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**Rostock Center for the Study  
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# Demographic Change and the Acceptance of Population-related Policies

## A Comparison of 13 European Countries

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A Comparison of 13 European Countries

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# I The acceptance of family policies in Europe

In light of the demographic change, which results not only in population ageing across most of Europe, but also affects traditional family structures, as well as the expansion of family policies in many of the European countries, this focus appears to be of special relevance for policy-makers and scientists alike. The structures of European populations have shifted from younger ones in the past to considerably older populations in the present. Additionally, due to low fertility, the number of people without children or grandchildren will rise. These changes need to be considered in social policies. Especially because allocation problems due to a rising number of old age beneficiaries challenge the balance between the generations within societies. Thus, well-balanced population-related policies are indispensable. Hence, it is necessary to know more about the socio-demographic characteristics of the Europeans and their population policy preferences especially how these are distributed over age, which is a crucial factor for policy acceptance. This would enable policy makers to react to the demographic trends and possibly to influence the change successfully.

This multivariate study, which is based on 13 European countries included in the International Population and Policy Acceptance Survey (IPPAS 2003) (Avramov and Cliquet 2007, Höhn et al. 2008a, Höhn et al. 2008b, Federal Institute for Population Research), focuses on attitudes towards 13 family policy reforms, which cover all dimensions of public transfers to the younger generation (money, time, education, housing). The data has been analyzed with the following questions:

- *Do social policy preferences differ across age?*  
Are the elderly less in favour of public transfers to the young than the younger generation and prefer public transfers channelled to the older generation?
- *Do social policy preferences differ between parents and childless people?*  
Are childless people less in favour of public transfers to the young and more in favour of public upward transfers than parents?
- *Do social policy preferences differ between married and unmarried people?*  
Are unmarried people less in favour of public downward transfers than married people?

## II Main Results and Policy Implications

The results can be summarized as follows: age matters, but so do parenthood and marital status. The main hypothesis was that older, childless, and unmarried people are less inclined to support transfers to the young. It was argued that – in contrast to classic political economy concepts – age has to be seen in connection with other demographic factors, which influence the life-course of an individual.

The analytical models identify strong age effects especially for policies providing financial assistance to families. Also parenthood has a strong effect on policy preferences across all transfer types. The results show that the elderly are less in favour of public transfers to the young than the younger generation and prefer public transfer channelled to the older generation. Further, childless people are less in favour of public transfers to the young and more in favour of public upward transfers than parents.

The role of marital status is slightly less pronounced than the ones of age and parenthood. In the case of financial transfers to families, being married increases the odds to support these policies, whereas regarding care policies the effect is mostly reversed. This probably, because married respondents are more likely to follow traditional values and are less in favour of e.g. policies that enable women to combine work and childcare.

Similar to marital status, we also find a strong gender difference when it comes to supporting childcare policies. Throughout all countries under study, men seem to be significantly less in favour of working mothers than women, and evaluate childcare facilitating modern upbringing of children as being less important. Given the different political legacies and concrete social policy set ups in the 13 countries, this result is somewhat surprising.

Generally, all effects found appear to be stronger in Northern and Western European countries, with some variation depending on the policy type, as compared to Eastern Europe and Cyprus. Among the Eastern European states, Poland, Hungary and at times also the Czech Republic are closest to their Western counterparts.

## **Policy Implications**

- Policy makers need to acknowledge that the younger and the older generation, parents and childless people, as well as married couples and singles differ in their social policy preferences.
- The focus on the positive aspects of intra-family relations and related transfers is too short-sighted, since population aging and changing family structures will alter demographic realities in the nearer future. It is advisable to shift the perspective towards intergenerational relations in the public domain.
- There is a potential for conflicts between different demographic groups, since their preferences are structured in such a way that each of them prefer public transfers directed to themselves. Policy makers will therefore have to put more effort in organising support for necessary social policy reforms.
- In order to achieve this support, various aspects of political communication will have to be put at the centre of social policy agendas. With increasing numbers of people that are less prone to support transfers to the young, tools of political education and campaigning might help to clarify the necessity of e.g. family policies. NGOs and interest groups (e.g. of the elderly) might help to provide adequate channels to reach these people, and therefore should be better integrated into respective policy-making processes.

## **III State of Research**

Demographic change is increasingly putting pressure on political systems throughout Europe: budget constraints and rising numbers of old age beneficiaries tighten allocation problems between generations in these countries. With population ageing continuing in the decades to come (in some countries even on an accelerated scale) not only the relation between generations might be affected, but also the acceptance of a range of population-related policies.

Largely based on intra-family relations and transfers, existing research has mostly come to the optimistic conclusion that ties within the family remain strong, and upward as well as downward transfers between parents and children are often generous. Some authors further conclude that these strong family relations might help the state to tackle future policy challenges related to population ageing, e.g. in the care sector.

However, in many European countries there are growing numbers not only of the elderly but also of people who remain childless and successively grandchildless over their whole life course. Thus, the implementation of policies solely relying on the traditional family model

might become more difficult in the future. Very few studies have looked at whether or not preferences toward policies allocating transfers between young and old differ by age.

Most of these studies find no age effect, which is primarily due to data quality (small sample sizes, wording of questionnaires and the like). Only a handful of very recent studies (Wilkoszewski 2009, Busemeyer et al. 2009, Miettinen et al. 2008, Wilkoszewski 2008) find evidence for preferences of different age groups intending to channel transfers towards themselves or at least opposing transfers to the respective other group.

Whereas Busemeyer et al. (2009) conceptualise age as a position within the economic life-cycle (young and in labour vs. old and retired) and furthermore do not look at effects of other demographic variables such as parenthood, Miettinen et al (2008) and Wilkoszewski (2009, 2008) introduce age as variable, independent from any meaning within the life-cycle, and also include parenthood and grandparenthood into their analyses. All three demographic factors have strong and highly significant effects on social policy preference outcomes.

In addition, the latter approaches look at specific family and pension policies, thus allowing for a detailed picture of policy preferences. All other existing studies use preferences on e.g. the overall nature of the pension system or government spending in different policy fields (unemployment, education, health care, and pensions), which are to a certain extent harder to interpret.

Most of the research interest in the field of intergenerational relations and social policy has been devoted to the magnitude and direction of transfers between the young and the old. The larger fraction of this work has been devoted to private intergenerational transfers or the effect of public transfers on intra-family exchanges. Only a few studies analyzed possible age-effects in this context, even though – from a theoretical point of view – age is crucial to preference patterns: (political and social) interests of different groups in the modern welfare state largely depend on rights and duties to which they are entitled according to chronological age.

Such an age-based system of access to and restriction of benefits can only be sustained as long as its character as a contract between age groups remains credible, i.e. every age group is treated – to a certain extent – in the same way as its respective counterpart in the past or in the future. However, demographic change poses major challenges to all modern welfare states. Unequal treatment for different age groups, therefore, is already moving up on the agenda and to be expected to gain importance in the future.

Generally, existing studies come to the conclusion that family transfers exist to a significant extent and are given mostly from the elderly to the younger generations (e.g. McGarry/Schoeni 1997), whereas public transfers have been directed upwards (Lee 2003), even though recent generational accounting studies have added support to the hypothesis that – in the case of the U.S. – the net present value over the life cycle for current younger genera-

tions is positive (e.g. Bommier et al. 2004). According to Schokkaert, one of the most remarkable findings in the empirical work on the magnitude of transfers is the significant effect of age and education as to voluntary work and charitable giving: the highly educated, old people give more of their resources than the less educated and young members of society (Schokkaert 2006).

Given the importance of preferences for redistributive policies, it is surprising that most studies dealing with the analysis of attitudes focus on private intergenerational transfers in specific social interactions in the family context (e.g. Cox and Soldo 2004). By far less research has been devoted to the analysis of preferences towards public intergenerational transfers. This is partly due to the fact that the necessary survey data are available only to a limited extent.

A comprehensive overview of studies on attitudes towards public intergenerational transfers is given by Kohli (Kohli 2005). Two data sources were used in these studies (Andreß/Heien 2001, Blekesaune/Quadagno 2003, Hicks 2001, Smith 2000, European Commission 2004, Kohl 2003), focusing on international comparison: (a) the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), a rather extensive (in terms of sample size) yearly survey with additional topical modules at larger intervals, and (b) the Eurobarometer, the regular survey of the European Union covering all member and candidate countries, although with smaller sample sizes than the ISSP, which makes the analysis of preferences according to age-groups difficult if not impossible.

Whether or not age has an influence on attitudes toward public intergenerational transfers therefore remains a controversial issue. Following Blekesaune and Quadagno's and Hicks' argument (Blekesaune/Quadagno 2003, Hicks 2001), Kohli draws the conclusion that "most attitude studies up to now show a level of acceptance of welfare policies that is much higher than the discourse on generational equity would lead us to think, with pensions being the most popular part of the welfare state. There is some differentiation along the age dimension, but much less than one would expect from an interest-based model of political preference" (Kohli 2005: p. 19).

On the basis of Eurobarometer data Kohl also argues that differences in attitudes between age groups concerning the needs for social protection at old age are relatively small, even though he identifies indications of weaker support for the idea of intergenerational solidarity among younger people (Kohl 2003).

In contrast, Smith – analysing ISSP data – finds systematic differences in support of governmental spending on pensions: "Across age groups the predominant pattern was for support for governmental spending for retirement benefits to rise with age [...]. This occurred in 19 of 25 countries. The generational differences were often quite large." (Smith 2000: p. 12).

Similar findings are presented in a very recent study by Busemeyer et al. (2009) using the 1996-wave of the ISSP, which looks at age/retirement and income effects on preferences toward education, health, and pension spending. Variation across countries and policy fields is considerable, with Germany (West) showing the smallest age differences. In their analytical concept Busemeyer et al. frame age in an economic life cycle perspective; their framework does not consider further demographic variables, such as parenthood or marital status.

The only recent existing research work, which extends the analysis by a broader demographic perspective are the studies by Miettinen et al. (2008) and Wilkoszewski (2009, 2008). Using the IPPAS-2003-wave all three studies find large effects of age and parenthood on preferences toward family policies. Miettinen et al. (2008) group the number of family policies included in the IPPAS into financial and institutional family policy measures and run separate analyses for the countries of the IPPAS grouped by their fertility level and for people without children and with one child. Wilkoszewski studies for the German case an array of 13 family policies covering all dimensions of public downward transfers (money, time, education, housing). All three studies find that older and childless people are less prone to support family policy measures.

We can summarise that existing research has been inconclusive on the question of whether age has an effect on social policy preferences with recent studies adding increasing support to the hypothesis of declining support for public transfers directed to the young with increasing age. Except for two studies, which use family policies as proxies for downward transfers and which are focusing on Germany, the emphasis lies on overall spending preferences in education and pension policies.

In this paper, we follow the research design proposed by Wilkoszewski and, additionally to Germany, extend the analysis to 12 further countries using the same data (International Population and Policy Survey 2003). We are particularly interested in whether the effects found for Germany also hold for other European countries.

For a comprehensive literature overview see Wilkoszewski (2009). For details on the research design, data and methods, as well as for descriptive results refer to the related working paper of Wilkoszewski and Muth (2009).

## **IV Demographic effects on preferences towards public downward transfers**

In the following, we will present and discuss the effects of age, parenthood, and marital status on preferences towards 13 family policies (see Table 1). The results of the binary logit models are grouped according to the type of transfer (monetary, time, education, housing). For the



sake of readability, we highlight the most important findings with regard to the demographic effects as well as concerning possible differences between countries. A comprehensive overview of all regression results is given in the related working paper (Wilkoszewski and Muth 2009).

**Table 1: Family policies and respective type of transfer**

*„What do you think of the following measures to facilitate having, looking after, and raising children? Are you strongly in favour, in favour, neither in favour nor against, against, or strongly against their implementation? (Put one cross in each line) Note: the measures described below are not just made up. Most of them have actually been implemented in some European countries. Some of these measures have already been implemented or considered by the government in our country.”*

	<b>Family Policy</b>	<b>Transfer Type</b>
1	Improved parental leave arrangements for working women who are having a baby	Time
2	Lower income tax for people with dependent children	Money
3	Better day-care facilities for children younger than age three	Time
4	Better day-care facilities for children between age three up to school age	Time
5	An allowance for families with children dependent on the family income	Money
6	An allowance at the birth of each child	Money
7	An allowance for mothers or fathers who do not take a job because they want to take care of the children while they are young	Money
8	A substantial rise in child allowance by 7% of the monthly GNP	Money
9	Child-care facilities for school-going children before and after school and during school holidays	Time
10	Flexible working hours for working parents with young children	Time
11	More and better opportunities for parents with young children to work part-time	Time
12	A substantial decrease in the costs of education	Education/Money
13	Better housing for families with children	Housing/Money

Source: IPPAS 2003

## **Family policies providing financial assistance to families**

As outlined in Table 1, family policies which mainly address monetary transfers include lower taxes for parents (2), a means-tested financial bonus for families (5), a financial bonus at birth (6), financial assistance to parents, who give up their jobs (7) and a substantial increase in child benefits (8). We will first look at the effect of age on preferences toward these policies.

### *Effect of age*

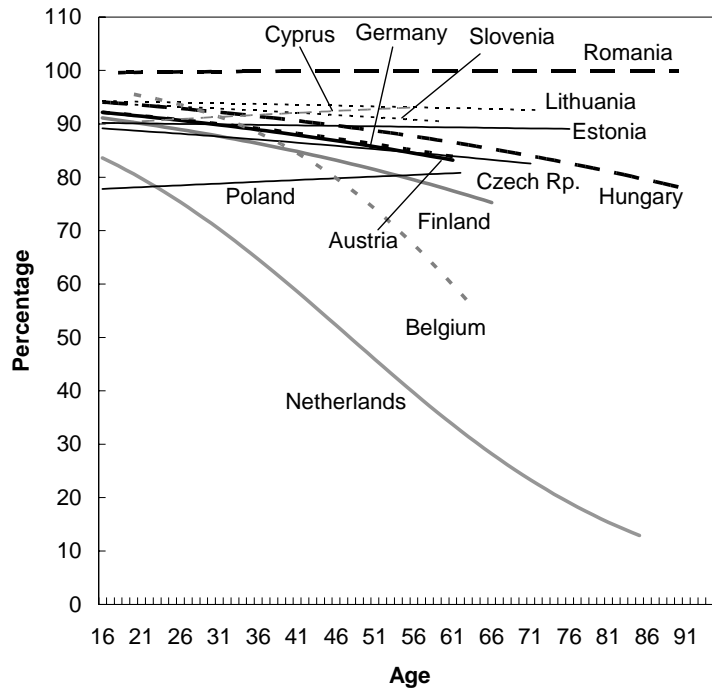
We find large and highly significant age effects in almost all countries under study, however there is some variation to be identified, too. The largest negative age effects can be found with regard to policy 2 (lower taxes) and 8 (child benefits), with lowest odds ratios in Belgium (0.935 for policy 2) and The Netherlands (0.933 for policy 8). Also in the other EU-15 countries Germany, Finland and Austria, support for these two policies decrease significantly with

increasing age, with an change in odds ratios of about 2 to 4 percentage points per year of life gained. In Figure 1 and Figure 2 the predicted proportions of agreeing with the two mentioned family policies are depicted for all 13 countries. The graphs show that the highest percentage of agreement occur in the Eastern and Central European countries Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Estonia. The differences between the countries are especially conspicuous for the policy measure (8) which suggests “a substantial rise in child allowance by 7% of the monthly GNP”. The Netherlands are the country with the lowest agreement for both policy measures: at age 16 the percentage of agreement is about 86% and falls to 13% for the family policy measure 2 and to 4% for the measure 8 at age 89. For Belgium, the drop is not as sharp as for the Netherlands: the agreement falls from 90-95% at age 20 to 52-55% at age 64. In Hungary, the decrease in supporting the two policy measures is significantly the lowest. There, the percentages of agreement for the two policy measures is 94% and 97% at age 17 and falls to 78% and 90% at age 95, respectively.

Preferences of new EU-member countries provide a more mixed picture. Whereas in Hungary and Poland there is a considerable and significant negative age effect for both policies (odds change of 2 to 3 percent per year of life), the Czech Republic, Estonia, Romania and Slovenia show only such a result for one of the two options. In the case of Romania and lower taxes for parents we even find a large positive age effect. No age effects can be identified for Cyprus and Lithuania.

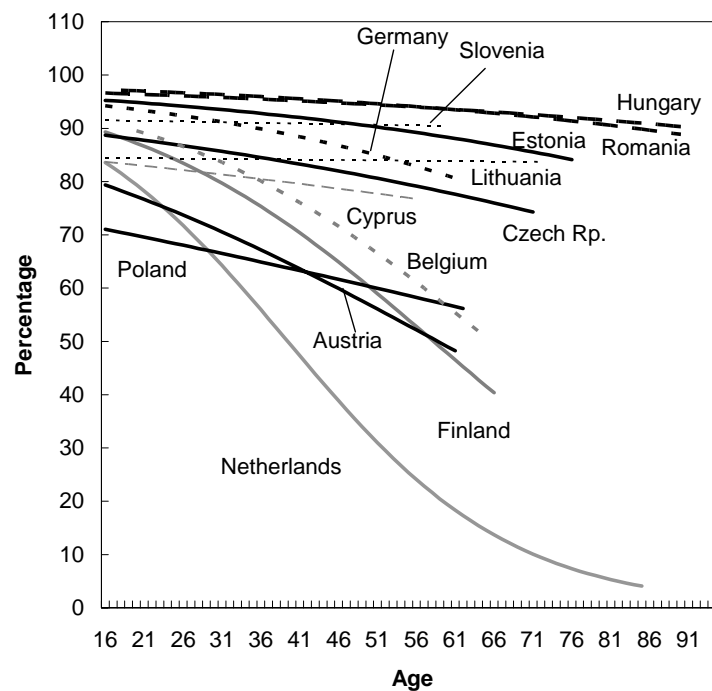
In general, this picture holds also for the other three policy measures (5, 6, and 7). Austrian, Belgian, Dutch, Finnish, German, Hungarian, and Polish respondents are less in favour of monetary transfers to families with increasing age. Cyprus, the Baltic and the other Central and Eastern European countries show no age effects or no consistent patterns. If significant negative age effects are found, then they are on a clearly lower scale than the ones identified for the first group of countries. In a very few cases (Czech Republic, Estonia) we even find a positive effect of age.

**Figure 1:** Predicted probabilities by age for supporting family policy 2: Lower income tax for people with dependent children (bold lines indicate significant age effects). Results are based on the logistic regression models, controlled for childlessness, receipt of benefits, education, sex, marital status, conservative attitude, and income.



Source: IPPAS 2003

**Figure 2:** Predicted probabilities by age for supporting family policy 8: A substantial rise in child allowance by 7% of the monthly GNP (bold lines indicate significant age effects). Results are based on the logistic regression models, controlled for childlessness, receipt of benefits, education, sex, marital status, conservative attitude, and income.



Source: IPPAS 2003

### *Effect of parenthood*

The second demographic variable of main interest is parenthood. The structural outcome of this effect is very similar to the one of age. In general, childless respondents are much less inclined to support either of the five financial transfers to families than parents. The largest effects are again found for support for policies 2 and 8.

In Belgium for example, the odds of a childless respondent to (strongly) agree with the implementation of lower taxes for parents are almost 82 percent lower than the one of a parent. Finland and the Netherlands show similar effects, followed by Austria, Germany with odds changes of about 50 to 70 percent.

Among the EU countries of the recent EU enlargements rounds the picture again is more diverse. Whereas Poland is very similar to the EU-15 countries, effects for the Czech Republic and Hungary for example are on lower significance levels.

In Cyprus, Lithuania, and Slovenia negative age effects can only be found for two out of five policies each. In addition, Estonia seems to be a special case. The results are mostly similar to the one of Poland. With regard to an income-dependent financial support for families (policy 5), however, the negative effect for childless respondents is reversed at a large scale and on a high significance level. This is in line with the positive age effect for the same policy measure identified above. For Romania no data on parenthood was available.

### *Effect of marital status and gender*

Since in a range of European countries future family structures will change to a significant extent due to cohabitation and high divorce rates, we also looked at the effect of marital status on policy preferences. In order to complement the array of demographic dimensions, we will also briefly present the findings for the covariate “sex”.

Being in a legal marriage, increases the odds to support the five proposed family policy reforms in all 13 countries under study, even though the effects remain at a marginal significance level in most of the cases. The strongest effects are found in Cyprus, where the odds to support e.g. lower taxes for parents (2) or a significant increase in child benefits (8) are more than 2 times higher for respondents within a marriage than for those outside. A similarly strong effect is identified for Romania in case of the child benefit increase. Overall the magnitude of the effect appears to be slightly higher in Central and Eastern European countries than in the Western European ones.

The regression models for the five monetary family policies also revealed an at times large gender difference in policy preferences. Generally speaking, male respondents are less inclined to support the transfers, with the effects showing some variation in magnitude and significance level across policies and countries. The strongest gender difference on the higher sig-

nificance levels can be found with regard to support for a financial allowance for parents, who give up their job to take care of their child(ren). In Austria, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Lithuania the odds for male respondents to support the policy are between 30 and 50 percent lower than for women.

## **Family policies providing more time resources to families**

In a further step, we look at those downward transfers, which are supposed to provide parents and families with more time, facilitating better childcare and parent-child relations. This transfer type includes the following family policies: better marital leave schemes for working mothers (1), better childcare facilities for children under the age of 3 (3), better childcare facilities for children from the age of 3 to the age of primary school entry (4), care facilities for children of school age for the time before and after school hours as well as during school holidays (9), flexible working hours for working parents with small children (10), and more and better part-time work possibilities for parents with children (11).<sup>a</sup> Again, we will highlight the most important findings with regard to the demographic effects age, parenthood, marital status, and gender, as well as concerning possible differences between countries. A comprehensive overview of all regression results is given in Wilkoszewski and Muth (2009).

### *Effect of age*

For these six care policies the age effects found are certainly less pronounced as compared to monetary transfers: a large fraction of countries do show lower support with increasing age, however, often on a small scale and non-significant. The strongest effects with an odds change of 3 to 4 percent per year of life are identified in Austria, Belgium, Finland, and the Netherlands for the policy reform “improved parental leave scheme for working mothers” (1), and in the Belgian case also for the policy “flexible working hours for parents” (10). With an odds change of 1 to 2 percent per year life, older respondents in Estonia and Poland also show significantly fewer support ratios for policy 1 than younger ones. The effects in the other countries are marginal or non-significant.

When looking at better day-care facilities for children below the age of 3, Austrian, Lithuanian and Polish respondents have decreasing support levels with increasing age for policy 3 (odds change of 1 to 2 percent per year of life); furthermore, older respondents in Austria, Finland, and Hungary are less inclined to support the same policy for older children above the age of 3 (odds change of about 1 percent per year of life). Again, the effects for the other countries are marginal or non-significant.

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a Numbers in parentheses are referring to the order of policies in Table 1.

Estonia is once more the outlier within the range of 13 countries. Even though older respondents in this country are clearly less in favour of improved parental leave schemes for working mothers (policy 1, odds change of 1.5 percent per year of life), we find a highly significant and large positive age effect in the case of better childcare for school children (policy 9, odds change of about 1.5 percent per year of life) and better part-time working opportunities for parents (policy 11, odds change of almost 3 percent per year of life).

### *Effect of parenthood*

A certain divide between the Western and Northern European countries in the sample and the Central and Eastern European ones (including Cyprus) becomes also visible when looking at the effect of parenthood, with Poland and at times also the Czech Republic and Lithuania forming outliers among their group by showing similar results like the first group of countries.

As in the case of monetary transfers, we find the strongest and most significant negative effects of childlessness for Belgium, Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands: the odds for a childless respondent in these countries to support the proposed care policies are between a third and over a half lower than the ones for parents. In general, this effect is much smaller and/or non-significant in the second group of countries (with the above mentioned outliers).

Surprisingly high positive effects are identified – again – for Estonia in the case of policy 9. The biggest outlier in this context is formed by Cyprus. Here the odds of childless people to support policies 4, 10, and 11 are over twice as high as those for parents. We suggest that these respondents belong to a comparatively progressive group of Cypriots, who have postponed their wish to become a parent, and therefore show on the one hand prospective preference patterns and on the other hand form a sort of avant-garde within a country, that still relies on mostly traditional care-structures.

### *Effect of marital status and gender*

Cyprus is also the clear outlier with regard to effects of marital status. Across all other countries there evolves a mixed picture depending on the type of care policy. In Cyprus, however, the odds for supporting four out of these six policies are two (policies 3 and 4), three (policy 11) and even four times higher (policy 10) for married people as compared to those respondents outside a marriage. There is also a positive effect for policies 1 and 9, however, it is statistically non-significant.

When looking at the other countries, marital status mostly has a positive effect with an odds change between 15 and 50 percent, even though very often this effect again is non-significant. No clear pattern with regard to the two country groups identified above can be

drawn. Outliers showing a significant negative effect of marital status are Belgium (policy 1), Germany (policy 3), Finland (policies 3 and 4), and the Netherlands (policy 3, 9, and 10).

With regard to gender preferences we find a rather consistent pattern across all countries: being male decreases the odds to support the six childcare policies by 20 to 50 percent, and this negative effect is mostly highly significant, with somewhat higher significance levels in Western and Northern European countries. These results show that even though the countries under study are very different in terms of their political legacy, family ideologies, and concrete family policies, men still prefer women to stay at home and take care of the upbringing of the children.

### **Further family policies: education and housing**

Finally, we will briefly summarise demographic effects on preferences towards two further family policies: decreasing costs for education (12) and providing better housing for families (13).<sup>b</sup> Whereas age seems to have a limited effect on the first policy (most of the negative odds ratios found are non-significant, except for Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Estonia), we find strong and significant effects in six out of eleven countries (no data for Belgium and Estonia) for the latter. Only Slovenia, Lithuania, Cyprus, and Romania show no effects.

Parenthood and gender, on the other hand, again seem to play an important role for determining social policy preferences: being childless decreases the odds to support these two policies by 30 to 60 percent in all countries except for Slovenia; and the odds for male respondents are 15 to 60 percent lower in about half of the countries. No significant gender difference in preferences for at least one of the two policies can be found in Finland, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Romania).

Marital status finally appears to be not a decisive demographic factor to determine preferences for the two policies. Except for Belgium and Finland, where married people have lower odds to support the suggested reforms, the magnitude of the effects, which are all non-significant, in the other countries is negligible.

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b Numbers in parentheses are referring to the order of policies in Table 1.

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