

Anti-intellectualism and Its Influence on Parenting

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Honors Research Thesis

April 3, 2026

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Introduction

In 1998, Andrew Wakefield published a paper linking vaccines with autism. Wakefield had previously studied medicine at St Mary's Hospital Medical School and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1985. His most significant contribution, for better or worse, was this 1998 paper. In his study, Wakefield looked at a group of 12 children, where eight of them were reported to have developed autism after receiving the MMR vaccine (Wakefield, 1998). Although Wakefield's study had no control group and no basis to link the vaccine with autism, he went on to preach to the press what he believed he had found. The paper has since been thoroughly debunked and retracted, but the damage was done. Wakefield's study effectively destroyed many Americans' faith in vaccines and science, causing ripple effects that are still seen twenty-eight years later.

But why did this objectively false study resonate with so many people? Parents want the best for their children, even if it comes at the cost of questioning long-held scientific institutions, like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In place of the normalized deference to these organizations' years of research, more holistic approaches to parenting and health have grown in popularity over the past few decades. What might start for some parents as a desire to limit the number of GMOs their child is consuming can slowly turn into a systematic distrust of experts in childhood growth and development.

This growing skepticism and rejection of experts reflects a larger pattern of anti-intellectualism in the United States. Anti-intellectualism, characterized by a tendency to reject mainstream science and institutions, is increasingly prevalent as the current climate in government encourages citizens to question organizations like the CDC and FDA.

Health is not the only facet of childhood growth and development that has come under attack. Education, specifically public schools, has faced a lot of scrutiny and a large exodus of families throughout the years. Although the public school system undoubtedly has its issues, the reaction to this from many parents has been to abandon it and its experts completely, instead weathering the path of homeschooling. Homeschooling encompasses such a wide variety of parenting and educational methods that it would not be accurate to describe all homeschoolers as anti-intellectuals. Still, homeschooling, and one of its subsects, unschooling, does frequently draw upon anti-intellectual rhetoric as justification for this against-the-grain form of education.

Parental rights in education have become a rising issue in public schools, resulting in things like the ability to opt a child out of certain curriculum and choose schools outside of a family's district. Much of the tension between parents and administrators comes from the question of who is really the 'expert' on any given child. Though the schooling system is backed by years of research and child development professionals, many parents still feel that their intrinsic understanding of their child trumps any opinion from an authority figure. Although many of these parents would likely balk at the title of "anti-intellectual," their distrust of long-standing institutions and experts aligns them with the disposition.

The culmination of all this, and more, is a subset of traditionally, though not always, conservative parents who are raising their children on the fringe of societal norms. The choice to not vaccinate their children and homeschool or unschool them is increasing in visibility and popularity. These alternative lifestyles' resonance with so many parents can seem baffling from the outside, and my research aims to understand exactly how and why anti-intellectual rhetoric has become so persuasive for some parents.

Literature review

Anti-intellectualism

Anti-intellectualism's history

Anti-intellectualism is not a new tendency, despite its resurgence as a currently relevant term used in academia and pop culture alike. Characterized by a distrust and distaste for intellectual institutions, its application and relevance have shifted over the years. Richard Hofstadter, an expert and historian on anti-intellectualism, explains it as “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent [intellectualism]; and a disposition to constantly minimize the value of that life” (1963, p. 7). Though the peak of Hofstadter’s research was in the 1950s and 60s, his work is still relevant to the modern anti-intellectual movement. After all, the anti-government, anti-institution sentiment that is at the heart of anti-intellectualism has resonated with people for as long as governments and institutions have existed (Mazo, 2011).

The existence of this extreme viewpoint dates much farther back than even the time Hofstadter was examining anti-intellectualism. Jeffrey Mazo, a research fellow for Environmental Security and Science Policy and Managing Editor of *Survival* at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, writes about this in his article about the Know-Nothings, a Civil War era anti-intellectual group. The group was characterized by as an “anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, pro-temperance secret society” (Mazo, 2011, p. 242). Their name, despite its implication, was a reference to the group’s secrecy, not its ignorance (Mazo, 2011). During its time, the Know-Nothings both endorsed candidates and ran on its own during elections (Mazo, 2011). However, the group was an official political party for only two years before splitting over

disagreements about slavery (Mazo, 2011). Although the specific political stances taken by anti-intellectual groups have changed over the course of history, the Know-Nothings serve as an example for how the doctrine has existed in American culture for centuries.

Richard Hofstadter's book, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963), documented how the disposition has changed over the years. Hofstadter (1963) wrote "an examination of this background suggests that regard for intellectuals in the United States has not moved steadily downward and has not gone into a sudden, recent decline, but is subject to cyclical fluctuations" (p. 6). The cyclical fluctuations Hofstadter references here are being seen again today.

Anti-Intellectualism in American Life was written in 1963, almost 30 years before Andrew Wakefield's vaccine study, and almost 60 years before Donald Trump took office. Hofstadter partially frames his explanation of the ideology through McCarthyism, using it as a (then) modern example of how anti-intellectualism is proliferated in American society. He wrote, "intellectuals were in the line of fire, and it seemed to give special rejoicing to [McCarthy's] followers when they were hit" (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 3). The targeting of intellectuals for political gain is a key mark of anti-intellectualism and can still be seen today. Donald Trump's attacks on the Department of Education, his rejection of the CDC, and his slow dismantling of journalistic institutions all reflect the historic pattern of anti-intellectualism.

This attitude plays on its appeal to average citizens, promoting the idea that higher education and credentials are not needed to achieve positions of power (Hofstadter, 1963). Hofstadter's argument shows anti-intellectualism as aligning itself with a somewhat twisted version of democratic ideals, pushing forward the notion that anyone, regardless of education or experience, can claim to be an expert. Historically, this has meant anti-intellectualism has garnered more popularity with those on the right side of the political

spectrum. The Republican Party is traditionally aligned with fundamentalist religion and anti-elitist politics fueled by populist resentment and suspicion.

The intertwining of anti-intellectualism with political identity can be seen in countless ways, but there are some key patterns that have arisen over time.

Anti-intellectualism as it relates to political affiliations

The current literature often connects the evolution of anti-intellectualism with the state of right-leaning politics in the United States. Mazo (2011) summarized this, saying, “this anti-intellectual strain in American culture has led to the unsalutary spectacle of current Republican presidential candidates competing, in a race to the bottom, over who can take the most extreme anti-scientific or anti-intellectual positions” (p. 239). This association of anti-intellectualism with right-leaning politics stems from a few places. The Republican Party’s endorsement of small government inherently aligns with the anti-institutional aspect of anti-intellectualism. In more recent years, skepticism of scientific institutions has risen greatly in right-leaning politics. This was especially motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where President Trump famously demonized the CDC, FDA, and the COVID-19 vaccine. The move of Republican/conservative politicians to make enemies out of government organizations ties directly into anti-intellectual sentiments. However, studies show a general affiliation between Republican/conservative politics and anti-intellectualism even pre-dating the pandemic.

A study from Matthew Motta (2017), an associate professor at Boston University’s School of Public Health, shows associations with anti-intellectual individuals and politicians “who made the distrust of experts prominent components of their campaigns” (p.

467). Additionally, the study found that “individuals with high levels of verbal intelligence are considerably less likely to hold anti-intellectual attitudes than individuals with low levels of verbal intelligence” (Motta, 2017, p. 467). The issues used to measure participants attitudes in the study included climate change and nuclear power, both issues that the Republican Party has historically stood strongly against. The findings from these showed that “anti-intellectualism is associated with decreased acceptance of...climate change, as well as the safety of nuclear power (both of which are matter of broad scientific agreement)” (Motta, 2017, p. 467). Although this study does not directly link anti-intellectualism with right-leaning politics, rather focusing on its relationship with verbal intelligence, others do.

For instance, a study from Edward Hohe (2024), an American politics and political methodology PhD student at Ohio State University, used observational evidence to conclude that Republicans are more likely to identify with anti-intellectual sentiment. In addition to examining the relationship between anti-intellectualism and political identity, Hohe also found that an individual’s epistemic hubris relates to the influence anti-intellectualism may have on them. Epistemic hubris is “the unwarranted certitude of fact” (Hohe, 2024, p. 1,169). Upon surveying a group of subjects from across the political spectrum, Hohe (2024) found that “Republican (relative to Democratic) identification is associated with greater epistemic hubris only among those who express high levels of anti-intellectual affect” (p. 1,170). Interestingly, Hohe notes that due to the salient quality of anti-intellectualism, it may have a higher effect on Republicans more broadly. “This suggests anti-intellectual affect is more politically salient and thus has a more synergistic relationship with partisanship. Since anti-intellectualism is politically salient, Republicans experience the effect of this affective dimension with greater potency” (Hohe, 2024, p. 1,174).

The current studies confirm the expectation that right-leaning politics correlate with anti-intellectualism. However, the simple confirmation of this relationship does little to explain the ensuing consequences of the ideology's popularity in such a large political party. Although some studies do make informal hypotheses about this, it is too soon to see how the current proliferation of anti-intellectualism will impact modern America.

Parental decisions and their influences

The rise of anti-vax/vaccine-hesitant parents

Although Andrew Wakefield's study from 1998 has since been retracted and disproven countless times, it fundamentally changed the relationship between many parents and vaccines. Like anti-government sentiments, vaccine hesitancy has existed since the first vaccine was invented. Compulsory vaccine laws started in England in 1853, penalizing parents who refused to comply (Capurro, et al., 2018). Even the first efforts to mandate vaccines saw heavy pushback. "The origins of the anti-vaccination movement emerged in [the] context of health risk, medical innovation and state social control -- opponents of vaccination decried the hazards of early immunization techniques and rejected compulsory immunization laws as a threat to their freedom" (Capurro, et al., 2018, pp. 26-27).

Although vaccine hesitancy has existed as long as vaccines themselves, the rise of anti-vax parents has grown exponentially in the past decade (Capurro, et al., 2018). Within the past year, there have been multiple measles outbreaks across the country even though it was nearly eradicated in the United States. The growing popularity of anti-vax rhetoric has firmly rooted itself in a position that utilizes fearmongering among parents who just want the best for

their children. “It’s fear that is the driving force here – fear that is often exacerbated by a deep-seated mistrust of The Man in whatever iteration they choose: Big Pharma, the government, medicine in general” (Capurro, et al., 2018, p. 36).

Despite the scientific and historical basis for vaccinating children, many modern parents choose to skip out on certain shots or refuse to vaccinate their children at all. Cosmin Toth, a faculty member of sociology and social work at the University of Bucharest, surveyed five mothers in Romania who decided not to vaccinate at least one of their children to understand where they were coming from. Toth (2019) categorized mothers’ motivations as falling into six repertoires. This included the “balanced medical decisions repertoire,” the “proper documentation repertoire,” and the “rejecting any risk out of love repertoire,” amongst many others. However, regardless of the specific motivation, all parents surveyed tried to “regain the identity of the rational, responsible and loving parent, consequently reclaiming the uncontestable right of decision regarding their own children” (Toth, 2019, p. 1). None of the surveyed parents wanted to harm their child or community, and all of them believed they were doing the right thing based on the research they had done. “In this way parents who have chosen not to vaccinate their children demonstrate on the one hand that they are aware of their risks and their magnitude but on the other hand their affection and responsibility towards their own child does not allow them to accept it” (Toth, 2019, p. 10).

Despite Toth’s findings, many media depictions of anti-vax and vaccine hesitant parents portray them as dumb, malicious, or out-right threats to communities. Capurro, et al.’s 2018 study from the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* examined media portrayals of anti-vaxxers after a 2015 measles outbreak in Disneyland. What they found is that “media coverage stripped the problem of vaccine hesitancy of its complexity by emphasizing a discourse of blame and

shame” (Capurro, et al., 2018, p. 40). The dissemination of anti-vaxxers as morally corrupt actors who want to cause harm has grown in popularity alongside the anti-vax movement itself. Media portrayals of anti-vax parents are very othering, pitting them against parents who do choose to vaccinate their children. It additionally “provide[s] a venue for denouncing parents who hold anti-vaccine views as a broader threat to society” (Capurro, et al., 2018, p. 40).

The division between anti-vax parents and pro-vax parents continues to grow, further motivating each side to stand resolute in their beliefs. For those who are not anti-vax, the reasoning behind the decision may seem incomprehensible. As seen in the Capurro study, the logic of this decision is often portrayed as irrational or selfish. But a study from Jiménez, et al. (2018) from Durham University found that many parents are easily swayed against vaccines. Researchers employed a fake disease and vaccine scenario to measure how information is communicated impacts parents’ decision making. Some participants read a provided article directly while others only heard it recounted by someone else who had read it. Researchers found that “vaccination campaigns may be made more effective by including personal experiences of the negative consequences of non-vaccination” (Jiménez, et al., 2018, p. 23). The survey additionally revealed that although anti-vax parents are not positively portrayed in the media, parents are more likely to believe other parents, regardless of credibility. Jiménez, et al. (2018) points out “this might be because parents are thought not to have hidden interests, while doctors, governments, and pharmaceutical companies often feature in medical conspiracy theories” (p. 24).

The current literature suggests the anti-vax movement is, despite its generally negative media attention, very appealing to a lot of parents. As pointed out in the Toth (2019) study, parents, regardless of vaccine stance, consider themselves and strive to be “loving and

rational.” The huge disconnect in parents who all see themselves as doing right by their children begs a much larger question of parental versus government authority in what is ‘right’ for children.

Homeschooling and unschooling

Homeschooling and unschooling serve as an interesting point in deviation from the connection of anti-intellectualism with right-leaning politics. The holistic nature of many homeschooling and unschooling avenues is traditionally associated with liberal ideologies. Both sides of the political spectrum meet in this topic, where the motivations and reasoning for untraditional schooling varies widely.

To understand this movement, it is important to define the difference between homeschooling and unschooling. Homeschooling encompasses a variety of schooling techniques that all take place outside of traditional public schools, whereas unschooling specifically is “a variation of homeschooling where, instead of following a set curriculum, children learn through everyday life experiences” (Riley, 2020, p. 7). The overlap between the two methods is plentiful both in motivation and methods, but the terms cannot be used interchangeably.

A study from Jesse Thomas (2016), a PhD graduate from the Texas Tech University, looked at motivations for homeschooling by surveying homeschooled families about their instructional decisions. The study first notes that “the amount of regulation by which a homeschooling family abides by is largely determined by the state in which they live,” meaning that the motivation for a family to homeschool could go so far as to relocation to a state that more aligns with their desires. However, a large portion (45%) of the surveyed parents reported

that their motivations stemmed from their child's unique learning style. Contrastingly, only 1% of participants said they set their educational routines "based on the suggestions of a curriculum package" (Thomas, 2016, p. 2,073).

One of the biggest common factors amongst homeschooling and unschooling parents alike is a distrust of public school to properly educate their children. Thomas (2016) notes that "whereas a public school teacher's education motivation may be overshadowed by a mandatory educational regimen, a parent has the freedom to draw from a number of resources" (p. 2,073).

Khara Schonfeld-Karan, an education researcher and former teacher, discussed parental motivation in unschooling in her book, *Parental Experiences of Unschooling: Navigating Curriculum as Learning-Through-Living* (2022). The book examines the multi-faceted decision for a parent to unschool their child, including issues of cost, time, and responsibility. Her study used the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology which "uses language and reflective discourse to question, prod, knead, and dance with" the examined issue (Schonfeld-Karan, 2022, p. 102). Schonfeld-Karan's study of the unschooling movement concludes that its place as a counter-culture movement "is scented with the fragrance of a fight against those who support or enact forms of schooling" (2022, p. 209). The, at times, combative nature of the term unschooling itself has resulted in some parents choosing to use different names for the same things (Schonfeld-Karan, 2022). Here, the choice to unschool is one that stems from a parent's genuine desire to do right by their child despite the backlash they might face for it.

Gina Riley, an assistant professor at the Hunter School of Education, touches on this in her book, *Unschooling: Exploring Learning Beyond the Classroom* (2020) who describes unschooling as both a parent and academic. Riley's research investigates the history and evolution of unschooling and resulted from her choice to unschool her son. She explains in

the introduction that her choice to unschool her son came from, “following my heart and the needs of the beautiful five-year-old boy in front of me” (Riley, 2020, p. 1).

Riley’s overview of the unschooling world reveals multiple strategies of implementing this kind of alternative education, ranging from relaxed to radical unschooling. Relaxed unschooling emphasizes the child’s role in choosing their own education. This can mean that some form of curriculum is used but is not used the same way it might be in public school. The parent’s role in this form of unschooling is to be “the facilitator, but not director, of the child’s learning” (Riley, 2020, p. 55). Radical unschooling puts the child in complete control not only over their schooling, but over every part of their day and life. The child gets to decide when they wake up, eat, watch TV, do school, etc. The motivation in this more extreme version of unschooling is to support children’s ability to make healthy decisions (Riley, 2020). When parents take a step back, the hope is that it will give their children the space to learn how to make responsible choices for themselves and the people around them.

The role a parent plays in unschooling practices, like with many forms of homeschooling, is critical to how a child learns. Although traditionally high parental involvement correlates with low child autonomy, a study from Kate Henley Averett and Griffin Lacy (2023) from the University at Albany finds the opposite to be true in the case of unschooling. Their study, which examined ownership versus partnership parenting styles in homeschooling and unschooling, found that “unschooling thus represents an empirical case against the theoretical conflation of parental involvement and child autonomy” (Averett and Lacy, 2023, p. 930).

What this study reveals, in conjunction with the other discussed works, is that unschooling operates in a unique educational space that is comparable to little else. Existing parental biases also contribute heavily to the decision to unschool. A poor experience in

public school, a certain viewpoint on parenting, and even political stances all contribute to a parent's choice to homeschool or unschool.

Parenting methods in relation to political affiliations

Studies have found that Republican/conservative parents are statistically more likely to be stricter and less respectful of children's autonomy, a direct contrast to some home/unschooling ideologies. The broad popularity of authoritarian parenting, characterized by the ethos that parental figures are to be respected and unquestioned by the child, amongst conservative groups has been thoroughly documented yet has a hard time fitting into the previously discussed alternative education routes some parents seem to be taking.

Day, et al. (2006) from the University of Toronto found in their study on maternal attitudes and young people's attitudes towards children's right that "the endorsement of autonomy rights appears to emerge in a parental context characterized by relatively low responsivity rather than within a nurturing and sensitive environment" (p. 206). These findings somewhat contrast the conclusions from the Averett and Lacy (2023) study, where child autonomy is high in an unschooling setting that requires parental nurturance and sensitivity. However, the Day et al. (2006) study also finds that "maternal conservatism was negatively related to mothers' support for both nurturance and self-determination rights" (p. 204). This suggests that parental support is heavily influenced by political ideologies.

This conclusion is furthered by the Janoff-Bulman et al. (2014) study from the University of Massachusetts and the University of St Andrews, which investigates the relationship between political orientation and parenting styles using the 'Strict Father' and 'Nurturant Parent' archetypes as a basis. The 'Strict Father' parenting style refers to parents that employ a

“moral template [that] underlies a conservative understanding of politics” (Janoff-Bulman, et al., 2014, p. 43). The ‘Nurturant Parent’ refers to the opposite, where a parent’s “moral template underlies a liberal understanding” (Janoff-Bulman, et al., 2014, p. 43). Although the study was correlational rather than longitudinal, it found that there is a strong link between parenting styles and politics, particularly with the correlation of conservatism and the Strict Father type. The study concluded with the observation that “the Strict [Father] seems to be an apt metaphor underlying conservatism” (Janoff-Bulman, et al., 2014, p. 15).

Correlation between political affiliation and parenting styles provides another piece to the puzzle that is parental motivation. Though only a single factor, it underlies every other choice a parent may make, both in the decision to vaccinate and how to educate their child. What is lacking in the research is a clear connection between topics. As shown, there is apt literature on anti-intellectualism, anti-vax and unschooling parents, and how political affiliation can impact parenting style. However, there is no one study that directly links each topic despite the natural overlap between them.

Project proposal

Method

I plan on writing a long-form journalistic piece by talking directly to those who have aligned their parenting styles with anti-intellectual ideologies. Understanding first-hand how this rhetoric has resonated with people will be the best way of navigating my topic. However, questioning someone's parenting choices has the potential to unintentionally offend those I will be interviewing. The process will require a lot of time dedicated to building trust with my interviewees. Entering these conversations with an open mind and judgments left at the door will be the most important thing when achieving successful interviews.

I plan on trying to interview 3-5 parents who are currently participating in things like unschooling or who have chosen not to vaccinate their children. Although the sample size may seem small, I plan on conducting in-depth interviews with each family. If the families are comfortable with it, I would like to shadow a day of schooling, see what their set-up at home is like, how they work with their children, etc. I would also like to include adults who were raised by anti-intellectual parents to see how they feel about the choice now.

Once my sources are in place, I plan to synthesize my findings in a long-form, written narrative piece that will investigate all sides of the issue. As my ultimate goal is to understand the appeal of anti-intellectual parenting methods, my final product will center around those I interview. Though my intention is not to necessarily give a platform to my subjects, their stories and experiences are what will fuel my project.

I plan on having my project be solely written word, although I may include pictures if I can secure in-person interviews that would present good photo opportunities. All my interviews

will be audio-recorded or hand-written. However, I don't plan on using any of the recordings as part of my final project.

Contribution

As mentioned above, little research exists on the cross-section of anti-intellectualism and parenthood. Given the current political climate, I feel that filling this gap will help the general understanding of an issue that is impacting the next generation. Additionally, much of the media coverage on these parenting styles is very sensationalized and often serves as 'rage bait'. By examining the topic in a more serious manner, I hope to bring a more thoughtful perspective to the issue.

Post-project clarification

In the final version of this project, anti-vaxx families were not included. The decision to omit them came after I began sourcing people to interview. I realized there are already lots of existing discussions and research on anti-vaxx perspectives, but more than that, I didn't want to risk other potential sources. Although unschooling families use a similar anti-intellectual rhetoric as anti-vaxxers, being grouped alongside such a controversial group may have been a deterrent.

My final project focuses solely on unschooling, and for a similar reason anti-vaxxers were excluded, the word "anti-intellectualism" doesn't appear at all in the piece. My intention was never to have a 'gotcha' moment with my interviewees, but rather to really understand their perspectives. The difference between this literature review to the final piece may seem stark, but was a natural progression of the project.

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