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# Conservative Protestantism and attitudes toward corporal punishment, 1986–2014



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## ABSTRACT

Research indicates that conservative Protestants are highly supportive of corporal punishment. Yet, Americans' support for this practice has waned during the past several decades. This study aggregates repeated cross-sectional data from the General Social Surveys (GSS) to consider three models that address whether attitudes toward spanking among conservative Protestants shifted relative to those of other Americans from 1986 to 2014. Although initial results reveal a growing gap between conservative Protestants and the broader American public, we find that average levels of support have remained most robust among less educated conservative Protestants, with some erosion among more highly educated conservative Protestants. Moreover, trends in variability suggest that conservative Protestants exhibit more cohesive support for this practice than do others. These results provide a window into the cultural contours of religious change and the social factors that facilitate such change.

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## 1. Introduction

The use of corporal punishment in American households remains the subject of fierce debate among scholars, pediatricians and psychologists, and the general public. On one hand, many researchers have reported that the physical punishment of children can have a range of harmful effects (Gershoff, 2010; Straus et al., 2013). Specifically, they argue that spanking and slapping children is largely ineffective as a means of discipline and socialization, and that children who experience corporal punishment are at elevated risk of aggression and antisocial behavior, negative psychosocial outcomes such as depression and reduced self-esteem, cognitive impairment, and a host of undesirable long-term consequences that may even stretch into adulthood (Straus, 1994; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff and Bitensky, 2007). In fact, a recent meta-analysis indicated consistent negative effects of spanking on children (Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

On the other hand, another recent meta-analysis concluded that results based on partial correlations were “statistically significant but trivial,” explaining very small proportions of the variance in externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and only a slightly larger share of the variance in cognitive development (Ferguson, 2013, p. 196). Moreover, some scholars have reported neutral or even positive associations between corporal punishment and a range of children's adjustment outcomes (Larzelere and Kuhn, 2005; Baumrind et al., 2010; Gunnoe, 2013). Investigators have observed that effects of physical discipline may be conditional on various child and family characteristics, including (a) child's age, (b) social class, (c) race and

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ethnicity, (d) religion, and others (Lansford et al., 2004; Gunnoe and Mariner, 1997; Ellison et al., 2011; Petts and Kysar-Moon, 2012). In contrast to the critics, these researchers have cautioned against global conclusions regarding potential negative consequences of corporal punishment (Larzelere and Baumrind, 2010; Larzelere et al., in press). Although public approval of this practice has declined somewhat in recent decades, a significant majority of U.S. adults continues to agree that “a good hard spanking” is sometimes necessary to discipline children (Smith et al., 2010; Straus et al., 2013).

Despite early indications of Protestant-Catholic convergence in parental values (Alwin, 1986), more recent evidence has revealed that conservative (i.e., fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic) Protestant adults and parents are disproportionately likely to support and to use corporal punishment (Ellison et al., 1996; Ellison and Sherkat, 1993a; see Alwin and Felson, 2010; Bartkowski and Ellison, 2009 for reviews). This line of research has traced these pro-spanking orientations to several specific theological tenets that are embraced by many, perhaps most, conservative Protestants, including (a) the belief that the Bible is the inerrant and authoritative Word of God; (b) the conviction that human nature is fundamentally sinful; and (c) the belief that spiritual salvation is attained only through repentance, acceptance of divine grace, and submission to God's will. The significance of these religious teachings for the approval and use of corporal punishment is elaborated below. Additional scholarship suggests other possible factors that might explain the relatively strong support for physical discipline among conservative Protestants, including their comparatively low levels of formal education, concentration in the southern region; and prevalence in rural areas and small towns. Each of these factors is linked not only with conservative Protestant affiliation, but also with support for corporal punishment (Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Straus et al., 2013). However, during the past several decades, conservative Protestantism has been influenced by notable educational upgrading (Beyerlein, 2004; Massengill, 2008), and the broad faith tradition has proliferated well beyond the southern rural climes in which it was traditionally concentrated (Park and Reimer, 2002; Shibley, 1996). In light of such recent developments in Americans' attitudes toward spanking and significant changes within conservative Protestantism, to what extent does the religious gap in attitudes toward corporal punishment persist? This question is particularly salient because, given the significance of corporal punishment in conservative Protestant child-rearing, persistent support for physical discipline may be a key mechanism through which subcultural distinctiveness is manifested and reproduced.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether differences in support for corporal punishment among conservative Protestants and those outside of this religious subculture have (a) persisted largely unchanged over the past twenty-five years or so; (b) waned during this period; or (c) actually widened. Assuming we discover a pattern of convergence or divergence in support for corporal punishment between conservative Protestants and the broader cultural mainstream, a second objective is to explore the possible sources of changes in the magnitude of the religious gap. For instance, are distinct trends in attitudes due to cohort replacement effects, shifts in educational attainment, or regional migration among conservative Protestants? Our third objective entails exploring the variability of opinion about corporal punishment over time. Some argue that as conservative Protestants have become increasingly “mainstreamed” over the last couple of decades, their intragroup attitudes and behaviors have become more internally heterogeneous (e.g., Hoffmann and Miller, 1998). This argument is rather straightforward. As education levels of conservative Protestants increase and as they become more prevalent outside of the South, there is likely to be more within-group heterogeneity in attitudes toward issues such as corporal punishment. Yet, if there continues to be a concerted effort among this group to maintain a distinctive subcultural identity, then the internal variability of attitudes has probably changed very little.

## 2. Three perspectives on conservative Protestantism and social change

Why might conservative Protestant support for corporal punishment have changed over time relative to that of other Americans? Several different theories of conservative Protestant culture and corresponding bodies of research provide potential answers to this question. In what follows, we outline three broad theoretical perspectives on the cultural contours of conservative Protestantism, summarize the supporting research literature, and discuss the expectations each generates concerning possible changes in conservative Protestant support for corporal punishment. So, although this study focuses on the religious sources of attitudes towards corporal punishment, it also speaks to broader processes of cultural and religious change.

### 2.1. Cultural polarization: retrenchment against the secular mainstream

Cultural polarization arguments suggest a widening gap in social attitudes between conservative Protestants and the American population at large. The most prominent perspectives within this framework have been Hunter's (1991) culture wars thesis and Wuthnow's (1988) assessment of the restructuring of American religion. Regardless of its specific form, cultural polarization highlights processes of conservative Protestant retrenchment against the presumed cultural liberalization of mainstream America. Some research on conservative Protestant parenting appears to be broadly consistent with this view. For example, scholars have identified an array of ideological divergences between conservative Protestant and secular parenting advice genres (Bartkowski and Ellison, 1995). Conservative Protestant advice literature commonly sold through Christian bookstores and online retailers has long maintained that corporal punishment is both theologically legitimated, even mandated, and pragmatically useful. Moreover, such manuals—including the millions sold under the

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