



# The politics of homeschools: Religious conservatives and regulation requirements<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, the number of homeschools in the United States (US) has grown, and a large proportion is attributed to increases in religiously affiliated homeschools (Kunzman, 2009). However, empirical analyses of the relationship between religion and homeschooling are lacking. This analysis begins to fill that void using a culture wars framework, and indicates that states with higher percentages of evangelical residents are less likely to regulate homeschooling. Consistent with Deckman's (2004) claim, these findings demonstrate the culture wars are active in education policymaking.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the US has experienced an increase in the number of homeschooling families. It is estimated that the number of homeschooled children has grown 15–20% annually (Bauman, 2001) and now totals about two million students (Murphy, 2012). While the population of homeschooling families is considered to be heterogeneous – such that parents homeschool for various pedagogical, ideological, and/or religious reasons (Gaither, 2008; Isenberg, 2007; Kunzman, 2009; Van Galen, 1991) – much of the growth in the number of homeschoolers is attributed to an increase in the number of conservative Christian homeschoolers (Cibulka, 1991; Kunzman, 2009; Lines, 2000, 1991; Murphy, 2012; Van Galen, 1991).

Homeschooling is generally defined as schooling which occurs outside of an institutional school setting, where parents are the primary instructor or supervise instruction. Fundamental to the debate surrounding the rights of all homeschooling families is the degree of state regulation of homeschools. There are those who push for more state regulations and maintain that states should implement a bare minimum set of requirements to ensure that all homeschooled students receive an adequate education (Cibulka, 1991; Kunzman, 2009; Lubienski, Puckett, & Brewer, 2013). Alternatively, many homeschooling parents distrust any state imposition of educational standards (Murphy, 2012). They hold that there is no evidence to suggest an educational adequacy issue (Cibulka, 1991; Murphy, 2012), and past studies of homeschooled children suggest that they perform better on standardized tests than public school students (Cibulka, 1991; Kunzman, 2009; Lines, 2000; Ray & Eagleson, 2008; Ray & Wartes, 1991; Ray, 2013, 2010). To fully assess the academic achievement and scholastic engagement of homeschooled students, analyses that control for individual, family, and community level factors are needed. For example, Havermans, Botterman, and Matthijs (2014) find that parent–child and parent–parent relationships effect student engagement and achievement – it may

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be the case that homeschooling enhances these relationships and enhances positive academic and engagement outcomes.

This study considers whether or not state regulations imposed on homeschools are influenced by the religious characteristics of the state of residence, and adds to the growing literature on the existence of culture wars in educational policy-making (Cigler, Joslyn, & Loomis, 2003; Deckman, 2004; Vieux, 2014). Hunter's (1991) culture wars theory suggests that there are distinct differences in policy preferences between religious conservatives and non-religious or religiously moderate individuals, and these opposing groups mobilize around and lobby for preferred public policy. The basic assumption is that religiously conservative homeschoolers are against state interference in their homeschools, and that states with larger percentages of religious conservatives are expected to impose fewer regulations on homeschool operations. To explore this question, a brief description of the homeschool movement and the culture wars framework is provided, followed by an examination of these findings' implications for the future of the homeschooling movement.

## 2. History of homeschooling

There were no compulsory attendance laws in early US history, and common schools were not widespread; however, homeschooling was an option (Reich, 2002). However, as states began to adopt compulsory public schooling laws, by 1920 homeschooling became socially unacceptable and illegal (Knowles, Marlow, & Muchmore, 1992; Murphy, 2012; Reich, 2002), and the number of homeschooling families declined (Knowles et al., 1992). Religious parents at the time did not take issue with compulsory attendance laws, because public schools included Protestant Christian values and teachings in the curriculum (Deckman, 2004). Homeschools were, however, an option for liberal-minded parents who did not agree with the nationalistic, capitalistic teachings in public schools, or those who favored more pedagogically oriented, child-driven instructional approaches (Gaither, 2008; Knowles et al., 1992; Murphy, 2012). This began to change in the mid-twentieth century when public schools incorporated evolution in the science curriculum (Gibson, 2004) and no longer included bible readings (*School District of Abington v. Shempp*, 1963) and prayer (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962). As a result, homeschooling became an option for religious-minded parents. This set the stage for conflict between religious parents and school districts over the enrollment of children in local public schools (Knowles et al., 1992).

Acceptance of homeschooling shifted after the Supreme Court ruling in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), which stated that forcing Amish children into the public school system infringed on their parental and religious freedoms, posed a threat to their cultural group, and violated their constitutional rights. During this era, the arrest and imprisonment of homeschool parents was a media field-day, particularly in some cases where homeschoolers were local church leaders (Knowles et al., 1992). This resulted in state changes to compulsory attendance laws and their enforcement (Knowles et al., 1992). In 1987, the 6th Circuit Court

of Appeals heard the case in *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education* in which a local school board was challenged on the use of textbooks that fundamentalist parents felt exposed their children to secular humanism and futuristic supernaturalism. While the court sided with the district (*Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education*, 1987), the case got the attention of states wishing to stay out of the crosshairs of religious conservatives and avoid lengthy court processes. All states altered compulsory attendance laws by 1993 (Reich, 2002). The inclusion of evolutionary theory (Gibson, 2004) and other public school texts and programs deemed morally questionable (Doan & Williams, 2008), the teaching of civil rights, diversity, and tolerance education in public schools (Deckman, 2004; Wilcox & Robinson, 2011), the establishment of school based health centers (Wald, Button, & Rienzo, 2001; Williams, Litvak, & Moriarty, 2004), and the repeal of religious teachings and practices from public schools led religious parents to re-evaluate the homeschooling option (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962; *School District of Abington v. Shempp*, 1963). From 1999 to 2008, the estimated number of homeschooled children more than doubled (Ray, 2008), with most of it attributed to increases in religiously motivated homeschools (Cigler et al., 2003; Knowles et al., 1992; Kunzman, 2009; Lines, 2000, 1991; Reich, 2002; Stevens, 2003; Van Galen, 1991; Wilcox & Robinson, 2011). Supporting these claims, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) finds that "the most common reason parents gave as the most important [reason for homeschooling] was a desire to provide religious or moral instruction (36% of students)... Parents of about 7% of students cited the desire to provide their child with a non-traditional approach to education" (NCES, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Thus, while some parents still homeschool for pedagogical reasons, they do not compose a large proportion of the homeschooling population. Furthermore, a recent Cardus Education Survey noted that, of the homeschooling families surveyed, about 80% did so for religious reasons (Pennings et al., 2011).<sup>2</sup> As homeschooling is constitutionally legal, particularly for families with religious justifications, religiously oriented homeschool advocates have set their sights on state regulations (Cibulka, 1991; Kunzman, 2009). On the face, this contemporary trend suggests that homeschooling policy is an area where Hunter's (1991) culture wars theory continues to be relevant to the study of US public policymaking.

The homeschooling alternative is ideal for religious parents because it provides them control over the content of their children's education and the opportunity to insulate them from mainstream, secular society. Proponents have consistently pushed for less government intervention in the educational choices made on behalf of their children, from the allowance of homeschooling to the regulations and restrictions placed on those homeschools (Bates, 1991; Cibulka, 1991; Cigler et al., 2003; Gaither, 2008; Kunzman,

<sup>1</sup> The other responses were: school environment (21 percent), dissatisfaction with academic instruction (17 percent), other (14 percent), and child needs (6 percent).

<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of this survey and its limitations, see Milton Gaither's (2011) blog entry "The Cardus Education Survey and Homeschooling".

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