

The problem with pronatalism: Pushing baby booms to boost economic growth amounts to a Ponzi scheme

August 12 2024, by Emily Klancher Merchant and Win Brown



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In the face of [shrinking populations](#), many of the world's major economies are trying to engineer higher birth rates.

Policymakers from [South Korea](#), [Japan](#) and [Italy](#), for example, have all adopted so-called "[pronatalist](#)" [measures](#) in the belief that doing so will defuse a demographic time bomb. These range from tax breaks and housing benefits for couples who have children to subsidies for fertility treatments.

But here's the thing: Low—or, for that matter high—birth rates are not a problem in and of themselves. Rather, they are perceived as a cause of or contributor to other problems: With low birth rates come [slow economic growth](#) and a [top-heavy age structure](#); high birth rates mean [resource depletion](#) and [environmental degradation](#).

Moreover, birth rates are [notoriously hard to change](#), and efforts to do so often become coercive, even if they don't start out that way.

As [demographers and population experts](#), we also know that such efforts are usually unnecessary. Manipulating fertility is an inefficient means of solving social, economic and environmental problems that are almost always better addressed more directly through regulation and redistribution.

A new pronatalist movement

According to the most likely scenario, [the world's population](#) will peak around the beginning of 2084 at about 10.3 billion people—approximately 2 billion more than we have today. After that, the global population is projected to stop growing and will likely shrink to just below 10.2 billion by 2100.

Yet many countries are already ahead of this curve, with [populations predicted to decline](#) in the next decade. And that has prompted concerns among some nations' economists over economic growth and old-age support. In some instances, it has also prompted nativist fears about

"replacement" through immigration.

As of 2019, 55 countries—mainly in Asia, Europe and the Middle East—had [explicit policies aimed at raising birth rates](#).

The U.S. does have [a child tax credit](#) but no policies directly aimed at raising birth rates, according to the U.N., which [tracks population policies worldwide](#).

Even so, in recent years, a [new pronatalist movement](#) has emerged in the U.S., drawing heavily from a range of ideologies, including racism, nativism, neoliberalism, effective altruism and longtermism.

Among the voices pushing for pronatalist policies are [Elon Musk](#) and influencers [Malcolm and Simone Collins](#), who warn that the human population [is on the verge of collapse](#).

Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump [has indicated he wants incentives for women to have more babies](#), and his running mate, JD Vance, has been a rare voice on the floor of Congress [warning of a U.S. baby bust](#).

New babies to solve old problems

The pronatalist movement is, we believe, inherently misguided. It is premised on the belief that ever-larger populations are needed to spur economic growth, which alone will lift individuals and communities out of poverty.

But absent direct state intervention, this [additional wealth generally accrues to those with established higher incomes](#), often at the expense of workers and consumers.

Seen this way, pronatalism is a [Ponzi scheme](#). It relies on new entrants to produce returns for earlier investors, with the burdens [falling most heavily on women](#), who are responsible for the bulk of childbearing and child-rearing, often without adequate medical care or affordable child care.

Government intervention in reproduction

For nearly a century, governments have used access to birth control and abortion as levers with which to try to adjust their population growth rates, but usually in the other direction: making birth control and abortion more widely available—and often pushing them on people who wanted more children—[when birth rates were deemed too high](#). Such policies were implemented in numerous countries between the 1960s and 1990s to stimulate economic growth, with [China's one-child policy](#) the most extreme example. Ironically, while high birth rates were [once seen as a barrier to economic development](#), today low birth rates are seen as a drag on [economic growth](#).

Advocates of efforts to reduce birth rates have pointed to the beneficial effects of family planning services. But critics warn that [instrumentalizing reproductive health care](#)—offering it as a means to the end of slowing population growth rather than an end in itself—makes it vulnerable to being taken away if population growth is deemed too slow.

Indeed, several of the countries that now restrict access to [birth control](#) and abortion, including South Korea and Iran, once promoted them in order to reduce their birth rate.

In 1968, the [International Conference on Human Rights](#) declared that couples had the right to decide the number and spacing of their children. At that time, the growth of the world's population was at its all-time high of just over 2% per year.

But if humans have the inherent right to control their reproductive lives, it follows that governments need to protect that right when birth rates are low as well as when they are high. It is, in our view, incumbent on policymakers to use other interventions to reach economic and social goals.

And these more direct approaches can be effective. For example, in the U.S., we saw child poverty cut in half during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of a higher tax credit, [only to return to pre-COVID-19 levels](#) when Congress allowed the supplemental credit to lapse.

Little effect on birth rates

To date, pronatalist policies have largely focused on subsidizing the cost of child-rearing and helping parents remain in the labor force.

While enormously beneficial to parents and children, such policies have had little effect on birth rates. For example, Italy's [2020 Family Act](#)—a comprehensive program that provides family allowances, increases paternity leave, supplements the salaries of mothers and subsidizes child care—has not stemmed the country's [falling fertility rate](#).

As fertility rates continue to drop, and as popular anxiety about population collapse heightens, governments are beginning to take more draconian measures. Along with promoting assisted reproductive technologies, [South Korea banned abortion in 2005](#). China's State Council recently announced [the goal of "reducing non-medically necessary abortions,"](#) supposedly to promote "women's development."

Around the same time, [Iran severely restricted access](#) to abortion, sterilization and contraception for the express purpose of increasing the birth rate.

Borrowing from the future

Those who deny racist, nativist or religious intentions in promoting pronatalism—especially in the U.S.—usually advocate for it on economic grounds.

Their reasoning is that declining fertility produces a top-heavy age structure. In the U.S. context, this means a large number of elderly people collecting Social Security relative to the number of working people paying into the system.

Experts have been projecting the [insolvency of Social Security](#) for decades. But the truth is that the U.S. does not need more babies to keep Social Security afloat. Rather, policymakers can increase the size of the working-age population through pro-immigration policies and can increase the amount of money flowing into Social Security by lifting the [income cap on contributions](#).

Governments can provide education, contraception and other health care services, not because doing so will reduce birth rates, but because these are vital components of a progressive, fair-minded society. And they can provide parental leave, child tax credits and high-quality child care, not because doing so will increase [birth rates](#) but because it will help the children who are born get the best possible start in life.

Seen through this lens, pronatalism offers a hollow-ringing promise that simply having more people will solve social and economic problems faced by a nation's current population. But that amounts to borrowing from the future to pay the debts of the past.

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Citation: The problem with pronatalism: Pushing baby booms to boost economic growth amounts to a Ponzi scheme (2024, August 12) retrieved 14 August 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2024-08-problem-pronatalism-baby-booms-boost.html>

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