



Shifting politics and the makeover of birth control policies

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A tale of two eras in population policy

This paper proposes to review, in broad strokes, the radical transformation of modern population policies on birth control and its significance. The implementation of policies aimed at influencing rates of population growth commanded increasing attention in the 1950s, when concern with the alleged imminence of a population explosion validated controlist policies. More recently, the relevance of such policies has sparked heated debates from unexpected directions and generated an inversion of controlism. In both phases, geopolitical interests and political dominance issues have largely conditioned the main thrust of “population” policies. This paper provides a brief overview of these two main phases, their roots, and their influence. Most of the discussion centers on the experience of the USA, a major player in academic research, as well as on the dynamics of both controlist and natalist movements during the modern era.¹

Evolving debates and repercussions of population control initiatives²

Towards the end of the 18th century, a historic debate, largely sparked by Malthus' negativism on population growth, started a lasting discussion on the relative merits of controlist and natalist policies. However, such discussions were restricted to a small group of intellectuals whose influence had relatively little bearing on public policies until the 1950s. The one glaring exception was the eugenics movement, which promoted the theory that selective human breeding could improve population, and led to horrific policies, especially in Nazi Germany.

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¹ The viewpoints and analyses presented here are the sole responsibility of the author. The text builds on the vast available literature and also reflects musings from more than 50 years of field work and academic experience on population dynamics.

² For an authoritative and extensive discussion of demographic research and policy initiatives in the last half of the 20th century, see Bongaarts and Hodgson (2022).

In the post-war period, accelerating population growth rates in developing countries prompted concern about a population explosion. Early studies – by Notestein, the Princeton School, Davis, Hauser and other leading demographers in the USA – pointed to a probable geometric increase in global population growth and identified the dangers that this trend represented (Szreter, 1993; Hodgson, 1991).

How to prevent this explosion? Explanations for fertility decline in developed countries had focused on the demographic transition, a model in which development produces the transition of a population from high to low birth and death rates. It soon became clear, however, that poorer countries were unlikely to promote the complex structural changes associated with the demographic transition. Therefore, other initiatives aimed at slowing population growth should be implemented.

In consonance with such concerns, the transition theory was replaced in the 1950s by a positivist attitude aimed at controlling rapid population growth, perceived as a major obstacle to development. This assessment brought visibility to the issue, and eventually legitimated bilateral and multinational efforts to control fertility in poorer countries. Thus, issues related to population growth and development entered the agenda of academics and policymakers in the post-war period. Such reflections on the implications of population growth for development eventually became central to the US government's initiatives regarding international relations and foreign aid.³

Geopolitics and policy

The shift towards “policy-oriented science” in demography originally flourished largely due to the USA's geopolitical efforts to support market-based development in underdeveloped countries during the initial stages of the Cold War. At this time, the Soviet Union and the USA were competing to incorporate Third World countries into their respective political and economic blocs. The USA considered that explosive population growth would frustrate economic development in poorer countries, causing them to fall prey to Communism (Hauser, 1960). Specifically, the victory of Marxist-Leninism in China spawned a greater fear that other Asian countries might convert to communism. Moreover, it was felt that the sluggish pace of changes to be produced by the wide-ranging structural and long-term transformations suggested by the demographic transition theory would also nudge developing countries in that same direction. In this context, the US government invited existing institutions and the liberal social sciences to help avoid such a catastrophe. Internationally-sparked debates thus gave rise to a variety of initiatives that eventually helped generate interest in population studies, improved the data base, and promoted the training of population experts (Martine; Faria, 1988, p. 44-45).

³ For fascinating narratives of the geopolitical rationale for changing policy directions, see Szreter (1993, p. 675-682), Hodgson (1983) and Bongaarts and Hodgson (2022). The discussions in this section are largely based on their analyses.

In this historical context, massive family planning campaigns, previously disparaged as an ineffective “quick fix”, were widely advocated as of the late 1950s. Financial resources materialized as foundations, institutes and international organizations – explicitly dedicated to combating the demographic threat – were born, especially in the USA. The expansion of global concerns with population growth also prompted the eventual creation, in 1969, of a specific United Nations agency (UNFPA) which was primarily centered on family planning.⁴

Controlist policies based on geopolitics in the US were particularly deliberate during the Lyndon Johnson administration, who stated in 1965 that “a 5 dollar investment in population control is worth 100 dollars invested in economic growth” and that population growth rates “challenge our own security”. He also conditioned foreign aid to “modernizing family planning efforts” (Bongaarts; Hodgson, 2022, p. 68 and 70).

The most significant share of available resources allocated to the population area were channeled to what is known as “the supply side”, that is, to the supply of information, technology and resources that would allow people to have fewer children. The assumption was that people were having more children than they wanted and that, therefore, providing contraceptive means would be sufficient to reduce fertility at the aggregate level. The rapid expansion of demographic studies was expected to provide the arguments and justifications for this campaign.⁵

In retrospect, instead of focusing solely on the supply side formula, the population control movement might have focused on actions that were capable of altering people's preferences for smaller families in order to reduce fertility. Declining fertility at the societal level is attributable to a variety of changes in the social structure that favor smaller families and consequently promote the use of birth control. These include urbanization, education, changing workforce opportunities, the empowerment of women, housing shortages, lack of day-care services for children and the general influence of globalization on values and behavior. In this framework, it could have been more effective to focus actions on variables such as women's education, the reduction of infant mortality, and social mobility (Demeny, 1992), or changes in the status of women, and the reduction of infant mortality (Bongaarts, 1994). Other indirect factors, such as institutional changes in the area of health and social security and the selective support of an influential mass media, could have also generated an increased motivation to reduce family size (Martine, 1996a).

However, such approaches were seen as more indirect and complicated, and consequently did not mobilize any significant political or economic lobby. This is important because it would appear that social policies capable of producing lasting political support are often those that mobilize some important economic sector. In the case of family

⁴ Over time, that agenda became more diversified as other population concerns were manifested in the developing countries that were being served by this agency.

⁵ The major and long-term influence that this turn of events eventually had on demographic training and research throughout the world cannot be overestimated. Foundations such as Rockefeller and Ford invested heavily in demographic training in US Universities, inviting students from all over the world, and also helped establish demographic training centers in Bombay, Cairo and Santiago (Bongaarts; Hodgson, 2022, p. 68).

planning, its lobby was reinforced by pharmaceutical laboratories and, to a minor extent, health workers. In the end, however, the most important catalyst for the rapid diffusion of neo-Malthusian policies may have been the apparent simplicity and rationality of the proposed remedy. This mentality was so widely spread that even Martin Luther King spoke of overpopulation as a serious threat, at the peak of US efforts to reduce fertility elsewhere.⁶

Several leading demographers provided key support for a controlist approach. Thus, for instance:

In appreciation of the desire to offer constructive advice rather than simply sit by and watch as the map of Asia turned red, the first small step, which Davis and Notestein independently took in published work appearing in 1950, was to advocate the only thing that could be done in the short term: the initiation of family planning policies in countries such as India (Szreter, 1993, p. 679).

The implementation of a large-scale international “family planning industry” was then promoted with such determination that it “ignored isolated warnings from some, to the effect that the analysis and policy underlying this supply-centered activism might in any way be flawed or inadequate” (Szreter, 1993, p. 682). Under Lyndon Johnson, USAID (United States Agency for International Development) definitively entered the population field in 1965, with a simplified family planning strategy that eschewed consideration of all the subtleties of the discussions that had occurred in the previous two decades (Demeny, 1994, p. 7).

Given the univocal initiatives on family planning in private foundations, as well as in bilateral and multilateral entities, the majority of underdeveloped countries were encouraged, directly or indirectly, to formulate a population policy (i.e. family planning) and to create a specific entity to implement said policy during the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the international community at least paid lip service to population stabilization in its population conferences. All this eventually contributed to the marked slowdown of global fertility rates that was observed later, and which persists in the 21st century. However, the operationalization of such policies was differentiated by region and by country, in part because of geopolitical and ideological differences. For instance, in most Latin American countries, where the dominant Catholic religion opposed birth control and prominent intellectuals were particularly distrustful of North American imperialism, efforts were made to integrate family planning concerns within a broader perspective on population dynamics.⁷

Nevertheless, in operational terms and at a global level, the term “population policies” was equated with “family planning” which, in turn, was generally seen as the only way to reduce fertility rates (Jain, 1998, p. 3-4).⁸ This view prevailed until the latter decades of the

⁶ “Unlike plagues of the dark ages or contemporary diseases we do not yet understand, the modern plague of overpopulation is soluble by means we have discovered and with resources we possess” (Alves, 2024a).

⁷ In this respect, the work of Carmen Miró, a Panamanian demographer chosen by funding institutions to found and manage CELADE (Center for Latin American Demography) in the late 1950s, merits highlighting. Under her firm direction, Latin American demography blossomed into its own as CELADE trained demographers, promoted scientific research and publications on an array of population topics throughout the region.

⁸ The notable exception was the Chinese experience, where a draconian “one child policy” was adopted from 1979 to 2015.

20th century. Thus, for many institutions and prominent scholars of that time, “population policies” were simply considered as equivalent to family planning, ignoring concerns about population composition and distribution. Even renowned economists such as Cassen (1994), and sophisticated critics of neo-Malthusianism, such as McNicoll (1997), failed to explore the other opportunities for intervention encompassed by the term “population policy”.

However, as time passed, the practical, “hands-on” policies regarding fertility control, as promoted mostly by the US government and US-based institutions, sparked controversies around their theoretical underpinnings and political implications. The coercive approach of some population programs and their international sponsors also faced criticism.

Growing controversies: science vs action on population

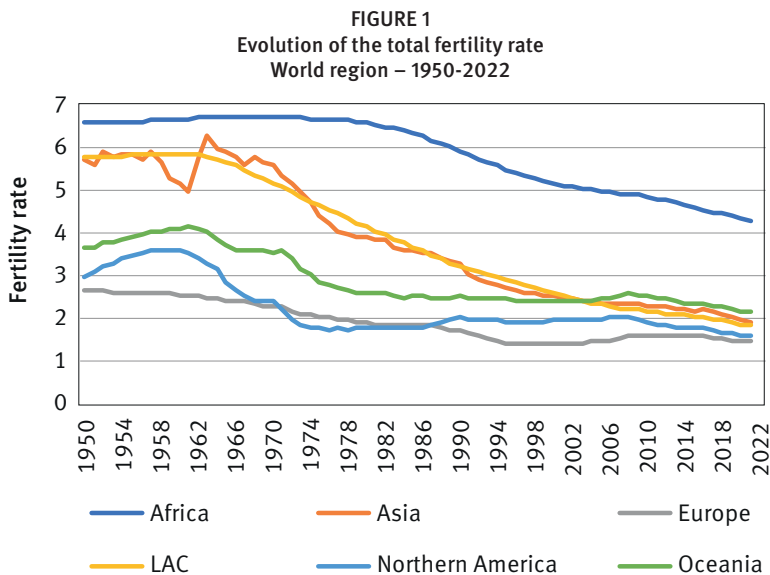
As the debate evolved, the outlook of demographers and other social scientists on population control generally became more guarded and conditional. After their initial forays into neo-Malthusianism, most began to adopt more cautious positions on this issue, as early as the 1960s (Wilmoth; Ball, 1992). In particular, revisionist economist/demographers were less prone to fret about the negative impacts of population growth. They tended to argue that population growth was not an issue in itself, as automatic feedback generated by the marketplace and technological development can always address its consequences (Dapice, 1993). However, the more outspoken arguments of economic revisionism (Simon, 1981, 1990) were also conducive to oversimplified generalizations regarding both development outcomes and population’s role in environmental degradation (McNicoll, 1995; Martine, 1996b, p. 9). At this point, as noted by leading experts, demographers’ support for family planning programs underwritten by geopolitical motives basically slowed to a halt, due to the near-zero correlation between population growth and *per capita* economic growth during the 1970s and 1980s (Bongaarts; Hodgson, 2022, p. 85).

In this void, natural scientists assumed a central role in denouncing the population threat, especially after more momentous environmental risks were exposed. Biologists and ecologists began to take over the neo-Malthusian flag in the early 1960s, and continued to draw attention to the negative impacts of population growth. The history of this debate is both enduring and fascinating, but would take us too far afield here. Nevertheless, the implications of population/environmental interactions are undoubtedly enormous.

The impact of family planning programs on development and population growth

Family planning efforts, coupled with improvements in contraceptive methods, are credited with being “a key factor in assisting individuals in changing their reproductive behavior [...] although these trends [...] are also attributable to rapid social and economic development” (Bongaarts, 1994, p. 772). This was reiterated more incisively by Bongaarts and Hodgson (2022, p. 119), who found that family planning programs accounted for “a

rise of 25-35% in contraceptive prevalence and a decline of 1.5 births per women in the TFR”. Consequently, it can be seen as an important contributor to the long-term decline of fertility rates occurring, at an unforeseen rate, at the global level and in most countries, as shown in Figure 1.



Source: United Nations Population Division.
Available in: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/MostUsed/>.

Nevertheless, demographic inertia guarantees that population will continue to grow for decades, irrespective of the level of commitment to family planning programs. Thus, India, the first country to adopt nationwide family planning policies officially in 1952, added an additional 1.05 billion people by 2023, despite dedicated government efforts that even included instances of forced sterilization. Similarly, China, after adopting its extreme “One Child” policy in 1979, grew by 840 million until the program was terminated in 2015. At the global level, fertility rates have finally begun to decline to replacement levels in the 2020s, but world population growth itself is only expected to start receding in the 2050s.

In brief, the preceding discussion highlights that the trajectory of research and action in the design and implementation of population policies aimed at fertility reduction has been controversial and fluctuating. However, in the recent words of Bongaarts (2023, Abstract, p. 1), one of the most authoritative figures in modern demography, the agenda is currently shifting towards more ideological and political issues:

[...] by the turn of the 21st century a broader population policy agenda evolved that included not only renewed interest in the unfavorable effects of population growth but also in other issues such as climate change, international migration, and rapid urbanization... Continuing disagreements between optimists and pessimists are now less about scientific facts and more about a host of economic, ethical, aesthetic, and political questions.

Indeed, as will be seen in the next section, new challenges have emerged in the scientific and political scenario regarding population issues. The declining fertility so besought by scientists and politicians some decades ago is now stimulating increasing counter-concerns among a significant contingent of policymakers, both at the global level and in many low fertility countries. Discussion of these issues have recently assumed unpredicted politicized contours due to ultra-conservatism – tinged with cultural, religious and racial overtones – on birth control. This concern has escalated in the rhetoric of prominent billionaires and self-styled savants who are preaching the urgent need to increase human population.

Such trends will have important consequences for reproductive health in the USA, as well as worldwide repercussions through restriction of aid to institutions focused on reproductive health. Moreover, differential reproductive patterns between countries and social groups, coupled with differentiated environmental stress, will inevitably bring another major demographic process to the forefront: immigration.

Current issues in relation to population policies

This section contends that the “population question” remains relevant on the agenda for reasons that now differ radically from the 20th century’s pursuit of stabilization. Two main topics merit consideration in the present-day context: declining birth rates across a wide swath of countries, and the evolution of birth control politics, especially in the USA. Though each of these topics would merit a separate treatise, this paper only proposes to outline some of the main facets of each issue.

The baby bust

It is becoming increasingly evident that, regardless of its main determinants, global fertility is now steadily declining at an unexpected rate, as shown in Table 1, which refers to the 161 countries with a total population exceeding one million inhabitants.⁹ A total of 80 countries, with a total population of 5.4 billion people (more than two-thirds of the total world population, including behemoths like China and India) have a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) *below* the 2.1 replacement level. Among these, 27 countries (including China), which represent one quarter of the world’s total, actually have a TFR of *less* than 1.5 children per woman. At the other end of the scale, 47 countries with a total population of 1.58 billion people, still have a high (over 3.0) TFR.

The challenges evolving as a result of rapid fertility decline are undoubtedly real and will have to be addressed by individual countries and through international cooperation. Very low fertility rates and a rapidly declining population size, as observed in countries like South Korea and China, now represent a significant challenge. As has been widely noted, fertility decline in any country eventually leads to an inversion of the demographic

⁹ This eliminates consideration of 78 countries that, together, represent only 0.2% of the total world population.

pyramid, wherein an increasing proportion of the total population is now found in older age groups. Population aging itself is widely associated with a series of social, economic and political issues, bringing new challenges in terms of rising dependency ratios and workforce shortages, while also defying the capacity of health care, pensions and other social systems to deal with this new configuration.¹⁰

Declining fertility rates have already prompted several countries to implement programs aimed at increasing fertility, in defiance of global environmental concerns. Even China, which recently experienced more deaths than births per year, is making a drastic turnaround, as it attempts to increase fertility in view of the problems that resulted from its past one-child policy. To date, relatively little success with pro-natalist policies has been registered.

TABLE 1
Total fertility rate (TFR), by groups of countries having more than one million inhabitants – 2022

TFR Levels	# of countries	Population	% total population
TFR < 1,5	27	2,012,935	25.0
TFR > 1,5 e < 2,1	53	3,405,418	42.3
TFR > 2,1 e < 3,0	34	1,029,099	12.8
TFR > 3,0 e < 4,0	20	688,809	8.6
TFR > 4,0	27	891,526	11.1
Countries having more than one million inhabitants	161	8,027,787	99.8
World Total	239	8,046,586	100.0

Source: UN/DESA World Population Prospects 2022. Available in: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

Theoretically, declining fertility could be countered in the short term by other factors, such as demographic inertia, immigration, increased life expectancy, and higher birth rates. However, each of these factors has its own limitations. Thus, the contribution of demographic inertia to population growth will dwindle, inasmuch as it is regulated within the context of previous fertility declines.¹¹ In turn, widespread immigration faces racial and ethnic xenophobia, while an increased life expectancy generates its own problems. Thus, just as results of family planning efforts are longer term by nature, pro-growth policies similarly require several decades, as well as changing ideologies, to yield the desired increases.

The baby boon

Over the last few years, a stunning reversal of 20th century concerns has shifted the focus in several Western countries, and particularly in the USA, towards the need to *reduce* birth control. This change is largely fueled by internal political concerns, rather than the classical geopolitical viewpoint that “population size equals power”. The recent denunciation of birth

¹⁰ Still, there may be some compensations. For instance, a recent study, based on the experience of Serbia and other Baltic countries, suggests that an ageing population can be the beneficiary of an increase in *per capita* income (Alves, 2024b).

¹¹ These will be further modulated by the intensification and frequency of environmental disasters, by additional conflicts between nations and between diverse social groups, as well as by pandemics and other Malthusian “natural checks”.

control stems from an unforeseen combination of cultural, religious, racial and political questions linked under an umbrella of ultra-conservatism.¹² Such a radical shift obviously has an impact on population policies in the USA, as well on foreign policy and aid in the domain of reproductive health.

*Birth control history in the USA*¹³

Issues related to birth control in the USA have a long history, dating back to the days of Theodore Roosevelt who, in 1905, condemned smaller families as decadent, criticized women who avoided having children, and promoted the fear of “race suicide” that he ascribed to changes in birth rate, family structure and sexual practices (Gordon, 2002, Chapter 6). Half a century later, Eisenhower refused to implement a recommendation to sponsor birth control in foreign aid, and later became a patron of Planned Parenthood. Johnson, as noted earlier, was instrumental in making birth control a requisite in foreign aid packages, but his tenure was also distinguished by a landmark 1965 Supreme Court decision (*Griswold v. Connecticut*) that defined contraception as a constitutional right for Americans. Congress approved Title X during the Nixon administration to help low-income populations in the United States gain access to reproductive health care. In 1973, during Nixon’s second term, the Supreme Court legalized abortion in the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Later, Reagan basically established the Republican position on the Global Gag Rule (GGR), which forbade assistance to any NGOs connected to abortion in any way, defunded UNFPA, denied US assistance to any institution that had any connections with abortion, and even suspended financing to the Planned Parenthood Federation. Thereafter, the GGR has traditionally been rescinded by Democratic Presidents and reinstated by Republican presidents. The Clinton administration managed to repeal Republican efforts to further limit family planning. Obama, in the Affordable Care Act of 2010, mandated that health insurance cover prescription contraceptives, but this initiative was soon repealed by the courts and the Trump administration. Trump eventually applied the GGR to all health assistance abroad, including HIV-AIDS. Moreover, he proposed a Title X “Protect Life Rule” which intended to prohibit physicians from relaying accurate reproductive health information to their patients. Trump has also called collapsing fertility a bigger threat to Western civilization than Russia (Ip; Adamy, 2024). Finally, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs Wade* in 2022, thus ending the right to abortion. The matter evolved into a major issue in the 2024 electoral campaigns.

Such dramatic reversals in mindsets and legislation towards birth control over such a short period are perplexing, particularly given that attitudes towards birth control among the American public have become increasingly positive over time and have generally been

¹² A clear illustration, of how deeply the concern with reduced demographic growth has spread into the ethos of developed countries’ economics, is provided by a recent article in a major popular mouthpiece for that ideology (Global, 2023). This was entitled – “Global fertility has collapsed with profound economic consequences” Therein, the trend towards declining fertility is labelled as a “dire demographic trajectory”.

¹³ The following brief historical review is mostly based on Lashier (2022). A detailed longer-term history of birth control in the USA prior to the 21st century can be found in Linda Gordon’s classic book (Gordon, 2002).

supported by both parties (Sundstrom; Delay, 2020, p. 130). A survey taken in 2022 actually showed that 93 percent of Republicans voters support birth control pills in “all or most cases”. A slightly smaller number of Republicans support other forms of contraception, with 82 percent supporting IUDs and 62 percent supporting “emergency contraception like Plan B” (Skelley; Fuong, 2022b).

The issue of birth control has obviously become a thorny political matter for Republicans, but it has coalesced interest from a broader range of birth control opponents, who have welded into a formidable coalition. This faction is committed to a politically motivated agenda that manipulates issues related to gender, religion, race, and power – issues that also fluctuate in accordance with the white perception of immigration flows. As aptly stated by Gordon (2002, Chapter 14, online) – “everything about reproductive rights must be seen in a political context”.

The literature on America’s recent amalgamation of birth control foes, its purposes and tactics, has expanded in recent years. A clear common thread in this narrative is that an underlying reactionary mentality has taken over conservatism in the area of human reproduction. This has produced a strong political group variously labelled as the “White Christian Nationalism” (hereinafter, WCN), or “White Christian Supremacist” movement.¹⁴

Analyses of the origins, objectives and consequences of this rapidly growing right-wing alliance indicate that this movement is generating heated controversy and ideological debate involving critical issues that heighten fanaticism, affect lawmaking and change the balance of power in American politics. It also gives rise to a movement that could be perceived as a form of “eugenics”, as it yearns for changes in the reproductive patterns of certain societal groups to re-establish their purported preeminence in a somewhat mythical past.

Given all these contradictions, it is understandable that women’s healthcare and fertility issues have become so contentious today. The incongruity between former positive attitudes towards birth control, and the current trend towards the criminalization of abortion and the weakening of Title X, can be associated with several factors, most of which are associated with historic racism in the USA and the expanding strength of ultra-reactionary culture – both in the USA and in several European countries. *Inter alia*, such influences have catalyzed a revived concern with the growing proportion of non-white populations in America.

Gender, religion, race and political power

Earlier generations of feminists, such as Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennet, argued that the female control of contraception was essential for the emancipation of women. In subsequent decades, they were able to make birth control a medical, rather than a moral or political issue, despite the acceptance of eugenistic rationales on race (Gordon, 2002,

¹⁴ For a well-researched analysis of the influence that White Christian Nationalism has exerted on birth control, cf. Gorski and Perry (2022). They present a chilling analysis of the origins and evolution of this movement which seriously threatens the continuity of democracy and promotes the institutionalization of a shift towards long-lasting autocratic rule.

Chapter 2). However, according to the spiel of contemporary far-right conservatives, the widespread acceptance of birth control has disrupted the family structure and distorted traditional gender roles. Misinformation about how contraceptives work, and how they affects users, is also purposely widespread. The Trump administration even tried to make the point that increased access to contraception would “affect risky sexual behavior in a negative way.” In other words, birth control would lead to promiscuity. This goes against the grain of extensive literature showing that risky sexual behavior does *not* increase with birth control.

As denoted by its moniker, the WCN movement against all manner of birth control also receives strong support from a fundamentalist religious position. Opponents of birth control routinely use religion to reinforce their arguments and propose the rather hypocritical notion that sex is for procreation, not pleasure. The Catholic Church has a long tradition of prohibiting all birth control measures, except for the infamously inadequate “natural” methods. The 1969 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (and recent messages from an otherwise progressive Pope) reinforced the Church's opposition to artificial contraception and effectively dismantled widespread hopes of a more liberal interpretation.¹⁵ Before WWII, the Christian (Protestant) tradition had also generally condemned birth control on the grounds that it led to promiscuity and adultery. Nevertheless, after the famous 1940 Lambeth Conference, most Protestant Churches went on to accept contraception (Jacobson, 2022). More recently, however, this attitude has been defaced by adherence to racist and reactionary perceptions, as well as by the promotion of fundamentalist attitudes regarding women's roles in society and family planning services and abortion.

On another level, Census data convincingly demonstrate that the American population is progressively becoming less white. The underlying racist motivation of the WCN movement was boosted by the results of the 2010 US Census, which revealed a significant shift in racial demographics. It was shown that, due to immigration and differential fertility rates, the majority of Americans under 18 were people of color (Moslimani *et al.*, 2024). Non-whites now make up about two-fifths of the country's total population (*Ibid.*). This information on differential growth rates by race has contributed to the fear that the traditional numerical superiority of the white (supposedly Christian) race, which had always been taken for granted, is now crumbling (Gorski; Perry, 2022).

This trend, categorized as “demographic determinism”, alarmed the traditional white supremacist mentality, since an increase in the proportion of non-whites, who are historically more prone to vote for the Democratic party, could disrupt the Republican Party's plans for stronger political control (Thompson, 2022). The unprecedented victories of Barack Obama in two presidential elections likely reinforced such apprehensions concerning the social and political advance of non-white forces (Gorski; Perry, 2022). As aptly stated by Porter (2024, online):

¹⁵ Recently, Pope Francis, a well-known progressive on other matters, reiterated the Catholic Church's traditional stance on procreation. Available in: <https://www.sitrib.com/religion/2024/05/10/have-courage-have-children-despite/>.

[...] today, the White, Anglo-Saxon Americans who believe this nation to be their birthright are truly under demographic siege. Twenty years from now, White, non-Hispanic Americans will slip below 50 percent of the population and become just another, albeit big, minority. For Trump's electoral base of older, White rural voters, the prospect of non-Whites acquiring power to challenge their status as embodiments of American identity amounts to an existential menace that may justify radical action.

The ongoing struggle against birth control by right-wingers could theoretically have two different objectives: promoting national population growth or only the growth of particular social groups. On the one hand, smaller populations can give an impression of reduced clout on the global stage. Yet, to this date, there does not seem to be much emphasis on the classic "population is power" position. Meanwhile, opposition to the "browning" of the American population is blatant. In practice, the aspiration for higher growth among whites and less growth among non-whites runs directly counter to actual differential rates of fertility by color, in the USA.¹⁶

The fact that overall fertility levels are constantly declining in the USA, despite strident anti-birth control campaigns, is excellent news in view of the country's huge environmental footprint. Not surprisingly, there appears to be little or no mention of the relationship between environment and population among opponents of birth control – except through the habitual environmental negationism of right-wing factions. Regrettably, such omissions may turn out to be the most significant legacy of the current stand against birth control.

In this ongoing debate, white Christian nationalism has been divested of its traditional "conservative" background and effectively became "reactionary" in its desire to return to a mythical past wherein the country's population was purportedly white, Christian, and dominant (Gorski; Perry, 2022, Chapter 4). Ensuing approaches to abortion and birth control, often couched in fundamentalist religious terms or as medical alerts, would appear to be geared toward reversing the trend toward lower fertility among white women in order to obviate the threatening demographic determinism inferred from the census data. Conveniently forgotten in all this is the truism that the best way to reduce abortion is to provide the means for effective contraception.

Immigration and xenophobia: catalysts of WCN and birth control opposition

Two main factors are contributing to the "browning" of USA's population, which is causing such distress to the overlapping WCN and right wing coalitions. One relates to differential growth rates by race, as described above. The other has to do with ongoing patterns of immigration, whose volume is multiplying and increasingly originates in the Global South, rather than from white European stock, thus generating xenophobic reactions against newcomers and their racial/ethnic origins. The large volume of migrants massing

¹⁶ It is interesting to observe that if the movement supported American population growth, rather than a racially-selective increase, it would have celebrated the higher fertility of non-whites and poor people.

at the southern border is making this issue increasingly visible, taking precedence over economic problems as the main concern of Americans according to a recent poll.¹⁷

Xenophobia has been a recurring constant since the country's foundation; it has ebbed and flowed, depending on the volume and characteristics of immigrant waves.¹⁸ For example, Irish and Catholics were the first group to suffer ostracism, followed by the Chinese, the Japanese, the Latins and now Muslims and Arabs. The current right-wing struggles against immigration ignores the fact that, among other things, this inflow compensates for declines in the fertility of the resident population "When fertility rates are below the population replacement level, immigration can make up the shortfall to keep population growth positive. This has been true since the decline of U.S. fertility rates to well below the population replacement level of 2.1 after the Great Recession of 2008-09" (U.S Demographic projections [...], 2024).

Throughout its history, varying levels of xenophobia have spawned various attempts by different American governments to favor or limit immigration. Most of these initiatives targeted the reduction of undesired immigrant streams. Yet, in other instances, they aimed at promoting immigration. Even Republican presidents, such as Reagan and George W. Bush, were pro-immigration, in continuance with the Statue of Liberty notion that America has always been receptive to – and a beneficiary of – international migratory movements. Conversely, the 2024 surge of xenophobia and anti-migrant extremism occurs exactly 100 years after the most aggressive official position ever taken against immigration in the USA. In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act, proposed by Democratic Senator DuRan Smith. As usual, this essentially aimed to limit immigration of non-whites and keep the Anglo-Saxon stock pure. Historically, however, all such previous aggressive keep-away stances were eventually reversed as labor demands increased and the stock of potential immigrants from around the world kept mounting. Today, immigrants make up approximately 14% of all Americans.

The non-white population increased by 32% from 2000 to 2022 and, more importantly, it has grown to constitute almost two-fifths of the total US population. The numbers have grown fastest in states that historically have *not* had large numbers of Black residents. Race-ethnic minorities are responsible for *all* national growth at the current time (Lopez; Malismani, 2024). As shown in Table 2, some 83% of all "Blacks" were born in the US and the remaining 17% are foreign-born.

¹⁷ Will politics or policy win out at the border? 538 Politics Podcast. Available in: <https://abcnews.go.com/538/video/politics-policy-win-border-538-politics-podcast-106779894>. Accessed on: 26 May 2024.

¹⁸ For an exceptional analysis of the vacillating stances and generally racist American experience with immigration, cf. Porter (2024). This assessment served as basis for much of this section's overview of immigration in the USA.

TABLE 2
Black population in the USA, by race and nativity – 2022

Race and nativity	All	Non-Hispanic (%)		Hispanic (%)
		Single race	Multiracial	
Black population total	47,928,117	82.6	11.3	6.1
Nativity				
U.S. born	42,828,566	82.7	11.6	5.6
Foreign born	5,099,551	81.1	8.4	9.5

Source: Moslimani *et al.* (2024).

In this situation and under the influence of the loud anti-immigration hoopla that dominates the political news, recent immigration flows, especially illegal border crossings, were perceived as the most important problem for voters in a 2019 Gallup polling (Porter, 2024). Strident condemnations of the immigrant flow by politicians such as Trump and DeSantis have further whipped up xenophobia and made immigration the constant object of furious attacks by right-wingers. Trump was famously quoted as saying that the United States should take in immigrants only from “nice countries [...] instead of countries that are a disaster”. Contrary to Trump’s explicit preferences, European immigrants now make up only 10% of incoming immigrants (Porter, 2024). In the face of such politically loaded fanfare, even President Biden, who had earlier suggested granting of citizenship to millions of unauthorized immigrants, later favored shutting down the border. The topic evolved into a major issue in the 2024 election campaigns.

Impacts of birth control negativism

What impact has the pro-birth campaign and restriction of abortion actually had on fertility? Definitive information on short and long term impacts are sketchy, but it is clear that fertility and population growth rates have continued to decline in the USA during the recent period marked by negativism on birth control. Concerning the impact of the Dobbs decision against abortion, it apparently had the desired effect of increasing fertility in the short run, as described in a recent report by the Population Reference bureau: “Since the June 2022 Dobbs decision [...], states banning abortion have seen an increase in births [...] by an average of 2.3% in states with total abortion bans, equating to approximately 16,000 additional births [...] bans had the greatest effect in states where they resulted in increased driving distances to abortion providers [...]” PRB(2024).

However, it is worth noting that the same report observes that this increase might be a short-term occurrence. Other studies in Romania showed that this same pattern of increased fertility shortly after abortion bans, was soon reverted. Moreover, it is likely that the effect, in terms of additional births that resulted from abortion restrictions in the US, did *not* conform to the aspirations of white natalists or anti-immigration sectors. Indeed, they are more likely to have occurred among lower class and non-white people who have less means of accessing abortion clinics in other States. In other words, such restrictions

will actually have the opposite effect to the desired results, given the widespread difficulties involved in accessing reproductive health support by the poor. Indeed, it is astounding to observe that, due to inequities in access to contraception, two-fifths of all pregnancies in the United States during 2019 were unintended (CDC, 2023).

Despite having little practical effect on white fertility rates, the main thrust of the actions and influences of right-wing and WCN factions in this domain has achieved what has obviously become its main objective – enormous political and economic mobilization. To retain their power, “conservative” leaders with roots in this white racist strategy continue to gerrymander political districts and oppose immigration. Rather than becoming more inclusive over time, “the Republican party doubled down on white Christian nostalgia in order to mobilize its base and appeal to nativism in order to expand its base” (Gorski; Perry, 2022, p. 106). In this context, Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan might have been more appropriately labelled as “Make America White Again”.

Trump’s 2016 presidential victory is often associated by pundits with a perceived threat of economic hardship in the lower and working class populations. However, racial and gender attitudes, as well as status threats to white Americans’ sense of dominant group status, can be posited to have been even more important. Trump was perceived as a savior leading the fight against globalism and its nefarious impacts, including immigration. “Both growing domestic racial diversity and globalization contributed to a sense that white Americans are under siege by these engines of change [...] racial and gender attitudes were found to factor more heavily in 2016 voter preferences than in 2012 preferences. Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote” (Mutz, 2018, E4337).

The energetic anti-immigration stances of Trump and his followers fit directly into the mainstream of campaigns aimed at maintaining white supremacy. The repercussions of these ultra-conservative movements thus go far beyond the attempt to manipulate birth control. Opposition to immigration, disregard of environmental problems, threats to civil rights and democracy, vaccine negationism, obstruction of voting access, opposition to gun control and the insurrection of January 6, 2021 are all embedded in the fabric of white supremacist and ultra-conservative beliefs that justify violence. In the words of Gorski and Perry (2022, p. 8) – “As white Christians approach minority status, white Christian nationalists are starting to turn against American democracy”.

This complex and varied combination of factors in opposition to birth control has been magnified by conservative influencers on social media who conflate birth control with abortion and connect it with negative health outcomes. Recent attempts to reduce access to contraceptive methods are an extension of efforts by fringes of the political right to curb access to emergency contraception, which many consider as abortion-reducing medication (Ramirez, 2024).

Such perspectives are being taken to another level through the radical views of contemporary tech billionaires such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, whose posts on social

media influence many millions of people (Mollman, 2023). Their message is basically that “we need more humans”. Thus, Musk has famously tweeted that – “population collapse due to low birth rates is a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming”. Along these lines, he suggests that fertility rates need to climb in order to amplify market sizes, inspire faster technological change, and promote the colonization of other planets. At the same time, Musk spouts baseless arguments concerning the negative effects of birth control: “Hormonal birth control makes you fat, doubles risk of depression and triples risk of suicide. This is the clear scientific consensus, but very few people seem to know it”.¹⁹ None of these correlations have any sort of basis in science.

Summary and conclusion

This paper has described two starkly different phases of values, assessments and actions regarding birth control that have deeply affected the conception and implementation of population growth policies. It corroborates Linda Gordon’s prescient observation that the meanings of reproduction control are socially and politically constituted and they express the (unstable) balances of political power between different social groups (Gordon, 2002, Preface, Kindle Location 85). The narrative presented here refers primarily to the experience of the U.S. in controlling other people’s fertility, as well as its own recent experience in promoting (white Christian) fertility. Nevertheless, the recent trend towards right-wing authoritarianism and its multiple impacts on the population question can be observed across a growing swath of countries.

Given the U.S.’s influence in world affairs, the impact of its political and geopolitical concerns at different moments in time tend to resonate across the globe, including in the area of reproductive health. After World War II, the demographic transition theory, based on the fundamental structural changes that had led to slow fertility decline in developed countries, was quickly abandoned in favor of a hands-on approach based on the massive supply of birth control information and methods. This strategy was fueled by the geopolitical interests of the U.S., which strove to prevent and counter the rapid spread of communism in poor and high-fertility countries. Demographers played a major role in supplying the justifications and data to implement this strategy fully across the developing world. However, the eventual clash between science and action helped abbreviate the life span of this aggressive approach. Nevertheless, it had a significant long-term impact on the adoption of contraception and the fertility rate of most developing countries.

Over the last two decades, concern with population growth and contraception has again become a major political issue, particularly for the USA, as differential reproduction patterns among diverse population groups are perceived as threats to the purported longstanding rights and privileges of white Christians. Demographic information showing higher growth

¹⁹ Elon Musk (the billionaire owner of X and unmarried father of 11) stated this on X at 4:10PM, February 16, 2024. This had been seen by 43.4 million viewers as of April 26, 2024.

rates among Black and Brown people helped spawn the formation of a coalition labelled as White Christian Supremacists (or White Christian Nationalism) that has essentially become a right-wing reaction to an alleged loss of privileges. Religion, race, sexism, and power have become major factors in delineating a strategy grounded on opposition to abortion and depreciation of contraception, apparently in the hope of stimulating a relative increase in the birth rates of white women. Such positions have received further support from natalist billionaires who pin their hopes for humanity on a new population explosion.

This entire situation must be framed within the context of global political tendencies, wherein ultra-nationalism, guided by the pursuit of self-interest and the rejection of multilateralism, is gaining precedence in a number of key countries. The ramifications of this movement extend well beyond the issue of birth control, having influenced increases in violence and the election of hard-right politicians to power, as well as the rejection of immigration - all trends threatening to extinguish democracy itself. It has even favored a return to some revisionist's belief (Simon, 1981) that population growth stimulates economic growth.

Similar trends toward political takeovers by ultra-reactionary forces in several European countries are shaking the global foundations of democratic structures and disrupting the human development gains that have characterized Western civilization since the end of World War II. The unspoken premises underlying these movements is that extreme nationalism, racism and the rejection of the rule of law will somehow favor more economic growth - partly by rejecting concerns with environmental degradation and social equity. Such postures directly confront the historical experience demonstrating that, since WWII, democracy has been a requisite for long-term economic prosperity and social advancement (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2014; Olson, 1993).

Of particular concern is the fact that these movements ignore or deny the catastrophic trajectory of critical environmental issues facing our planet.²⁰ The challenges that are evolving as a result of rapid fertility decline are undoubtedly real and they will have significant implications for the environment as well as for global peace. They will have to be dealt with by individual countries as well as by the global community. But, as witnessed in the above narrative, a myopic view on the need for population and economic growth, steeped in nationalism and racism, overrides the comprehensive demands of long-term sustainability.

Ideally, the measures to be taken should be in accordance with a positive appraisal of diversity, with a new measure of solidarity between populations and countries, as well as respect of human rights within the pursuit of sustainability. Refutation of inequity and inequality should temper increasing nationalistic politics and their pursuit of economic

²⁰ J.D. Vance, Vice-Presidential candidate in the 2024 American elections, describes people who avoid having children because of climate change threats as "bizarre". Russian President Vladimir Putin is taking steps to promote larger families through monetary incentives as well as the limitation of abortion and contraceptive services.

growth at all costs. Truculent anti-immigration and racist policies do not benefit either sending or receiving countries.²¹

Regarding population dynamics in general, a key issue for the future will be the recognition and administration of huge migratory movements that will be enhanced by growing inequality, conflicts and environmental disasters at the global level. Without serious attention to the need for humanitarian regulation and compassionate administration of such movements, world peace will become nearly impossible. Finally, the propagation or restriction of birth control cannot resolve the global critical threats that are being multiplied in the short term, but the unavailability of reproductive health services portends the loss of basic human rights as well as the aggravation of all environmental challenges. Thus:

Providing quality reproductive health services to millions in need is an obligation from the standpoint of individual rights. It is also essential for the long-term relationship between population and sustainability [...] other types of initiatives need to be supported by newer and stronger forms of multilateral actions concerning consumption, economic growth, inequality and the very pursuit of happiness within a much improved context of global governance (Martine, 2022, p. 31).

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²¹ A recent and convincing analysis of the advantages of immigration can be found in Goldstone (2024).

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