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Abstract

At a conference on the theme “Can policies enhance fertility in Europe?”, presentations and discussion would naturally assume that very low fertility rates will not increase on their own accord, but will instead require the nudge or bludgeon of policy. Indeed, by my reckoning, some four-fifths of conference discussion was explicitly or implicitly based on this assumption. Outside these halls, it is the same. One sees little optimism in the academic or popular press that fertility rates might spontaneously rebound. Instead, there as here, the discussion turns now to policies that might induce couples to bear and raise more children or, failing that, policies that might mitigate the undesirable effects of fertility rates persisting well below the replacement level for a long time. I argue here a contrary view: Fertility in Europe is as likely to rise over the next ten years as it is to stay low or fall further. I argue that we do not know what will happen, that we do not know enough, in fact, to project one future over another.

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