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The Changing Educational Gradient in Non-Traditional Attitudes Toward Family Behaviour: A Cross-National Study

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Abstract

Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory highlights how secularisation and individualism disrupted traditional family behaviours, e.g., high fertility and lifelong universal marriage, in Western countries. While non-traditional family behaviours appeared in Nordic countries first, later diffusing to other regions, variations in approval across educational groups and historical time remain underexplored. This study examines approval levels towards non-traditional behaviours—voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, parental divorce with children under 12, and mothers working with children under 3—across sociopolitical regimes in Europe, education levels, and historical time. European Social Survey data (2006, 2018) from 21 countries revealed different approval depending on the family behaviour. Approval was widespread for nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and mothers working, but voluntary childlessness and parental divorce were less accepted. Country differences were not always as predicted by SDT theory: Nordic countries showed the highest approval for all non-traditional family behaviours, followed by Southern Europe, while Western and Eastern Europe were more resistant. Approval of maternal employment and parental divorce varied by education, with higher approval among the highly educated. Regarding historical changes, in Southern Europe the initially higher approval among the highly educated for unmarried cohabitation and non-marital childbearing in 2006 had levelled out by 2018.

Keywords*:* Non-traditional family attitudes; Educational gradient; Second Demographic Transition (SDT)

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, families have become more diverse. It is more uncertain whether a couple will have any children, and if they do, how many (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Albertini and Brini 2021; Balbo et al. 2013). Additionally, the sequencing of events, such as marriage and childbirth, has become less standardised (Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010, 2012). The underlying causes of these changes are the subject of ongoing debate. Some theorists have emphasized economic factors, including the increasing economic independence of women (Becker 1993; Oppenheimer 1977) and the increasing economic uncertainties couples face (Alderotti et al. 2021; Blossfeld et al. 2005; Vignoli et al. 2020). Others, including the proponents of the second demographic transition (SDT) theory have emphasised ideational change, increased progressivism, individualism and secularisation (Lesthaeghe 2020; Van De Kaa 1987). SDT theory suggests that shifts in values, from traditional to more individualistic, underlie the decline in birth rates, postponement of marriage and childbirth, rise of non-marital fertility and voluntary childlessness.

According to SDT theory, increased education has played a pivotal role in the diffusion of these new values, with highly educated individuals leading the shift towards less traditional, more individualistic, family attitudes and behaviours (Sobotka 2008). However, there is now clear evidence in many Western countries that demographic behaviours associated with the SDT are more widespread among lower-educated individuals. Over time, these groups have increasingly adopted behaviours such as non-marital childbearing and long-term cohabitation, while still maintaining more traditional family values (Sobotka 2008). may stem from involuntary disadvantaged circumstances – such as economic uncertainty – rather than from less traditional values and attitudes (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). For instance, individuals with lower education levels are more likely to have children within cohabitation, as a result of their less standardised lifestyles and a reluctance to enter financially committed long-term arrangements (Wood et al. 2014). In contrast, highly educated individuals are more likely to postpone marriage and childbearing to pursue their studies and enter the labour market, but tend to

follow a more traditional sequence, with births occurring within marriage (Lappegård et al. 2018; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010).

Prior research examining the diffusion of the SDT across countries and subpopulations has predominantly focused on differences in actual behaviour, rather than on differences in attitudes. The literature on cross-country differences in the educational and temporal gradients of non-traditional family attitudes and norms—based on empirical evidence from nationally representative samples—remains relatively limited. This is perhaps surprising, given that SDT theory emphasises how ideational change initially spread within specific countries and educational groups—namely, the Nordic European countries and the highly educated—and gradually diffused to other segments of the population over subsequent decades. Studying attitudes directly should offer a more valid lens into the cultural shifts underpinning demographic behaviours.

Brzozowska (2021) and Martín-García et al. (2023) are focusing on cross-country variations in ideals and attitudes. Brzozowska (2021) found a positive correlation between attitudinal and behavioural indices of SDT across 23 European countries, although this correlation varied by historical period. Hofäcker and Chaloupková (2014) used data from the 2006 European Social Survey to investigate how family life courses correspond to cross-cohort changes in socially established norms regarding family transitions. They found that changes in family-related norms often precede actual demographic behaviour, but the extent and speed of these changes vary across European countries. Lappegård et al. (2018) found evidence to suggest that individualistic social norms and attitudes at the country level were more influential than structural economic conditions in explaining cross-national variation in fertility behaviours. However, all of these studies fall short in several key respects: they do not cover a wide range of countries or do not allow for meaningful comparisons across sociopolitical regimes in Europe; they focus on a narrow set of attitudes and behaviours; and they often limit their analysis to specific demographic groups, such as men or particular generations. More broadly, few studies to date have examined how ideational and attitudinal shifts differ across educational groups, or how these

differences—the educational gradient in ideals and attitudes—have evolved over time. This paper therefore takes a fresh look at the social stratification of family-related norms and values by examining, in greater depth, whether shifts in non-traditional family attitudes have occurred across different educational groups, and how these patterns vary across European countries. We address the following research questions: (1) *Are there differences in non-traditional family attitudes across countries (grouped by sociopolitical regimes that are consistent with the original SDT theory of progression)?* (2) *Are there differences in non-traditional family attitudes across educational levels, and do these educational differences vary across sociopolitical regimes?* (3) *Have educational differences in non-traditional family attitudes varied over time, and does this change vary according to sociopolitical regime?*

We offer a novel contribution to the literature on family change by shifting the analytical focus from behaviours to attitudes. Such attitudinal data can reveal cultural and normative shifts that may not yet be visible in behaviours—especially in contexts where structural constraints limit individuals' ability to act on their values and preferences. Leveraging comparative data across diverse European contexts and educational strata, our research not only maps the diffusion of non-traditional family attitudes but also scrutinizes the extent to which observed demographic patterns are consistent with genuine ideational change (as posited by SDT theory).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Non-traditional family behaviours and the attitude–behaviour nexus

SDT theory identifies several non-traditional family behaviours that diverge from the historically dominant model of early and universal marriage, high fertility, and gender-specialized roles (Lesthaeghe 1995, 2010). These include voluntary childlessness (which represents the decoupling of marriage, sexuality, and parenthood); unmarried cohabitation (reflecting the shift away from marriage as the dominant form of partnership); non-marital childbearing (which illustrates the decoupling of marriage and

parenthood); parents' divorce (which reflects both increased union instability and changing family structures). In terms of gender roles, increases in mother's full-time employment when children are young signal a weakening of traditional gender specialisation in caregiving.

The extent to which individuals approve of such non-traditional behaviours reflects the acceptance of shifting family norms and values. Studies linking demographic behaviours to psychological mechanisms provide a conceptual bridge between non-traditional family attitudes and behaviours, positing that behaviours often reflect underlying values, norms, and ideals (e.g., Ajzen 1991; Bachrach and Morgan 2013; Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011). And so, changes to family attitudes could very well precede behavioural shifts, which aligns with SDT theory's proposed role of changing values and cultural shifts in demographic change (Lesthaeghe 2010). While the attitude-behaviour link is conceptualised differently across these frameworks, a shared idea is apparent: attitudes are generally seen as distal predictors of behaviour. However, because behaviour is often contingent on social, economic, and institutional opportunity structures, attitudes may not always translate directly into action. Even when certain attitudes are internalised, individuals may face barriers to acting on them—whether due to structural constraints (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011) or perceived low self-efficacy and controllability (Ajzen 1991). This caveat aligns with the "pattern of disadvantage" argument (PoD; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010), which suggests lower-educated individuals may exhibit behaviours associated with the SDT theory not necessarily out of ideological alignment (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011), but due to constrained life circumstances. Two theoretical frameworks—the Cognitive-Social Model (Bachrach and Morgan 2013) and the Theory of Conjunctural Action (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011)—further suggest possible feedback loops between behaviour and attitudes. One loop involves individuals reshaping their own attitudes through their own experience, especially when reflecting on their actions within their opportunity context. Another involves societal behaviours feeding back into individual attitudes—for example, widespread childlessness may reshape cultural schemas, making such attitudes

more acceptable or normative. Such feedback could, in principle, support less sequential macro-level change than posited by the SDT theory.

2.2 Shifting patterns in family behaviours across Europe

In this section, we use published statistics from 2006 to 2018 (the timeframe considered in this paper) to outline key shifts and differences in family behaviours across Europe. This data includes the former socialist states in Eastern Europe, which featured less prominently in the original SDT formulation (Van De Kaa 1987). Starting with trends in marriage, fertility, and childbearing (Figure 1, panels a–d), we observe a general "postponement transition"—with delayed union formation and parenthood over time—though regional differences persist. In Western and Northern Europe (e.g., Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and France), as well as Southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Spain, and Portugal), ages at marriage and first birth tend to be high (Figure 1, panel a and panel b), with key family transitions increasingly occurring at age 30 or older. In contrast, Eastern Europe (e.g., Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland) shows younger ages at marriage and first birth.

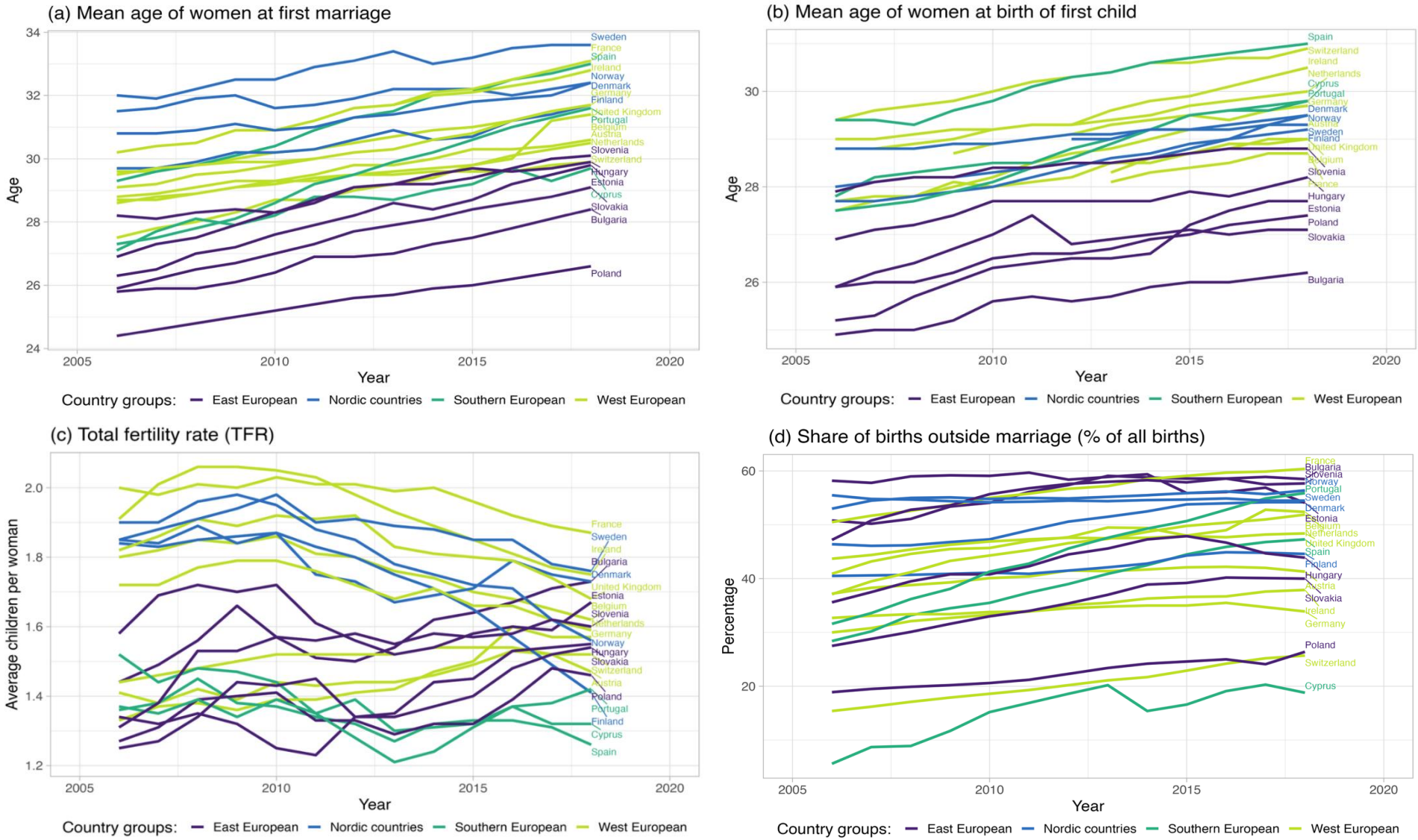
Fertility rates have generally declined across Europe, with regional nuances (Figure 1, panel c): initially stable or slightly declining rates in Northern and parts of Western Europe, followed by more recent drops in countries such as France, Sweden, and Norway; persistently low fertility (with some fluctuations) in Eastern Europe; and the lowest levels in Southern Europe. The share of children born outside marriage rose steadily between 2006 and 2018, though the pace and extent of change varied widely by country and region (Figure 1, panel d). Non-marital births are common in countries like France, Sweden, and Norway, while patterns elsewhere in Western, Southern, and Eastern Europe are more varied—for example, higher rates in Belgium, Slovenia, Portugal, and the UK, and lower rates in Switzerland, Poland, and Cyprus.

Turning to maternal employment and childcare enrolment (Figure 2, panels a–c), we observe an overall increase in maternal employment across most European countries, particularly in those that

expanded family-friendly policies and childcare services (e.g., Germany; Chirkova 2019). Nonetheless, a degree of polarization is apparent: Nordic and Eastern European countries maintain relatively high maternal employment, especially where welfare support is strong (e.g., Sweden, Denmark), or where public childcare systems remained intact or were revitalized after the post-socialist transition (e.g., Slovenia; Javornik 2016). In contrast, full-time maternal employment is comparatively lower in many Western European countries but not part-time employment (Figure 2, panel a). Southern Europe experienced slower growth, with notable differences across countries. Portugal stands out with relatively high maternal employment and higher rates of enrolment in formal childcare, whereas rates in Spain are more moderate—perhaps reflecting greater public willingness in Portugal to invest in work-family reconciliation policies compared to Spain (Doblytė and Tejero 2021).

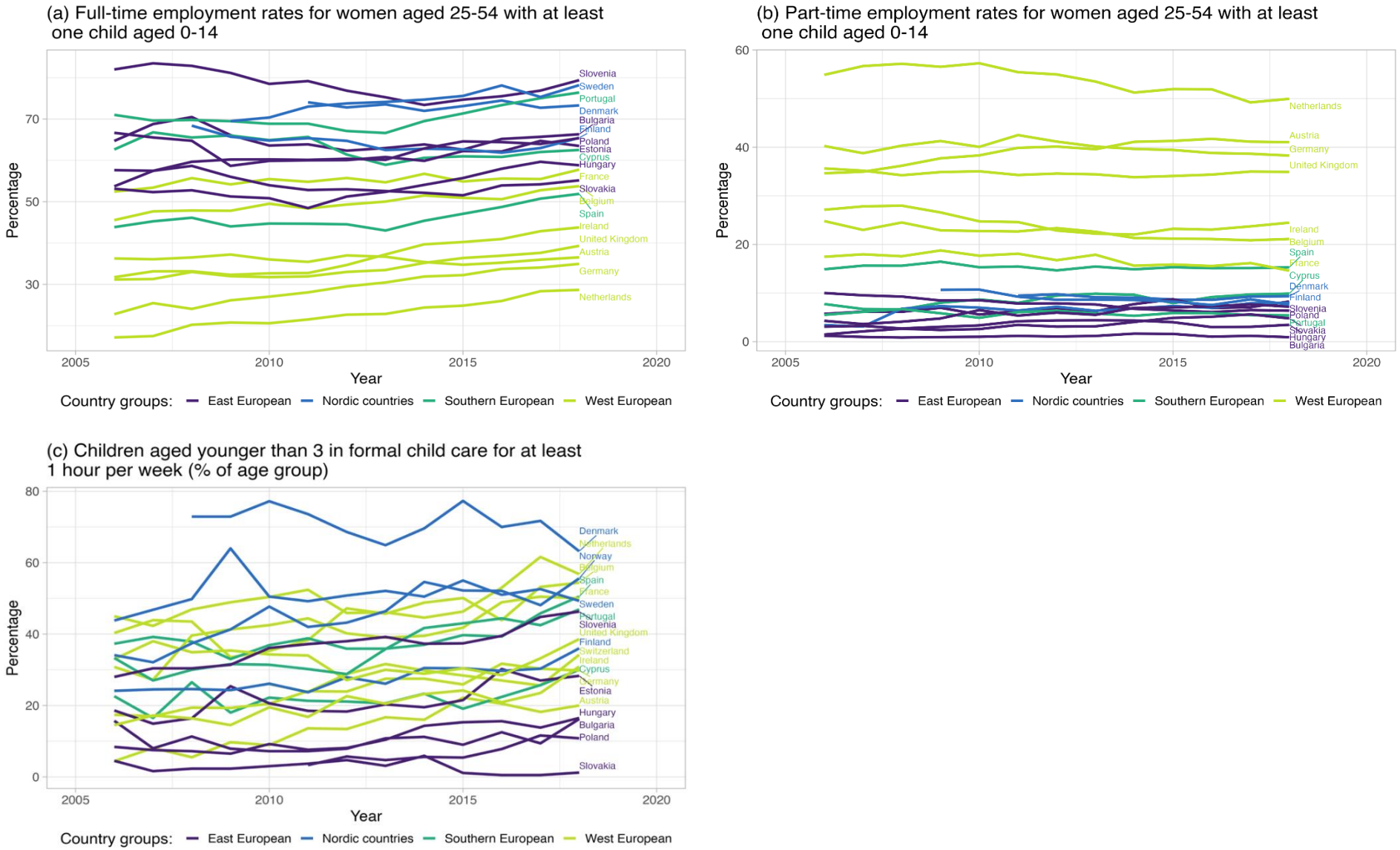
In sum, key shifts in family behaviour have continued to occur at different speeds and with varying intensity across Europe, consistent with a previously observed pattern of "convergence towards diversity" (Billari and Wilson 2001). In other words, there is a convergence in the direction of change (toward more non-traditional family behaviours), but diversity in how and when these changes manifest across countries (and social groups). Scholars have emphasised that distinct historical, cultural, institutional, and policy influences all help account for cross-national differences in non-traditional family behaviour (Esping-Andersen 1999; Lesthaeghe 2010; Mayer 2009).

Figure 1: Trends in marriage, fertility, and nonmarital childbearing in Europe



Source: Eurostat and UNECE Database (Panel a), Eurostat (Panel b and Panel c); OECD Family Database (Panel d). All times series span from 2006 to 2018 (with potential country-specific missing values)

Figure 2: Trends in maternal employment and childcare enrolment across Europe



Source: OECD Family Database (Panel a and Panel b) and Eurostat Database (Panel c). All times series span from 2006 to 2018 (with potential country-specific missing values).

2.3 Do non-traditional family attitudes vary across sociopolitical regimes in Europe?

A useful heuristic tool for classifying the "convergence to diversity" of non-traditional family behaviours within Europe is to identify sociopolitical regimes. These regimes allow for the grouping of different countries that share strong similarities in the sociopolitical conditions Indeed, the sociopolitical contexts act as opportunity structures shaping non-traditional family behaviours, which, in turn, reflect distinct historical and cultural influences. Therefore, the extent to which non-traditional family attitudes and behaviours are embraced is likely similar among countries within the same sociopolitical regime and relatively different across distinct sociopolitical regimes.

Recent research by Zimmermann et al. (2024) has shown that sociopolitical regimes can effectively delineate patterns of differentiation and de-standardization in family life courses across Europe. We adopt the same sociopolitical regimes (with minor modifications) to map intra-European differences in non-traditional family attitudes and behaviours. Notably, these sociopolitical regimes correspond closely with the country groupings identified in the original SDT framework, which are based on how quickly and extensively SDT-related behaviours have spread (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007). It is also unsurprising that countries within sociopolitical regimes are geographically proximate, as spatial diffusion is a key component of the SDT theory (Vitali et al. 2015; Vitali and Billari 2017). Notably, these sociopolitical regimes correspond closely with the country groupings identified in the original SDT framework, which are based on how quickly and extensively SDT-related behaviours have spread

The *Nordic countries* (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) are often considered SDT "forerunners", exhibiting low marriage rates and high rates of children born outside of marriage. Many couples cohabit before or instead of marriage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). These countries are also characterised by high gender equality and strong and progressive welfare states which support a dual-career model—with generous parental leave, subsidised childcare, and work-life balance policies.

There are generally favourable attitudes toward women's participation in the workforce and widespread gender-egalitarian values (Guetto et al. 2015), as well as high tolerance for non-traditional behaviours such as voluntary childlessness, unmarried cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing—except in Finland (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014). There is also strong support and legal protection for non-traditional family forms (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands) is often considered an early adopter of the SDT, with the Netherlands, Belgium, and France being closer to the Nordic countries, Germany and Switzerland having similarly low fertility and delayed family formation as the Nordic countries but being less progressive on gender roles (e.g., stronger male-breadwinner norms). Ireland and the UK have seen changes in non-traditional family behaviours later than the Nordic countries, but with high variation (Ireland has historically been more conservative; Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Regarding non-traditional family attitudes, Western Europe generally exhibits heterogeneity in attitudes. Using the European Values Study (EVS) data, Guetto et al. (2015) found that the liberalisation of attitudes toward women's gender roles—particularly in the context of family and work—between 1990 and 2008 was less pronounced in Germany and the United Kingdom compared to Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. Another cross-sectional study suggests that the UK, the Netherlands, and Switzerland exhibit levels of tolerance for non-traditional behaviours comparable to those of the Nordic countries. In contrast, scepticism towards these behaviours is stronger in Austria and Germany, while Ireland shows notably lower tolerance for non-marital childbearing (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014).

Southern Europe (Cyprus, Spain, and Portugal) can be described as late adopters of the SDT behaviours. Low fertility and delayed family formation are evident, but unmarried cohabitation and nonmarital births remain lower due to strong family-oriented cultures and Catholic influence (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). The dual-career mode is weakly supported by policies; childcare availability

and workplace flexibility are limited (particularly compared to the Nordic countries or Western Europe), making it difficult for women to balance work and family. Traditional gender roles—with women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners—remain more entrenched, and ideational shifts toward gender equality have been slower to diffuse than in the Nordic countries or Western Europe (Guetto et al. 2015). Despite growing societal changes—such as gradual shifts in public attitudes toward gender equality and family diversity—there is overall weak institutional support for and lower acceptance of non-traditional family forms such as voluntary childlessness, unmarried cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014).

Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia) can also be described as late adopters of the SDT, where SDT trends were delayed due to socialist regimes that prioritised marriage and fertility (Sobotka 2008). Following the post-communist transition, there was a sudden drop in fertility, rise in nonmarital cohabitation, and postponement of marriage—aligning with SDT, but often driven by economic instability rather than cultural shifts (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011). This regime is notably heterogeneous. Cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing are more common in countries like Estonia, Slovenia and Bulgaria, but remain relatively rare in Poland and Slovakia (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021), reflecting religious influences. Policy support for the dual-career model also varies: Estonia and Slovenia have relatively strong work-family policies, whereas Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary favour the male breadwinner model (Ferrarini and Sjöberg 2010). Poland and Hungary have also actively pushed back against non-traditional family attitudes and emphasise traditional family roles (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). As recently as 2006, Eastern Europe exhibited the lowest tolerance —or even outright rejection— toward non-traditional family behaviours such as voluntary childlessness, unmarried cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014).

Given that the spread of non-traditional behaviours follows different patterns across European sociopolitical regimes, we hypothesise that there is a gradient in the approval of non-traditional family

behaviours across sociopolitical regimes, too. Specifically, our first hypothesis (H1) is: "*The approval for non-traditional family behaviours will be highest in Nordic countries, moderate in Western Europe, and lowest in Southern and Eastern Europe.*"

2.4 Do educational differences in non-traditional family attitudes vary across sociopolitical regimes in Europe?

Theory and prior research suggest that non-traditional family attitudes may vary not only across European sociopolitical regimes but also within them—particularly across educational groups. According to SDT theory, the cultural shift from "traditional" to "non-traditional" family attitudes began among the highly educated. On one hand, this group was more frequently exposed to progressive ideologies—often through universities—and more likely to critically question traditional family behaviours (Lesthaeghe 2010). This exposure fostered greater emphasis on self-actualisation, individual autonomy, and other post-materialist values (Van De Kaa 1987). On the other hand, the highly educated typically enjoy a level of economic security that enables them to make life choices—such as not marrying or not having children—based on personal fulfilment rather than traditional expectations. Additionally, their greater cultural capital may facilitate the gradual diffusion of these non-traditional attitudes to other social groups.

The gradual, top-to-bottom diffusion across educational strata is a key mechanism in explaining the cultural shift toward post-materialist values that emphasise individual autonomy, self-actualization, and gender equality. Importantly, SDT theory assumes that once such values take hold, they are unlikely to be reversed. Although the diffusion process is expected to continue until it reaches a point of broad societal saturation—where educational differences in family behaviour are minimised, though not necessarily eliminated—, the original formulation of the theory does not specify a clearly defined endpoint (Lesthaeghe 1995; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007; Van De Kaa 1987). The theory was developed in the late 1980s to account for cultural and behavioural shifts that had already begun in the mid-1960s in Western Europe, including rising cohabitation, fertility postponement, and changing

gender roles. While the timing and pace of diffusion have varied significantly across European countries, the first two decades of the 21st century likely saw a broader dissemination of non-traditional family attitudes and behaviours. However, it remains unclear whether the SDT has fully diffused either across or within countries. In particular, the extent to which educational gradients in non-traditional family behaviour have diminished—or persist—continues to be an open empirical question.

Existing studies on non-traditional family behaviours find a positive educational gradient (Trimarchi and Van Bavel 2017; Van Winkle 2018; Vitali et al. 2015; for recent overviews of the literature see: Vasireddy et al. 2023; Kuang et al. 2025), which, in some European countries, has either remained stable or even strengthened across birth cohorts (Wood et al. 2014). If we assume that non-traditional family behaviours serve as prima facie evidence of non-traditional family attitudes, this suggests a similar positive educational gradient in family attitudes. However, research on this relationship is scarce, and findings are mixed. Some studies find that highly educated individuals tend to embrace less traditional values, compared to those with lower levels of education (Grunow and Evertsson 2019), while others report no consistent differences in traditional attitudes between educational groups (Martín-García et al. 2023). Grunow and Evertsson (2019) conducted interviews with 156 dual-earner couples from eight countries (Sweden, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Poland and the Czech Republic) to understand their views on sharing childcare and employment. These qualitative results at least indicate an educational gradient in traditional values regarding parenthood. Using data from the 2018 ESS for five European countries (Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK), Martín-García et al. (2023) found that while university education is positively correlated with the age considered ideal for fatherhood, there is no empirical support for a similar positive correlation between university education and the acceptance of male childlessness, male nonmarital childbearing, or full-time employment for fathers with small children. We will comprehensively examine the relationship between education and non-traditional family attitudes and test the assumed diffusion process of non-traditional family attitudes. Our second hypothesis (H2) is: "*The approval for non-traditional family behaviours*

will be highest among the highly educated individuals and lowest among the lower-educated individuals."

Economic theories emphasise the role of economic uncertainty—particularly among lower-educated groups—in shaping non-traditional family behaviours such as unmarried cohabitation or non-marital childbearing (Alderotti et al. 2021; Becker 1993; Blossfeld et al. 2005; McLanahan 2004; Mills and Blossfeld 2013; Vignoli et al. 2020). The PoD framework highlights how non-marital childbearing is more prevalent among those with lower educational attainment, despite initially emerging among the highly educated in most European contexts (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Further empirical evidence also supports a negative educational gradient in non-traditional family behaviours in different European countries (e.g., Lappegård et al. 2018; Zimmermann and Konietzka 2018). This arguably challenges the SDT assumption that the highly educated are the forerunners in embracing values such as individual autonomy, gender equality, and self-actualisation, which are thought to drive non-traditional family behaviours (Zaidi and Morgan 2017). However, the PoD perspective suggests that such behaviours may represent more deliberate, value-driven choices among the highly educated—enabled by economic security and liberal ideologies—whereas among the lower-educated, they may be more strongly shaped by structural constraints, such as precarious employment, rather than ideological shifts.

Linking this theoretical argument back to sociopolitical regimes, educational groups may experience varying access to resources and supportive policies depending on the regime (Mayer 2009; Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). In particular, when a sociopolitical regime is characterised by weak support for work-life balance, high income inequality, or strong religious and pronatalist traditions—such as those in Southern and Eastern Europe—traditional family attitudes may be reinforced among lower-educated groups. Conversely, in regimes characterised by strong support for work-life balance, low-income inequality, and high levels of secularisation—such as in the Nordic countries and parts of

Western Europe—non-traditional attitudes may already be widely accepted among the different educational groups, thereby weakening the educational gradient. We will comprehensively examine the educational gradient in non-traditional family attitudes across sociopolitical regimes. Our third hypothesis (H3) is*:* "*The educational gradient in the approval for non-traditional family behaviours is weakest in Nordic countries and strongest in Southern and Eastern Europe.*"

2.5 Do educational patterns of non-traditional family attitudes vary over historical time in Europe?

The original SDT theory suggested that most European countries would eventually converge toward new non-traditional demographic behaviours in a relatively unidirectional and universal manner (Van De Kaa 1987). SDT theory argued that once less traditional values are adopted, they tend to persist and continue shaping family behaviours over time. When accompanied by institutional changes—such as reforms in social policies or legal rights, for example—this shift may be further structurally reinforced, making a return to traditional family models increasingly improbable (Lesthaeghe 2010; Zaidi and Morgan 2017). In the cross-national context, countries that underwent the cultural shift and adopted SDT-related behaviours early—such as Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, or France—are considered forerunners, while others, particularly in Southern and parts of Eastern Europe, are seen as laggards. The diffusion of non-traditional family attitudes across countries is likely also influenced by structural and cultural factors such as economic development, religious influence, and social policies, which could further account for a gradual and uneven transition (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Over time, laggard countries are expected to converge with forerunners, leading to a broader societal embrace of non-traditional family attitudes (Van De Kaa 1987).

Criticisms towards the SDT involve particularly the unidirectional process of change and its failure to predict certain contemporary patterns of family change (Zaidi and Morgan 2017). Research on non-traditional family behaviour suggests, for example, that the cultural shift may stall or even

reverse in some contexts (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Sobotka 2008; Spéder 2023). Other studies contrast the top-down, unilinear SDT progression with a more complex and, to some extent, path-dependent process across countries or sociopolitical regimes (Hofäcker and Chaloupková 2014; Lappegård et al. 2018; Van Winkle 2018; Zimmermann et al. 2024).

Despite extensive research on non-traditional family behaviours, there remains a notable lack of studies examining the diffusion of non-traditional family attitudes over time across educational groups in Europe. The time dimension is essential for evaluating the SDT because it allows researchers to trace the pace, scope, and stability of attitudinal change. Therefore, we will examine the educational gradient in non-traditional family ideals over and across sociopolitical regimes. Our fourth hypothesis (H4) is: "*The educational gradient in the approval for non-traditional family attitudes has become smaller over time, across all country groups.*"

3. Data and method

3.1 Dataset and sample

Our data are from two rounds (2006 and 2018) of the European Social Survey (ESS), which included the specific 'Timing of Life' question module (ESS 2006, 2018). The ESS surveyed respondents aged 15 and older in more than 30 countries. We restricted the sample to countries included in both survey rounds; as a result, data for the Czech Republic, Croatia, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine were excluded because they only took part in one of the survey rounds. We considered individuals born between 1940 and 1999. Our final sample had information from 63,330 respondents in 21 countries (the sample size varies slightly due to missing values for specific dependent variables).

3.2 Study variables

We selected the following questions from the 'Timing of Life' question module to create outcome measures that refer to the approval of non-traditional family behaviour. All questions were administered using a split-ballot design, meaning that respondents were randomly asked to answer questions about women's or men's behaviours, irrespective of their own specific gender. The questions were: "*How much do you approve or disapprove if a man/woman: 1) …chooses never to have children?; 2) …lives with a partner without being married to her/him?; 3) …has a child with a partner he/she lives with but is not married to?; 4)…gets divorced while he/she has children aged under 12? 5) …has a full-time job while he/she has children aged under 3?".* The response alternatives on these Likert-type items ranged from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve". We recoded "strongly disapprove" and "disapprove" to "disapprove"; "neither approve nor disapprove" to "neutral"; and "strongly approve" and "approve" to "approve". In questions 1 to 4, we analysed the responses regarding both men's and women's behaviours collectively. Further analyses divided by the gender of the person's behaviour (Figure A 1–Figure A 3) tended to confirm this operationalisation decision, as the trends were similar for men's and women's behaviour. For question 5, we examined responses to men's and women's behaviours separately, given the typical gender inequalities in caring for young children. Although we considered women's full-time work with children aged under 3 to be a non-traditional family behaviour, we also reported results for men as a contrast group.

Our key variables of interest are sociopolitical regimes, education, and year of the interview. We consider four different sociopolitical regimes, with minor modifications based on Zimmermann et al. (2024), that correspond closely with country classifications according to their progression in the original SDT theory (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007): *Nordic countries* (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden); *Western Europe* (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, The Netherlands); *Southern Europe* (Cyprus, Spain, Portugal); and *Eastern Europe* (Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovak Republic). Education was re-coded as 'low' (ISCED 1–2),

'medium' (ISCED 3–4), and 'high' (ISCED 5–8). The third key independent variable is the year of the interview, categorised as 2006 and 2008. Control variables are birth cohort and sex of the respondent. In supplemental analyses, we also introduced religion to examine whether it confounded the relationship of interest; however, this was not the case (Figure A 1–Figure A 3).

3.3 Analytical approach

First, we examine the unadjusted distribution of responses to the Likert-type scale "disapprove", "neutral", or "approve" in each sociopolitical regime. Next, multinomial logistic regression models are used to estimate the likelihood of respondents selecting one of these three responses, with the results shown as predicted probabilities (Agresti 2007). To test H1 and H2, we regressed approval on the key independent variables: sociopolitical regimes, education, year of the interview, and controls. To test H3, we added the interaction between sociopolitical regimes and education. Finally, to test H4, we added a three-way interaction between sociopolitical regimes, education and year of the interview. Although the dependent variables are ordinal in nature, and a proportional-odds cumulative logit model is typically the standard approach for such outcomes, we opted for a multinomial logit specification. This choice reflects our assumption that the effects of covariates are not uniform across transitions between response categories (Brant tests confirmed the violation of proportionality). All results are weighted using the analysis weights provided by the ESS team. These weights correct for differential selection probabilities within each country, for nonresponse, for noncoverage, and for sampling error related to the four post-stratification variables. They also take into account differences in population size across countries (ESS n.d.).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive results

Table 1 reveals distinct patterns across sociopolitical regimes. Taking the different attitude questions together, approval of non-traditional family behaviours is consistently highest in the Nordic countries,

but cross-national differences vary according to particular aspects of behaviour. A notable finding regarding attitudes toward voluntary childlessness is the high proportion of neutral responses in Western Europe, exceeding 50%. In contrast, 45.5% of respondents in Eastern Europe disapprove of voluntary childlessness. Similar trends are observed for non-marital cohabitation and childbearing. In Western Europe, neutrality is the most common stance (45–47%), while other regimes show higher levels of approval. However, Eastern Europe also registers a considerable share of disapproval (almost 27%). Attitudes diverge more sharply when considering women's full-time employment or divorce while raising young children. Disapproval is high across most regimes—except in the Nordic countries—and often surpasses approval or neutrality. For example, in Eastern Europe, 39.1% disapprove of divorce with children under 12, compared to 30.8% neutral and 24.4% approving. Finally, Table 1 also presents the distribution of education across regimes, given its importance in our analysis. Medium-educated individuals constitute the largest group in most regimes (around 50%), except in Southern Europe, where low-educated individuals are most prevalent (54.9%).

Table 1: Weighted descriptive statistics for non-traditional family attitudes by sociopolitical regime 2006 and 2018 data combined.

Approval for non – traditional family behaviours	Regimes				Total
	Nordic countries	Western Europe	Southern Europe	Eastern Europe	
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Approval if a person chooses not have children					
Disapprove	306 (7.1%)	7,346 (16.5%)	1,890 (19.6%)	4,967 (45.5%)	14,508 (20.9%)
Neutral	1,207 (28.1%)	23,546 (53.0%)	3,536 (36.7%)	2,776 (25.5%)	31,065 (44.9%)
Agree	2,738 (63.7%)	13,156 (29.6%)	4,108 (42.7%)	2,763 (25.3%)	22,766 (32.9%)
Missing	49 (1.1%)	380 (0.9%)	92 (1.0%)	398 (3.7%)	919 (1.3%)
Approval if a person chooses to live unmarried with a partner					
Disapprove	197 (4.6%)	4,483 (10.1%)	1,064 (11.1%)	2,650 (24.3%)	8,394 (12.1%)
Neutral	767 (17.8%)	20,957 (47.2%)	2,596 (27.0%)	2,899 (26.6%)	27,219 (39.3%)
Agree	3,303 (76.8%)	18,725 (42.1%)	5,911 (61.4%)	5,134 (47.1%)	33,073 (47.8%)
Missing	32 (0.7%)	264 (0.6%)	54 (0.6%)	222 (2.0%)	571 (0.8%)
Approval if a person has a child with a partner not married to					
Disapprove	285 (6.6%)	6,285 (14.1%)	1,220 (12.7%)	2,466 (22.6%)	10,257 (14.8%)
Neutral	728 (16.9%)	19,896 (44.8%)	2,472 (25.7%)	2,910 (26.7%)	26,007 (37.6%)
Agree	3,255 (75.7%)	17,994 (40.5%)	5,890 (61.2%)	5,279 (48.4%)	32,418 (46.8%)
Missing	31 (0.7%)	253 (0.6%)	43 (0.5%)	249 (2.3%)	577 (0.8%)
Approval if a person gets divorced while the child is under 12					
Disapprove	740 (17.2%)	11,650 (26.2%)	2,664 (27.7%)	4,260 (39.1%)	19,315 (27.9%)
Neutral	1,153 (26.8%)	21,017 (47.3%)	3,142 (32.6%)	3,360 (30.8%)	28,672 (41.4%)
Agree	2,350 (54.7%)	9,730 (21.9%)	3,658 (38.0%)	2,662 (24.4%)	18,401 (26.6%)
Missing	56 (1.3%)	2,031 (4.6%)	161 (1.7%)	622 (5.7%)	2,870 (4.1%)
Approval if a woman has a full-time job while the child is under 3					
Disapprove	283 (13.2%)	7,896 (35.5%)	1,089 (22.1%)	1,580 (28.8%)	10,848 (31.2%)
Neutral	388 (18.1%)	7,770 (34.9%)	1,389 (28.2%)	1,308 (23.8%)	10,857 (31.2%)
Agree	1,450 (67.7%)	6,425 (28.9%)	2,399 (48.7%)	2,432 (44.3%)	12,706 (36.5%)
Missing	21 (1.0%)	152 (0.7%)	53 (1.1%)	166 (3.0%)	393 (1.1%)
Approval if a man has a full-time job while the child is under 3					
Disapprove	123 (5.7%)	1,756 (7.9%)	447 (9.5%)	398 (7.3%)	2,725 (7.9%)
Neutral	397 (18.4%)	7,262 (32.7%)	1,069 (22.8%)	802 (14.8%)	9,531 (27.7%)
Agree	1,613 (74.8%)	12,927 (58.3%)	3,124 (66.5%)	4,059 (74.9%)	21,724 (63.1%)
Missing	23 (1.1%)	238 (1.1%)	55 (1.2%)	157 (2.9%)	473 (1.4%)
Education					
Low	1,140 (26.5%)	13,899 (31.3%)	5,282 (54.9%)	3,407 (31.2%)	23,728 (34.3%)
Medium	2,031 (47.2%)	20,490 (46.1%)	2,182 (22.7%)	5,537 (50.8%)	30,241 (43.7%)
High	1,097 (25.5%)	9,777 (22.0%)	2,107 (21.9%)	1,896 (17.4%)	14,877 (21.5%)
Missing	30 (0.7%)	262 (0.6%)	55 (0.6%)	64 (0.6%)	411 (0.6%)

Note: Weighted statistics from ESS data. Attitudes were originally asked as Likert-type items ranging from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve". We recoded "strongly disapprove" and "disapprove" to "disapprove"; "neither approve nor disapprove" to "neutral"; and "strongly approve" and "approve" to "approve".

4.2 Regression results

4.2.1 Differences across sociopolitical regimes

Figure 3 presents the predicted probabilities of disapproval, neutrality, and approval for five non-traditional family behaviours—voluntary childlessness, non-marital cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, divorce while raising children under 12, and women's full-time employment when children are under 3— as well as men's full-time employment when children are under 3, by sociopolitical regime. These probabilities are derived from a multinomial logit model regressing the approval outcomes on sociopolitical regime and control variables, whose results are shown in Table A 1.

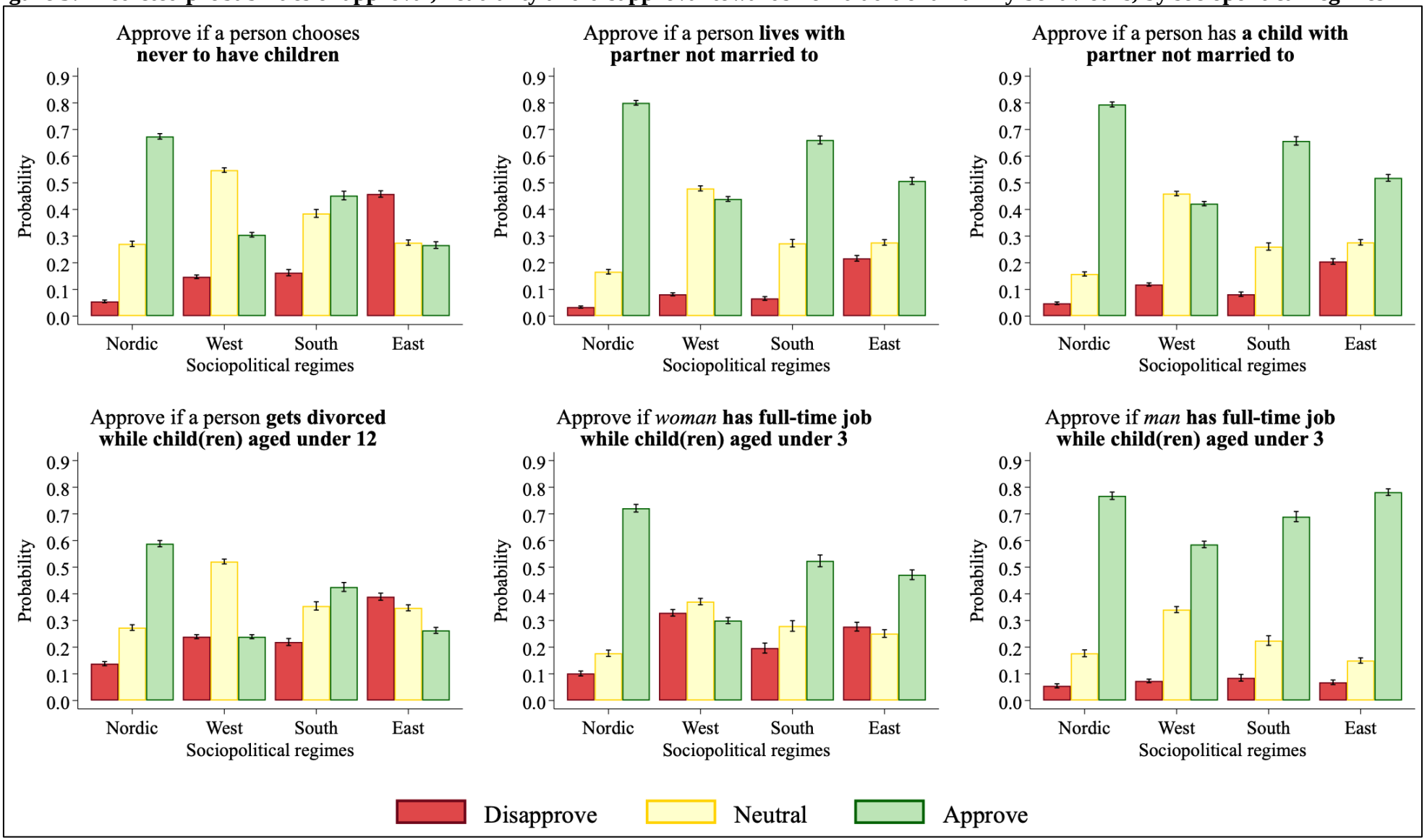
Differences across regimes are evident, though not always as expected. Approval of all non-traditional behaviours is highest in the Nordic countries, supporting the notion that they are forerunners of non-traditional family attitudes. Predicted approval ranges from approximately 60% (divorce with young children) to 80% (non-marital cohabitation). Notably, in the Nordic countries, approval for full-time work by mothers and fathers of young children is nearly equal. In Western Europe, neutrality toward non-traditional behaviours is generally the most common response. For non-marital cohabitation and childbearing, neutrality and approval are nearly equal (around 40%). For divorce among persons with young children and voluntary childlessness, neutrality is much more prevalent (around 60%) than approval (20–30%). Regarding women's full-time employment with children under 3, neutrality is roughly equal to both approval and disapproval (30–40%), in stark contrast to the high approval for men in the same situation (around 60%).

Southern and Eastern Europe exhibit lower levels of approval for all non-traditional family behaviours, compared to the Nordic countries, though not necessarily compared to Western Europe. Approval remains notable—exceeding 50%—for non-marital cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, and mothers' full-time employment with young children. When comparing the two regimes more closely, disapproval of all non-traditional family behaviours is markedly higher in Eastern Europe, with predicted probabilities between 40–50%, compared to Southern Europe, where disapproval

reaches at most 25–30%. Conversely, approval for these behaviours tends to be higher in Southern Europe than in Eastern Europe. Only approval for men's full-time employment is relatively similar across both regimes, and remains extremely high, with predicted probabilities between 70–80%.

In sum, the patterns across sociopolitical regimes offer only partial support for Hypothesis 1. Nordic countries appear to fully embrace SDT behaviours, while Southern European countries follow these trends to a lesser extent. Eastern Europe seems to be in the earlier stages of a cultural shift regarding voluntary childlessness and parental divorce, but shows greater openness toward non-marital cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, and mothers working full-time with young children. Western Europe, by contrast, is characterised by a high degree of neutrality and generally the lowest levels of outright approval for non-traditional family behaviours.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of approval, neutrality and disapproval towards non-traditional family behaviours, by sociopolitical regimes



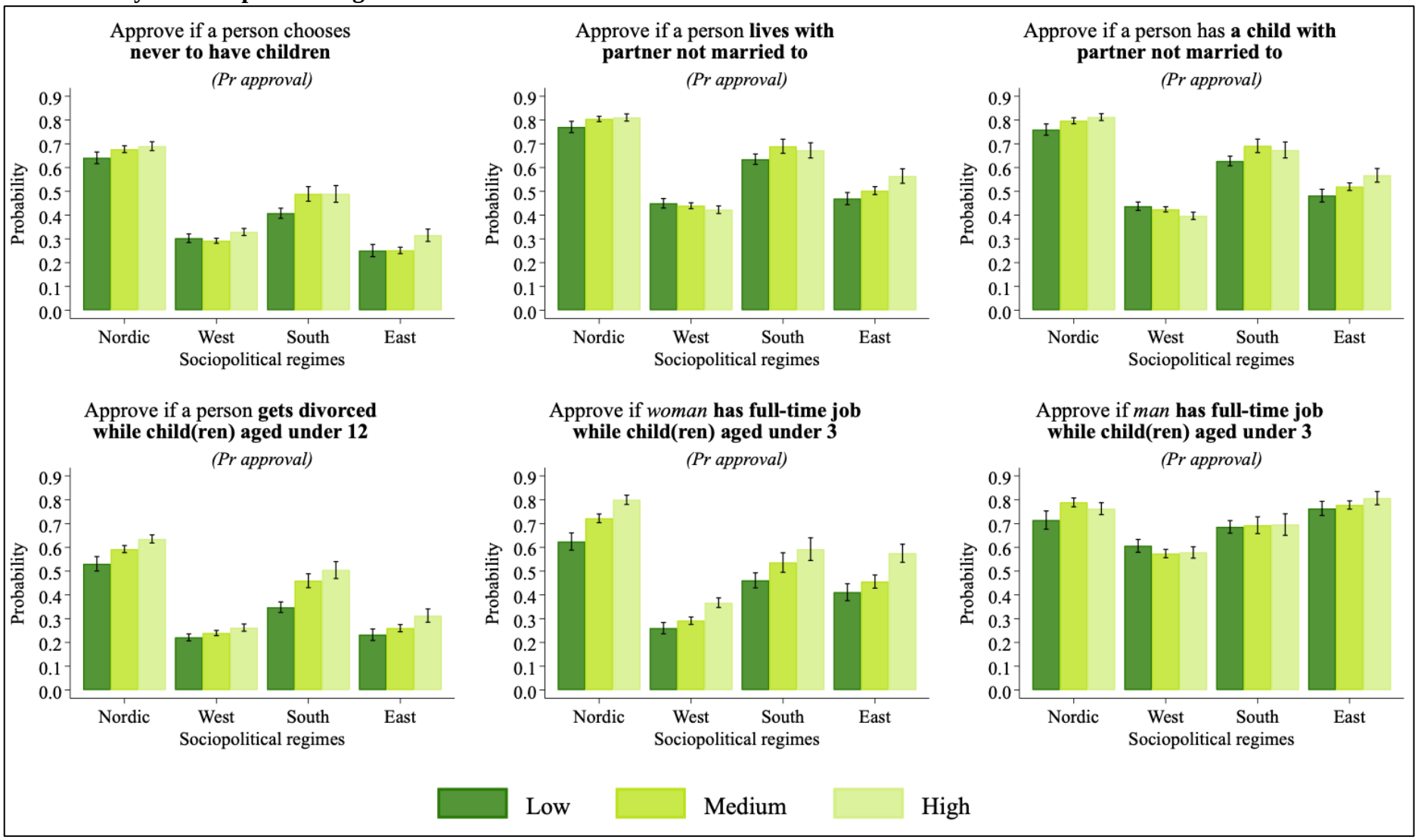
Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit model regressing approval on country groups and controls (birth cohort and sex). Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

4.2.2 Differences according to education and sociopolitical regimes

Turning first to educational differences only (the regression results are presented in full in Table A 1), we observe that there is no clear and consistent positive educational gradient in the approval of all non-traditional family behaviours. In fact, the higher educated are less likely to approve of voluntary childlessness, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation—relative to being neutral—than the highly educated, although this effect is limited in size and not always statistically significant. However, the highly educated are more likely to relatively approve of parental divorce and women's full-time work with children aged under 3. There is, however, a clear educational gradient in the disapproval of all non-traditional family behaviours: the medium and highly educated are statistically significantly less likely to disapprove—relative to being neutral—than the lower educated. For behaviours such as voluntary childlessness, divorce with children aged under 12, and women's full-time employment with children aged under three, the difference in relative risks between educational groups is substantial. In sum, Hypothesis 2 is partially supported.

Next, we consider differences by education and sociopolitical regime: Figure 4 displays the predicted probabilities of approval for each of the five non-traditional family behaviours—plus approval of men's full-time employment while raising young children—by education level and sociopolitical regimes. These probabilities are derived from a two-way interaction between sociopolitical regime and education, which is statistically significant. Overall, a clear educational gradient in approval is observed only for two behaviours: divorce while raising children under 12 and women's full-time employment with young children. In both cases, approval increases with higher levels of education. This contrasts sharply with attitudes toward men's full-time employment in the same context, which is broadly approved across all sociopolitical regimes and shows no significant variation by education. For the remaining behaviours—voluntary childlessness, non-marital cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing—educational differences are modest across all regimes. Moreover, the largely overlapping confidence intervals suggest that these differences may not be

Figure 4: **Educational differences in the probability of approval of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by the sociopolitical regimes**



Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit regressing the approval of non-traditional family behaviours on country groups, education, their interaction, year of the interview, and controls (birth cohort and sex). Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

statistically significant. In supplemental graphs (Figures A4 and A5), we plotted the probabilities of neutrality and disapproval toward non-traditional family attitudes. These analyses show that neutrality is higher among the higher educated only in Western Europe (a positive gradient; Figure A4), whereas disapproval is consistently higher among the least educated across all outcomes and sociopolitical regimes (a negative gradient; Figure A 5).

Contrary to our expectations, the educational gradient in approval of either divorce while raising children under 12 or women's full-time employment with young children is not weakest in the Nordic countries nor strongest in Southern and Eastern Europe. These findings suggest that the relationship between education and approval of non-traditional family behaviours does not align neatly with sociopolitical regime types. In sum, Hypothesis 3 is thus not confirmed.

4.2.3 Changes over historical time

Figure 5 displays the predicted probabilities of approval for each of the five non-traditional family behaviours—plus approval of men's full-time employment while raising young children—by education level, sociopolitical regime, and historical time. These probabilities are derived from a three-way interaction between sociopolitical regime, education, and time, which is statistically significant. When considering predicted probabilities, we do not observe a decrease in the educational gradient over time in either the Nordic countries or Western Europe. However, we identify several patterns characterising the increase in approval probabilities. In Nordic countries, there has been a slight rise in educational differences regarding voluntary childlessness, nonmarital cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing. Here, highly educated individuals have increased their approval of these behaviours more than other educational groups. A similar trend is observed in Western European countries concerning the approval of women's full-time employment while raising children under the age of 3.

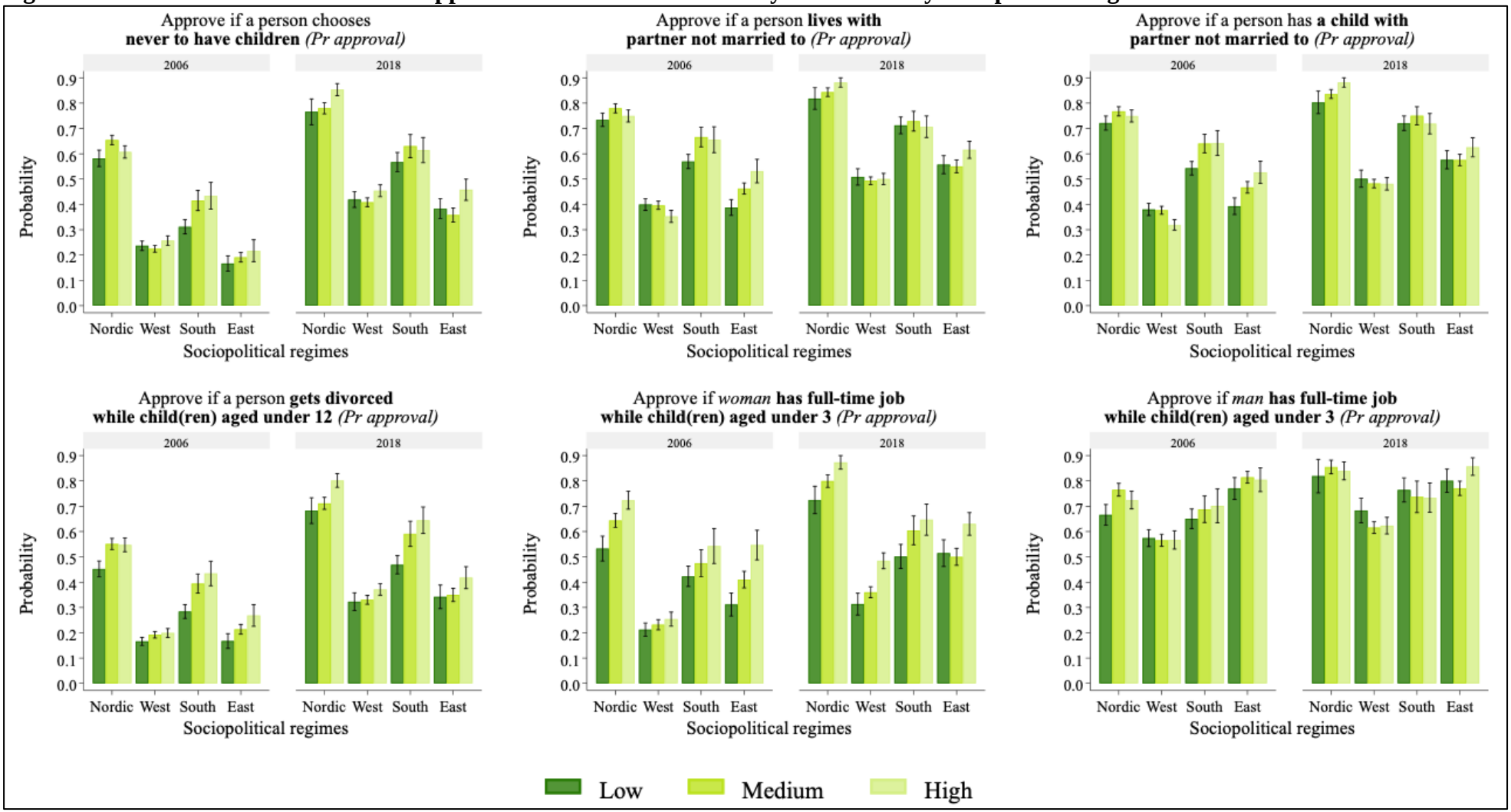
Furthermore, we observe a clear reduction in educational differences in the approval of nonmarital cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing in both Eastern and Southern Europe. In the 2006 round of the ESS, highly educated individuals in these two sociopolitical regimes were significantly

more likely to approve of such behaviours, but by 2018, this gradient had narrowed. In Southern European countries, this reduction is also evident in the approval of voluntary childlessness, whereas Eastern European countries have shown a slight increase in educational differences regarding this behaviour. From Figure A 3, we can see that the changes in Southern European countries have occurred in the approval of men's behaviours, but not women's.

In the supplemental graphs (Figures A6 and A7), we plotted the predicted probabilities of disapproval and neutrality toward non-traditional family attitudes. Figure A 6 shows a consistent negative educational gradient in disapproval over time, indicating that the least educated tend to be the most disapproving of non-traditional family behaviours in both survey rounds, and that this gradient has not diminished. Regarding neutrality, Figure A7 shows little change over time in both the overall levels and the educational gradient.

In sum, the patterns across education levels, sociopolitical regimes, and historical time offer only partial support for Hypothesis 4. Regarding diffusion over time, we note that approval of non-traditional family behaviours has generally increased, without a corresponding reduction in educational disparities in approval.

Figure 5: Educational differences in the approval of non-traditional family behaviours by sociopolitical regimes and over time



Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit regressing the approval of non-traditional family behaviours on country groups, education, year of the interview, their interaction, and controls (birth cohort and sex). Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to examine how non-traditional family attitudes vary across educational groups, sociopolitical regimes, and time, with a particular focus on whether these patterns align with the expectations of the SDT theory or rather reflect persistent social stratification, as expressed in a concurrent framework – the pattern of disadvantage by (PoD; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). We analysed cross-national data from 2006 and 2018 and ran multinomial logistic regression models estimating the likelihood of disapproval, neutrality, and approval toward five non-traditional family behaviours: voluntary childlessness, non-marital cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, divorce while raising children under 12, and women's full-time employment when children are under 3. Although we considered women's employment a non-traditional behaviour, we also report results for men as a contrast group. With this approach, we provide the most comprehensive and up-to-date account of SDT-related attitudes across Europe to date.

Our findings offer a nuanced picture not entirely consistent with trends that would be expected from SDT theory. First, we found that patterns in non-traditional family attitudes across sociopolitical regimes only partially followed the SDT progression. As expected, Nordic countries indeed act as forerunners, whereas Eastern European countries tend to lag behind, especially when considering the high predicted share of disapproval of voluntary childlessness and divorce of parents raising young children. However, Southern European countries exhibit less expected results. Overall, they present high predicted approval of the non-traditional behaviours considered in this paper (although there are variations in the share according to the behaviour). The main surprise derives from the fact that they have often been "laggards" in the adoption of SDT behaviours and were, therefore, still expected to have lower approval for such behaviours.

Western Europe also exhibited a distinct pattern, characterised by the highest levels of neutrality and the lowest levels of outright approval for non-traditional family behaviours. There are at least two potential explanations for this unexpected finding: on one hand, people in countries where 'state

neutrality' (Kis 2012) prevails, especially in liberal regimes, may have internalized values that discourage interference in and judgment of others' private lives. On the other hand, others' lack of a precise stance may derive from a strong conflict between the growing presence of such behaviours and the persistence of traditional institutions and cultural norms, especially in those countries with the strongest social norms (Elster and Gelfand 2021).

More generally, we found that non-marital cohabitation and childbearing, as well as maternal employment when children are under 3 (with the exception of Western Europe), enjoy widespread support across all sociopolitical regimes. This suggests a shift or adjustment in attitudes—perhaps because these non-traditional practices have become commonplace in contemporary Europe. In contrast, voluntary childlessness and divorce involving young children remain more difficult to approve, particularly in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, these two findings align with SDT arguments of partial convergence and progression at different speeds in attitudes toward non-traditional family behaviours across Europe. On the other hand, the latter may also point to processes of re-traditionalization or persistent cultural resistance in certain contexts as suggested by Spéder (2023).

Second, our findings reveal that educational differences in approval of non-traditional family behaviours are selective rather than universal. A clear educational gradient in approval is evident only for two behaviours: divorce while raising young children and women's full-time employment with young children—both showing higher approval among the more educated. In contrast, men's full-time employment in the same context is broadly accepted across all educational levels and sociopolitical regimes. For other behaviours—voluntary childlessness, non-marital cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing—educational differences are modest and often statistically insignificant. Additional analyses show that neutrality is more common among the higher educated in Western Europe, while disapproval is consistently higher among the least educated across all sociopolitical regimes. The fact that approval of women's full-time employment shows an educational gradient—while men's does not—supports the notion of a double standard and the "incomplete gender revolution" in Europe, particularly

among the less educated the low-educated (Goldscheider et al. 2015; Liefbroer and Merz 2009). One possible explanation is that the opportunity cost of working instead of caring for a young child is lower for low-educated women than for their higher-educated counterparts (UN Women 2018), making full-time employment less socially acceptable in this group.

Third, while approval of non-traditional family behaviours has generally increased across Europe—albeit with the aforementioned idiosyncrasies—this diffusion has not been accompanied by a consistent narrowing of educational differences. In fact, in many contexts—particularly in the Nordic countries and Western Europe—the educational gradient in approval has remained stable over time, suggesting that ideational change persists unevenly distributed across social strata. This pattern challenges the SDT's assumption of a universal cultural shift toward individual autonomy and self-expression. Instead, our results likely lend partial support to the PoD perspective, which posits that lower levels of approval among the less educated may reflect structural constraints or differing life experiences, rather than a lack of exposure to new norms and attitudes. Notably, we do observe a reduction in educational differences in attitudes toward non-marital cohabitation and childbearing in Eastern and Southern Europe—regions where such behaviours have become more common in recent decades. This suggests that behavioural normalisation may, over time, lead to attitudinal convergence, though this process appears to be context-specific and uneven.

Fourth, while our findings revealed no significant changes in the educational gradient over time in either the Nordic countries or Western Europe, individuals with lower levels of education in Eastern and Southern Europe have become increasingly favourable toward non-traditional family behaviours. These findings are consistent with the more recent diffusion of non-traditional family behaviours in Southern and Eastern Europe, compared to the earlier transitions observed in the Nordic countries and Western Europe (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). Moreover, recent literature on rising economic uncertainty in Southern Europe suggests that such conditions may contribute to the adoption of less nor-

mative behaviours among lower-educated individuals (Vignoli et al. 2016). If lower-educated individuals were particularly likely to adopt non-traditional family behaviours—irrespective whether due to socioeconomic pressures or not—they may have also become more accepting of them over time. Differently from the SDT theory explanation, which highlights how changes in attitudes precede behaviours, this mechanism would be consistent with a feedback loop mechanism whereby changes in behaviours precede attitudes.

Our study is not without limitations. It relies on two pooled cross-sections, which prevents us from assessing whether changes in personal circumstances influence individuals' approval, neutrality, or disapproval over time. Nor can we determine whether these attitudes are linked to actual behaviours. The relevant data from the ESS 'Timing of Life' module—measuring approval of non-traditional family behaviours—was only collected in 2006 and 2018. As such, we cannot capture potential shifts in attitudes that may have occurred following the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, with only two time points, we cannot fully assess claims of a "re-traditionalization" of norms and values or confidently attribute our findings for Eastern Europe to a genuine cultural reversal, rather than a temporary fluctuation or sampling variation. Some scholars analysing long-term survey data and demographic indicators argue that Eastern European societies continue to struggle with accepting non-traditional family behaviours (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021; Spéder 2023), and our findings may be interpreted in that light. Moreover, recent results from the European Election Study suggest growing support for conservative parties in 2024 compared to earlier years (2004, 2019), particularly in Europe outside the EU-15 (excluding Luxembourg, Ireland, and Greece) (Abou-Chadi 2024). We therefore support calls for more systematic research into the nature and evolution of people's attitudes, values, and norms (Spéder 2023), and encourage the collection and analysis of more recent data to assess whether attitudinal trends have shifted in response to recent social and political developments.

In sum, our findings highlight that certain non-traditional behaviours—such as non-marital cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, and women's full-time employment when children are young—

have become relatively widely accepted. However, attitudes remain more divided on other issues, such as voluntary childlessness and divorce involving women with young children. Differences along SDT-aligned sociopolitical regimes are evident: Nordic countries have fully integrated and accepted non-traditional behaviours, while Southern European countries are progressively aligning with these trends. In contrast, some countries—particularly in Eastern and Western Europe—exhibit more ambiguous patterns. Our findings also reveal inconsistent patterns in terms of the educational gradient and its change over time. Taken together, this suggests that ideational shifts have occurred non-linearly and in hybrid forms across sociopolitical regimes and social strata within the European context.

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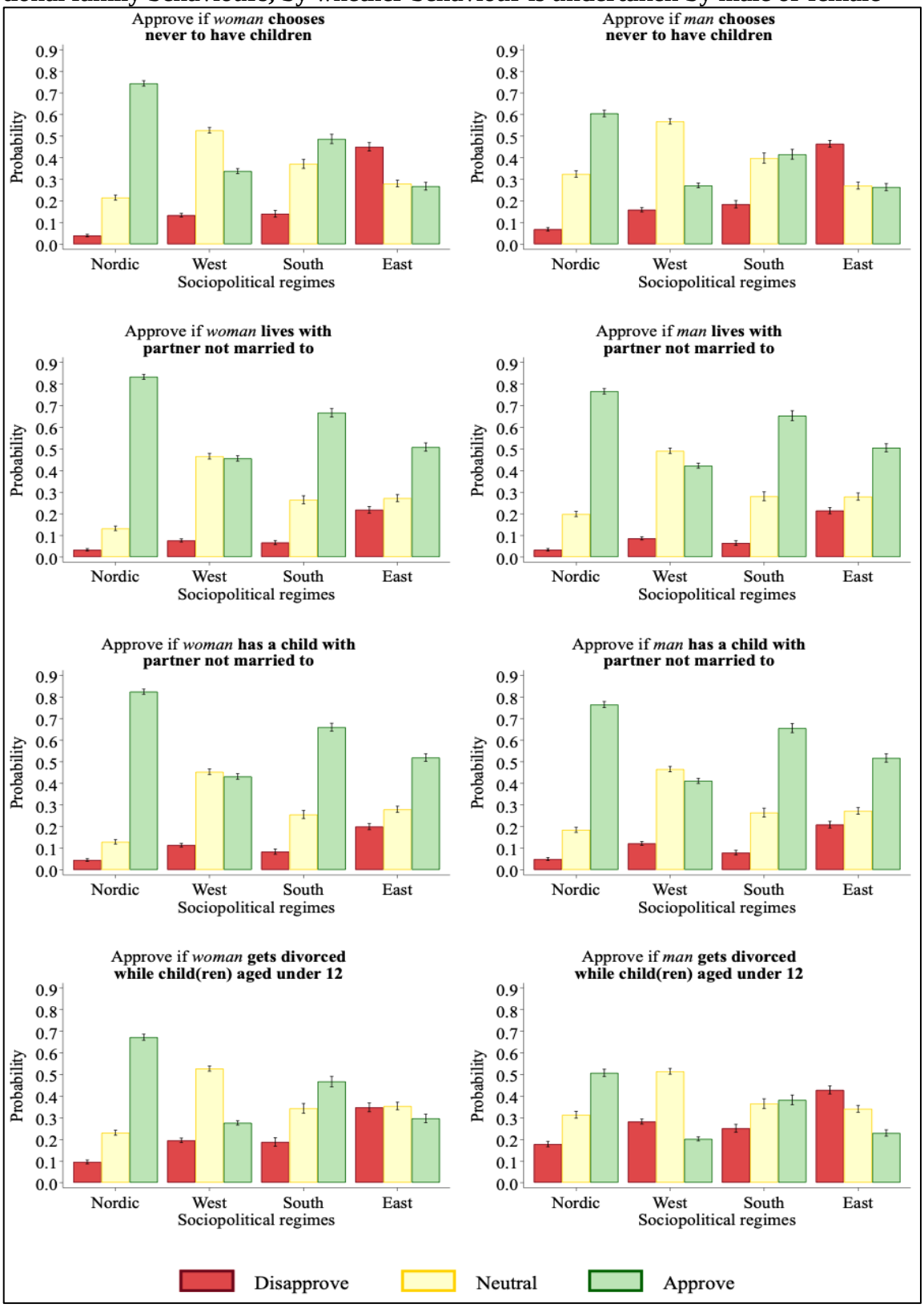
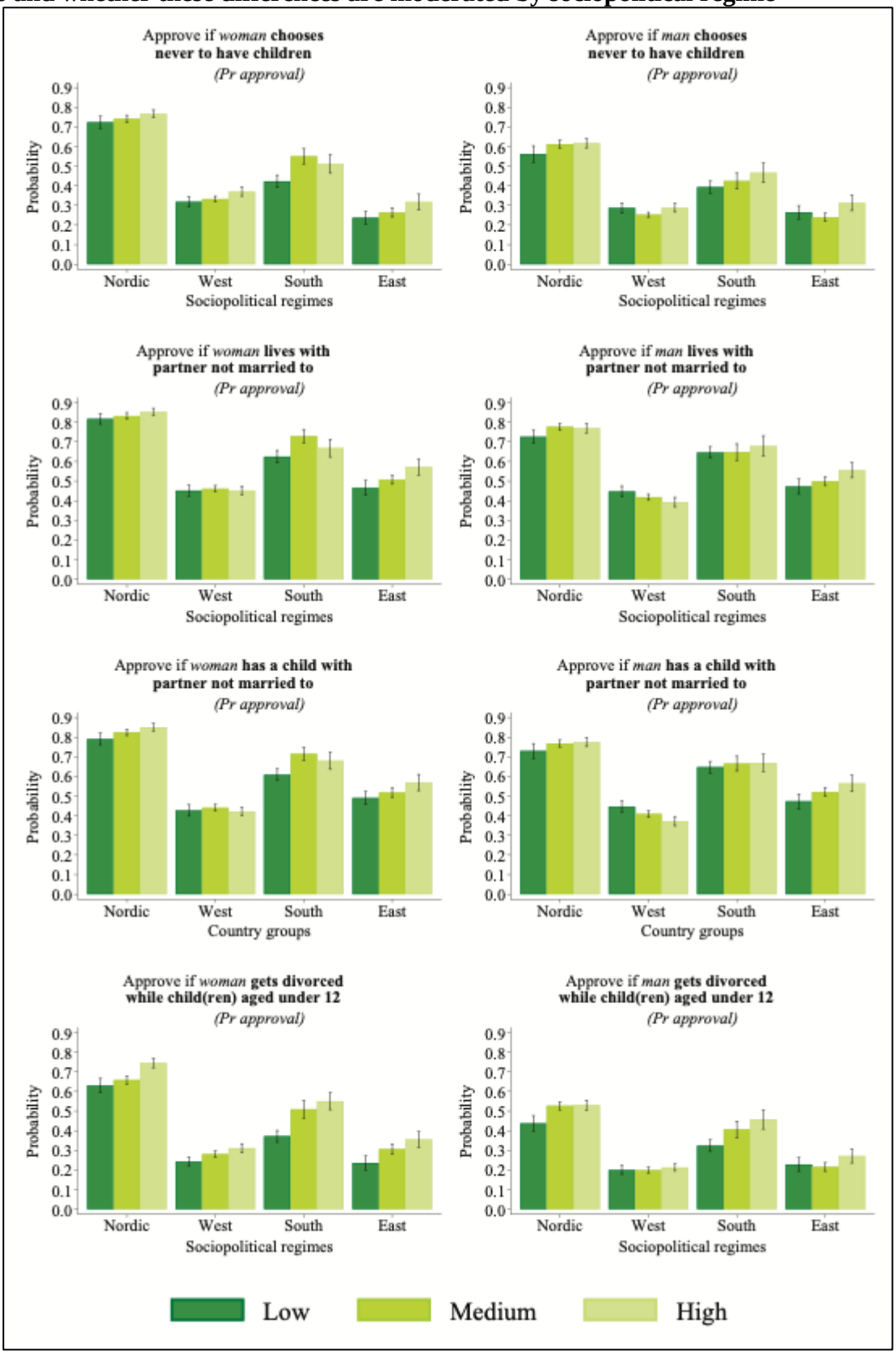
SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Figure A 1: Predicted probabilities of approval, neutrality and disapproval towards non-traditional family behaviours, by whether behaviour is undertaken by male or female



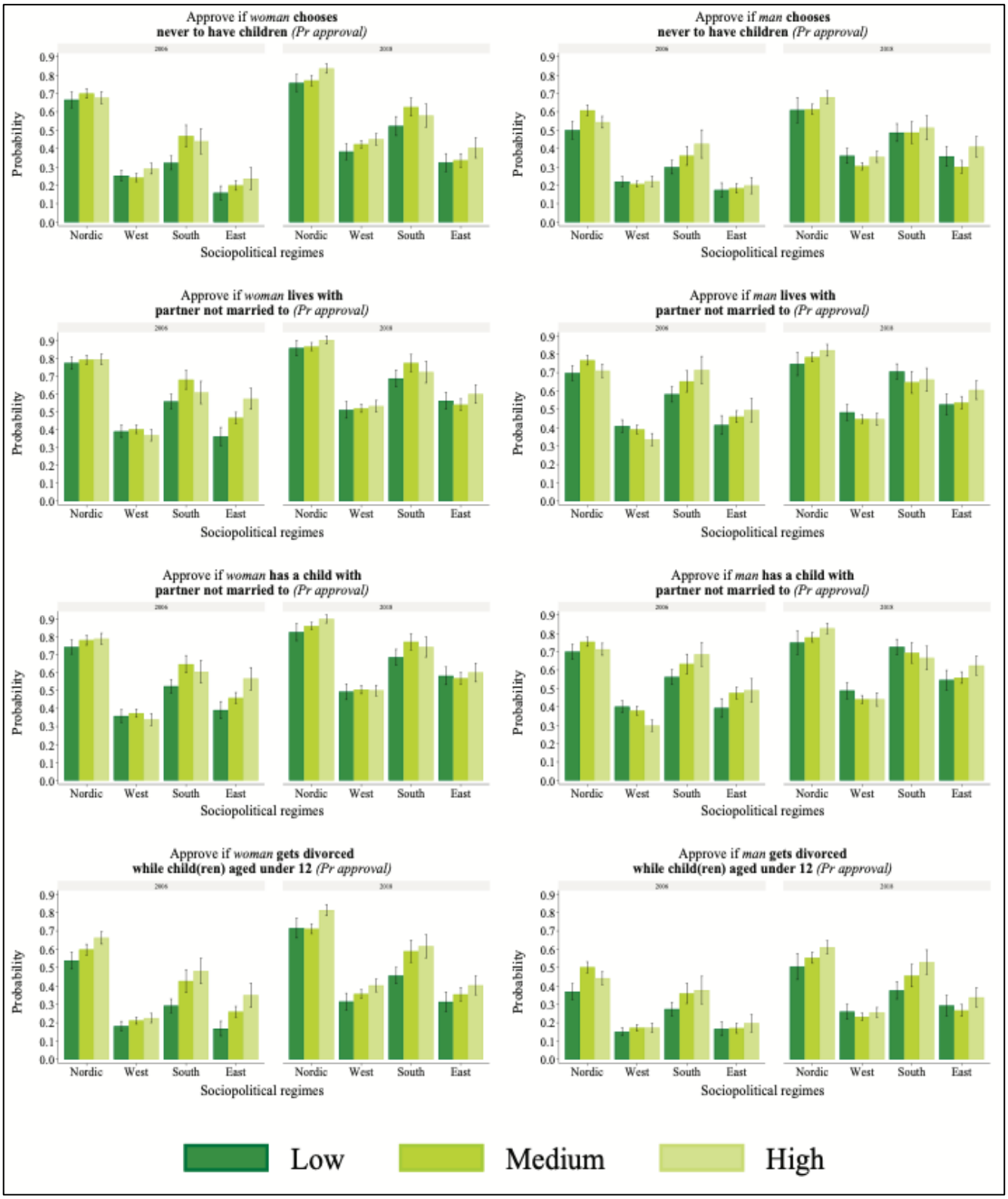
Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit model regressing approval on country groups and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

Figure A 2: Educational differences in the probability of approval of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by sociopolitical regime



Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit model regressing approval on country groups and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

Figure A 3: Educational differences in the probability of approval of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by sociopolitical regime and historical time



Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit model regressing approval on country groups and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

Table A 1: Risk ratios of approval and disapproval, relative to neutrality, according to sociopolitical regimes, education levels, year of the interview and controls

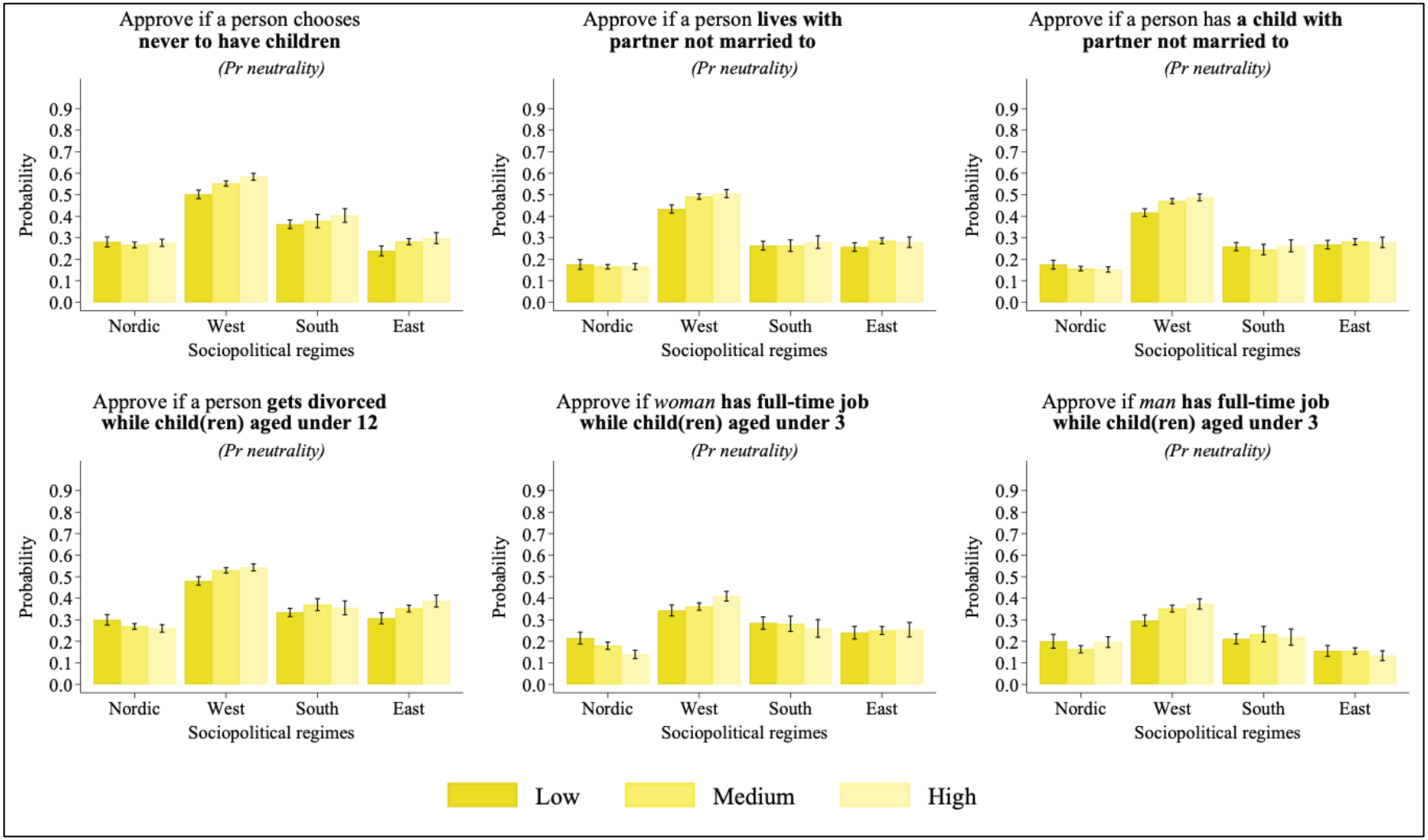
	Voluntary childlessness		Nonmarital cohabitation		Nonmarital childbearing		Divorce with children aged less than 12		Women working while having children aged less than 3		Men working while having children aged less than 3	
	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral
Sociopolitical regimes (ref. West)												
Nordic	0.75***	4.47***	1.19**	5.24***	1.18***	5.47***	1.10**	4.69***	0.65***	5.03***	1.44***	2.53***
	(0.04)	(0.14)	(0.08)	(0.19)	(0.07)	(0.18)	(0.05)	(0.17)	(0.04)	(0.25)	(0.14)	(0.12)
South	1.57***	2.11***	1.42***	2.64***	1.22***	2.75***	1.35***	2.62***	0.79***	2.32***	1.76***	1.79***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.06)	(0.17)	(0.20)	(0.12)
East	6.18***	1.74***	4.61***	2.00***	2.87***	2.04***	2.44***	1.65***	1.24***	2.32***	2.11***	3.04***
	(0.27)	(0.07)	(0.22)	(0.06)	(0.13)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.12)	(0.19)	(0.16)
Education (ref. Low)												
Medium	0.72***	0.93**	0.56***	0.91**	0.66***	0.93	0.68***	1.05	0.82***	1.11	0.67***	0.86***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)
High	0.43***	0.98	0.50***	0.88***	0.63***	0.88***	0.54***	1.15***	0.49***	1.27***	0.49***	0.83***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Gender (ref. Male)												
Female	0.92**	1.05	1.01	1.07**	1.03	1.08***	0.69***	1.22***	0.89**	1.09	0.96	1.05
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.05)
Year of the interview (ref. 2006)												
2018	0.83***	1.84***	1.00	1.50***	0.86***	1.55***	0.81***	1.68***	1.03	1.84***	1.23***	1.16***
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.05)
Birth cohort (ref. 1940-1949)												
1950-1959	0.79***	1.17***	0.79***	1.29***	0.70***	1.22***	0.70***	1.26***	0.83**	1.20**	0.97	0.96
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.07)
1960-1969	0.69***	1.26***	0.76***	1.44***	0.63***	1.39***	0.55***	1.30***	0.73***	1.30***	0.83	0.86**
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.06)
1970-1979	0.72***	1.43***	0.67***	1.52***	0.60***	1.50***	0.57***	1.49***	0.74***	1.47***	1.10	0.92
	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.03)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.07)
1980-1989	0.71***	1.41***	0.67***	1.77***	0.60***	1.68***	0.59***	1.57***	0.65***	1.45***	1.22	0.84**
	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.03)	(0.10)	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.06)

Table A 1: Continued

	Voluntary childlessness		Nonmarital cohabitation		Nonmarital childbearing		Divorce with children aged less than 12		Women working while having children aged less than 3		Men working while having children aged less than 3	
	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral	Disapprove vs Neutral	Approve vs Neutral
Birth cohort (ref. 1940-1949)												
1990-1999	0.66***	1.53***	0.66***	1.78***	0.74***	1.83***	0.69***	1.70***	0.61***	1.30***	1.38**	0.71***
	(0.06)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.12)	(0.05)	(0.12)	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.21)	(0.06)
Constant	0.59***	0.32***	0.35***	0.54***	0.54***	0.54***	1.31***	0.22***	1.60***	0.40***	0.27***	1.96***
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.01)	(0.13)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.14)
Observations	61,952	61,952	62,305	62,305	62,347	62,347	60,003	60,003	31,294	31,294	30,789	30,789

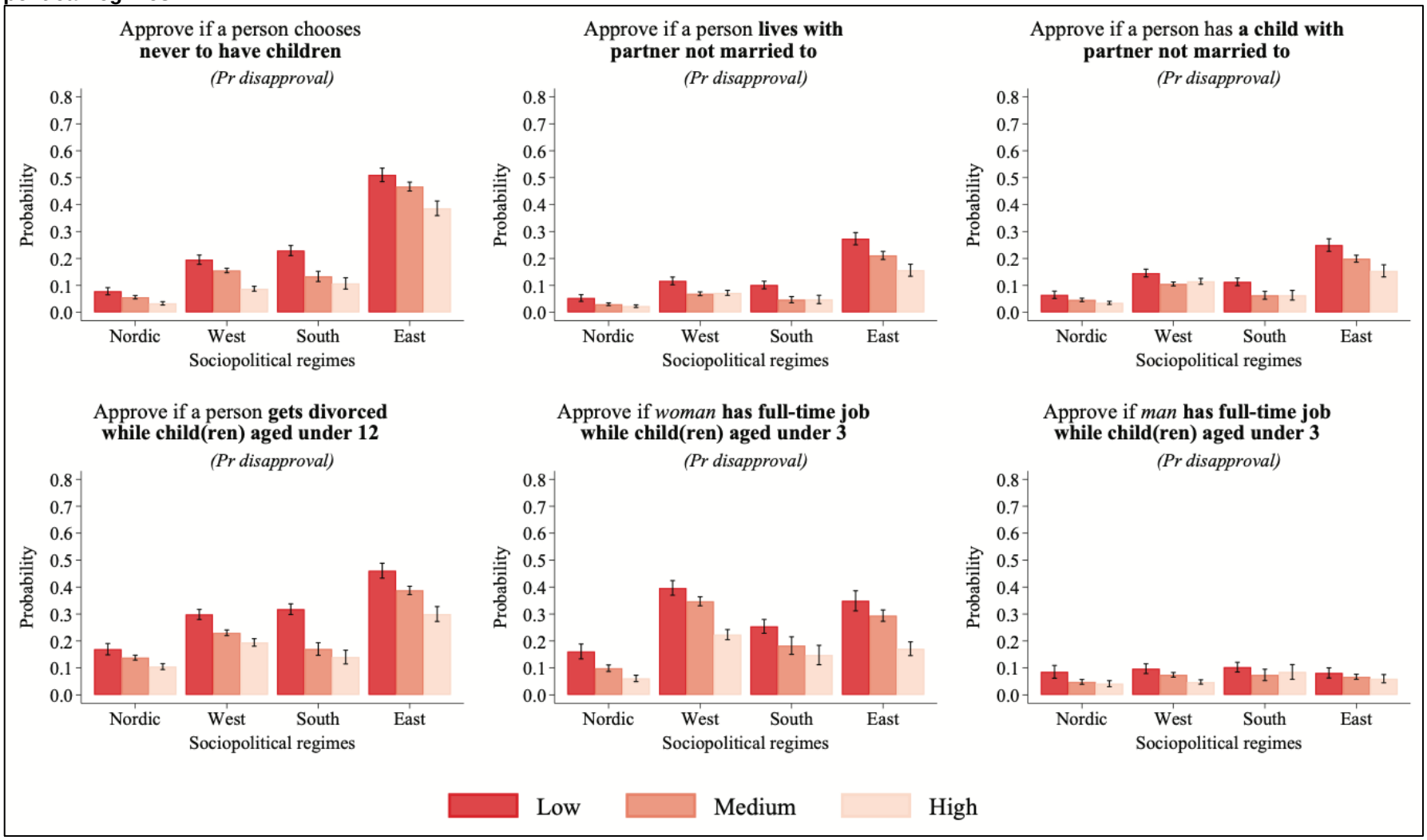
Source: Own weighted computations from ESS (2006, 2018)

Figure A 4*:* Educational differences in the probability of neutrality of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by sociopolitical regime



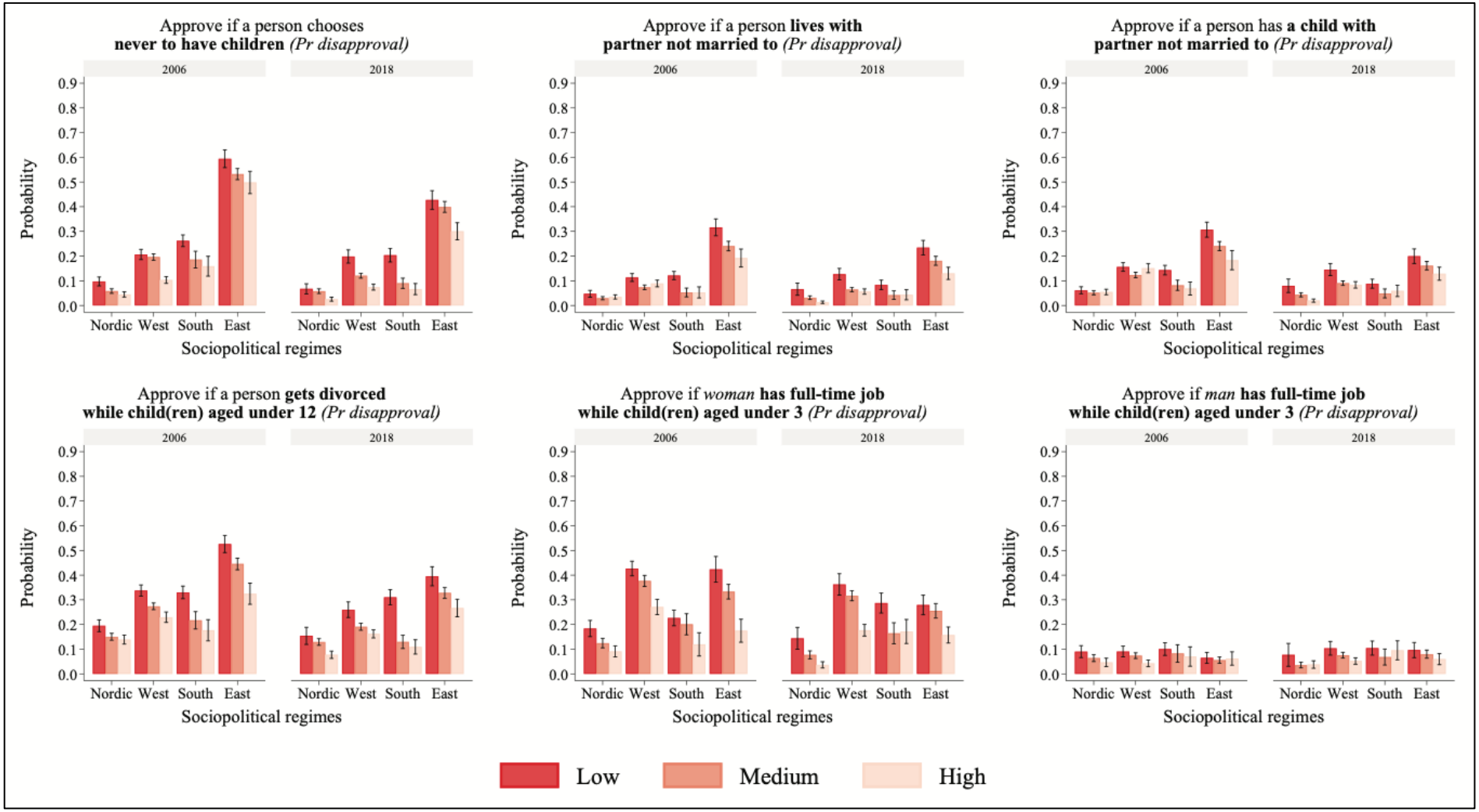
Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit regressing the approval of non-traditional family behaviours on country groups, education, their interaction, year of the interview, and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

Figure A 5*:* Educational differences in the probability of disapproval of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by socio-political regimes



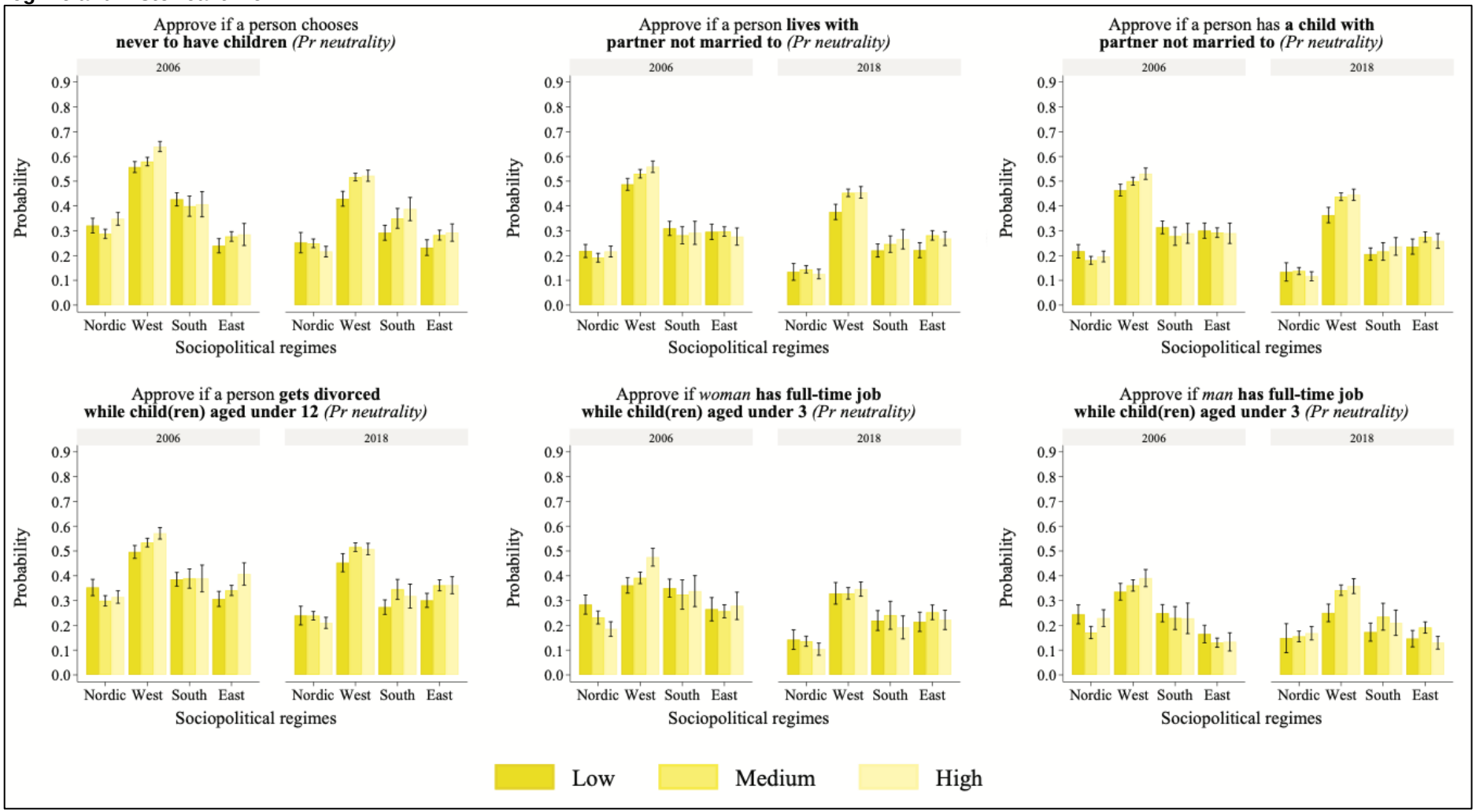
Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit regressing the approval of non-traditional family behaviours on country groups, education, their interaction, year of the interview, and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

Figure A 6*:* Educational differences in the probability of disapproval of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by country group and historical time



Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit regressing the approval of non-traditional family behaviours on country groups, education, their interaction, year of the interview, and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.

Figure A 7*:* Educational differences in the probability of neutrality of non-traditional family behaviours and whether these differences are moderated by sociopolitical regime and historical time



Source: Authors' weighted computations from ESS round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) from a multinomial logit regressing the approval of non-traditional family behaviours on country groups, education, their interaction, year of the interview, and controls. Confidence intervals are derived from clustered and bootstrapped standard errors.