



# Economic Gender Equality and the Decline of Alimony in Switzerland

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Research has established a historical decline of alimony for divorced women in Western countries. Because the main function of alimony is to compensate for differences in couples' economic resources and needs, it is plausible that the reduction of alimony is a *consequence* of greater economic equality between husbands and wives. Scholars of divorce law, however, have argued that declines in alimony have instead resulted from a deliberate reorientation of alimony law that, by limiting alimony, has sought to facilitate divorces and to *cause* greater economic gender equality. Through a trend decomposition analysis that draws on couple income data linked to case-level court reports from Switzerland before and after the introduction of no-fault divorce (1990–2008), this study assesses the extent to which the decline of alimony is a consequence of reduced economic inequality in couples. During the study period, alimony declined from about one divorce in two to about one divorce in three, but the explanatory value of lower economic inequality in couples is limited regarding this trend. In fact, greater shares of couples' incomes earned by women and more egalitarian distributions of child custody after divorce can explain, at best, half the decline in limited-term alimony. Greater equality in pension incomes explains steep reductions in unlimited alimony but cannot account for why limited-term alimony awards for women of working age have become less likely. I conclude that increases in Swiss women's economic self-sufficiency have not kept pace with the decline of alimony. The hypotheses that changing norms in alimony law are reducing alimony and that less alimony stimulates women's employment thus deserve closer examination.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Aside from the allocation of child custody, the main issue at stake in divorce negotiations is the economic settlement. Marital property regimes provide relatively clear guidelines for how wealth that spouses brought into or accumulated during marriage is to be

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This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant 149594). Prior versions of this article were presented at a research workshop at Bern University of Applied Sciences, at the "Inequality Within Couples Workshop" at Humboldt University in Berlin, and at the junior researcher workshop at the Center for Family Sciences at the University of Basel. The author thanks the Swiss Federal Statistical Office for providing the data, anonymous referees and workshop participants for their helpful comments, and Joshua Vidich for proofreading the article.

divided upon divorce, and laws pertaining to child support have become highly formalized in recent decades (Skinner & Davidson 2009). However, in both European and U.S. divorce law practice, rules governing the determination of support orders to divorced ex-spouses, that is, alimony, are much less formalized and vary greatly between contexts (Oldham 2017; Ribot 2011; Starnes 2011).

What is the purpose of alimony? Under the early institutional marital regimes in Western countries, the husband was often given full control of and responsibility for the couple's economic resources (Cherlin 2004). The resulting economic inequalities between spouses were challenged by the legalization and diffusion of divorce. Since they held no wealth, divorce jeopardized women's economic security. Alimony then emerged as a means to balance discrepancies in economic resources and needs for divorced couples, thereby reducing the financial consequences of divorce for women and public welfare (Katz 2014:95; McMullen 2011).

With a growing number of couples having equal earnings, and of divorcees equally sharing parenting responsibilities, the core rationale for alimony has thus been eroding. In such a context, it is unsurprising to find that alimony is on the decline. In Scandinavian countries, alimony had already become a marginal phenomenon early on in the 20th century (Laplante 2016; Ribot 2011), while downward trends in alimony have also been confirmed more recently in the United States, Germany, and France (Bredtmann & Vonnahme 2019; McMullen 2014; Ribot 2011). U.S. law scholar Judith McMullen expects that alimony will "probably sooner rather than later" be restricted to couples in highly particular circumstances (McMullen 2014). From this perspective, declines in alimony orders are a *consequence* of less economic inequality between divorcing husbands and wives. If women gained in economic independence in proportion to the reductions of alimony they received, one could speak of well-calibrated alimony systems that have kept pace with societal changes.

Yet, reductions in alimony have also been linked to divorce law playing a more active role. Many have claimed that reduced alimony is the result of changes in the ideals underlying legal texts and their application by courts (McMullen 2014; Oldham 2017; Ribot 2011; Schwenzer 2009). Specifically, alimony law is increasingly thought of as being oriented toward the principle of "clean financial breaks." This notion advocates the avoidance of alimony in the interest of speeding up the divorce process (cf. Peters 1986), reducing conflict, and facilitating spouses' transition to life after divorce (Crowley 2016, 2017). "Clean financial breaks" are also rooted in the view that divorce settlements not involving alimony encourage women's economic self-sufficiency. Limiting alimony is seen not only as a way to give women an incentive to work after divorce, but also as a signal to currently married women and, ultimately, a means to *cause* a more gender-egalitarian society (Berghahn 2004; Leroyer 2016).

If, however, alimony was reduced based on these motives and women were unable to offset the lost private transfer income with greater earnings, they have been left worse off financially (Bredtmann & Vonnahme 2019). In such a scenario, rather than increasing gender equality, more restrictive alimony laws have caused the historical persistence of economic hardship found among divorced women in many national contexts (Bayaz-Ozturk et al. 2018; Bröckel & Andreß 2015; Kessler 2018; Le Bourdais et al. 2016).

This study assesses the reduction in the number of alimony orders in Swiss divorce judgments between the 1990s and the 2000s and asks whether they were a consequence of reduced economic inequality in couples. I employ a trend decomposition analysis on couple income data merged with all divorce judgments reported by courts. Specifically, I assess the extent to which the decline in alimony can be explained by changes in couples' incomes and the allocation of child custody. Furthermore, I relate changes in pension income inequality to the decline in limited-term and unlimited alimony.

Since Swiss divorce law was fundamentally reformed in 2000, the study is particularly well suited to highlight the role of changes in divorce law in the decline of alimony. In line with broader trends toward more clean breaks in Western divorce law, the new Swiss divorce law foresaw a much more restrictive alimony practice (Schwenzer 2011). Although my analyses do not allow me to directly assess the influence of legal changes on the frequency of alimony orders, they do establish the possible range of such influence: the less the decline in alimony can be explained by reduced economic couple inequality, the more likely it is that legal change has caused the reduction in alimony.

In the following, I describe divorce law before and after the 2000 law revision, highlighting the main changes in the legal texts that regulate the determination of alimony. I then articulate expectations concerning the influence of changes in economic gender equality on the decline of alimony. In the empirical part, I describe my sample, measurements, and analytical strategy, as well as present evidence on trends in the characteristics of divorce orders and divorcees, the predictors of alimony orders, and the decomposition analysis. I conclude the article with a summary of its most important results and my conclusions pertaining to policy making and future research.

## II. SWISS ALIMONY LAW DURING AND AFTER FAULT-BASED DIVORCE

Alimony in Switzerland is restricted to married couples and is regulated by marriage law. In 1988, marriage law was reformed along the lines of a companionate model of marriage that considered the rights and duties of women and men to be equal. The most relevant change this egalitarian matrimonial regime had on divorce outcomes was an equal split of property acquired during marriage (i.e., an acquired property regime<sup>1</sup>) as opposed to the former regime under which two-thirds of property went to the husband (Büchler & Cottier 2012:180–90).

In 2000, to adjust divorce law to this new marriage model, Swiss divorce law was fundamentally reformed from a fault-based system to a system based on divorces of mutual consent and unilateral divorce. Under both the old and new regimes, most divorce negotiations were held out of court and were coordinated by family lawyers. Compliance of agreements with divorce law was ensured because all agreements in final

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<sup>1</sup>If not explicitly stated in an individual contract between the spouses.

divorce statements had to be approved by the court (Binkert & Wyss 1997:18; Schwenzer 2011).

The determination of alimony usually proceeds in three steps. First, the individual economic needs of the divorcing spouses (including eventual children) are assessed. Second, the incomes of the spouses are assessed. Third, the difference, or surplus, between spouses' needs and incomes, if there is any, is identified. If alimony is awarded, this surplus is translated into a monthly payment to the recipient spouse, which, in virtually all cases, is the woman (Schwenzer 2011). Payments are usually set for a limited duration (of several years) but can also take the form of a one-time transfer (henceforth, lump sum) or of a lifetime annuity (henceforth, unlimited alimony).

Under the earlier fault-based regime, differences in marital property and guilt were central to the determination of alimony. Alimony was used to compensate for property lost as a result of the divorce or for "serious violations of personal relations,"<sup>2</sup> but was granted *only* to spouses who were not at fault. The only exception to this rule was if the divorce would have caused a guilty spouse to incur great financial difficulties and become dependent on social welfare after divorce<sup>3</sup> (Binkert & Wyss 1997:19–20). In this case, even a spouse found guilty of causing the divorce could have been awarded alimony.

With the abolition of fault-based divorce, this law text was replaced by a conception of alimony based on the idea of clean breaks (Schwenzer 2011). Accordingly, the first paragraph of the new legal text articulates the idea that maintenance payments should be limited to spouses who are highly unlikely to be able to support themselves.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to its legal predecessor, it then specifies an explicit list of marriage and spousal characteristics that must be considered when determining the size and duration of alimony (Art. 125, para. 2). This list includes:

1. the division of duties during the marriage;
2. the duration of the marriage;
3. the standard of living during the marriage;
4. the age and health of the spouses;
5. the income and assets of the spouses;
6. the extent and duration of childcare still required of the spouses;

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<sup>2</sup>Swiss Civil Code, Art. 151: "If the divorce affects the property rights or expected future property rights [Anwartschaften] of the innocent spouse, the guilty spouse shall pay him or her appropriate compensation. If the circumstances which led to the divorce constitute a serious violation of personal relations [Verhaeltnisse], the judge may award him or her a sum of money as satisfaction."

<sup>3</sup>Swiss Civil Code, Art. 152: "If a guiltless spouse falls into great need as a result of the divorce, the other spouse, even if he or she is not at fault in the divorce, may be obliged to make a contribution to the spouse's maintenance in accordance with his or her financial circumstances."

<sup>4</sup>Swiss Civil Code, Art. 125, para. 1: "If a spouse cannot reasonably be expected to provide for his or her own maintenance, including an appropriate level of retirement provision, the other spouse must pay a suitable contribution."

7. the vocational training and career prospects of the spouses and the likely cost of reintegration into working life;
8. expectancy of federal old age and survivor's insurance benefits and of occupational or other private or state pensions, including the expected proceeds of any division of withdrawal benefits.

The text creates a typology of ideal couples for whom, according to the new divorce law, alimony should be awarded more frequently, at greater levels, and for longer durations. Such cases include long-lasting marriages, in which one spouse has invested in a career and is capable of making alimony payments while the other spouse has provided the care and housework, and where either the lasting disadvantages from this division of labor, the continued provision of childcare, advanced age, or health problems threaten the latter partner's financial well-being after divorce and in retirement.<sup>5</sup> Alimony should not be permitted, on the other hand, for couples who had an egalitarian distribution of tasks during marriage and where neither spouse will incur serious financial difficulties after divorce.

Finally, the new legal text includes a fairness clause (*Billigkeitsklausel*) that allows for the negation of alimony under unfair circumstances. What constitutes "unfair circumstances" is specified only vaguely, but includes cases where the recipient spouse has not contributed to the couples' income, where the economic dependence has been self-inflicted, or where the recipient has committed a crime against the potential paying spouse.<sup>6</sup> Because judges have discretion in determining these "unfair circumstances," the fairness clause has been criticized for keeping alimony negotiations subject to the question of guilt (Büchler & Cottier 2012:191).

To sum up, comparing the legal texts before and after the divorce law revision shows that there has been a change in the *core* principle of alimony law. While alimony determination under the former law was closely linked to the question of fault, the new regime has sought to limit alimony to highly dependent spouses. In this respect, these trends in Swiss divorce law are comparable to broad tendencies toward a greater focus on clean breaks and increased economic self-sufficiency in the divorce law of other developed countries (McMullen 2014; Ribot 2011).

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<sup>5</sup>Although not specified in the legal texts, legal practitioners orient themselves on fixed numbers of marital duration and ages of spouses and children. Divorce judgments decided on by the federal court provide the reference for such fixed rules. Until recently, alimony was more likely in cases in which the recipient spouse was older than 45, or took care of children aged 15 years or younger; as well as in cases in which marriages lasted more than 10 years (Egli 2008). On the federal level, there are no such rules concerning the economic characteristics of the couple.

<sup>6</sup>Swiss Civil Code, Art. 125, para. 3:

Exceptionally, a maintenance contribution may be denied or reduced if it would clearly be inequitable, particularly because the spouse otherwise entitled to receive such contribution:

1. has grossly neglected his or her duty to contribute to the maintenance of the family;
2. has willfully brought about his or her own indigence;
3. has committed a serious criminal offence against the other spouse or a person close to him or her.

### III. ECONOMIC GENDER EQUALITY AND THE DECLINE OF ALIMONY

Despite these shifts in core principles, there are also commonalities between the old and new divorce law regimes. The basic formal process to determine alimony has remained constant over time and—at least since 1988—property has been divided equally between spouses. Furthermore, although the order of importance has been reversed, both laws consider the question of guilt and couples' economic resources and needs as determinants of alimony (Schwenzer 2009).

Because husbands' and wives' economic resources and needs played an important role in determining alimony under both regimes, I expect that one cause of the decline in alimony has been reductions in economic inequality in couples. As in other Western countries, Swiss women's labor market participation rates, as well as their wages, have grown over time (Jann & Engelhardt 2008). Although previous research has shown that the rise in labor market participation of mothers in Switzerland has primarily taken the form of part-time jobs (Liechti 2014; Struffolino & Bernardi 2017), I nevertheless expect trends in women's labor market capacities and the resulting reductions in economic inequality to have weakened claims for alimony.

One expectation is that increases in women's employment during marriage reflect a changed division of tasks during marriage. Less inequality in husbands' and wives' earnings histories are likely to have weakened claims for alimony based on an unequal division of tasks during the marriage. I test this by assessing the extent to which increases in the wife's share of a couple's total income *before the divorce* can explain the decline in alimony. Another expectation is that even women who did not work much during marriage are now more likely to become economically independent after divorce. Since institutions that govern the reconciliation of work and family have increased women's employment (Stadelmann-Steffen 2011) and such institutions have improved over time, I expect that reductions in couples' (expected) income inequality *after divorce* has additionally weakened claims for alimony. I test this by assessing the extent to which increases in the wife's share of a couple's total income *after divorce* can explain the decline in alimony.

Revision of the divorce law was accompanied by two changes that directly affected economic gender inequality after divorce. The first was the introduction of shared legal custody. In 2000, it became possible for both parents to share legal responsibility for their children after divorce. Given that in most divorces in the 1990s, legal custody was awarded to the mother, I expect that the introduction of shared parental responsibility has led to a greater involvement of divorced fathers in the upbringing of their children. The resulting increase in the capacity of mothers to work in the post-divorce period has presumably contributed to reducing their need for alimony. I therefore hypothesize that changes in the distribution of legal child custody further explain the decline in alimony.

The second change to the divorce law in 2000 that has resulted in a reduction of economic gender inequality was the introduction of occupational pension splits (Schwenzer 2011). In Switzerland, occupational pensions are a mandatory, defined

contribution pension scheme<sup>7</sup> and make up about 40 percent of men's and 20 percent of women's retirement income (Fluder et al. 2016). The new rule stipulated that all assets from occupational pension schemes that were accumulated during marriage are to be split in half at divorce.

Pension assets can be withdrawn once the beneficiary reaches retirement age. By increasing women's economic resources after retirement, the new splitting rule has thus reduced the role of alimony as a means to ensure retired women's economic security (cf. Art. 125 para. 1 and par. 2, point 8) (Egli 2008:88). I therefore expect the steepest reductions in alimony to concern cases that overlapped with divorcees' retirement (e.g., unlimited alimony). Since pension assets are not available for women of working age, the new splitting rule does not increase their income (until they retire) and has thus not lowered their need for limited-term alimony.

The data used in this study do not include measures of pension assets. In contrast to income and child custody, I am thus unable to directly assess the role of pension assets in the decline of alimony. However, based on information on the wife's age and the duration of the alimony order, it is possible to distinguish between divorce cases where alimony negotiations were affected by expected financial situation in old age and those where such influence is minimized. To demonstrate the role of occupational pension splits in the decline of alimony, I present separate results for the decline in unlimited alimony and for alimony that is of limited duration awarded to women of working age (cf. Section V.D).

## IV. METHODOLOGY

### *IV.A. Data Sources and Study Population*

My analyses drew on all case-level court reports of divorces granted in Switzerland between 1990 and 2008.<sup>8</sup> To examine trends in alimony over as long a period as possible, I focused on divorces at the beginning and end of this period. To ensure high statistical power, I pooled divorces from the years 1990 to 1992 to represent divorces under the fault-based divorce law regime (henceforth, the 1990s cohort) and divorces from the years 2006 to 2008 to represent divorces under the mutual consent divorce law regime (henceforth, the 2000s cohort).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Occupational pension income depends on the value of assets accumulated at retirement.

<sup>8</sup>Data were provided by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO). Court-based information was collected by the FSO as a basis for divorce statistics. To reduce the administrative burden on courts, information on alimony awards was no longer collected after 2008. Since 2010, divorce statistics in Switzerland are based on the Swiss civil registry database (Infostar).

<sup>9</sup>As a sensitivity analysis, I repeated the main analyses for 1993–1995 versus 2003–2005 (see Figure A3). The results are highly comparable with those for 1990–1992 versus 2006–2008.

Of the total divorces legally granted between 1990 and 2008, 99.3 percent contained full information on the study variables (apart from income). Due to the unavailability of pension incomes, I restricted the analyses of both cohorts to divorces in which spouses had not reached the age of retirement when they filed for divorce (wives: below age 62, husbands: below age 64). To restrict the sample to divorces under the new matrimonial property regime, I restricted the maximum difference between the date at which the couples filed for divorce and its legal enactment to two years (such that the earliest divorces were filed for in 1988). These steps reduced the sample to 92.7 percent of all divorces.

To measure divorcees' incomes, I linked court data with the income registers of the central compensation office from 1982 to 2015. The data merge between divorce and income data drew on the social security numbers (SSN) of the couples. Because SSN are not included in court data, I linked court data to the Swiss civil registry database (Infostar), where the social security numbers of all individuals currently living in Switzerland are listed. To do so, I used information on individuals' date of birth and date of last civil-status change. To identify the correct date of last civil-status change for divorced individuals who remarried (or remarried and divorced for a second time, etc.), I matched information on marriage dates from the FSO marriage database to the divorce database. In total, I was able to identify the SSNs of both spouses in 47.4 percent of all divorces.

I found that, compared to all divorces, divorces in which it was possible to identify the SSNs involved more divorces with alimony orders, longer-lasting marriages, and spouses who were older and had each held a Swiss citizenship before marriage. I used statistical balancing techniques (Hainmueller 2012) that adjusted all available characteristics of the sample of couples with identified SSNs to the full population data. For example, among all divorced wives in 1990, 51.72 percent were awarded some form of alimony (see Section V.C). Among the sample with identified SSNs, the share was 60.65 percent. When applying the weights to the sample with identified SSNs, the share was exactly equal to the full population level (51.72 percent). This held true for all types of alimony, child custody, and control variables (cf. Table 1), making my results representative of the study population with respect to these characteristics

#### IV.B. Measures

I measure *alimony awards* with dummy variables indicating whether the final divorce judgment approved by courts included an alimony order for the wife. The data allow me to distinguish alimony depending on its duration: either in the form of a one-time lump-sum payment, monthly payments of up to four years of duration, five to 10 years of duration, more than 10 years of duration, and unlimited alimony. I present the results for each type of alimony separately, as well as for an overall measure indicating whether there was an alimony order of any type.

Information on *wives' and husbands' incomes* is based on monthly incomes from dependent employment, self-employment, and social insurances. To measure the average income before divorce, I use a six-year window before couples filed for divorce (this is

Table 1: Characteristics of Divorces and Divorcees for Divorces Legally Enacted between 1990 and 1992 (1990s) Versus Those Enacted Between 2006 and 2008 (2000s)

		1990s		2000s	
		Mean/ Percent-Share	SD	Mean/ Percent-Share	SD
Alimony	Alimony: overall	50.7		33.1	
	Alimony: lump sum	5.2		1.6	
	Alimony: less than 5 years	14.4		10.5	
	Alimony: 5–10 years	15.5		13.5	
	Alimony: more than 10 years	9.5		6.8	
	Alimony: unlimited	9.2		1.4	
Incomes and income inequality	Wife, before divorce, CHF/month	2,057.5	1,875.3	2,333.9	1,970.2
	Husband, before divorce, CHF/month	5,452.5	3,062.7	5,366.9	3,546.6
	Wife's share of couples' total income, before divorce	27.6		32.6	
	Wife, after divorce, CHF/month	3,156.9	2,227.1	3,082.4	2,438.8
	Husband, after divorce, CHF/month	5,831.2	3,848.4	5,536.4	4,379.1
	Wife's share of couples' total income, after divorce	37.1		39.5	
Children, legal custody	No children from marriage	39.7		39.5	
	Adult children	14.7		13.6	
	Mixed/shared	1		15.9	
	Only father	3.8		2.2	
	Only mother	40.8		28.8	
Control variable: age at judgment	Wife	36.2	8	40.6	8.7
	Husband	39	8.1	43.2	9
Control variable: marital duration	Years married	10.7	7.9	12.9	8.3
Control variable: citizenship before marriage	Both Swiss	59.6		52	
	Husband Swiss, wife foreign	14.6		15.6	
	Wife Swiss, husband foreign	14.9		16.7	
	Both foreign	10.9		15.7	
Control variable: region	Leman region	20.8		19.2	
	Mittelland	21.3		23.2	
	Northwest	13.2		13.7	
	Zurich	21.7		19.6	
	East	12.9		12.8	
	Central	6.5		7.6	
	Ticino	3.6		3.8	

Table 1: *Continued*

		1990s		2000s	
		Mean/ Percent-Share	SD	Mean/ Percent-Share	SD
Control variable:	City	73		68.1	
geographical characteristics	Agglomeration/rural centers	16.5		18.9	
	Rural area	10.5		13.1	
N		11,952		37,839	

NOTES: Income measures refer to the average in the six years before the couple filed for the divorce and in the six years after the couple filed for divorce. Weighted results.

SOURCE: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

the maximum observation period for the earliest divorces filed in 1988).<sup>10</sup> I likewise use a six-year period to measure wives' and husbands' average incomes after couples filed for divorce. To measure *economic inequality in the couple*, I calculate the wives' percentage of the couples' total income. All monetary values have been adjusted to December 2015 price levels to adjust for changes in wages and prices over time. To reduce the influence of outliers, I top- and bottom-coded the sample at the first and 99th percentile of gender-specific distributions of income before divorce.

*Attribution of child custody* is captured by a categorical variable that indicates whether, at the time of the judgment, the couple had no children together, a youngest child aged 18 or older (there is no decision on custody in the case of adult children), at least one minor child where legal custody was shared between parents or where legal custody was mixed (one or more children allocated to the mother and one or more children allocated to the father<sup>11</sup>), at least one minor child in sole legal custody of the father, or at least one minor child in sole legal custody of the mother. Legal and physical child custody often diverge in Switzerland (Cantieni 2007). Yet, I expect that if legal custody is allocated solely to the mother, she also provides childcare, is thereby more restricted in her earning capacity after divorce, and is more likely to be awarded alimony (van Damme et al. 2009).

I account for several additional characteristics potentially related to alimony decisions. All my models include control variables that capture the following dimensions.

*Marital duration* is measured by the duration between the legal date of marriage and the date the couple filed for divorce. As outlined above, I expected alimony to be more frequent in cases of longer marital durations.

<sup>10</sup>Sensitivity analyses show that including more years in the income measure leads to more accurate predictions of alimony awards (i.e., all six years before the divorce instead of only the year of divorce).

<sup>11</sup>In the 1990s cohort, observations in this category are restricted to mixed custody because shared custody was not yet available.

*Age at divorce* measures the age of the husband and the wife at judgment. I expected age to matter in alimony decisions because it determines a woman's chances to (re)build a career and become economically self-sufficient. I assume that younger women have greater labor market opportunities after a divorce, since they are more capable of acquiring additional education and new skills. I therefore expect the woman's age to be positively related to alimony orders (Egli 2008:122). Age is likely negatively related to alimony when husbands are close to entering retirement and thereby have less income with which to pay alimony.

*Citizenship before marriage* is used as an approximation for spousal earning potential. Individuals who do not have Swiss citizenship have lower household incomes and experience more difficulties on the Swiss labor market (Federal Statistical Office 2017). For these reasons, I expect husbands who do not have Swiss citizenship to be less likely to be ordered to pay alimony than husbands who do. From this follows the expectation that women without Swiss citizenship are more likely to receive alimony.

*Region* locates the reference person's residence in one of the seven regions (*Grossregionen*, NUTS-2-Level),<sup>12</sup> which I used as a proxy for local gender norms. I assumed that alimony awards are less frequent in areas with more egalitarian gender policies and attitudes. The Lemman region is typical of an area whose inhabitants express more egalitarian gender policies and attitudes; a counterexample is central Switzerland (cf. Gasser et al. 2015). *Geographical characteristics* reflect the reference person's living environment. This variable distinguishes three types: urban areas, agglomerations or rural centers, and rural areas. I expected the inhabitants of urban regions to have more progressive gender attitudes than agglomerations or rural centers (cf. Gasser et al. 2015).

#### IV.C. Analytical Strategy

Two criteria are used to determine whether changes in income and child custody arrangements have caused the decline in alimony: a change in income and child custody, and an association between income and child custody and alimony awards.

##### 1. Changes in Alimony and Economic Inequality

To test these criteria, I first compare the characteristics of the two cohorts. This comparison includes the share of divorces with alimony orders in both cohorts, distinguished by type of alimony. I then show how much the characteristics of divorcing couples and divorcees have changed with respect to measures of income, income inequality before and after the divorce, and the attribution of child custody. I also discuss the most relevant changes in control variables.

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<sup>12</sup>It is unknown whether the reference person is the wife or the husband, but, as this information is likely taken at the initiation of the divorce, the information can be assumed to refer to the couple's household location in most cases.

## 2. Strength of Associations

To test the associations between income, child custody arrangements, and control variables and alimony awards, I calculate cohort-specific logistic regression models predicting alimony awards. These models can be written as:

$$\Pr(Y_{i1990s} = 1 | X_{i1990s}) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_{1990s} * X_{i1990s})}} \quad (1)$$

$$\Pr(Y_{i2000s} = 1 | X_{i2000s}) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_{2000s} * X_{i2000s})}} \quad (2)$$

where  $\Pr(Y_i = 1 | X_i)$  denotes the probability that the wife in divorce  $i$  is awarded alimony given the vector  $X_i$  of predictors.  $\beta$  describes the vector of slope parameters of predictors  $X$  and the regression intercept. Due to collinearity issues, my models include only the wife's share of the couple's total income and husband's income (omitting the wife's income) and I calculate separate models for income measures based on incomes before and incomes after the divorce. To account for nonlinear associations between my income measures and alimony, I use categorical variables that split the sample into quintiles (e.g., the lowest quintile group = 20 percent of the sample with the lowest values). To express coefficients in terms of probability and to compare associations across the cohorts, I calculate average marginal effects (*AME*) for each predictor in  $X$  (except for control variables) (Auspurg & Hinz 2016).

## 3. Decomposition

Finally, to explain cohort differences in the probability of alimony awards, I perform a three-fold Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition (Jann 2008). I decompose the difference in the probability of alimony awards between the two cohorts,  $D$ ,

$$D = \Pr(Y_{2000s} = 1) - \Pr(Y_{1990s} = 1) = E + C + I \quad (3)$$

in a part  $E$ ,

$$E = \{E(X_{2000s}) - E(X_{1990s})\}' \beta_{1990s} \quad (4)$$

that summarizes the part of  $D$  that is related to the change in divorcees' endowments—How much of the change can be related to differences in the average levels of predictors?—, a part  $C$ ,

$$C = \{E(X_{2000s})\}' (\beta_{2000s} - \beta_{1990s}) \quad (5)$$

that summarizes the part of  $D$  that is related to the change in coefficients—How much of the change can be explained by different slopes of the predictors?—and a part  $I$ ,

$$I = \{E(X_R) - E(X_L)\}'(\beta_R - \beta_L) \quad (6)$$

that quantifies how much of the difference is due to simultaneous changes in predictor levels and slope coefficients. I present the overall results of  $E$ ,  $C$  and  $I$ . Since my hypotheses refer to the endowments part  $E$ , I present the detailed decomposition results of  $E$  for income measures, child custody arrangements and control variables.

#### 4. The Influence of Occupational Pension Splits

To better understand the influence of occupational pension splits on the decline of alimony, I use results for unlimited alimony awards on the total sample—here, the new splitting rule should have a large effect—and for an age-restricted sample and limited-term alimony. The latter include decomposition results for the decline of alimony up to four years in duration for all women below age 57, as well as the decline of alimony up to 10 years in duration for all women below age 51. Alimony negotiations in these divorces were not affected by the new splitting rule because at the time the couples filed for divorce, the women were too young and the duration of alimony too short for it to have affected their economic resources in retirement as women reach retirement age at 62.

## V. RESULTS

### V.A. Changes in Divorcee Characteristics

How did the composition of divorcees change between the two cohorts? Table 1 reports the weighted descriptive statistics of all divorces in the 1990s and 2000s cohorts. Most importantly, it shows that the share of divorces in which the wife was awarded any type of alimony strongly declined in the latter cohort. In the 1990s cohort, wives were awarded alimony in about every second divorce. In the 2000s cohort, the share of divorces with alimony for wives was reduced to about one divorce in three (−18 percentage points). The separate results for each type of alimony show that alimony became less frequent irrespective of its form. However, I also find that the decline in unlimited alimony awards was steepest (from over 9 percent of all divorces down to 1 percent). I interpret this as evidence for the role of the introduction of pension splits, which, by increasing women's retirement income, made alimony during retirement age less necessary. Yet, there were also other ways that the composition of divorcees changed that could explain the decline in alimony.

Table 1 shows that the gap between husbands' and wives' incomes was less in the later cohort. In the 2000s cohort, wives' average annual incomes in the six years prior to filing for divorce increased in comparison with the 1990s cohort by 13 percent, with an average monthly income of 2,486 CHF. Husbands' average income, on the other hand, fell slightly in the 2000s cohort (−2 percent), even though they still earned significantly more than their wives. The cumulative effect of these changes was an 18 percent increase in wives' share of the couples' total income: from 27.6 to 32.6 percentage points.

However, note that women's incomes during the period after divorce did not see the same progression from the 1990s to the 2000s cohort. While in both cohorts, women strongly increased their incomes from the period before to the period after the divorce, the increase was stronger in the earlier cohort (53 percent vs. 32 percent), such that after divorce, women in the later cohort actually earned *less* than in the earlier cohort (−2 percent). Because husbands saw substantial reductions in their post-divorce income (−5 percent), wives still increased the percentage of the couples' total income in the 2000s cohort to a small extent (+6 percent).

Child custody has become more equally shared between divorcing spouses. The introduction of shared legal custody coincided with a strong reduction in the proportion of women who have sole custody over children (−29 percent). The share of childless divorcees has remained stable over time.

Not all changes in control variables indicate fewer alimony awards. On the one hand, longer-lasting marriages, more divorces in central Switzerland, wives' higher age at divorce, and a greater share of wives without Swiss citizenship would all imply an increased probability of alimony awards. On the other hand, the higher age of husbands at divorce and the greater frequency of divorces involving husbands without Swiss citizenship are in line with a reduced level of alimony in the later cohort.

These findings show that in the later cohort, women earned higher incomes, income inequality was lower, and women were much less likely to be granted sole custody over common children. However, because my findings also show that women's incomes *after divorce* have stagnated (or even declined) from the earlier to the later cohort, as well as that women in the later cohort were older and divorces in traditional gender contexts more frequent, changes in the characteristics of divorcees do not unanimously point toward fewer alimony awards.

### V.B. *Income, Child Custody and Alimony Awards*

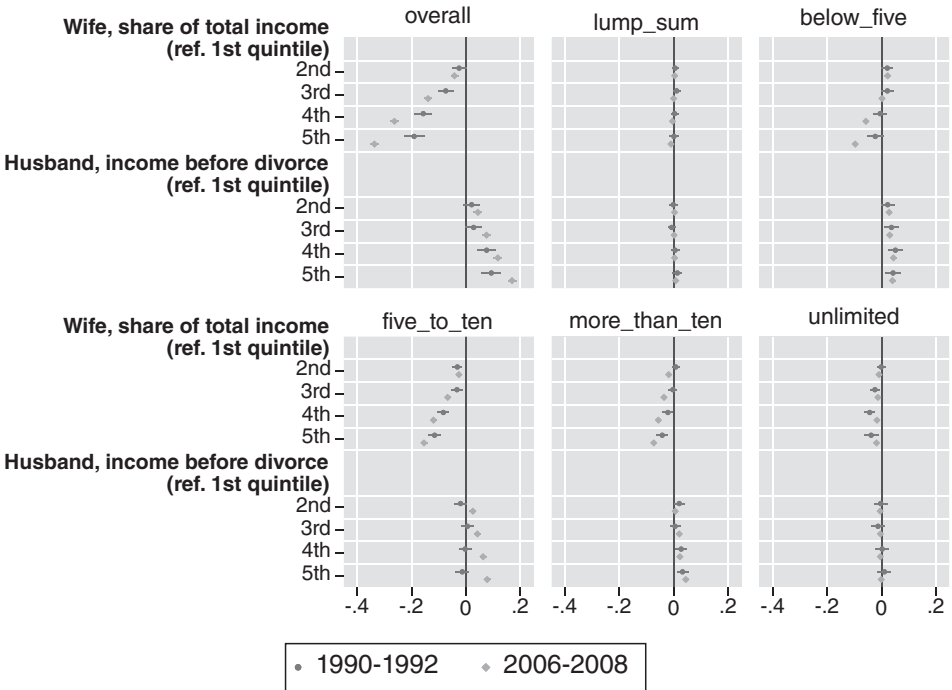
Are income and child custody associated with alimony awards and are these associations similar in both cohorts? Since income inequality measured in terms of incomes after divorce has only slightly decreased between the cohorts and thus represents only a weak explanation of declines in alimony, from here on, I will restrict the discussion to results based on incomes measured in the period before the divorce.<sup>13</sup> Figure 1 depicts the AME of the wife's income share, the husband's income, and child custody arrangements on the probability of an alimony order. These results convey two important lessons.

First, they show that income and child custody arrangements are good predictors of alimony awards when looking at all forms of alimony (panel "overall"). In both cohorts, alimony was much more likely for divorces in which the wife earned a relatively small share of the couple's total income than for divorces in which the wife earned a high share of the couple's total income (e.g., first vs. fifth quintile, 1990–1992: −19 percentage

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<sup>13</sup>Results for the association between income measures based on post-divorce income and alimony awards, as well as respective decomposition results, are presented in the Appendix (Figures A4 and A5).

Figure 1: Average marginal effects (and 95 percent confidence intervals) on alimony awards, based on logistic regression models, by type of alimony.



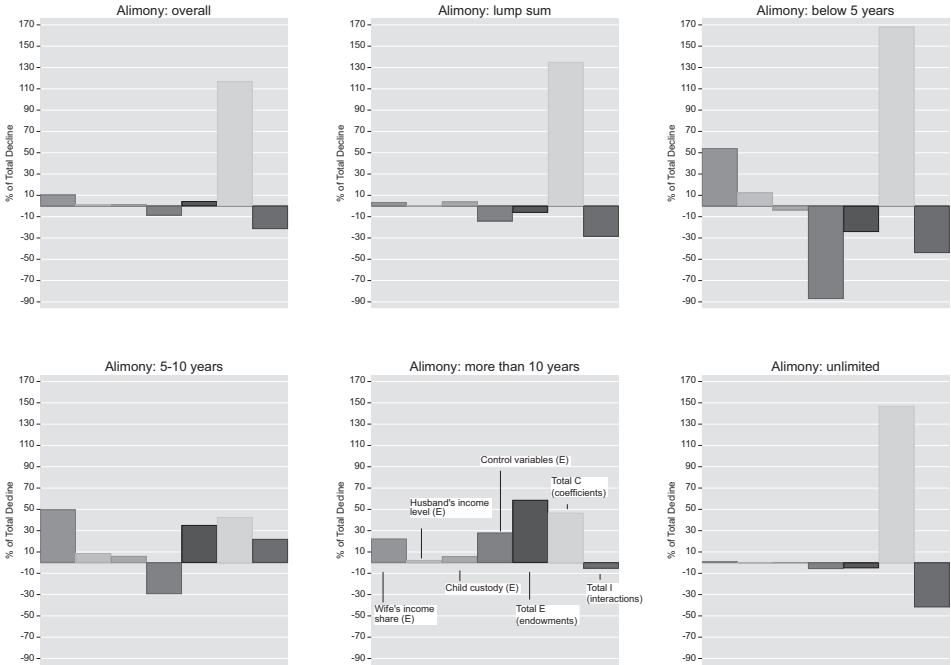
NOTES: Overall = all kinds of alimony awards; lump\_sum = one-time payment; below\_four = regular payment of up to four years in duration; five\_to\_ten = regular payment of five to 10 years in duration; ten\_and\_more = regular payment of more than 10 years in duration but less than life long; unlimited = life annuity. Income measures refer to the six years before the couple filed for divorce. All calculations controlled for: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

points). Likewise, alimony is much more likely in divorces with high-income husbands than in divorces with low-income husbands (e.g., first vs. fifth quintile, 1990–1992: +9 percentage points). In divorces without underage children, alimony was much less probable than in cases where the mother received full custody (e.g., in 1990–1992 the difference was 33 percentage points). The difference in the probability of alimony is less when comparing childless divorcees with cases in which custody was mixed (1990–1992: 22 percentage points).

Second, the results show that the associations vary by type of alimony. The above-reported associations between income, child custody, and overall alimony can also be found for measures of alimony of 10 or more years in duration (panel “10\_or\_more”). Alimony orders of 10 or more years in duration are more likely when the woman earned a low share of the couples’ total income, the husband had a high income, and child

Figure 2: Decomposition of the decline in the probability of alimony awards in divorce judgments 1990–1992 versus 2006–2008, percentage of total decline of each alimony type, detailed decomposition results of endowment part and overall decomposition results, by type of alimony.



NOTES: Decline overall: 17.6 percentage points, lump sum: 3.6, less than five years: 3.9, five to 10 years: 2, more than 10 years: 2.7, unlimited alimony: 7.8. Based on specification of logistic regression models underlying Figure 1. Income measures refer to the six years before the couple filed for divorce. Control variables: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

custody was attributed to the mother. However, among the 1990s cohort, I did not find an association between wife's share of the couple's total income and alimony below four years in duration, nor an association between the husband's income level and alimony of five to 10 years in duration. My income and child custody measures also had only a very weak relation to lump-sum and unlimited alimony orders. This suggests that other, here unobserved, factors are relevant for these types of alimony (e.g., pension assets for unlimited alimony).

In short, I found income and child custody to be relatively good predictors of alimony awards and to therefore qualify as explanations for the decline of alimony orders. However, the results indicate that accounting for differences between types of alimony will also likely be crucial for understanding the decline in alimony.

### V.C. Decomposing the Decline of Alimony Orders

Bringing all these analyses together, Figure 2 presents the results of my decomposition analyses. I will now discuss the overall decomposition results, the results for the endowment part by type of alimony, and the detailed results of the endowment part by characteristic.

The endowment part (“Total E,” gray bar) reflects the combined influence of changes in the *levels* of the wife’s share of a couple’s total income (“Wife’s income share”), the husband’s income level (“Husband’s income level”), the levels of child custody (“Child custody”), and the control variables (marital duration, spouses’ ages, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics; “Control variables”). “Total E” measures how much the decline in alimony would have differed if these characteristics had remained constant between the 1990s and 2000s cohort. For the overall measure of alimony, I found that the “Total E” amounts to only 4.5 percent of the decline of alimony (0.079 percentage points). Conversely, differences in the coefficients between the cohorts (“Total C,” red bar) fare much better at explaining the decline in alimony: they account for 117 percent of the decline (20.6). From the simultaneous changes in levels and coefficients, one can expect an *increase* in alimony amounting to 20 percent of the absolute value of the decline (“Total I,” purple bar, 3.8). All in all, these results show that with the differences in the levels of observed characteristics, I can explain the overall decline of alimony only to a very limited extent.

As could be expected from my analyses of associations (see Section V.B), the results vary largely between types of alimony. “Total E” is negative for lump-sum alimony, short limited-term alimony (less than four years), and unlimited alimony, implying that changes in characteristics cannot explain the decline in these forms of alimony. However, Total E amounts to 35 percent of the decline in alimony of five to 10 years in duration (0.7 percentage points) and 59 percent of the decline in alimony of more than 10 years in duration (1.6 percentage points).

For these latter two measures of limited-term alimony, changes in the level of wife’s share of a couple’s total income account for relatively large proportions of this positive “Total E” (49 percent for alimony of five to 10 years, 23 percent for alimony of more than 10 years). Changes in the levels of child custody arrangements account for a small additional portion of the decline in these forms of alimony (6 percent for both types). Changes in the wife’s share of the couple’s total income are also able to explain a considerable part of the decline of alimony for less than four years in duration (54 percent). However, because changes in the levels of control variables would lead one to expect an increase in the probability of such alimony awards from the earlier to the later cohorts (i.e., 87 percent less of a decline), “Total E” is negative. As could be expected from the low rates of change in husbands’ incomes from one cohort to the next (see above), changing levels of husband income have not contributed substantially to the decline of any form of alimony.

Summing up the results of the decomposition analysis, it can be concluded that reductions in the levels of income inequality in divorcing couples partly account for the decline of limited-term alimony (all forms except lump-sum and unlimited alimony). However, given changes in other sociodemographic characteristics of couples (e.g., their older age and longer marital duration), the divorcees’ characteristics measured in this

study taken together are far from a good explanation of the declines in these kinds of alimony awards. Furthermore, changes in divorcees' characteristics are clearly unable to explain the declines in lump-sum alimony or unlimited alimony.

#### *V.D. The Influence of Occupational Pension Splits*

It is possible that my inability to explain the decline of alimony is due to not accounting for occupational pension splits, which were introduced in the time between the two cohorts. Because I was unable to include direct measures of pension assets and thereby account for their role in the decline of alimony awards, I calculated results for subsets of cases in which any influence of pension agreements on alimony decisions is minimized.

I decomposed the decline of limited-term alimony up to four years in duration for all women below age 57 and the decline of medium-term alimony up to 10 years in duration for all women below age 51. My results show that while alimony declined among these cases to an even larger extent than among the total study population (4.2 percentage points [pp] and 2.9 pp vs. 3.9 and 2), "Total E" did not make up a large positive part of the decline in either analysis (cf. Figures A1 and A2).

I concluded that the greater equality in pension incomes that came about with the introduction of pension splits is likely to have reduced the number of *unlimited* alimony awards (cf. above). However, since I found strong declines of alimony in cases where pension incomes were not relevant to the determination of alimony and that could not be explained by my observed characteristics, the decline in alimony must have been caused by factors other than reduced income inequality, child custody arrangements, or pension incomes.

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

One of the few established findings of empirical research into alimony is its historical decline in Western countries. Since the main function of alimony is to compensate for economic inequality among divorced couples, a declining trend in alimony is likely to be the *consequence* of greater economic equality between husbands and wives. Scholars of European and U.S. divorce law (McMullen 2014; Ribot 2011), however, have made the counterargument that, rather than resulting from passive adaptation to new social realities, reductions of alimony orders have been due to a deliberate reorientation of alimony law, which, by limiting alimony, has sought to facilitate divorces and to *cause* gender equality. Focusing on the case of Switzerland before and after the abolition of fault-based divorce in 2000, this study tested the first of these two explanations by examining the extent to which the decline in alimony is a consequence of reductions in the inequality of economic resources and needs between divorcing wives and husbands.

I find that economic inequality in divorced couples became substantially less during my study period. When compared to the 1990s cohort, wives' incomes in the 2000s cohort made up a larger part of the total income that couples earned in the years before they filed for divorce. The introduction of shared legal custody in 2000 strongly increased the share of divorcees who shared parenting responsibilities after divorce, potentially

improving the labor market prospects of women, who often would have had sole custody under the old regime. Finally, since 2000, occupational pension assets that had accumulated during marriage had to be split upon divorce; thus, women divorced in the 2000s cohort had higher retirement incomes than women divorced in the 1990s cohort.

However, my main results are that while alimony declined from about one in two divorces in the 1990s to one in three divorces in the 2000s, the extent to which greater equality in wives' and husbands' economic resources explain this trend is limited. I find that the reduction in income inequality among couples, together with the more egalitarian distribution of child custody, can at best explain half the decline of limited-term alimony. Given that changes in divorcees' other characteristics (such as longer marital durations and women's older age) have produced higher rates of alimony, the change in divorcees' characteristics does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the decline in alimony. The steepest reductions in alimony orders have taken place among alimony orders of unlimited duration. I interpret this as evidence for the replacement of unlimited alimony with occupational pension splits, which became mandatory in 2000. However, because pension assets are available only upon reaching retirement age and women's incomes *after* divorce did *not* increase across cohorts, the decline in unlimited alimony caused greater inequality in couples' economic resources immediately following divorce. Furthermore, I am also unable to explain the decline in limited-term alimony in divorces involving women who were well below retirement age—cases in which the new splitting rule played little to no role for the determination of alimony.

The present study was hindered by the inability to measure couples' pension assets or other forms of wealth directly. This made it impossible to provide an exhaustive quantification of how changes in each kind of economic resource related to the decline in alimony. However, given the limited importance of pension assets for my working-age sample and that it is unlikely that wealth inequality in divorced couples lessened during a period of a stable matrimonial property regime, I conclude that increases in Swiss women's economic self-sufficiency have not kept pace with the decline in alimony.

On this basis, I suspect that the more restrictive alimony laws in Western countries are one reason why the economic losses caused by divorce for women have remained stable over time (Bayaz-Ozturk et al. 2018; Bröckel & Andreß 2015; Kessler 2018; Le Bourdais et al. 2016). However, whether changing orientations and goals in divorce law have really caused a decline in alimony, and whether women were unable to compensate respective losses in alimony are questions that require more research. To answer them, future studies will need to more directly spotlight the nature and evolution over time of the argumentation used by judges to grant and dismiss alimony claims and to employ well-controlled comparisons of women's economic situation under different legal regimes (cf. Bredtmann & Vonnahme 2019).

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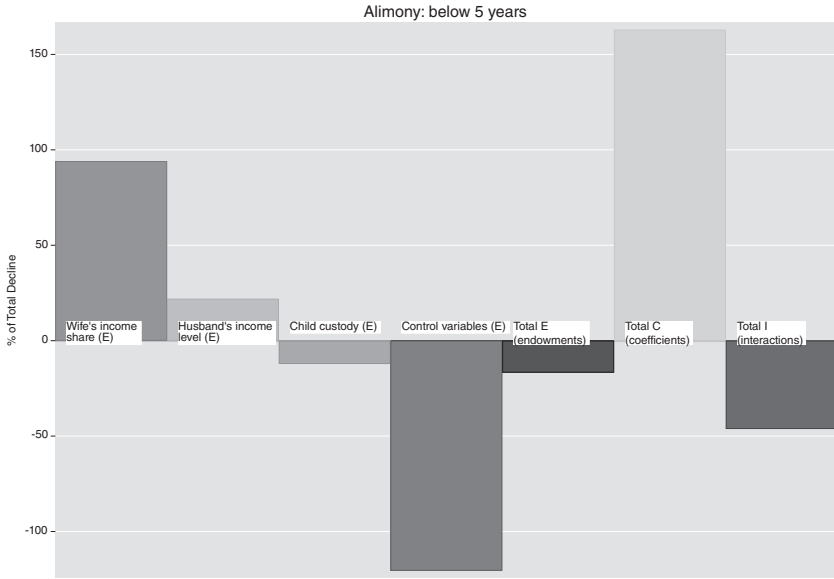
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APPENDIX

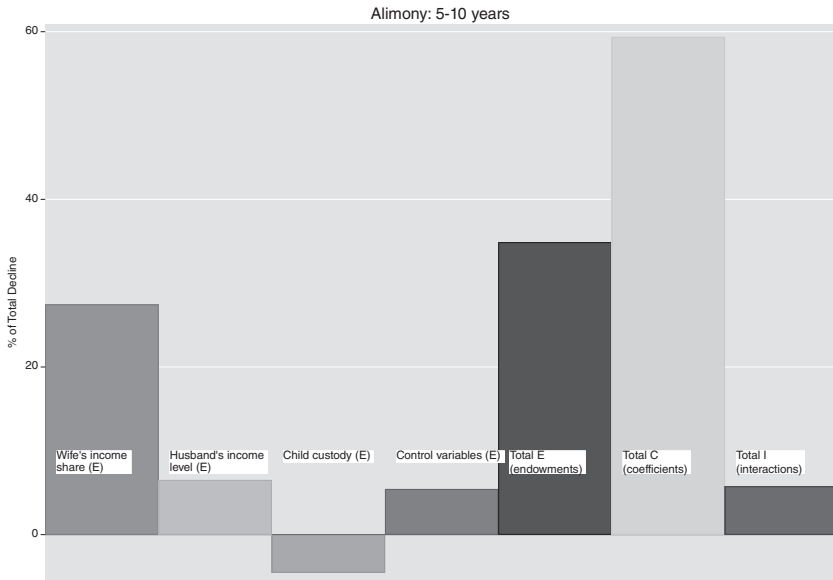
Figure A1: Decomposition of the decline in the probability of alimony awards below four years in duration in divorce judgments 1990–1992 versus 2006–2008, proportion of total decline, divorces with wives aged 56 or younger.



NOTES: Decline: 4.2 percentage points. Based on specification of logistic regression models underlying Figure 1 (main text). Income measures refer to the six years before the couple filed for divorce. Control variables: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

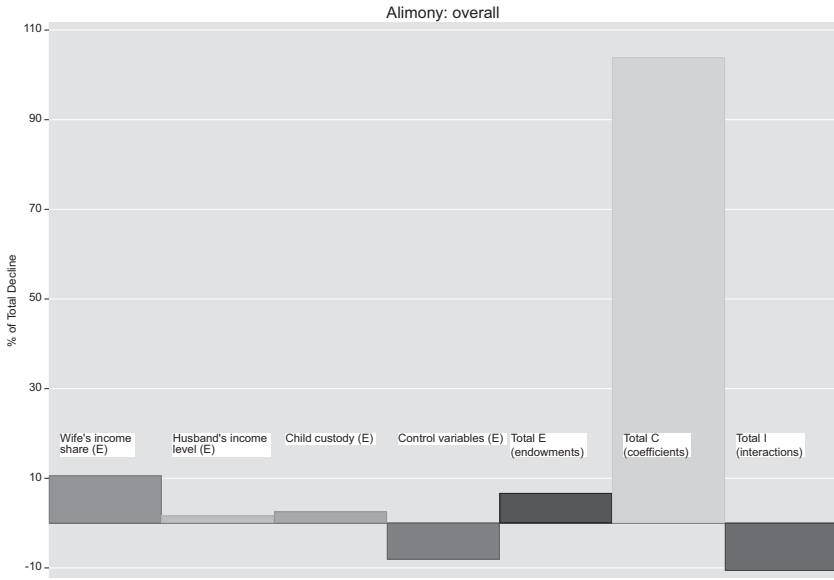
Figure A2: Decomposition of the decline in the probability of alimony awards of five to 10 years in duration in divorce judgments 1990–1992 versus 2006–2008, proportion of total decline, divorces with wives aged 50 or younger.



NOTES: Decline: 2.9 percentage points. Based on specification of logistic regression models underlying Figure 1 (main text). Income measures refer to the six years before the couple filed for divorce. Control variables: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

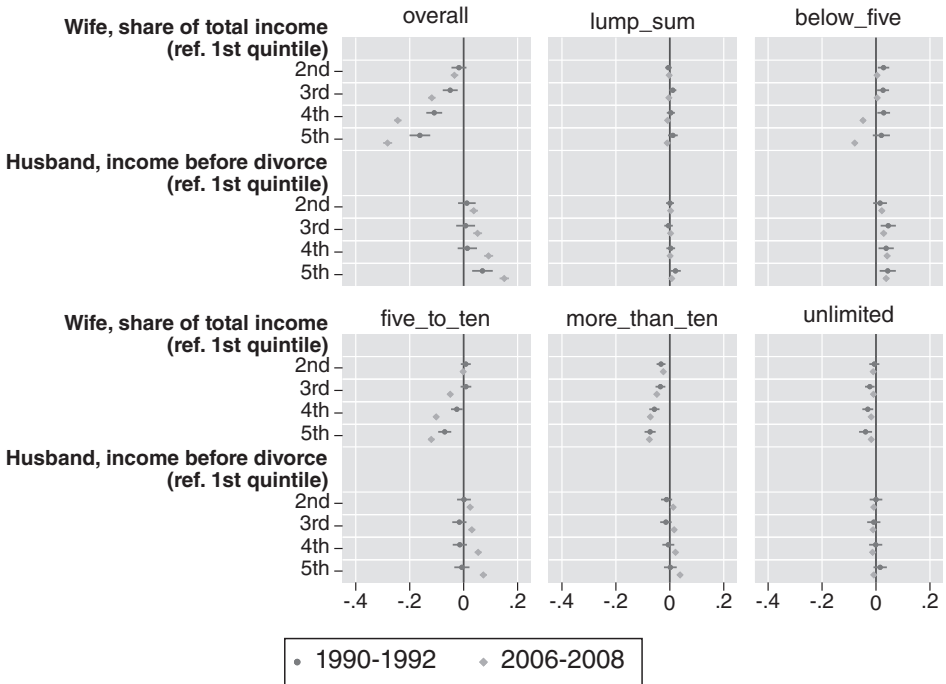
Figure A3: Decomposition of the decline in the probability of alimony awards in any form in divorce judgments 1993–1995 versus 2003–2005, proportion of total decline.



NOTES: Overall decline: 17.5 percentage points. Based on specification of logistic regression models underlying Figure 1 (main text). Income measures refer to the six years before the couple filed for divorce. Control variables: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

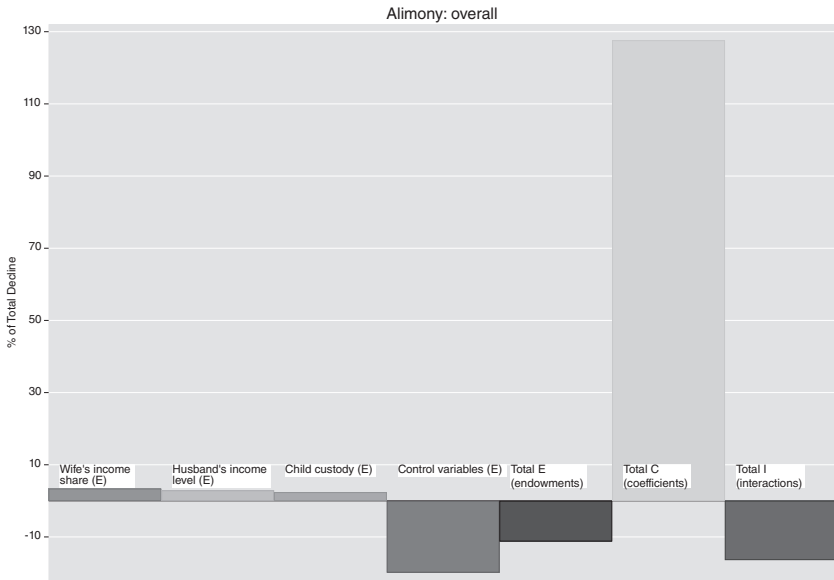
Figure A4: Average marginal effects (and 95 percent confidence intervals) on alimony awards, based on logistic regression models, by type of alimony, based on income measured after divorce.



NOTES: Overall = all kinds of alimony awards; lump\_sum = one-time payment; below\_four = regular payment of up to four years in duration; five\_to\_ten = regular payment of five to 10 years in duration; ten\_and\_more = regular payment of more than 10 years in duration but less than life long; unlimited = life annuity. Income measures refer to the six years after the couple filed for divorce. All calculations controlled for: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region, and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.

Figure A5: Decomposition of the decline in the probability of alimony awards in any form in divorce judgments 1990–1992 versus 2006–2008, proportion of total decline, results with incomes measured after divorce.



NOTES: Based on specification of logistic regression models underlying Figure 1 (main text). Income measures refer to the six years after the couple filed for divorce. Control variables: age of both spouses, marital duration, citizenship before marriage, region and geographical characteristics. Weighted results.

SOURCES: Divorce statistics from the Federal Statistical Office merged with income information from the Central Compensation Office, author's calculations.