration**

The Italian configuration illustrates both the structural and the normative dimensions of the translation gap. Strong family centrality can coexist with significant change in household structures and partnership behaviour: Luciano et al. (2012) describe Italian families as characterised by strong ties and mutual aid while simultaneously noting a transition toward nuclear forms and growth in single-parent families, one-person households and childless couples.

A key insight from the evidence is that Italy is not only a case of low fertility and familism but also one of rapidly advancing family behaviour change, as seen in the social and demographic changes documented by Aasve, et al., 2024, where there was a drastic diffusion of SDT markers across cohorts. This matters analytically: the persistence of low fertility cannot be attributed to ‘behavioural traditionalism’ alone, since pluralisation is advancing. The analytical focus must then rest on timing, uncertainty, and the conditions needed to translate intentions into births.

Prolonged postponement also reshapes the intergenerational timetable in ways that carry their own consequences. When partnership formation and first births occur later, parents

and grandparents are older, when support exchanges would traditionally be stronger. In settings where kin are highly involved in care and mutual aid, later childbearing can both intensify reliance on kin and reduce the practical capacity of older generations to provide them. In SDT terms, familism does not prevent postponement, but it can shape how it is managed through interdependence and expectations of private support.

The translation gap between ideals and births implies a tension between moral orientations and lived feasibility. Brinton, et al. (2018) show that fertility intentions can reveal perceived constraints because individuals increasingly treat employment security, housing and relational stability as prerequisites. Comolli and Vignoli (2021) complement this by demonstrating that heightened macro-level uncertainty suppresses births in Italy even among those who remain broadly family-positive. Together, these findings suggest that pessimistic expectations about feasibility can depress fertility independently of state family values.

Italy's family configuration also shapes the public legitimacy of family pluralisation. Ioverno et al. (2019) show that religiosity, political conservatism and traditional gender ideology are associated with negative attitudes towards same-sex parenting in Italy. Although this thesis does not claim a direct demographic effect from these attitudes, they indicate the persistence of normative boundary-drawing in the family domain and help contextualise why SDT pluralisation may be uneven, contested and politically salient.

The Italian configuration is most clearly illuminated when fertility levels are read alongside timing indicators. Figure 3 confirms Italy's position among the highest mean ages at childbirth in the EU by 2021, and Figure 4 documents how the age-specific fertility pattern has shifted toward older ages between 1999 and 2024, with reduced fertility at younger ages and greater concentration later in the life course. This is consistent with SDT accounts

emphasising the interpretive importance of timing alongside period fertility levels (Bignami et al., 2024; Sobotka, Matysiak & Brzozowska, 2020) and with evidence that norms of 'appropriate timing' have shifted toward later parenthood across Europe (Lazzari, Compans & Beaujouan, 2024). For the Italian paradox, the critical implication is that later timing increases exposure to mechanisms of non-realisation, particularly under uncertainty and constrained feasibility, making postponement itself a pathway toward permanent childlessness.

This 'postponement-and-feasibility' configuration is reflected in both end-state outcomes and near-term planning. Figure 2 shows a pronounced rise in cohort permanent childlessness between the 1950 and 1975 cohorts, with Italy among the clearest increases, suggesting that delayed family formation is not fully recuperated for a growing share of cohorts. This fits SDT markers of rising childlessness and the increasing visibility of childfree outcomes (van de Kaa, 2002; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; Ariès, 1980; Sobotka & Testa, 2008; Sobotka, Matysiak & Brzozowska, 2020). At the same time, Figure 7 shows that fertility intentions within three years in 2024 are strongly skewed toward non-intention across age groups, indicating weak near-term plans even before behaviour occurs. Together, Figures 2 and 7 support the dissertation's core 'translation gap' claim: family-positive orientations and ideals can persist, but intentions become conditional and are frequently not realised when sequencing requirements and feasibility constraints dominate.

### **5.3 Political and Societal Implications**

The most consequential implication of the Italian configuration is that the SDT-type translation gap (the systematic widening of the distance between family-positive ideals and realised births) carries distinct social and political consequences in a conservative familistic

context, consequences that differ meaningfully from those in more individualistic low-fertility settings. To understand this consequences, as part of RQ3, these should be examined at two levels.

At the social level, the most direct consequence is a set of lived tensions generated by the mismatch between cultural expectations and demographic reality. Italy's familistic context does not insulate individuals from structural constraints on childbearing; instead, it amplifies their burden because the same networks that provide support also carry normative expectations of parenthood that cannot be fulfilled. Young adults who delay family formation, often for structural reasons documented by Comolli and Vignoli (2021) and Brinton et al. (2018), do so within family environments where that delay is experienced not as a neutral individual choice but as a deviation from expectation. Over time, this creates a feedback dynamic: as Rosina and Fraboni (2004) identify, young Italians learn to manage value conflicts through deferral rather than confrontation, which sustains the appearance of family-positive orientation while progressively reducing the probability of realisation. The asymmetry is especially pronounced for women. Brinton and Lee (2016) demonstrate that low fertility is most persistent where women's educational and labour market integration has advanced, but institutional and normative caregiving expectations remain gendered: precisely the Italian configuration. Women face high opportunity costs of motherhood in a context that simultaneously affirms motherhood as the primary feminine identity, producing a structural bind that is not resolved by pronatalist rhetoric. The social-level consequence most visible in the data is the gradual downward revision of aspirations documented by Luppi, Bellani and Rosina (2025): what begins as a deferred intention, sustained long enough under structural constraint, becomes an absence of desire. This is not a failure of family values; it is their erosion under conditions that repeatedly prevent their realisation.

At the political level, the same translation gap generates a different but related consequence: it provides material for demographic anxiety, especially when low fertility outcomes are exposed through a moralised and political lens. When family is publicly valorised, yet births decline, when pluralisation of family forms becomes visible through rising non-marital births (Figure 5 and Figure 6) and changing household compositions, conservative political actors face an interpretive choice. The structurally accurate account (that low fertility is driven by feasibility constraints, postponement dynamics and the conditionality of parenthood under post-industrial conditions) is politically inconvenient because it implicates labour markets, housing policy and work-family reconciliation institutions. Meanwhile, the culturally legible account (that low fertility reflects moral decline, the erosion of family values and the consequences of SDT-type pluralisation) is far more tractable for conservative mobilisation. De Zordo, Marre and Smietana (2022) document precisely this dynamic: fertility decline is framed as a civilisational threat, linked to pluralisation, migration and the weakening of Christian social norms, rather than to the structural conditions that actually drive postponement. In Italy this manifest through the party-political narratives of Fratelli d'Italia, whose family-centred programme (Varriale, 2025) and associated media discourse, 'Italy without Italians' framings (under the assumption that given low fertility levels, the lack of workforce would be replaced through migration into the country, thus displacing Italians until most of the workforce is composed by foreigners), Christian values rhetoric, demographic replacement anxieties (Jones, 2023). Kourou (2020) and Altinors and Chryssogelos (2024) contextualise this as part of a broader transnational national-conservative pattern in which pronatalist discourse functions as a 'family-mainstreaming' strategy, mobilising fertility as a site of sovereignty, identity and moral order. The political implication for SDT interpretation is that the theory cannot be read as a purely demographic account in conservative contexts: SDT processes (pluralisation,

individualisation, conditional parenthood) become politically contested objects, and the way low fertility is publicly explained shapes the kinds of policy responses it generates. Pronatalist policies directed at symbolic family protection rather than feasibility conditions are likely to have limited demographic effects while reinforcing normative pressures that further burden those who cannot meet the threshold for 'appropriate' parenthood.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

This dissertation's strongest contribution (its explicit varied synthesis) also defines its principal limitation. First, the evidence base is secondary. The dissertation relies on public statistics and published analyses rather than original statistical modelling. This design is appropriate for the aim of comparative interpretation, but it limits causal inference and the ability to resolve contradictions across studies that use different measures and modelling strategies.

Second, the studies synthesised use different time windows and operationalisations. Some focus on period fertility measures that are sensitive to tempo effects; others examine short-term intentions; and others examine cohort desires and expectations. Differences across studies may therefore reflect differences in what is being measured rather than substantive disagreement.

Third, while the dissertation repeatedly refers to feasibility and institutional context, it does not provide a systematic policy or regime analysis. Brinton and Lee (2016) indicate that labour-market institutions can matter greatly for fertility, and Comolli and Vignoli (2021) provide Italy-specific evidence on uncertainty. But within the project's scope and source limits, this dissertation cannot map Italian family policy in detail or evaluate policy effects.

Finally, the dissertation intentionally treats SDT as the primary theoretical framework and does not develop a separate micro-level behavioural model; this choice strengthens coherence and aligns with the interpretative frame. Further research could be done on original micro-level analysis using harmonised cross-national data to test whether the ideal–intention–birth gap is systematically larger in familistic, constraint-heavy contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This dissertation examined a contemporary Italian paradox: a society that remains strongly family-oriented in cultural and political terms, in which conservative actors increasingly foreground fertility, yet, it exhibits persistent low fertility. Using the Second Demographic Transition as the primary theoretical framework, it synthesised comparative evidence on conservative orientations and fertility outcomes across Europe, positioned Italy within those patterns and interpreted the social and political consequences of Italy's distinctive configuration. Using the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), this dissertation constructed a comparative synthesis of published research and public demographic indicators to address the three questions: how conservative orientations relate to fertility ideals, intentions and births across Europe (RQ1); why Italy represents a distinctive pathway within SDT, rather than an exemption (RQ2); and how the coexistence of low fertility and conservative feminism becomes socially and politically meaningful (RQ3).

Italy's trajectory illustrates how SDT dynamics can take a distinctive form. The descriptive evidence positions Italy as a stable 'lowest-low' fertility case within EU distribution (Figure 1), reinforcing the interpretation of a persistent regime rather than a temporary shock (Bignami et al., 2024). At the same time, Italy is not demographically static. SDT markers often associated with SDT pluralisation have risen sharply, with Italy 'catching up' toward the EU trajectory of some of them (Figure 5) (Aassve, et al., 2024). This combination supports the dissertation's multiple trajectories claim: SDT markers and the countries that encompass them do not move in unison. Thus, Italy can become more pluralised in (some) family behaviours while remaining persistently low in fertility.

The core mechanism sustaining Italy's configuration is partly captured through timing and non-realisation. Italy's mean age at childbirth has risen to among the highest values in Europe (Figure 3), and age-specific fertility shows a shift toward later ages alongside lower fertility at younger ages (Figure 4). Timing matters because it increases exposure to conditions that turn delay into non-realisation. The rise of the cohort permanent childlessness, especially pronounced in Italy in the OECD comparison (Figure 2) is consistent with an interpretation in which births are not recuperated after proponent. Italy focused evidence shows uncertainty shocks in macro-level instability can further suppress births and intensify postponement (Comoli & Vignoli, 2021). Simultaneously, this dissertation acknowledges that the translation gap can become self-reinforcing over time. Evidence of a group of young Italians reporting that they do not desire nor expect children (Luppi, Bellani & Rosina, 2025) together with weak near-term fertility intentions in Italy in 2024 (Figure 7) suggest that prolonged non-realisation can feed back into intentions and into ideals.

Finally, the dissertation highlights why this configuration has distinctive political and societal implications, as demographic outcomes can become objects that invite interpretation and mobilisation. As visible markers of family pluralisation expand alongside low fertility, nationally (Figure 5), and regionally (Figure 6), fertility decline becomes a way in which political actors can frame moral and social order. The demographic anxiety literature shows how much such context can produce narratives of national declines and 'family crisis', framing demographic outcomes as cultural failures over feasibility constraints (De Zordo, Marre & Smeitana, 2022; Altinors & Chryssogelos, 2024). This dissertation's implications then argue SDT in conservative contexts must be read not only as demographic change, but as a contested political rhetoric.

In sum, the evidence supports SDT's emphasis on pluralisation, conditional parenthood and the weakening of universal-life-course expectations, while reinforcing the need to treat

SDT as a framework of multiple trajectories. Italy, within it, demonstrates that persistent low fertility can coexist with strong family symbolism and conservative politics, because the crucial break occurs at the translation stage from intentions to births and over time, reshapes intentions itself.

## **6.1 Contribution**

This dissertation's contribution is interpretive and cumulative. It uses SDT to explain why a conservative, family-oriented society produces persistent low fertility, not because an erosion of family values, but because the structural conditions required to translate those values into births are systematically and repeatedly insufficient. This reframes a question that often receives an ideational answer (values have changed) with a structural one (the conditions for acting on values have deteriorated), while preserving the SDT framework's emphasis on the interaction between the two.

Second, the dissertation contributes to SDT debates by sharpening the case for multiple trajectories. Italy is used to demonstrate that SDT markers can diffuse unevenly: behavioural pluralisation may advance while fertility remains persistently low. This challenges linear interpretations of SDT and supports the view that national pathways reflect interactions between ideational change, institutional context, and life-course sequencing.

Third, the dissertation links demographic interpretation to political meaning. By showing that the translation gap generates not only demographic outcomes but social tensions and political narratives that misread those outcomes as cultural failure, the dissertation connects demographic analysis to a broader question about how post-industrial societies manage the distance between what they publicly value and what their structures allow. The

contribution here to demonstrate that demographic regimes shape (and are shaped by) public narratives.

Overall, the dissertation argues that Italy's 'paradox' is best understood as a stable configuration produced by the coexistence of familism and conservative symbolism with constraint-driven postponement and non-realisation. This offers a theoretically coherent way to interpret persistent low fertility in conservative contexts within SDT, and it clarifies why effective responses would need to address feasibility conditions and life-course constraints rather than relying on symbolic pronatalism alone.

## Appendix

**Table 1a: Core Data Sources**

<b>Source/Data set</b>	<b>What it is</b>	<b>Key concepts/indicators</b>	<b>Geographic Coverage</b>	<b>Time Coverage (as used in this dissertation)</b>	<b>How it is used</b>
Eurostat (online database)	EU official statistical series (period indicators)	TFR; mean age at childbirth; marriage/divorce indicators	EU-27+individual countries	1990s- present	Descriptive trends and cross-country comparison
National Statistical Offices (ISTAT)	Official national demographic series and contextual indicators	Italy-specific fertility/time-series details	Primarily Italy	1990s- present	Italy triangulation
European Social Survey (EES)	Harmonised cross-national survey; repeated rounds; includes modules on norms and timing	Left-right self-placement religiosity items; fertility intentions item (only some rounds); timing/norms (ESS 2006 module)	Multiple European Countries (varies by round)	Primarily 2004/5 and 2010/11 for fertility intentions; 2006 for timing norms (as used in cited sources)	Comparative values/intentions evidence and norms context
European Values Study (EVS)/World Values Survey (WVS) (as	Cross national values surveys used for SDT-related norms and	Family/gender role attitudes; female employment attitudes;	Europe (EVS)/Wider (WVS)	Waves as used in cited studies (1990s-2010s)	Macro attitudinal change in country clustering

<b>Source/Data set</b>	<b>What it is</b>	<b>Key concepts/indicators</b>	<b>Geographic Coverage</b>	<b>Time Coverage (as used in this dissertation)</b>	<b>How it is used</b>
used in cited studies)	gender-role attitudes	broader value profiles			
Generations and Gender Survey (GGS)	Cross national-demographic survey focusing on family dynamics and intentions	Fertility intentions; partnership; gender role attitudes (multi-dimensional)	Selected European countries (coverage varies)	As used in the cited paper (varies)	Values-intentions relations and cross- country heterogeneity
IPPAS (as used by Sobotka & Testa)	Comparative survey on population policy attitudes and childlessness	Attitudes toward childlessness; intended childlessness	13 European societies (including Italy)	As used in Sobotka & Testa	Attitudes to childlessness and cross country differentiation
Italian survey evidence on desires / expectations (as used by Luppi, Bellani & Rosina)	Italy-only repeated survey evidence of fertility desires/ expectations among young adults	Fertility desires; expectations; trends in childlessness preference	Italy	2012-2022	Italy trend evidence on preference revision and expectations shifts

**Table 1b. Evidence map: key studies/reports used and contribution**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
Bignami, Endrich, Natale & Ueffing (2024)	European Commission (JRC) review of trends/drivers (draws on EU statistics + literature)	EU / Member States	Long-run; emphasis on late 20th c.–present	Low fertility trends; postponement ; drivers (education, norms, partnering, policy context)	RQ2 (EU trajectory context); supports SDT framing of contemporary low fertility
Philipov & Berghammer (2007)	Comparative article; European survey data on religiosity and fertility ideals/intentions/behaviour	Multiple European countries	As analysed in study	Religiosity (attendance/affiliation); ideals; intentions; expected/actual children	RQ1 (conservatism /religiosity relates more strongly to ideals than intentions/behaviour)
Arpino	Compar	Europe	ESS	Left–ri	RQ1

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
& Mogi (2024)	Qualitative research note; ESS rounds with fertility intention item	European countries (ESS)	2004/05 and 2010/11	Family ideology; intention to have a child within 3 years; controls incl. religiosity/values	RQ1 (ideology–intention association; heterogeneity by region/age)
Sobotka & Testa (2008)	Comparative chapter; IPPAS survey analysis	13 European societies incl. Italy	As analysed in study	Attitudes to childlessness; intended childlessness; family-positive attitudes	RQ1–RQ2 (childlessness acceptance varies; links to intentions; Italy within cross-national differentiation)

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
Liefbroer, Merz, & Testa (2014)	Multilevel analysis; ESS 2006 timing/norms module	Europe (ESS)	2006 ESS module	Fertility-related norms; perceived expectations; cross-national variation	RQ1 (normative context persists under SDT; relevance for conditional parenthood)
Lappegård, Neyer & Vignoli (2021)	Comparative article; GGS	Eight European countries	As analysed in study	Multi-dimensional gender-role attitudes; fertility intentions; context moderation	RQ1 (values–intentions are multidimensional; warns against one-dimensional ‘traditional vs egalitarian’)
Brinton	Macro-	24	Past	Gender-	RQ2

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
& Lee (2016)	comparative article; OECD countries	OECD countries incl. Italy	two decades (as analysed)	role ideology types; labour market institutions; TFR	(why ‘family-oriented’ contexts can still have very low fertility; supports ‘constraint-heavy SDT’ interpretation)
Arpino, Esping-Ander sen & Pessin (2015)	Macro-level analysis; WVS/EVS + fertility indicators	27 countries	As analysed in study	Female employment attitudes; TFR; men/women attitude convergence	RQ1–RQ2 (non-linear transitions; ‘multiple trajectories’ within SDT-compatible change)
Comolli &	Italy-focused	Italy	2011–2012	Uncertainty;	RQ2 (Italy:

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
Vignoli (2021)	quasi-experimental study		(natural experiment) + surrounding years	birth rates; postponement /first births	uncertainty-linked fertility drop; supports constraint/feasibility reading)
Luppi, Bellani & Rosina (2025)	Italy trends in preferences (survey-based article)	Italy	2012–2022	Desires; expectations; increasing non-desire/non-expectation of children	RQ2 (possible preference revision; deepens ‘paradox’ beyond postponement)
Luciano et al. (2012)	Italy overview of family change (demography + familism)	Italy	‘Last 20 years’ (as described)	Marriage decline/postponement; non-marital births;	RQ2 (Italy’s uneven SDT marker diffusion; familism +

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
	context)			instability; slow transition vs other countries	slow pluralisation)
Lomazzi (2017)	Institutional/political continuity and gender-regime transmission (Italy)	Italy	Post-war–1993 (as described)	Conservative governance continuity; institutional reproduction of gender/family models	RQ2 (contextualises durability of familistic institutions shaping SDT trajectory)
Ioverno et al. (2019)	Italy survey study on family pluralisation attitudes	Italy (n≈4,187)	As analysed in study	Political conservatism; religiosity; gender ideology; attitudes to	RQ2 (pluralisation contested; conservative boundaries around

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
				same-sex parenting	legitimate family forms)
De Zordo, Marre & Smietana (2022)	Conceptual synthesis on demographic anxieties	Europe/Global North (discussion)	Contemporary	Demographic anxiety; politicisation; reproductive governance frames	RQ3 (implications/meaning: low fertility as political/moral object)
Kourou (2020)	Analysis of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements	Europe-focused	Contemporary	Family-mainstreaming; pronatalism; anti-gender mobilisation	RQ3 (implications/meaning)
Altinors & Chryssogelos (2024)	Political economy of national-conservatism	Transnational (Europe)	Post-2000s	National-conservatism; state role; traditional hierarchies	RQ3 (implications/meaning)
Forti (2022);	Italy	Italy	2010s–2020s	Right-wing	RQ3

<b>Source</b>	<b>Evidence type/dataset</b>	<b>Geographic scope</b>	<b>Time window (as analysed)</b>	<b>Key variables</b>	<b>Contributions to RQs</b>
Aassve, Mencarini, Pieani and Vignoli (2024)	ISTAT +2016 “Families Social Subjects and Life Cycle” (FSS) multipurpose survey; event-history models	Italy (Regional breakdown: North/Center/South-Isles)	Trend series roughly 1990s-2021; cohort/event history analyses using retrospective histories up to 2016 survey	Marriage decline; cohabitation; nonmarital fertility; divorce; social gradients by education and region	RQ2 (Italy’s SDT marker profile; shows ‘catch up’ in pluralisation); RQ (implications for familistic institutional context and political/social meaning of change)
Varriale (2025)	party/ideology analyses			actors; family/birth rhetoric; ideological positioning	(implications/meaning)
Fieder & Huber (2018; 2024)	Survey-based analyses on political attitudes and fertility differentials	Europe (and broader)	As analysed	Political orientation; number of children; cohort composition	RQ1 (micro differentials vs macro low fertility; interpretive nuance)

**Note:** This dissertation uses this evidence map to build the argument. Aggregate demographic indicators establish occurrences in family trends; survey-based studies clarify how conservative values relate to ideals and intentions; Italy-specific research clarifies why translation from ideals and intentions into births may be weaker under uncertainty and structural constraints.

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