The Socialization of Conflict and Its Limits: Gender and Gun Politics in America

Kristin A. Goss, Duke University

Objective. This study considers efforts by gun rights and gun regulation groups to socialize the conflict over firearms policy by engaging a coveted issue public—women. I assess whether gun rights groups have succeeded in weakening women’s support for gun control laws and increasing women’s firearms ownership. I also examine whether gun regulation groups have succeeded in mobilizing their female sympathizers for political action. Methods. Drawing on two survey archives spanning several decades, I use descriptive statistics and logistic regression to analyze the relationship between women and guns over time. Results. Gun rights groups have had little success in persuading women to become “pro-gun” in attitudes or behaviors. Gun regulation groups have mobilized their female sympathizers but not enough to offset the political engagement of pro-gun men. Conclusion. The findings suggest that civic identities, organizational capacities, and countervailing pressures constrain efforts to socialize conflict through persuasion and mobilization.

In his classic statement of American politics, Schattschneider (1960:2) argued that “the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it.” What he termed the “socialization of conflict” represents an enduring strategic goal of political organizations, yet strategies for engaging the audience are seldom straightforward. Some audiences may require a strategy of persuasion; they may need to learn to see the issue as advocates do and to believe that the issue is worthy of attention. Some audiences may already be persuaded of the issue’s importance but still require a strategy of mobilization, translating preferences into political action.

This study examines competing efforts spanning several decades to socialize conflict in a particularly interesting issue arena—gun policy—by focusing on a particularly coveted yet underengaged audience—women. Although Schattschneider (1960) argued that the “socialization of conflict” is typically a tool of the politically weaker group, in this case both gun rights groups and gun regulation groups have had good reason to expand the scope of conflict to include women. This is because both sides have a “woman problem” that would be politically advantageous to solve.

The “woman problem” facing gun rights organizations is the problem of persuasion: of creating a space within the gun culture for women and convincing them that it is in their interest to join. The persuasive challenges are formidable: public opinion polls consistently find that women favor gun regulation at significantly higher rates than men (Goss, 2006; Goss and Skocpol, 2006; Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986; Smith, 1980, 1984) and are far less likely to condone a firearm in the home (Goss and Skocpol, 2006). With declining rates of male firearm ownership (Smith and Son, 2015) and hunting (Aiken and
Harris, 2011), together with increasing rates of female-headed households (Wang, Parker, and Taylor, 2013), gun groups began a campaign of persuasion aimed at bringing women into the fold (Tucker, 2012; O’Brien, 1992; Caldwell, 2004). For example, the National Rifle Association (NRA) launched a women’s issues division and a “Refuse to be a Victim” campaign in the early 1990s (Browder, 2006:1). Today, the NRA sponsors women-only firearms training programs around the country (O’Brien, 1992) and hosts a Women’s Leadership Forum and a women’s channel on its website. For two decades beginning in 1992, the NRA’s flagship magazine, The American Rifleman, featured a column directed at women, and from 2003 to 2006 the organization published a magazine, Women’s Outlook, for that audience. These projects link firearms ownership to frameworks of gender identity, such as egalitarianism (Landsberg, 1993) and maternalism (Green, 1993).

While pro-gun advocates have faced a challenge of persuasion, pro-regulation groups have had a problem of mobilization. These groups have sensed for some time that winning policy battles often requires demonstrating the same sustained, grassroots energy that has given gun rights groups political clout in Washington and many state capitals (Spitzer, 2015). Women, especially mothers, have a long history of social reform efforts and could constitute that grassroots base, but they traditionally have been undermobilized relative to their interest in the gun regulation issue (Goss, 2006, 2013). Studying the movement through 2000, Goss (2006) identified the dearth of mobilized women as a key reason behind the “missing movement” for gun control in America. That said, gun reform advocates have tried intermittently to mobilize women by combining maternal and feminist identities into novel frameworks of collective action (Goss, 2014; Goss and Heaney, 2010).

Schattschneider (1960:3) observed that “if a fight starts, watch the crowd, because the crowd plays the decisive role.” This article watches the crowd—American women—over the roughly 30-year period in which their sympathies and political engagement have been the target of strategic contestation. I assess three measures of engagement: (1) gun ownership; (2) support for gun regulation; and (3) political activism on the gun issue. I draw on two sets of data: General Social Survey data from 1972 to 2014 and Pew Research Center surveys from 1993 to 2013. For the questions on gun ownership and political participation, I present simple descriptive statistics. For the public opinion questions, I present descriptive statistics and utilize logistic regression analysis to isolate the relationship between gender and position on gun regulation and whether it has changed over time.

This article is organized as follows. First, I assess gun rights groups’ efforts at persuasion by evaluating longitudinal trends in public opinion: Have men’s and women’s attitudes shifted, and, if so, are such changes due to an evolution in the underlying relationship between gender and gun policy attitudes? After considering public opinion, I evaluate whether persuasion has affected another outcome: gun ownership. Are women (and single women in particular) being swayed by arguments that guns are tools of female empowerment and protection? Finally, I examine the question of mobilization. In particular, I assess whether a high-profile event involving child victims of gun violence—the 2012 shooting at the Sandy Hook school in Newtown, CT—helped pro-regulation groups to bring their traditionally undermobilized female sympathizers into the political fray.

Public Opinion: Has the Gun Narrative Softened Women’s Support for Regulation?

For gun rights groups, the key political challenge has been to persuade women to shed their aversion to firearms and to abandon their commitment to stronger gun laws. As noted above, polls have found a pronounced gender gap on gun regulation; indeed, one would be hard pressed to think of an issue that has had a larger gender gap over such a long period
of time. Within the context of gun rights groups’ efforts to shift women’s opinion, three questions arise:

1. How do men and women compare in their views of gun regulation, and how have any differences between men and women changed over time as gun rights and gun regulation groups have sought to curry favor with women?
2. Is the experience of gender itself a predictor of one’s position on gun regulation—or is gender merely a proxy for other factors that are associated with gender (e.g., gun ownership)?
3. Has the association between gender and support for gun regulation weakened over time, controlling for other factors known to affect one’s position on guns?

To answer these questions, I analyze the “generic” question on gun policy contained in the GSS and Pew surveys. The GSS asks whether the respondent would “favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun.” Pew asks: “What do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, OR to control gun ownership?”

How Do Men and Women Compare, and Have Any Gender Differences Shifted Over Time?

The GSS and Pew surveys both demonstrate a large and persistent gender gap on the question of gun regulation. The GSS asked its gun permit question nearly every year between 1972 and 2014 (n = 27 years). Figure 1 shows the longitudinal trends, by gender, along with the gap between women’s and men’s support.

The gender gap in 1959 (15 points) remained relatively unchanged from 1972 through 2014. In general, the gap was between 12 and 15 points in that period, although it showed greater volatility in the 2000s and may have narrowed slightly over the past decade.

Pew’s longitudinal series, which asks a different generic question (whether it is more important to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to control ownership), shows a
similar pattern: a pro-gun shift alongside a generally stable, but more volatile and possibly narrowing, gender gap. Figure 2 shows the trends.

Although gender has traditionally been an important predictor of one’s position on gun policy, guns and partisanship have grown increasingly intertwined (Silver, 2012). Figure 3 shows the gun permit series by gender and party affiliation. While Republican and Democratic women were fairly closely aligned when the polling series began in the 1970s and for some years later, they have diverged sharply in recent years.
From the figure, it appears that Republicans, including women, are driving the shift toward the gun rights position. While Republican women used to be only slightly less supportive of gun control laws than Democratic women, the gap has widened since the early 2000s. Republican women are now less supportive of gun regulation than are Democratic men. In other words, partisan identification has come to dominate gender as a correlate of gun policy views.

**Is the Association Between Gender and Opinion on Gun Policy Real?**

The descriptive association between gender and position on gun policy raises the question of whether the association is meaningful, or simply an artifact of other variables associated with both variables. Table 1 reports the results of binary logistic regression models—one covering the cumulative GSS data (representing 25 years of data over the period 1973–2014) and the other zeroing in on a recent year, 2012, when Pew conducted a survey containing not only the variable of interest (position on gun policy) but also a rich array of control variables. The models include control variables that prior research has found to be associated with gun policy views.1 Because coefficients in logistic regressions are difficult to interpret, Table 1 reports odds ratios. Odds ratios tell us how a one-unit shift in an

| TABLE 1 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>GSS Cumulative (n = 34,771)</th>
<th>Pew 2012 (n = 1,034)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.945</td>
<td>1.931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.041</td>
<td>1.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.003</td>
<td>1.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>1.364</td>
<td>1.244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in home</td>
<td>0.943</td>
<td>0.943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. North Central/Midwest</td>
<td>0.579</td>
<td>0.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>0.586</td>
<td>0.603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain/West</td>
<td>0.312</td>
<td>0.323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun in home</td>
<td>0.367</td>
<td>0.369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>1.173</td>
<td>0.582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>1.415</td>
<td>2.253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.802</td>
<td>0.489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>0.140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference categories are male, white, no children at home, Northeast, no gun in home, Republican Party identification.

1For the sake of robustness, I ran the models both with and without controlling for party identification. Controlling for partisanship is statistically perilous for two reasons: (1) it is unclear which direction any causal relationship between party ID and gun policy beliefs might run (party ID may drive position on guns, but position on guns may also help determine one’s party ID); and (2) the direction of causation may be mediated by one’s gender (for example, men may pick their political party based on its position on guns, while women may determine their position on guns based on their party’s position). As we see in the table, controlling for party ID did not change the gender findings and had little impact on most other odds ratios in the models.
independent variable (such as gender) affects the likelihood of moving from one condition (pro-gun) to another (pro-regulation). In Table 1, the odds ratios should be evaluated against a baseline of 1, with values greater than 1 meaning that the reported category (e.g., female) is associated with greater support for gun regulation relative to the reference category (e.g., male); likewise, values less than 1 reflect less support for gun regulation relative to the reference category. (Note that the positive signs on the coefficient are not indicative of a positive correlation with the outcome variable.)

The findings from these models are remarkably similar and consistent with conventional wisdom. Being nonwhite, a Democrat, and from a more densely populated area is associated with relatively greater support for gun regulation, while owning a gun and being from the South, Midwest, or West predicts relative support for gun rights. In all four analyses, the Beta coefficients (not reported) are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, with the exception of the child variable in the GSS models, which is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. In short, the findings are robust both across models and with respect to prior research.

Zeroing in on gender, we see that being female is an independently powerful predictor of supporting gun regulation, even after controlling for other variables (e.g., race, region, gun in home) that are also associated with gun policy beliefs. Indeed, women are nearly twice as likely as men to prioritize gun control over gun rights, all else being equal, meaning that gender is one of the strongest predictors of gun views. This finding holds even after controlling for political ideology. The two sets of findings are strikingly similar, especially given that they covered different time spans and asked different questions. In sum, gender matters.

Has Gender Weakened as a Predictor of One’s Position on Gun Policy?

The graph would appear to provide evidence that gun rights groups have succeeded in winning Republican women’s hearts and minds on the gun question, either by socializing young women as they come of political age, or by converting older GOP women to the pro-gun perspective, or both. However, another possible explanation exists. Rather than changes in women, perhaps the trend reflects changes in the composition of the Republican Party, wherein moderates have died or moved into the independent or Democratic columns. Without panel data, we have no way of definitively testing these two hypotheses. However, two pieces of circumstantial evidence lend greater support to the composition explanation than to the socialization or conversion stories. First, if pro-gun narratives were having an effect, we would expect to see stronger pro-gun sentiment among GOP women who came of political age in the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, when the NRA’s push to redefine women’s relationship with guns was fully underway. However, analysis of the data reveals no such generational pattern: GOP women from the Millennial, Generation X, Baby Boom, and “Silent Generation” birth cohorts are closely aligned, now and over time, on gun policy beliefs. There is stronger evidence that a change in the composition of the Republican Party is responsible for the shift toward gun rights. The share of Republican women who say they are conservative, or extremely so, grew by 10 percentage points between 2000 and 2012, coinciding with the downward turn in support for gun control among these women (analysis not shown).

These findings, however, do not rule out the impact of gun rights advocacy. During this time period, ties between the GOP and the NRA grew tighter (Horwitz and Anderson, 2009). Thus, it is possible that GOP women (and perhaps some men) moved toward gun rights in part because they were more conservative and in part because being a “good Republican” came to mean supporting gun rights. This account is consistent with the
finding of Carsey and Layman (2006) that voters are especially likely to line up with their party on low-salience issues (which gun rights may be for GOP women). If so, “gun lobby” effects would be indirect, yet nonetheless important.

Stepping back from questions of partisanship, we are ultimately concerned with whether the underlying relationship between gender and gun policy position, all else being equal, has changed over time.

To answer that question, I conducted two sets of analyses: a logistic regression using pooled data for 25 usable years of GSS data and separate logistic regressions for each year. Both models controlled for the factors (above) associated with people’s position on the gun issue. The difference was in how the models dealt with time. The pooled regression used year, gender, and a gender \times \text{year} interaction term as independent (indicator) variables. Intuitively, this model tested whether the underlying relationship between people’s gender and their attitude toward gun policy evolved over time. The separate regressions, one per year, provide a more helpful way of visualizing the year-to-year partial effects (odds ratios) of gender on gun policy position. If the odds ratios associated with the gender variable diminished over time, we might have reason to believe that the relationship between the experience of gender and feelings about gun regulation was weakening and that gun groups’ effort to break women’s support for gun control was working.

The results from both regression methods reveal no meaningful change over time in the association between being female and supporting gun regulation. For the pooled model, in only three years (1982, 2000, and 2010) was the gender \times \text{year} indicator variable significantly different from the reference year (1973) at the conventional level of significance ($p < 0.05$). Underscoring the lack of clear patterning, in two cases (1982 and 2010) the underlying relationship between gender and gun position was significantly stronger than in 1973, and in the third case (2000), it was significantly weaker. Separate logistic regressions for each year of available data provide a more vivid and intuitively satisfying picture of the relationship between gender and gun policy position over time. Figure 4 shows the odds ratios, by year, for the gender variable. The graph can be interpreted as illustrating the gender gap on gun control over time, net of other individual-level factors that might influence one’s position.

As the graph shows, the association between gender and gun policy position jumps around over time (including in three outlier years discussed above). The absence of a down-sloping line suggests that the underlying relationship between being female and supporting gun regulation is holding firm. The graph provides little reason to believe that gun rights forces have reoriented the relationship between womanhood (whatever perspective that identity entails) and support for gun regulation. On average over four decades, the fact of being a woman has typically doubled or more than doubled the odds of supporting gun regulation. Although the pattern is noisy from year to year, the data show no overall, consistent diminution in this relationship.

Ownership: Have Pro-Gun Narratives Made Women Less Gun Shy?

Media headlines going back at least to the late 1980s have heralded the emergence of a female gun culture. Women’s purported embrace of firearms has been attributed to demographic changes (more women living alone due to delayed marriage, more women heading households); personal safety fears, especially during the crime epidemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s; and feminist arguments that guns represent an “equalizer” allowing women to repel larger and stronger male attackers (Barr, 1993; Gosch, 1992; Johnson, 1989; Leary, 1992; Wu, 1991). From the late 1980s to the present, shooting range
operators, firearms instructors, gun dealers, and firearms manufacturers have reported large increases in women’s patronage (see, e.g., Abbott, 1992; Campbell, 1988; Johnson, 1989; Melody, 1992; Smith, 2014; Wu, 1991). NRA officials quoted in media accounts have identified women as a fast-growing constituency (Enriquez, 2006; Hillery and Berg, 1994; Johnson, 1989; Knight-Ridder Newspapers, 1995; Mooneyham, 2000). Industry groups have reported jumps in women’s participation in hunting and other shooting sports (Frye, 2006; Guensburg, 2012; Kelly, 2000; Kernicky, 1995; Pardo, 2005; Richardson, 1996). Gun makers and allied industries have released products and marketing campaigns tailored to women (Breslin, 2013; Johnson, 1989; Landsberg, 1993; Smith, 2014).

These reports suggest that gun interests have met the challenge of persuading women to take up arms for sport and self-defense, thereby facilitating efforts to boost gun organizations’ memberships, course enrollments, and political clout. If true, the rise in female gun ownership should show up in the GSS, a respected study of American attitudes and behaviors. Since 1980, the GSS has asked at least every other year whether the respondent has a gun in the home, and, if so, whether the gun personally belongs to the respondent. Therefore, Figure 5 shows the pattern for men and women who say they personally own a gun.

Two stories could be told about these data. The first is that efforts to sell women on guns are not working: the female ownership rate has been essentially flat for 30 years, and perhaps declined slightly relative to the mid-1990s. However, an alternative account is that women indeed do represent an important market for gun interests, as females seem resistant to whatever forces are causing male ownership to decline.

Scholars have found that married men are more likely than married women to say there is a gun in the home, suggesting either that women aren’t aware of the firearm or are reluctant to admit it exists (Ludwig, Cook, and Smith, 1998). Thus, I also report data on women who presumably do know there’s a gun in the home—women who live alone or are single.
One way to sort out these explanations is to look at gun ownership trends among unmarried women and among women who live alone. Because they lack “protection” from a gun-owning spouse, these women may be most open to firearm interests’ message that guns are useful for self-defense. On this account, the flat line in Figure 5 might be the product of two countervailing processes: a decline in guns in traditional married households and a concomitant rise in ownership among single women and women living alone. Figure 6 shows the gun ownership trends among women in these categories, compared to married women.
Remarkably, the story is much the same by household type. Patterns of personal gun ownership among unmarried and married women are down from the early 1980s and are basically flat since the early 1990s. For women who live alone, self-reports of guns in the home have fluctuated but generally hovered around 20 percent for decades. These data provide evidence that gun rights activists’ push to arm women, now in at least its third decade, is enjoying little if any success. Indeed, the picture for gun rights advocates might be even bleaker than it appears. This is so because, if social inhibitions around reporting gun ownership have declined for women, then their actual rate of ownership would have been higher in the past than the survey records. In that case, the “true” flat line might actually be downward sloping. The data do not allow us to test this supposition, but if true, we might conclude that the gun rights movement’s effort to destigmatize female gun ownership has had a greater effect on survey compliance than on anything else.

How might we reconcile decades’ worth of anecdotal reports that women are taking up arms with the flat ownership trend revealed by the GSS? One possibility is that female gun ownership is growing among geographically concentrated subsets of women, while declining among others. In this scenario national-level statistics might look unchanged, while range owners and gun shops might indeed be seeing localized increases in female patronage. The GSS data do not contain enough respondents in any given year to evaluate whether female gun ownership is rising within small geographic regions, but it is intuitively plausible.

Another possibility is that, within gun-owning households, women are more likely to claim ownership of a preexisting firearm. In this reckoning, the observed decline in gun-owning households might be offset by women’s increasing embrace of guns already present in the home. The data provide some evidence for this proposition. Among women in gun-owning households, there has been a 4–5 percentage point increase since the early 1980s in the fraction who say that gun is theirs, and a corresponding decrease in men saying that they personally own the household gun. The growth in women’s claim to the household gun is most pronounced among political independents and, to a lesser extent, among Democrats. Surprisingly, Republican women—who might be expected to be most open to pro-gun messages—have become no more likely to claim personal ownership of the household firearm. These data are consistent with anecdotal reports that women are joining their spouses and families in shooting sports. Of course, the very modest increase in women’s claims to the household gun may simply reflect more egalitarian norms around marital property generally, as opposed to affinity toward the firearm per se.

To summarize the findings, survey data provide no evidence supporting an increase in women’s gun ownership at the aggregate level. However, reaching definitive judgments is difficult. Women could be “taking to guns” by using family or rented firearms; if so, standard ownership questions would not capture this trend. If more women are buying guns, but are more hesitant than their longtime gun-owning female counterparts to report their ownership, surveys would underestimate the true number of women owners. By this account, female ownership could be increasing. On the other hand, if changing cultural norms are making women more willing to claim or admit gun ownership, then surveys would have underestimated earlier ownership levels. If so, the “true” slope is downward, meaning female ownership is decreasing. A best estimate would be that there is a bit of truth in both accounts: some women are taking up shooting sports using family guns, while they and others are becoming less inhibited about admitting to a firearm in the home.

Interestingly, in any given year typically 10-20 percent of women who live alone and have a gun in the home do not claim that gun as their own. It may be that the gun belonged to a deceased parent or spouse or that the respondent is temporarily storing the gun for someone else.
In terms of women’s embrace of guns and gun rights, the evidence provides gun organizations little reason for optimism. Women’s rates of ownership have not declined as men’s have, which suggests perhaps that the gun rights message is getting through on some level. But ownership rates among women—especially promising subgroups, such as women who live alone—have not posted the gains that gun groups might have expected after decades of work. Early research found that feminist women embraced gun control and saw no conflict between these positions (Smith, 1980). Gun rights forces have sought to force such a conflict by persuading feminist women—and mothers and civic-minded women generally—that guns and gun rights are critical to their projects. In short, these groups have sought to reorient the relationship between gender and guns. Survey evidence provides little reason to believe that these efforts have succeeded.

**Mobilization: Have Pro-Regulation Groups Engaged Their Female Sympathizers?**

Just as pro-gun and pro-regulation organizations want to influence women’s opinions on gun policy and their patterns of firearm ownership, advocates also seek to mobilize women as voters and activists on gun policy. Individual-level survey data allow us to assess the mobilization effects of a particularly salient focusing event: the shooting of 20 first-graders and six educators at the Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. The shooting prompted a national dialogue on gun violence, propelled firearms policy reform to the top of the national political agenda, and provided a focal point for the socialization of conflict over guns. Sandy Hook may have provided a particular political opening for pro-regulation groups, for which the mobilization of sympathizers has proved an enduring challenge.

Organizations on both sides of the gun debate framed messages tailored to women’s civic identities. Pro-gun interests argued that “bad guys with guns” posed a pervasive threat and that mothers had a duty to take up arms to protect themselves and their families. These groups argued that women’s and children’s interests would be served by opposing legislation to tighten firearms laws. On the other hand, pro-regulation forces, including an incipient group of women mobilizing through Facebook, countered that guns posed a danger to children and that stricter laws were necessary. The Facebook effort notwithstanding, the pro-gun side dwarfed its opponents in organizational capacity. For example, the NRA had about 10 times the budget and membership of all its leading opponents combined (Cook and Goss, 2014).

Survey evidence collected at the time allows us to examine how especially compelling focusing events, coupled with public calls to action, might change participatory dynamics. Traditionally, supporters of gun rights have been more politically engaged around the issue than gun control supporters (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Goss, 2006). This action gap is due in part to the fact that women, one of the subpopulations most strongly supportive of gun laws, have traditionally been less likely than males to participate (Goss, 2006). However, prior research has found that especially salient school shootings, coupled with maternal frameworks, boost women’s advocacy for gun reform (Goss, 2006, 2003). The Sandy Hook shooting, which garnered constant media coverage and put gun laws at the top of the national agenda, provides an opportunity to evaluate the mobilization piece of the socialization of conflict model. If ever an event could draw women into political combat over gun policy, Sandy Hook was it.

Separate surveys taken in the aftermath of the shooting allow us to watch how the audience of American women—on both sides of the gun policy debate—engaged, or did not engage, on this salient issue. In December 2012, January 2013, and May 2013, the Pew Research Center asked random samples of Americans whether they had performed
TABLE 2
Activism by Gender and Position on Gun Policy Within Six Months of Sandy Hook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pro-Gun Men</th>
<th>Pro-Gun Women</th>
<th>Pro-Regulation Men</th>
<th>Pro-Regulation Women</th>
<th>Pro-Gun Advantage (Both Genders Combined)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacted public official</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>1.3:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributed money to organization</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed opinion on social media</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>1.5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed petition</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>1.3:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did at least one of the above</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>1.6:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

any of four political acts: contacted a public official to express their opinion about gun policy; contributed money to an organization that takes a position on gun policy; expressed their opinion on gun policy using Facebook, Twitter, or another social network; or signed a petition about gun policy. At the five-month mark (May 2013), Pew also asked whether the respondent had contacted public officials about expanding background checks on gun purchases—the main policy reform that Congress had been considering. The May 2013 survey also distinguished between participation ever and participation within the past six months—roughly corresponding to the post-Sandy Hook time frame. The questions allow us to compare patterns of participation across four subsamples—pro-gun men, pro-gun women, pro-regulation men, and pro-regulation women—and to determine whether Sandy Hook altered these patterns. We are especially interested in the participatory pattern of pro-regulation women, whose underinvolvement has posed a quandary for the gun reform movement.

Table 2 shows the fraction of people in each of the four subgroups who reported engaging politically on the issue within the past six months, roughly the period after Sandy Hook. As the table shows, pro-regulation women participated on par with their male counterparts—but lagged far behind pro-gun men (and in some cases pro-gun women).

The figures appear to confirm the conventional wisdom that pro-gun individuals feel more passionately about their position than do pro-regulation voters and are more willing to act on those beliefs. However, prior studies have found that the gap is not one of intensity, but rather of mobilization (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Goss, 2006). Different levels of mobilization reflect the different capacity of groups on each side to do the mobilizing, as one of the main drivers of political engagement is “being asked” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). By these measures, the gun rights side has a strong advantage. Although pro-regulation groups have recently invested more in grassroots movement building (Goss, 2014), this survey occurred before these efforts had taken shape.

Another way to look at the data is from the vantage point of lawmakers, who are on the receiving end of traditional contacts, petitions, and social media posts. Table 3 shows the distribution of messages that a hypothetical national politician would have seen in the post-Sandy Hook period. (Note that the distribution will vary widely by jurisdiction.) The first
row shows the distribution of each of the four subpopulations across the survey sample—so, for example, pro-regulation women make up the largest subsample (30.2 percent). The next four rows show the distribution of political activity across the four subsamples. Where the sample percentage is higher than the activity percentage, the subpopulation is “underperforming,” and where the sample figure is lower than the activity figure, the subpopulation is “overperforming.”

As the table shows, pro-gun men consistently overperform—they are only 27 percent of the sample but generate 28–37 percent of political acts. By contrast, pro-regulation women consistently underperform—they are 30 percent of the population, but with one important exception, they generate 24–28 percent of political acts. All told, for both genders combined, the pro-gun advantage is between 9 and 19 percentage points, meaning gun rights supporters are considerably more active than their numbers in the population would predict.

The important exception to this set of findings concerns contacting public officials about expanding the federal background check system to include most private gun sales. This policy reform became the focal point of pro-regulation groups’ advocacy efforts after Sandy Hook. The May 2013 Pew poll found that pro-regulation women more than matched pro-gun men, and dwarfed pro-gun women, in the likelihood of reaching out and in the sheer number of messages sent. On this narrow but salient question, pro-regulation women overperformed.

The analysis above covers gun-related activism within the six months preceding the survey and provides insights on the level and nature of post-Sandy Hook activism. However, because survey organizations often ask about gun-related activism only after a major shooting, not before, it is difficult to gauge how these events shape public engagement. We can, however, gain some leverage on the question by comparing activism, especially women’s activism, reported at one month and five months after the event. In January 2013 and May 2013, Pew asked national samples whether they had ever taken four different actions around the gun issue (contacting, contributing, social media commenting, and petition signing).

Analysis of the data indicates that the fraction of Americans reporting gun-related political activity moved only minimally in the predicted direction of more activism between January and May 2013, a period that encompassed legislative debates at the national and state levels over gun policy. Women mirrored this trend, moving very little even in social media
engagement. In sum, the data provide little evidence that the media coverage of Sandy Hook and subsequent legislative attention to gun reform altered entrenched patterns of participation, with the notable exception of contacting public officials about background checks.

American Women and Guns: 30 Years of Little Change

For at least two decades, both gun rights and gun regulation groups have sought to gain an advantage in the “great American gun war” (Bruce-Briggs, 1976) by recruiting a large and potentially pivotal audience: American women. These efforts have come at the very time when women’s family roles have been shifting, leaving women presumably open to messages of persuasion and mobilization. This study has assessed the results of efforts to “involve the audience” of women in support of, or in opposition to, gun laws.

The overarching finding is that the battle to win over women has come to a draw. Even with the rightward drift in American politics, women are still significantly more likely than men to favor gun regulation, and the experience of “being a woman” remains a strong predictor, all else being equal, of pro-regulation sentiment. Despite a massive marketing campaign, few women own guns, at least by American standards, and surveys reveal no upward trend.

At the same time, at least as of 2013, the traditional participation gap on the gun issue continues to be significant. Pro-regulation women are far less likely than pro-gun men (and, usually, pro-gun women) to express their preferences through the political system. Although pro-regulation women did speak out on the timely issue of expanded background checks, these women remain generally undermobilized relative to pro-gun men when it comes to other forms of engagement around gun policy, including contacting public officials, giving money to advocacy groups, signing petitions, and even speaking out through social media. Even though pro-gun men are fewer in number than pro-regulation women, the men generally produce more political activity. This imbalance may be reduced as pro-regulation groups shift greater resources toward women’s mobilization (Goss, 2014).

Why has so little changed? The data cannot provide definitive answers, but theories of persuasion and mobilization allow for informed speculation. If efforts to reframe issues work only rarely (Baumgartner et al., 2009), we might expect even greater difficulties when the reframing effort requires altering widely accepted civic identities, such as motherhood, and engrained gender roles, such as those around masculine protection and female caregiving. Where pro-gun forces have made progress—at the level of mass public opinion—the story is consistent with the theory of partisan sorting. With the parties increasingly divided on gun questions, women may not be changing their minds so much as flowing to the party that better represents their preexisting commitments.

The case of gun politics in the United States demonstrates the limits of the conflict socialization model of politics. In a media-saturated era in which “framing” may seem like a panacea to issue advocacy groups, this case of women and guns offers a sobering reminder that messages may matter less than underlying dynamics such as civic identities, policy commitments, and organizational capacities.

5 On the pro-regulation side, the fraction of women saying they had ever expressed a gun-related opinion through social media is lower than the fraction saying they had done so within the past six months, a finding that logically must be due to random variation in sampling.
REFERENCES


Kernicky, Kathleen. 1995. “Pistol-Packin’ Mamas—The NRA Sponsors a Controversial Program that Teaches Women How to Arm Themselves.” St. Louis Post-Dispatch August 7:4E.


