

Let's get married!

The choice of wedding date in Italy between tradition and secularisation, 1970-2019

Francesca Rinesi, Claudia Iaccarino
ISTAT – Italian National Institute of Statistics

Background

Marriage - unlike births, deaths or migration - is more a social than a demographic phenomenon. Nonetheless, marriages have always been considered as an important aspect in population studies because, especially in the past, they were the most frequent way of family formation and the prerequisite for births.

In recent decades, Italy has undergone numerous economic, social and legislative changes. The elements that characterise the second demographic transition have been slow to take off, although recent years have seen a spread of diversification in family formation, an increase in unions' dissolution and out-of-wedlock births. If it is true that the link between nuptiality and fertility is increasingly weakening over time, it is also true that in Italy in 2022 almost six out of ten births (58.5%) occurred within marriage (Istat, 2023). Notwithstanding the spread of new ways of having a family, marriage - albeit always later, less universal, less subject to normative dictates and often preceded by cohabitation - still represents an institution that is not entirely obsolete in many European countries (Billari and Liefbroer, 2016; Rosina and Fraboni, 2004) and even less so in Italy, given that 72.5% of men and 80.9% of women who are now 50 years old are or have been married.

The choice of the month and day of the wedding is linked to numerous religious, social, climatic and economic factors. The period of Lent is in fact historically linked to an invitation to sobriety that is not well suited to the celebration of a wedding, as well as it is not permitted to celebrate catholic weddings on Sundays during Advent. The decrease in marriages celebrated on these dates typically entails the anticipation/postponement of weddings in earlier or later periods (Federici, 1964; Bourgeois, 1946; Ruiu and Breschi, 2015). Then there are specific days or dates that attract or discourage marriages (Federici, 1964; Ruiu and Breschi, 2016; Rault and Régnier-Loiler, 2016). Among those that attract we find, for example, 14 February or particular dates such as palindromes, while among the dates that repel we find 17 (which in Italy is linked to the superstition of bringing bad luck), especially if combined with Friday.

But was this always the case? Some scholars shown that the choice of the month of marriage was closely linked not only to popular beliefs and religious precepts, but also to the productive structure of the country: fewer marriages are observed in months where labour-intensive activities are concentrated. As the country's productive structure changed (from an agricultural to an industrial economy and tertiary sector), so did the seasonality of marriages (Dribe and van de Putte, 2012; Ruiu and Breschi, 2015).

The study of changes in the marriage seasonality assumes importance not only for purely descriptive reasons of the historical evolution of the demographic phenomenon per se, but also because the changes observed may be considered as a proxy measure of the degree of secularisation of a population. Of particular interest, then, is to understand whether the detachment from traditional choices in the wedding date has affected the population as a whole or whether it has involved individuals with certain socio-demographic characteristics more than others.

Aim of the paper, data and methods

This work aims to analyse a particular aspect of nuptiality, namely the seasonality of marriages in Italy. In particular, the study will focus on three different aspects:

- The seasonality of marriages today in terms of the choice of both the day of the week and the month of the wedding celebration;

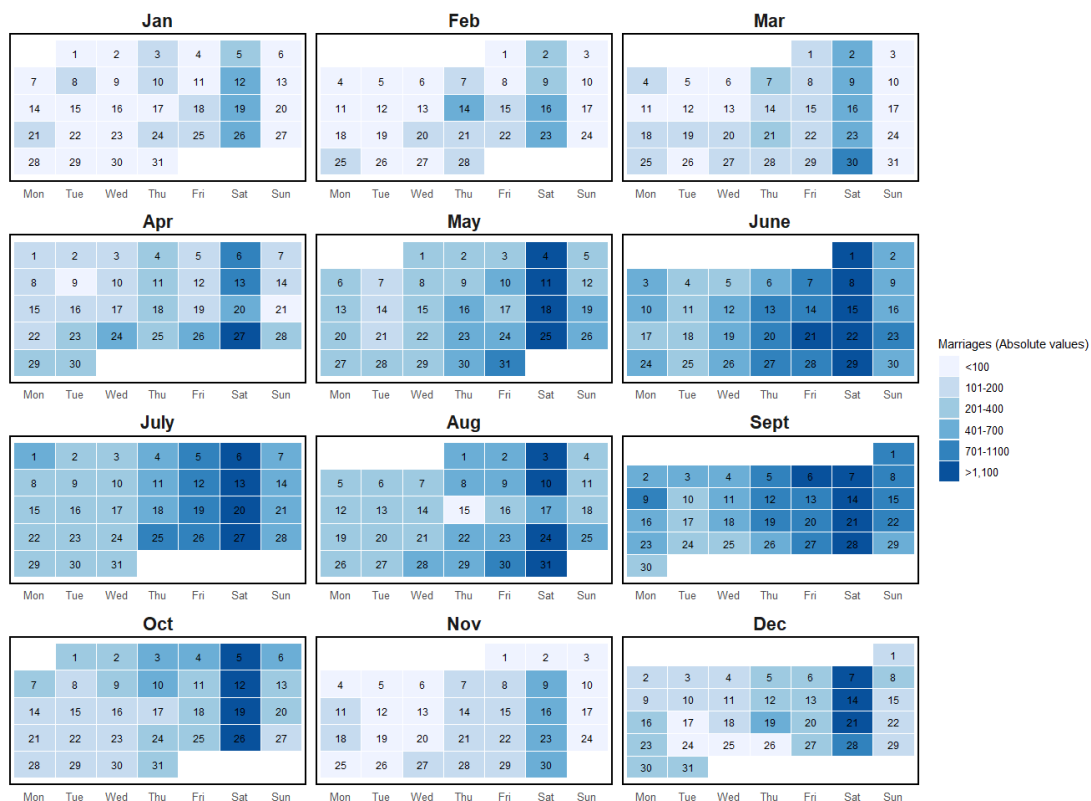
- The evolution of seasonality of marriages over the last 50 years;
- Detection of the characteristics of the marriage (rite of celebration and geographical area of celebration) and of the bride and groom (age, educational qualification, citizenship, former marital status) that are associated with the choice of a given wedding day and month and whether or not this association has changed over time.

In this investigation, we used the microdata of all marriages celebrated in Italy from 1970 to 2019 as registered in the civil status register of the population. More than 14,350,000 records were thus analysed. Due to data limitation, the analysis of the week day of the wedding is restricted to the period 1995-2019, as is that of the association of the bride and groom's nationality and the choice of the month of the wedding celebration. Multinomial logistic regression models will be estimated to shed light on which wedding and bride and groom characteristics are most associated with the choice of a wedding month. Indeed, this strategy (adopted by Dahlberg and Andersson (2018) to estimate the effect of some socio-demographic variables on the seasonality of births in Sweden) make possible to investigate the role of each socio-demographic characteristic considered on marriage seasonality, other variables being equal. The same methodological approach will be used to study the factors associated with the choice of the week day of the wedding.

Preliminary results

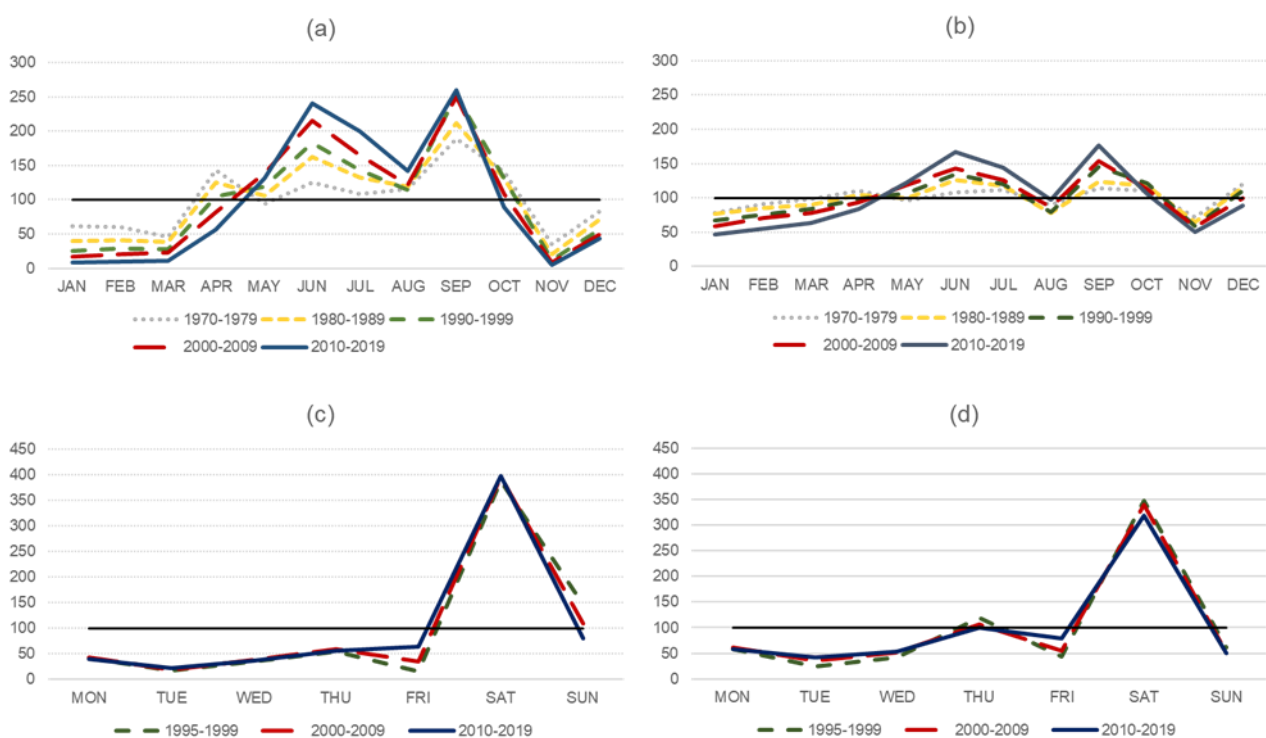
Nowadays, weddings are mostly celebrated in the summer months and the choice of week day falls mainly on Saturdays (Figure 1). As shown in previous studies that refer not only to Italy, there are dates that are particularly attractive (e.g. 14 February) and others that are avoided. This is the case of the 17th (which superstition in Italy says is 'unlucky'), especially if it falls on a Friday. In 2019, Lent began on 6 March and Easter was celebrated on 21 April: it is possible to notice - albeit less pronounced than in the past - the anticipation/postponement of weddings due to this religious precept.

Figure 1 – Calendar of marriages celebrated in Italy, 2019 (Absolute values).



Overall, the tendency to concentrate weddings on certain week days and months is much more evident for weddings celebrated with a religious rite than for civil ones. However, over the years, the polarisation in the choice of the month of the wedding is becoming stronger, regardless of the rite of celebration chosen. With regard to the choice of the day of the week, Saturday remains the most chosen wedding day, but over the years the stigma towards weddings celebrated on Fridays, a day that superstition held to be unfavourable, has diminished (Figure 2). These considerations also remain valid when looking at the results of the multivariate models.

Figure 2 – Marriage seasonality: (a) Ratio of expected/observed number of religious marriages by month, 1970-2019; (b) Ratio of expected/observed number of civil marriages by month, 1970-2019; (c) Ratio of expected/observed number of religious marriages by week day, 1995-2019; (d) Ratio of expected/observed number of civil marriages by week day, 1995-2019.



The next steps are to broaden the number of explanatory variables used (adding, for instance, the distinction between small centre and large centre) and to test interactions between covariates in order to define profiles ranging from the most traditional to the least traditional couple in their choice of wedding date. We also plan to analyse the seasonality of same-sex civil unions, introduced in Italy only since 2016, to check whether they show a more or less traditional seasonality in the choice of celebration of the union.

References

- Billari, F.C. and Liefbroer, A.C. (2016), "Why still marry? The role of feelings in the persistence of marriage as an institution" in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.67 Issue 3, pp. 516-540;
- Bourgeois, J. (1946), "Marriage a seasonal custom. Contribution to a sociological study of marriage in France" in *Population*, Vol. 1, re-published in *Population*, Vol. 4, 71, pp. 681-699;

- Dahlberg, J. and Andersson, G. (2018), "Changing seasonal variation in births by sociodemographic factors: a population-based register study", in *Human Reproduction Open*, pp. 1-8;
- Dribe, M. and van de Putte, B. (2012), "Marriage seasonality and the industrious revolution: southern Sweden, 1690-1895", in *Economic History Review*, Vol.65, n.3, pp. 1123-1146;
- Federici, N. (1964), "Sulle diversità territoriali delle oscillazioni periodiche dei matrimoni in Italia", *Rivista italiana di economia, demografia e statistica*, Vol.XVIII, n.3-4;
- Istat (2023), "Natalità e fecondità della popolazione residente. Anno 2022", Accessed October 26, 2023, <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/289772>;
- Rault, W. and Régnier-Loilier, A. (2016) "Seasonality of marriages, past and present", in *Population*, Vol. 4, 71, pp. 675-680;
- Rosina, A. and Fraboni, R. (2004), "Is marriage losing its centrality in Italy?", in *Demographic Research*, Vol 11, Article 6, pp. 149-172;
- Ruiu, G. and Breschi, M. (2015), "For the times they are a changin' – The respect for religious precepts through the analysis of the seasonality of marriages. Italy, 1862-2012", in *Demographic Research*, Vol.33, Article 7, pp. 179-210;
- Ruiu, G. and Breschi, M. (2017), "Superstitions surrounding the choice of wedding date in Italy: What has changed since the beginning of the economic development process to the present?", in *Journal of Population Research*, 34, 45-78.