Under Fire: Understanding oppositional positions on gun control

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What is your position on gun control?

- Gun laws should be stricter: 85%
- Gun laws should be kept as they are now: 15%
- Gun laws should be loosened: 0%

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses.
Does your position change if the question asked something different (e.g., firearms sales laws; ban on assault weapons only)?

- Yes: 32%
- No: 68%

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses.
Gun violence is a problem in the US. 

Homicides by firearm per 1 million people

In advanced countries according to the Human Development Index. Numbers are for 2012.

What is the trend in US mass shootings in recent years?

- Mass shootings have increased. 57%
- Mass shootings have remained about the same. 40%
- Mass shootings have decreased. 3%

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses.
Number of mass shootings per year, 1982-2017
(Source: Mother Jones, 2018)
What is the trend in FATALITIES from mass shootings in recent years?

- Fatalities have increased: 68%
- Fatalities have remained about the same: 33%
Number of mass shootings fatalities per year, 1982-2017

(Source: Mother Jones, 2018)
Parkland movement → sustained conversation about gun control

#Never Again

#Stand Second

Source: http://time.com/
Vitriol because 2\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment interpretation is debated.

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.
Do you think the 2nd Amendment gives *individuals* the right to firearms?

- Yes- the 2nd Amendment guarantees an individual right: 73%
- No- the 2nd Amendment applies to militia, not individuals: 28%

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses.
Supreme Court interpreted 2\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment as individual right

- \textit{DC v. Heller} (2008): Affirmed 2\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment right to own handgun for self-defense
- \textit{McDonald v. City of Chicago} (2010): Applied to states
- 95\% \textit{post-Heller} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Amendment claims failed

But, lawmakers struggle to pass “sensible” firearms policies

- Difficulty stems from emotionally-charged public opinions on gun control
  - Recognizing opposing arguments can be challenging
- Understanding how citizens approach controversial debates is important
  - to advance less polarizing climate regarding gun control policy
  - to offer legislators an avenue for uniting citizenry
Purpose of study

To determine whether and how citizens understand others’ opposing viewpoints on gun control
PUBLIC OPINIONS ON GUN CONTROL
According to Gallup poll, US support for stricter gun sales laws highest since 1993.

PA also supports stricter gun laws: LionPoll 2017 \( (n’s= 1318-1438) \)

- **Stricter gun laws in general:** 23 oppose, 61 support
- **Requiring background checks for all gun buyers:** 5 oppose, 81 support
- **Nationwide ban on sale of assault weapons:** 23 oppose, 60 support
- **Nationwide ban on sale of guns to people who have been convicted of violent crimes:** 6 oppose, 79 support
- **Stricter regulation on ammunition sales:** 22 oppose, 61 support
- **Ban on gun modifications that can make a semi-automatic gun work more like an automatic gun:** 17 oppose, 64 support
- **Easier access to firearms:** 18 oppose, 64 support
Do you think it is too easy to buy a gun in the U.S. today, too difficult to buy a gun in the U.S. today, or about right?

- Too easy: 85%
- Too difficult: 15%

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses.
PA opinions: LionPoll 2017

Do you think it is too easy to buy a gun in the U.S. today, too difficult to buy a gun in the U.S. today, or about right?

- Too easy: 51%
- About right: 23%
- Too difficult: 4%
- No opinion/missing: 22%
Summary

• We know where people stand
• Some surveys tells us why
• Little information on how people understand others’ positions on gun control
  – Important so we can move toward legislative compromise
Research questions

RQ1: How do Pennsylvanians articulate reasons for opposing positions on sale of firearms laws?

RQ2: What factors predict Pennsylvanians’ ability to articulate reasons for opposing positions?
METHODS
Telephone survey: Penn State Poll

- Conducted by PSH Center for Survey Research
- Part of biannual omnibus Penn State Poll
- Administered March 12-May 19, 2016

- Random sample of 600+ adult PA residents
Survey questions

• In general, do you feel that laws covering the sale of firearms should be made:
  – more strict;
  – less strict;
  – or kept as they are now?

• What is your main reason or reasons for your position on the sale of firearms?

• What might be the main reason or reasons you think other citizens have a different position on the sale of firearms?
Coding scheme

• Open-ended questions:
  1. Reasons for own position
  2. Reasons for others’ position

• 2 independent coders
  – Kappa = 0.663-0.698, \( p < 0.000 \)
    Third coder resolved all inconsistencies
In general, do you feel that laws covering the sale of firearms should be made:

- More strict: 86%
- Kept as they are now: 12%
- Less strict: 2%

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses.
Laws covering the sale of firearms should be...

(n=589)

- More strict: 56%
- Kept the same: 38%
- Less strict: 6%
What is your main reason for your position on the sale of firearms? (If using more than one word, use _ to connect the phrase.)

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses
Reason for position

(n=589)

- Self-protection/defense: More strict (18), Less strict (12)
- 2nd Amendment/rights: More strict (20), Less strict (29)
- Hunting/recreation/sport: More strict (3), Less strict (10)
- Upbringing/lack of: More strict (4), Less strict (24)
- Mental health/accessibility: More strict (36), Less strict (13)
- Societal issues/culture: More strict (9), Less strict (7)
- Depends on weapon: More strict (9)
- Don't know/didn't articulate: More strict (1), Less strict (3)
What might be the main reason you think other citizens have a different position on the sale of firearms? (If using more than one word, use _ to connect the phrase.)

Poll is full and no longer accepting responses
Others’ reasons for opposite position

(n=589)
RQ1: How do Pennsylvanians articulate reasons for opposing positions on sale of firearms laws?

Those who think firearms sales should be more strict think others want laws kept the same or loosened:

• because of 2nd Amendment rights
• for self-protection/ defense
• based on their personal experiences

Those who think firearms laws should be less strict/ kept the same think others want laws more strict because:

• they are misinformed
• of their personal experiences
• of the media
Notably, many are unable to articulate reasons for other positions.

- Unable to articulate OWN position: 3.3%
- Unable to articulate OPPOSING position: 18.8%
- Articulated OPPOSING position as "they don't understand": 17.7%
- Articulated OPPOSING position as attacks on people with opposing viewpoints: 2.8%
<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Able to articulate others’ position</th>
<th>Others are “Misinformed”</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support stricter laws on firearms sales</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
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<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>**75+ years less able to articulate than 18-24 years</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college/ Associate’s degree</td>
<td>(Not a significant predictor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate education</td>
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Notes: Independent was the reference category for political affiliation; High school/GED was the reference category for education.
Summary

Better able to articulate opposing positions:

• Whites
• Those age 18-24 years (compared to 75+ years)
• Those with more education

Opposing positions are “misinformed” is less likely said by:

• Those who want stricter gun laws
• Democrats
IMPLICATIONS
Suggestions for policymakers

• Nearly 40% of Pennsylvanians are unable to articulate opposing positions on sale of firearms laws
• Inform constituents of all arguments
• Demonstrate consideration of all arguments
  – Constituent support may improve
Suggestions for future research

• Replicate post-Parkland in current political climate
  – With more expansive list of questions

• Does understanding others’ positions improve with other controversial topics?