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France: High and stable fertility

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Abstract

The current total fertility rate in France is around 1.9 children per woman. This is a relatively high level by current European standards and makes France an outlier, despite the fact that its other demographic trends, especially conjugal behaviour, and social and economic trends are not very different from other Western European countries. France can serve as a counterfactual test case for some of the hypotheses advanced to explain the current low level of fertility in most European countries (delay in fertility, decline in marriage, increased birth control, greater economic uncertainty). France's fertility level can be partly explained by its active family policy introduced after the Second World War, and adapted in the 1980s to accommodate women's entry into the labour force. This policy is the result of a battle, fuelled by pro-natalism, between the conservative supporters of family values and the promoters of state-supported individual equality. French family policy thus encompasses a wide range of measures based on varying ideological backgrounds, and it is difficult to classify in comparison to the more precisely focused family policies of other European welfare states. The active family policy seems to have created especially positive attitudes towards two- or three child families in France.

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