

How Focused on the Family?

Christian Conservatives, the Family, and Sexuality

W. Bradford Wilcox^{*}
Department of Sociology
University of Virginia
wbwilcox@virginia.edu

^{*} W. Bradford Wilcox, Department of Sociology, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400766, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4766.

The family revolution of the last half-century in the United States has not, in the main, been good for the American experiment in ordered liberty. This family revolution—characterized by a decline in the social power, functions, and moral authority of the family, and reflected by marked increases in out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce, and single parenthood—has exacted a heavy toll on the American republic and its citizens. Family breakdown, and its consequences, has undercut personal liberty, increased the size and scope of governmental power, and endangered the emotional and social welfare of untold numbers of children.¹ Our nation’s experience with the family revolution of the last fifty years would seem to vindicate the wisdom of Founders such as John Witherspoon and John Adams, who saw marriage as a seedbed of social virtue that the new republic could not easily do without.² Indeed, even some contemporary liberal political theorists—such as William Galston—have come to see the ways in which the family revolution threatens such liberal values as reason, respect for persons, and self-governance.³

More precisely, social scientific research on the family suggests that the polity and children have both been deeply affected by family breakdown. Increases in out-of-wedlock births, divorce, and single parenthood account for a substantial portion of the increases in crime, child poverty, and substance abuse that the United States witnessed since the 1970s; in turn, these developments have led local, state, and federal governments to expand their social services, their police powers, and their expenditures.⁴ One Brookings study, for instance, found that the growth in single-parent

¹ Isabel Sawhill. 1999. “Families at Risk.” In H. Aaron and R. Reischauer, *Setting National Priorities: the 2000 Election and Beyond*. Washington: Brookings Institution. Paul Amato. 2005. “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation.” *Future of Children* 15: 75-96.

² Nancy F. Cott. 2000. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and Nation*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Pp. 19-21.

³ William Galston, 1991. *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For another account of liberal goods, see Stephen Macedo. 1990. *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ George A. Akerlof, Janet L. Yellen, and Michael L. Katz. 1996. “An Analysis of Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing in the United States.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* CXI: 277-317. Sawhill. 1999. Amato. 2005.

families increased federal welfare expenditures by \$229 billion from 1970 to 1996.⁵ In this way, family breakdown threatens the American experiment's tradition of limited government, insofar as the size, scope, and cost of government increases when families to govern themselves and socialize children in an effective manner.

More importantly, family breakdown threatens liberal values such as reason, respect for persons, and self-governance. Specifically, children who grow up outside of an intact, married household are two to three times more likely to drop out of high school and engage in delinquent or criminal behavior,⁶ and unmarried adults are significantly less likely to participate in the nation's political life by voting.⁷ At the national level, the aggregate consequences of family breakdown are particularly striking. For instance, on the educational front alone, sociologist Paul Amato estimates that increasing the percentage of adolescents who live in an intact, married family to the 1960 level of family stability would reduce the number of children repeating a grade by nearly three-quarters of a million and the number of school suspensions by more than one million every year. In these ways, then, the family revolution has clearly hurt the nation's tradition of limited government, along with the capacity of American children and adults to grow in the liberal virtues of reasonableness, respect for others, and self-governance.

Thus, in assessing the contribution that conservative Christians have made to American democracy, this essay takes up the following question: What have been the political and pastoral contributions, if any, that conservative Protestants have made to the renewal of family life in the United States? In answering this question, I will summarize conservative Protestant family ideology, explain its cultural and social sources, and reflect on the impact that this ideology has had on American family policy, as well as the family-related beliefs and behaviors of ordinary

⁵ Sawhill. 1999. p. 108.

⁶ Amato. 2005.

⁷ Nicholas Wolfinger and Raymond Wolfinger. 2006. "Family Structure and Voter Turnout." Working Paper, Department of Family and Consumer Studies, University of Utah.

conservative Protestants.⁸ The conservative Protestant record in renewing family life is important, of course, because this subculture's successes and failures in focusing on the family have a lot to do with the state of the family in the American republic, which in turn—as I have argued—has much to do with the success of the ongoing American experiment in ordered liberty.

Resisting Family Change

Although most culture-producing institutions in the United States—from higher education to Hollywood to mainline Protestantism—accommodated or advanced the family revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, conservative Protestantism resisted key elements of this family revolution. Conservative Protestant leaders and institutions did this in part by articulating a familistic ideology that endowed the family with transcendent significance as the primary locus of social, emotional, and moral life; in particular, their familistic outlook sought to preserve marriage's social status as the institutional anchor for sexual activity, childbearing, and childrearing. Partly as a consequence, conservative Protestant leaders targeted nonmarital sex, homosexuality, abortion, parenting, and divorce as topics of central concern.

One indication of the distinctive conservative Protestant response to the family revolution comes from my survey of *Christianity Today*, the flagship journal for conservative Protestantism, and the *Christian Century*, the leading journal of mainline Protestantism. I found that *Christianity Today* devoted nearly four times as many articles and editorials to family-related topics than did

⁸ By “conservative Protestants,” I am referring to American men and women who belong to theologically-conservative denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, and the Evangelical Free Church. More broadly, this term captures Protestants who would typically be classified as evangelical Protestants, fundamentalist Protestants, or Pentecostal Protestants. See Brian Steensland, Jerry Park, Mark Regnerus, Lynn Robinson, Bradford Wilcox, and Robert Woodberry. 2000. “Classifying American Religion: A New Method.” *Social Forces* 79: 291-318.

the *Christian Century* from 1970 to 1990—19 percent versus 5 percent.⁹ This is one indication of the distinctive family focus in conservative Protestant circles. I also found that 58 percent of *Christianity Today*'s family-related articles from 1970 to 1990 focused on matters related to sex—including nonmarital sex, homosexuality, and abortion.¹⁰ In 1970, for instance, *Christianity Today* ran an editorial asking if the nation needed a “new Gibbon to write *Decline and Fall of the United States of America*” in light of “signs of decay” such as pornography, the sexual revolution, and abortion.¹¹ Likewise, a 1980 resolution passed by the Southern Baptist Convention deplored the “homosexual lifestyle” and any efforts to make “it equally acceptable to the biblical heterosexual family life style.”¹² And though abortion did not initially garner much attention among conservative Protestant institutions and leaders, they began to turn against the practice once they connected it to the sexual revolution and to what they saw as a feminist assault on motherhood. In 1980, for instance, Jerry Falwell, then head of the Moral Majority, wrote: “For six long years Americans have been forced to stand by helplessly while 3 to 6 million babies were legally murdered through abortion on demand... When a country becomes morally sick, it becomes sick in every other way.”¹³ In these ways, then, the family culture produced by conservative Protestant institutions sought to reinforce traditional normative links between sex, childbearing, and marriage by critiquing departures from traditional norms about sex and reproduction.

Conservative Protestant familism is also apparent in elite discourse on parenting and divorce. Because they see the home as a bulwark of faith and morality for God and country, conservative Protestant leaders place a high priority on fostering an ethic of intensive, affectionate, but strict parenting. In the words of one conservative Protestant leader, “If we are to rebuild our

⁹ W. Bradford Wilcox. 2004. *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P. 52.

¹⁰ Wilcox. 2004. P. 46.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 44.

¹² Ibid. P. 47.

¹³ Ibid. P. 47.

nation we must first strengthen our homes and make sure that they are Christ-centered. Husbands and wives must assume the full responsibilities of Christian parents so that children may walk in the ways of the Lord.”¹⁴ Among other things, this means that parents are to conduct themselves as God does to his children—that is, they are supposed to be attentive, loving, *and* just in their interactions with their children. James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, put it this way: “Healthy parenthood can be boiled down to those two essential ingredients, love and control, operating in a system of checks and balances... the objective for the toddler years is to strike a balance between mercy and justice, affection and authority, love and control.”¹⁵

By and large, conservative Protestant elites have also expressed considerable concern with the divorce revolution of the last thirty years. For instance, Dobson had this to say about the dramatic increase in divorce in the 1970s:

Come on, America. Enough is enough! We’ve had our dance with divorce, and we have a million broken homes to show for it. We’ve tried the me-philosophy and the new morality and unbridled hedonism. They didn’t work. Now it’s time to get back to some old-fashioned values, like commitment and sacrifice and responsibility and purity and love and the straight life. Not only will our children benefit from our self-discipline and perseverance, but we adults will live in a less neurotic world, too!¹⁶

Here, however, it is important to note that conservative Protestant discourse on divorce has been more equivocal than has conservative Protestant discourse on, say, homosexuality. A large number

¹⁴ Ibid. P. 49.

¹⁵ James Dobson. 1978. *The Strong-Willed Child: Birth through Adolescence*. Wheaton, IL: Living Books/Tyndale House. P. 52.

¹⁶ Wilcox. 2004. P. 45.

of conservative Protestant leaders do not follow a strictly “biblical” approach to divorce—which would only allow divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery (Matt 19:9) or the desertion of a nonbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7: 15)—and instead argue that remarriage should be available to any believer who repents of previous marital sins; from this perspective, biblical themes of compassion, second chances, and forgiveness are deployed against more “legalistic” responses to divorce.¹⁷ For instance, 36 percent of Southern Baptist pastors took this more permissive view of divorce and remarriage, according to a 1980 poll.¹⁸ In general, then, conservative Protestantism has been a force for a traditional form of familism, though it is sometimes less consistent when it comes to the issue of divorce.

Understanding Conservative Protestant Family Culture

The conservative Protestant concern with the state of the family is largely rooted in three cultural and four social sources. First and foremost, conservative Protestantism subscribes to a traditional form of the Christian faith that sees the Bible as a literal and authoritative guide to moral truth. Many of this tradition’s positions—especially on topics such as premarital sex and homosexuality where numerous biblical passages speak directly to these behaviors—are derived from this traditional outlook.¹⁹ A lead editorial in a 1980 issue of *Christianity Today* is suggestive in this regard: “What does Scripture teach? *Heterosexuality is the biblical norm.* ... Throughout the whole of Scripture, heterosexuality is both assumed and affirmed as God’s order of creation.”²⁰

Second, conservative Protestant familism is rooted not only in its distinctive religious ideology but also in its commitment to a traditional form of Americanism that links the health of

¹⁷ Ibid. P. 48.

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 49.

¹⁹ Ibid. P. 47.

²⁰ Ibid.

the nation to the health of the family. This is why, for instance, Dobson can be found issuing an anti-divorce appeal to Americans (“Come on, America”), rather than to Christians, or why a conservative Protestant family expert would link Christian parenting to efforts to renew the nation (“If we are to rebuild our nation...”). The family revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s struck these conservative Protestants not only as an attack on their faith but also as an attack on the American way of life, one which they sought to resist at nearly every turn.²¹

Third, many conservative Protestant leaders are deeply concerned about the outworkings of the family revolution in their own lives, the lives of friends and family, and their congregations and communities. Having witnessed divorce on the rise in their churches, seen a family friend have a child outside of wedlock, or watched neighborhood children grow up without a father, these conservative Protestant leaders are quick to connect these family developments to human suffering and social decline.²² And hence they are motivated—as was James Dobson, who was a professor of pediatrics and a child psychologist at the University of Southern California until he started Focus on the Family in 1977—to try to do something to reverse the family revolution.

But the sources of conservative Protestant familism are rooted not only in cultural factors but also in four important social factors and processes. First, when the cultural shifts of the late 1960s and 1970s surfaced, conservative Protestants were markedly more Southern and working-class than the nation as whole. In the 1970s, 58 percent of conservative Protestants were Southern and 46 percent were high school dropouts, that is, markedly more Southern and less educated than the nation as whole in the 1970s.²³ Because of their regional identity and class location, conservative Protestants—and their institutions—were not inclined to identify with the “ethic of liberation” than emanating from elite East and West coast centers of cultural production. Instead,

²¹ Ibid. p. 49.

²² Ibid. Pp. 49, 190. Christian Smith. 2000. *What Do Christians Really Want?* Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 138-141.

²³ Wilcox. 2004. P. 32.

they were more likely to identify with an ethic of moral order that fit their experience of economic limitation and suited a Southern culture that relied in part on its religious faith to distinguish itself from the North.²⁴

Indeed, issues of religious identity also figure prominently in conservative Protestantism's embrace of a familistic outlook. Christian Smith has argued that religious subcultures thrive on "distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat" and the vitality of evangelicalism is "not a product of its protected isolation from, but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity."²⁵ The distinctive ideology produced by conservative Protestantism on family-related matters has allowed this religious subculture to signal to the world and to its members that it is distinctive; the conflictual stance it takes to the broader society also helps it generate a sense of internal solidarity.

For instance, Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote a guest editorial for the *New York Times* explaining his denomination's family focus in this way: "Southern Baptists are engaged in a battle against modernity, earnestly contending for the truth and authority of an ancient faith. To the cultured critics of religion, we are the cantankerous holdouts against the inevitable. But so far as the Southern Baptist Convention is concerned, the future is in God's hands. If faithfulness requires the slings and arrows of outraged opponents, so be it."²⁶ Martial language like this on family matters helps to build a strong sense of collective identity among conservative Protestants. The success that conservative Protestant elites have in connecting their faith to familism also explains in part why conservative Protestants have retained traditional family values even as they have experienced marked social mobility in the last four

²⁴ Ibid. Pp. 32-33.

²⁵ Christian Smith. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P. 89.

²⁶ Wilcox. 2004. P. 63.

decades.²⁷ That is, even conservative Protestants have in some respects become more integrated into mainstream society, they still hold on to their unusual family-related ideology because this ideology helps them build and sustain a distinctive collective identity.²⁸

Third, conservative Protestantism has been able to articulate and defend its familistic ideology, even when elements of this ideology are unpopular, because of the large collection of institutional resources it controls. Conservative Protestantism has a multi-billion-dollar publishing industry, more than 400 colleges and seminaries, more than 100,000 congregations, and hundreds of special purpose organizations, such as Focus on the Family. For instance, Focus on the Family has an annual budget exceeding \$100 million dollars, employs more than a 1,000 persons, broadcasts a radio show on more than 2,900 stations in North America, and boasts 2.3 million members who draw regularly on its audio, video, web, and literary offerings.²⁹ These institutional resources provide this tradition with the means to resist, at least to a degree, many of the broader cultural trends in the United States.

Fourth, conservative Protestants—partly because of their socioeconomic status—have been particularly vulnerable to the practical outworkings of the family revolution. As this paper indicates below, conservative Protestants and the communities they live in have been particularly affected by the family revolution; for instance, divorce is more common among conservative Protestants and Southerners than it is in the nation as a whole.³⁰ These changes—coupled with their distinctive theological and moral commitments—have also contributed to conservative

²⁷ Ibid. Pp. 62-63.

²⁸ Sally Gallagher. 2003. *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 64.

³⁰ On conservative Protestant divorce, see W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Williamson. 2006. “The Cultural Contradictions of Mainline Protestant Family Ideology and Practice.” In *American Religions and the Family: How Faith Traditions Cope with Modernization*, edited by D. Browning and D.A. Clairmont. New York: Columbia University Press. On divorce in the South, see Ron J. Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert. 2006. “The ‘Second Demographic Transition’ in the U.S.: Exception or Textbook Example ?” Working Paper. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Population Studies Center.

Protestants' deep concern about the state of the American family, their own families, and the families in their communities. In the words of pollsters Stanley and Anna Greenberg, "They... are alarmed about pervasive moral laxity and threats to the traditional family."³¹ The irony, here, of course, is that one reason that conservative Protestants are talking right on family matters is that they do not like the fact that they have walked left or that their friends, family members, or neighbors have walked left on family matters.

Indeed, their own failures in family domains such as divorce helps to explain why—at least at the pastoral level—conservative rhetoric around homosexuality has been more strident than conservative Protestant rhetoric around divorce. Homosexual desires and behavior affects a relatively small number of conservative Protestants; divorce, by contrast, affects a large minority of conservative Protestants.³² For this reason, among others, pastors and conservative Protestant leaders probably feel more comfortable signaling their familistic commitments by attacking homosexuality rather than divorce. And, as we have seen, they also appear somewhat more willing to look for the spirit of the Gospel rather than the letter of the biblical law when it comes to divorce, as opposed to homosexuality.

Nevertheless, even though they have softened their position on divorce to some degree, conservative Protestantism has been a major voice for familism in the United States in the last three decades. This support is particularly striking because most major cultural producing institutions in the United States and in Europe have not articulated a strong familistic ideology or resisted the family revolution in sharp terms. Undoubtedly, conservative Protestantism's distinctive religious ideology and its substantial command of institutional resources—among other

³¹ Stanley B. Greenberg and Anna Greenberg, "Contesting Values," *The American Prospect* 15 (no. 3): March 1, 2004. <http://www.prospect.org/print/V15/3/greenberg-s.html>. Accessed March 31, 2007.

³² Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout. 2006. *The Truth about Conservative Christians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 132-133, 146.

factors—has enabled it to chart a different course than most culture-producing institutions when it comes to the family.

Conservative Protestant Discourse and Influence Regarding Family Policy

Conservative and family organizations founded and supported by conservative Protestants have emerged as major players in family-related policy in the last two decades. At the national level, since the late 1970s, Conservative Christians have founded groups like the Christian Coalition (1989), Concerned Women for America (1979), Focus on the Family (1977), and the Family Research Council (1983) to promote their pro-family agenda. At the state level, 35 groups have been formed since 1988—in part through the encouragement of Focus on the Family—to promote a range of family-related policies.³³ Pro-life organizations, such as the American Life League and the National Right to Life Committee, also rely on conservative Protestant support, though these organizations also draw substantial practical and financial support from Catholics. Collectively, these groups attract regular support from more than three million Americans and annually raise more than two-hundred million dollars to advance their agendas; these institutional resources help them play an important role in contemporary debates about abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage, and stem-cell research.³⁴

These family-oriented organizations have pursued a mix of policies. In the last three years, for instance, the Georgia Family Council has focused on divorce reform, marriage education, and school choice.³⁵ Over the same period, the Family Research Council has focused on abortion, pornography, religious freedom, and same-sex marriage.³⁶ Even though the diverse policy agendas

³³ <http://www.citizenlink.org/fpc/>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

³⁴ My estimates of group membership and budgets for these organizations are derived from information assembled by People for the American Way. <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=158>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

³⁵ Randy Hicks, president of Georgia Family Council, personal interview, March 22, 2007.

³⁶ <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?c=HOME>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

of these institutions and their leaders are shaped by religious commitments and theological ideas, their public discourse tends to be secular. Specifically, these family-oriented organizations rely on utilitarian, scientific, and therapeutic arguments that they think have a greater chance of resonating with the public and especially with the policy and media elites who tend to set the terms of public discourse.³⁷

Conservative Protestant leaders report that their own experience with legislators, journalists, and the public has led them to believe that overtly religious appeals are not as effective as are appeals that conform to the largely utilitarian, scientific, or therapeutic canons of discourse in the public square. For instance, Tony Evans, who is currently president of the Family Research Council, was one of the primary sponsors of Louisiana's 1997 covenant marriage law, when he was a state representative. Perkins reports that his initial bill on covenant marriage was shaped by his own reading of biblical teachings on divorce and marriage, and by input he received from pastors in his district.³⁸ But Perkins says he did not refer to the Bible in arguing for covenant marriage because the society is moving in a "post-Christian" direction and because most people don't understand how the Bible would be applied in a legislative context.³⁹ Instead, he relied on social scientific evidence about the effects of divorce to make his public case for covenant marriage, which allows couples to enter into marriages that provide more restrictive grounds for divorce (abuse, adultery, a felony conviction, or abandonment) than does conventional marriage in Louisiana.⁴⁰

On the other hand, some conservative Protestant politicians also report that they do not wish to impose positions shaped only by religious beliefs on the public. Thus, they argue that they

³⁷ W. Bradford Wilcox. 2002. *Sacred Vows, Public Purposes: Religion, the Marriage Movement, and Marriage Policy*. Washington: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

³⁸ Wilcox. 2002. P. 9.

³⁹ Ibid. P. 13.

⁴⁰ Steven Nock. 2005. "Marriage as a Public Issue." *The Future of Children* 15: 13-32.

only pursue policies that have some reasonable connection to the common good.⁴¹ For instance, Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who has also pushed through covenant marriage and a range of other marriage-related policies in Arkansas, argues that his policy agenda is not directed by his faith, even though he is a former Baptist minister. “[I] have tried not to assume that my position as Governor gave me the right to impose my faith on others,” reports Huckabee.⁴²

Similarly, Wade Horn, former Assistant Secretary for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Bush administration’s point man on marriage policy, has said that his marriage agenda is directed to the common good, not his Presbyterian faith. He says there is a “line as a government official between being motivated [by faith] and then taking it and imposing it as the only proper view on a particular question [like marriage].” Horn adds that his agenda is driven by “what empirical literature tells us, not just what our personal faith tells us.”⁴³ Although Huckabee and Horn’s support for marriage policy is undoubtedly shaped by their theological and ideological commitments, their understanding of their own approach to family policy, as well as their secular tactics, are indicative of the increasing sophistication and maturation of conservative Protestant efforts to influence American debates about life issues, sexuality, and marriage. More and more, conservative Protestant groups are trying to influence public discussions and policies related to the family by approaching the contemporary public square in a secular spirit—that is, with a desire to pursue the common good or at least to rely on secular reason and arguments in their pursuit of that good or in pursuit of a religiously-grounded good.

On the other hand, one striking and implicitly religious feature of the legislative agenda advanced by conservative Protestant family groups is that they rarely pay attention to the

⁴¹ Wilcox. 2002. P. 13.

⁴² Ibid. P. 13.

⁴³ Ibid. P. 13.

economic or material challenges facing American families. Rarely do state or national pro-family organizations directed by conservative Protestants make a full court press for policies such as expanded child tax credits, universal health care vouchers, or the elimination of the substantial marriage penalties facing poor and working-class Americans.⁴⁴ Instead, they remain preoccupied with “values” issues.⁴⁵ Their preoccupation with public policies that focus explicitly on moral matters rather than economic matters is largely an outgrowth of a conservative Protestant theological emphasis on personal moral and spiritual renewal as the key to societal renewal. Many ordinary and elite conservative Protestants seem to think that family renewal in the United States is achievable simply through widespread religious conversion or cultural change. Partly because they do not have a tradition of sustained reflection on social ethics, like Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, conservative Protestants and their pro-family organizations do not believe or are not cognizant of the idea that social structural changes may also be required for the renewal of family life. Thus, their policy agenda is typically limited to “values”-related public policies such as same-sex marriage and stem-cell research.

When it comes to advancing their public policy agenda, Conservative Protestant leaders and organizations have had varying degrees of success. In general, their record of success is closely connected to the level of popular support their legislative objectives engender at the federal or state level. This mixed record of success is reflected on life issues such as abortion and stem-cell research. For instance, in the 1990s, pro-family and pro-life organizations succeeded in getting legislation mandating parental consent in cases involving abortion for minors passed in 27 states.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For a discussion of public policies influencing the economic welfare of families, see Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam. 2005. “The Party of Sam’s Club: Isn’t it time the Republicans did something for their voters?” *The Weekly Standard* Vol. 11 (9). <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/312korit.asp>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

⁴⁵ Christian Smith. 2000. P. 28.

⁴⁶ Michael J. New. 2007. “Analyzing the Effect of State Legislation on the Incidence of Abortion Among Minors.” Heritage Center for Data Analysis Report CDA01-01. Washington: Heritage Foundation. P. 2.

Most of these states are culturally conservative, and pro-life groups have been able to take advantage of the political climate in these states, as well as the fact that most Americans believe that parents should have a role in deciding whether or not their teenage daughters get an abortion.⁴⁷ By contrast, pro-family groups have been less successful in stopping public initiatives to fund or allow stem-cell research in states with large numbers of liberal or moderate-minded citizens, in part because of the state political climate and in part because stem-cell research enjoys the support of a majority of Americans.⁴⁸ In the last five years, for instance, pro-stem-cell legislation or policies have passed or been implemented by executive order in eight states—from California to Missouri to New Jersey.⁴⁹

Conservative Protestant groups have also had mixed success on marriage policy. After the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled that same-sex marriage was required by the Massachusetts' constitution in 2004, conservative Christian groups launched efforts to amend state constitutions to prohibit same-sex marriage, as well as an effort to amend the U.S. constitution. The latter effort has failed so far, but these groups have succeeded in passing anti-same-sex marriage constitutional amendments in 27 states (losing so far only in Arizona).⁵⁰ At the federal level, they also helped the Bush Administration pass a \$500 million Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2006; this initiative is designed primarily to provide relationship skills and social services to low-income couples interested in getting marrying or staying married.⁵¹ Legislative successes in these domains can be attributed to widespread popular opposition to gay marriage, to more modest

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 15. For data on American views about parental consent and abortion, see <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=253>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

⁴⁸ <http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/DailyNews/poll010626.html>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

⁴⁹ <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/genetics/embfet.htm>. Accessed April 1, 2007. See also <http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/columnists.nsf/jomannies/story/589A01B95A761499862572AD00139595?OpenDocument>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

⁵⁰ <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/Marriage50/>. Accessed April 1, 2007.

⁵¹ Nock. 2005. See also <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#goals>.

support for government programs to promote marriage, and to the fact that most legislators are not strongly opposed—at a personal level—to these policies.⁵²

On the other hand, conservative Christian groups have had little success in their efforts to reform divorce laws at the state level. Recent efforts on the part of pro-family organizations in Georgia, Michigan, and Virginia to make modest changes to state divorce laws have not succeeded. In Georgia, for instance, the Georgia Family Council tried to extend the waiting period for married couples with children who are seeking a divorce from 30 days to 120 days. Their effort failed. Randy Hicks, the president of the Georgia Family Policy Council, attributes their failure to two factors: first, many legislators are divorce attorneys and have a vested interest in current divorce law and, second, many legislators and ordinary citizens in Georgia have been divorced. As a consequence, in Hicks' experience, legislators and citizens both bridle at any suggestion that they have done anything wrong and are also "concerned about government becoming more involved in people's lives by extending the waiting period on divorce."⁵³ Family advocates working in other states report similar challenges in reforming divorce.⁵⁴ Their difficulties are not surprising, given that only 37 percent of the American public thinks that divorce laws should be tightened, according a 1999 TIME/CNN poll, and that a large minority of Americans are divorced.⁵⁵

In sum, then, efforts by pro-family organizations have met with mixed success, in part because some of their objectives do not enjoy widespread popular support. On the other hand, they have been influential precisely because they have been willing to spearhead causes that are

⁵² For polling data on same-sex marriage, see <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/07/30/opinion/polls/main565918.shtml>. For polling data on the Healthy Marriage Initiative, see http://www.futureofchildren.org/newsletter2861/newsletter_show.htm?doc_id=321689. Accessed April 1, 2007.

⁵³ Hicks, personal interview, March 22, 2007.

⁵⁴ Wilcox. 2002. P. 13.

⁵⁵ For the Time/CNN poll data, see <http://patriot.net/~crouch/wash/timetable.html>. Accessed April 1, 2007. For data on the prevalence of divorce, see Andrew Cherlin. 2008. *Public and Private Families*. Boston: McGraw Hill.

popular among ordinary Americans but not always among policy, media, and academic elites—such as the drive against same-sex marriage. When they highlight these issues and pressure politicians to vote in conformity with majority opinion, they are exercising a unique role in American public life and family policy. In other words, on a number of family-related issues, they represent the only organized institutional force advancing a more traditional perspective that has popular but not elite support, and their leadership can crystallize popular support for traditional family causes that would otherwise be ignored or rejected by elites. Indeed, their efforts on behalf of conservative family-related causes is one reason that American public discourse and public policy remains more conservative, and more ideologically heterogeneous, than family-related discourse and policy in other Western countries.⁵⁶

Family-related Beliefs and Behaviors among Conservative Protestants

Conservative Protestant institutions and elites responded in a distinctive fashion to the family revolution of the last half-century in the United States. Unlike many culture-forming institutions in the U.S. and the West more generally, they sought to resist this family revolution and renew family life in America by producing and promoting a familistic ideology. At the pastoral level, how successful have they been in shaping the beliefs and behaviors of ordinary conservative Protestants?

To adequately answer this question, I must first address the subject of religious effects on human beliefs and behaviors. The social scientific literature on religion indicates that religion influences family-related beliefs and behaviors through—among other things—theological beliefs and religiously-grounded moral norms related to the family, social networks that offer social support and control for a range of family-related beliefs and behaviors, and a religious nomos that

⁵⁶ For a similar point, see Kristen Luker. 2006. *When Sex Goes to School*. New York: Norton.

endows family life with transcendent meaning and purpose, and buffers against the stresses that can hurt family life. In part because they are exposed to these norms, networks, and a religious nomos more frequently, and in part because they are more likely to have a salient religious faith that they connect to their family lives, persons who attend religious services on a regular basis—say, several times a month or more—are more likely to have their family-related beliefs and behaviors shaped by the religious tradition to which they are affiliated than are persons who attend services on a nominal basis.⁵⁷ Consequently, in discussing the links between conservative Protestantism and family life, I will distinguish between effects for active and nominal members of the conservative Protestant tradition. According to my analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1998-2002, 12 percent of the American population attends conservative Protestant churches several times a month or more, and 10 percent of the American population attends such churches once a month or less.

My analysis of GSS data from 1972 to 1998 suggests that conservative Protestantism has largely been successful in fostering a more familistic outlook among its members. Over this 20 year period, conservative Protestants have become somewhat more accommodating of premarital sex, but remain markedly more traditional than other Americans. In the 1970s, 51 percent of conservative Protestants reported the view that sex before marriage is “always wrong,” compared to 23 percent of other Americans; in the 1990s, 45 percent of conservative Protestants held this view, compared to 19 percent of other Americans. Among conservative Protestants attending church several times a month or more, however, the shift was minimal: in the 1970s, 65 percent of active conservative Protestants opposed premarital sex, whereas in the 1990s, 63 percent of active conservative Protestants took this position. Moreover, my statistical models indicate that the

⁵⁷ Wilcox. 2004. pp. 99-104. Mark D. Regnerus. 2007. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford. Pp. 43-56.

effects of conservative Protestantism, especially churchgoing conservative Protestantism, far outweigh the effects of sociodemographic factors such as education, gender, and age in shaping public opinion about premarital sex.⁵⁸

In looking at attitudes toward divorce, conservative Protestants have become slightly more familistic (as has the population at large). From the 1970s to the 1990s, opposition to divorce rose. In the 1970s, 61 percent of conservative Protestants reported the view that divorce should be “more difficult to obtain,” compared to 44 percent of other Americans; in the 1990s, 65 percent of conservative Protestants took that view, compared to 47 percent of other Americans. Among frequently attending conservative Protestants, opposition to divorce rose from 71 percent to 75 percent. My analysis of the GSS data indicate that a conservative Protestant affiliation, and especially an active conservative Protestant affiliation, was strongly associated with opposition to divorce and was a better predictor of divorce attitudes than were sociodemographic factors such as education, gender, and age.⁵⁹

These results suggest that conservative Protestant institutions have been largely successfully at resisting the family revolution at the level of family ideology. Conservative Protestant views on premarital sex and divorce have not changed much, and churchgoing conservative Protestants are significantly more familistic than average Americans. Of course, conservative Protestant views on family matters are not monolithic; for instance, more than one-third of churchgoing conservative Protestants do not think premarital sex is “always wrong,” even though virtually no conservative Protestant leaders would endorse such a view. Nevertheless, my research suggests that no other major religious group or institutional player in the United States has been as successful in getting its members to subscribe to a familistic ideology as has

⁵⁸ For data on conservative Protestants and premarital sex, see Wilcox. 2004. pp. 79-80, 218. Note that figures for “other Americans” were calculated from 1972-1998 GSS data specifically for this paper.

⁵⁹ For data on conservative Protestants and divorce, see Ibid, pp. 78, 217. Note that figures for “other Americans” were calculated from 1972-1998 GSS data specifically for this paper.

conservative Protestantism. Accordingly, at least when it comes to family-related beliefs, conservative Protestant institutions have been surprisingly successful in resisting the family revolution.

On the other hand, a close look at the influence that conservative Protestantism has had on family-related behaviors such as premarital sex, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and parenting suggests a more mixed portrait of conservative Protestant effectiveness in shaping family-related behaviors. On some outcomes, conservative Protestants do indeed behave in a more familistic fashion than the population at large; however, on other outcomes conservative Protestants behave in ways that are less familistic than the population at large.

In terms of sexuality, surprisingly enough, conservative Protestants display a somewhat more permissive approach to sex and cohabitation than the population at large. On average, conservative Protestant adolescents have sex at a slightly earlier age than other adolescents.⁶⁰ They are also more likely to cohabit as young adults than are other young adults; for instance, one recent study found that 40 percent of conservative Protestant young adults (age 18-28) cohabited, compared to 39 percent of mainline Protestants, 35 percent of Catholics, and 37 percent of adults from other religious traditions.⁶¹ Only secular young adults cohabited at a higher rate—51 percent—than did conservative Protestants.⁶² At the same time, the literature also suggests that conservative Protestants who attend church frequently are less sexually active and less likely to cohabit than their nominal peers. For instance, only 36 percent of churchgoing conservative Protestant young adults cohabit, compared to 51 percent of nominal conservative Protestant young adults.⁶³ Nevertheless, churchgoing young adults from other religious traditions are less likely to

⁶⁰ Regnerus. 2007. pp. 127-128.

⁶¹ David Eggebeen and Jeffrey Dew. 2007. "The Role of Religion in the Family Formation Processes of Young Adults." New York: Annual Meeting (March), Population Association of America.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ My calculations using data from Eggebeen and Dew. 2007.

cohabit than are churchgoing conservative Protestants.⁶⁴ So, when it comes to premarital sex and cohabitation, conservative Protestants are more permissive in practice than other young adults, even though they are more likely to affirm traditional sexual morality in theory.

When it comes to marriage and divorce, the picture is somewhat more congruent with conservative Protestant familism. Conservative Protestants marry at younger ages than other Americans, and conservative Protestants are significantly more likely to be currently married than are other adults, even after controlling for sociodemographic factors such as age, education, and income.⁶⁵ My estimates from GSS data indicate that 54 percent of conservative Protestant adults are married, compared to 45 percent of other adults.⁶⁶ Frequent conservative Protestant churchgoers are especially likely to be married: 59 percent of active conservative Protestants are married, compared to 47 percent of nominal conservative Protestants.⁶⁷ No other major religious or secular group in the U.S. is as likely to be married (with the possible exception of Mormons, for whom there are not enough cases in the GSS to determine with sufficient statistical certainty their marriage rates). So conservative Protestants, especially churchgoing conservative Protestants, do seem to be particularly attached to the married state.

On the other hand, conservative Protestants are not any more likely to stay married than the population at large. My analyses of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) indicates that married conservative Protestants were slightly more likely to divorce than other married Americans between 1988 and 1993, though the differences were not statistically significant. Specifically, between the two waves of the NSFH, about 10 percent of conservative Protestant married couples divorced, compared to approximately 9 percent of other married couples. But here again, religious attendance matters. Only 7 percent of churchgoing conservative

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, and my estimates of adult marriage patterns among U.S. adults using 1998-2002 GSS data.

⁶⁶ These estimates are derived from 1998-2002 GSS data.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Protestant couples divorced in this time period, compared to 16 percent of nominal conservative Protestant couples.⁶⁸ Indeed, my analyses of the NSFH indicate that churchgoing conservative Protestant couples are no more likely to divorce than their churchgoing Catholic and mainline Protestant peers, whereas nominal conservative Protestants are more likely to divorce than their nominal *and* secular peers.⁶⁹ So, when it comes to divorce, religious attendance is a very strong marker dividing divorce-averse churchgoing conservative Protestants from their divorce-prone nominal peers.

Finally, when it comes to parenting, I find—consistent with their commitment to the ideology of familism—that conservative Protestants are significantly more likely to be active and affectionate parents, compared to other Americans.⁷⁰ For instance, conservative Protestant fathers spend about 2.0 hours more per week on youth activities such as sports activities, scouting programs, and religious youth groups, compared to unaffiliated fathers.⁷¹ Once again, churchgoing conservative Protestants stand out: they spend 3.75 more hours per week on such activities than do unaffiliated fathers, whereas nominal conservative Protestant fathers are not significantly different from unaffiliated fathers.⁷² So, again, conservative Protestant fathers who are churchgoing are markedly more family-oriented than their nominal peers.

How do we make sense of conservative Protestantism’s mixed record when it comes to family-related behaviors? Part of the story here regarding sex, cohabitation, and divorce involves class. Conservative Protestants tend to be less educated than other Americans and, as a

⁶⁸ These figures are based on analyses of Wave 1 (1987-1988) and Wave 2 (1992-1994) of the National Survey of Families and Households.

⁶⁹ Wilcox and Williamson. 2006.

⁷⁰ Wilcox. 2004. W. Bradford Wilcox. 1998. “Conservative Protestant Childrearing: Authoritarian or Authoritative?” *American Sociological Review* 63: 796-809.

⁷¹ Wilcox. 2004. P. 229.

⁷² Ibid.

consequence, are more vulnerable to early sex and divorce.⁷³ I also suspect that the fact that many conservative Protestants have a Scotch-Irish or “redneck” heritage may make them prone to engaging in risky behavior; such a disposition has been linked to early sex and to lower relationship quality that leads to divorce.⁷⁴ Finally, Christian Smith has argued that the distinctive moral beliefs articulated by conservative Protestants are designed to build collective identity as much or more than they are designed to shape personal behavior.⁷⁵ Thus, one reason that some conservative Protestant family-related beliefs are only “loosely coupled” to family-related behaviors may be that these beliefs’ primary purpose is not to guide behavior but rather to serve as markers of conservative Protestantism’s religious and moral traditionalism.⁷⁶ For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention’s vociferous public support for traditional marriage even in the face of high rates of divorce among Baptists may have as much to do with the church’s effort to signal its symbolic position vis-à-vis liberal modernity as it does with any effort to influence the marital behavior of Southern Baptists.⁷⁷

Still, despite the fact that conservative Protestants do not live in complete conformity with their familistic beliefs, it is worth noting that the more devout conservative Protestants—that is, those who attend church several times a month or more—tend to live more familistic lives than most Americans. Churchgoing conservative Protestants marry at higher rates than the national average, divorce at lower rates than the national average, and have higher rates of parental involvement than the national average. The family-oriented norms, networks, and nomos that

⁷³ For instance, after controlling for sociodemographic factors including education, the association between conservative Protestantism and divorce in the NSFH declines by about 75 percent.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of Scotch-Irish culture and risky behavior, see Thomas Sowell. 2005. *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*. San Francisco: Encounter. For a discussion of the relationship between a risk orientation and sex, see Regnerus. 2007. For a discussion of the link between a risk orientation and marital quality and stability, see E.L. Kelly and J.J. Kelly. 1987. “Personality and compatibility: a prospective analysis of marital stability and marital satisfaction.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52: 27-40 .

⁷⁵ Smith. 1998.

⁷⁶ Wilcox. 2004. Pp. 194-196.

⁷⁷ Ibid. P. 194.

conservative Protestants encounter in their congregations and in parachurch institutions like Focus on the Family often, if not always, foster a more family-centered way of life.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, a growing consensus has emerged among social scientists that marriage serves the common good and especially the welfare of children. As Ron Haskins, Sara McLanahan, and Elisabeth Donahue recently observed in a Princeton-Brookings policy brief, “Marriage provides benefits both to children and society. Although it was once possible to believe that the nation’s high rates of divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing represented little more than lifestyle alternatives brought about by the freedom to pursue individual self-fulfillment, many analysts now believe that these individual choices can be damaging to the children who have no say in them and to the society that enables them.”⁷⁸ This paper has sought to determine how much conservative Protestantism has contributed to the American experiment in ordered liberty by renewing marriage as the primary institutional anchor for sexual activity, childbearing, childrearing, and the adult lifecourse.

In the public sphere, conservative Protestant institutions and elites have a record of mixed success in shaping public policy and public opinion related to family matters. Furthermore, their theological commitment to individual moral and spiritual renewal has left many pro-family institutions and elites from the world of conservative Protestantism blind to the need to advance economic policies to strengthen American families and marriage in particular. This is a major blindspot, given the influence that economic forces have on American families.

⁷⁸ Ron Haskins, Sara McLanahan, and Elisabeth Donahue. 2005. “The Decline in Marriage: What to Do.” *The Future of Children/Princeton-Brookings Policy Brief* (Fall). Princeton: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University. P. 1.

Nevertheless, in a number of policy domains, the presence and voice of conservative Protestant institutions and elites in the American public square has pushed federal and state policy in a more pro-marriage direction. For instance, sociologist Andrew Cherlin recently pointed out that “marriage policy”—including the Bush administration’s \$500 million Healthy Marriage Initiative—has recently received a great deal of attention in the U.S., even though virtually no political actors in Europe are concerned with marriage policies.⁷⁹ Undoubtedly, one reason that marriage policy is a going concern in the U.S. is because of the determined advocacy, the substantial institutional resources, and the political influence of conservative Protestant family organizations. Thus, marriage in the United States has more institutional power and influence—including higher levels of policy support and a distinctive legislative standing in family law—than it does in Northern European countries such as Norway and Sweden in part because pro-family organizations have sought to both resist the deinstitutionalization of marriage and to strengthen marriage, and have substantial resources they can bring to the public sphere to advance their agenda.

In the pastoral sphere, conservative Protestant institutions and elites have also had mixed success in fostering strong families in their own subculture. On the one hand, drawing largely on their traditional religious belief system and their substantial institutional resources, they have largely succeeded in articulating and fostering a distinctively familistic ideology among their members (and conservative Christians in other traditions). On the other hand, the conservative Protestant record of success when it comes to shaping behavior is not uniformly good. Particularly in reference to premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce, conservative Protestants do worse than the population at large. Nevertheless, they are more likely to be married and to be involved and

⁷⁹ Andrew Cherlin. 2007. “Marriage and Public Policy.” New York: Annual Meeting (March), Population Association of America.

affectionate parents than the population at large. And, in fairness to conservative Protestants, I do find that churchgoing conservative Protestants who are being exposed to the familistic messages and networks found in this subculture typically do better than average Americans on most family outcomes. Conservative Protestants also face cultural and class handicaps that many other Americans do not face, and which make it more difficult for them to abide by their familistic beliefs.

In sum, then, in the public and pastoral domains of American life, conservative Protestants have made modest contributions to resisting the family revolution of the last half-century and to renewing marriage in the United States. In my view, if they aim to achieve more substantial success in renewing American family life they would have to broaden their policy agenda (and their rhetoric) beyond “values” issues to include economic issues that affect the quality and stability of family life in the United States. They would also have to make a more sustained and sophisticated effort to offer secular reasons, arguments, and stories in a wide range of elite and popular venues to push the broader culture (as opposed to just their own subculture) in a more familistic direction. For instance, conservative Protestant family organizations would need to do a better job of identifying, supporting, and promoting marriage-friendly scholars in the social sciences, as well as marriage-friendly writers, producers, and actors in Hollywood. Without such efforts to expand their agenda and to make their public case more winsome, and less sectarian, conservative Protestant family organizations and elites are not likely to renew marriage in the United States and, more broadly, to strengthen the American experiment in ordered liberty.