

**The Political Weaponization of Gun Owners:
The NRA's Cultivation, Dissemination, and Use of a Group Social Identity**

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Abstract: There is substantial evidence indicating that the NRA's political influence is closely tied to the deep political engagement of the minority of Americans who oppose strict gun control laws. This explanation of the NRA's influence, however, raises its own questions; namely, why are gun owners so devoted to their cause and why is the NRA so effective at mobilizing them? I marshal a wide-range of evidence covering nearly nine decades to demonstrate that an important cause of the political activity of gun owners is the NRA's long-term cultivation and dissemination of a distinct, politicized gun owner social identity, which the NRA uses to mobilize mass political action on its behalf. My findings shed new light on the ability of interest groups to develop and use resources that help them influence policy by altering the political behavior of members of the mass public.

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Despite internationally exceptional rates of gun violence and strong public support for stricter rules, firearm regulations in the U.S. remain comparatively weak (Lupkin 2013; Parker et al. 2017). This puzzling outcome is commonly attributed to the political influence of the National Rifle Association (NRA). Yet the source of this prominent interest group’s political power is something of a mystery. Theories of interest group power often emphasize the *private channels* through which groups exert influence – through, for example, behind-the-scenes lobbying and campaign support, regulatory sway, and so on. Influence in these models is often a product of the *financial resources* groups bring to bear on politics. To be sure, the NRA spends substantial sums on electoral campaigns, but spending, by itself, is an insufficient explanation of its clout. A close inspection reveals that the NRA differs from most groups that fit neatly into predominant theoretical frameworks. Its large mass-based membership, for example, is mostly middle-class, not wealthy; and despite its close relationship with gun manufacturers, there is ample evidence that the NRA is not beholden to them or other economic elites (Feldman 2008; Murphy 2012).

Other accounts suggest that the NRA’s influence may be best understood as a function of the political involvement of its supporters. Indeed, these individuals exhibit very high levels of political engagement and their behavior has been shown to have substantial impacts on policy outcomes (or lack thereof). But even as these findings help explain the NRA’s influence, they raise still more questions. Why are gun owners so devoted to their cause? Why is the NRA so effective at mobilizing them politically?

I argue that the NRA has assiduously and strategically cultivated a distinct, politicized gun-owner *social identity* over the course of many years, which enables it to influence politics by mobilizing its supporters into frequent and intense political action on its behalf. The NRA’s use of this identity can be thought of as an often overlooked but distinct form of “outside lobbying”

(in which an interest group attempts to influence politics by altering mass behavior) as well as a non-material, solidary benefit that helps it overcome the collective action problems faced by mass-based groups (Kollman 1998; Clark and Wilson 1961). I develop this argument by analyzing two original text corpora: (1) 79 years of the NRA's *American Rifleman* magazine and (2) gun control-related letters to editors of four major U.S. newspapers. Both are complemented by original archival data and other available data on the political behavior of gun owners.

The cultivation of social identity is not the sole explanation for the NRA's formidable political clout, and the nature of my analysis does not enable me to make dispositive causal claims about its impact on policy or the NRA's role in creating it. But I do present systematic, comprehensive empirical evidence of the NRA's long-running effort to use *ideational* resources to cultivate a *mass* channel of political influence (in contrast to more conventional *financial* resources and *private* channels of influence), as well as evidence that these efforts have been successful at cultivating a highly politically active and engaged membership. Alternative explanations of the NRA's clout that exclude this channel of influence are therefore likely missing an important part of the story. More generally, these findings suggest that greater attention ought to be paid to the ways in which interest groups might cultivate and exploit alternate pathways of influence that are hidden in plain sight.

Interest Group Power and the NRA

Identifying and explaining interest group power has long presented serious analytical challenges because political power takes several distinct forms and is often very difficult to see (Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Moe 2005; Pierson 2016). Scholars have nonetheless produced substantial, wide-ranging insights, which, though diverse and numerous, can be distilled into two common themes. The first focuses on groups' financial resources (e.g.,

Hall and Wayman 1990; Ansolabehere et al. 2003), and the second on what can be described as private channels of influence – influence achieved through behind-the-scenes techniques (e.g., Hansen 1991; Hall and Deardorff 2006). Research on interest groups generally finds that groups representing businesses and affluent citizens are most likely to form, maintain themselves, and exert influence (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Gilens and Page 2014).

Although financial resources and private channels are crucial – and although the NRA does, of course, make campaign contributions and engage in lobbying – these activities are not sufficient explanations of its success. First, several groups that make comparable campaign contributions (e.g., environmental groups and labor unions) do not appear to have influence comparable to the NRA’s, while groups that do seem to have comparable influence (e.g., business groups) spend much more money than the NRA on lobbying.¹ Second, the NRA’s influence – observed as far back as the debates over the National Firearms Act (1934) and the Federal Firearms Act (1938) – long predates its foray into political spending, which did not occur until the 1970s with the creation of its PAC and Institute for Legislative Action (Leff and Leff 1981; Spitzer 2016). Finally, gun regulation advocates have at times outspent the NRA – including following the Sandy Hook massacre, when Michael Bloomberg put his full financial weight behind gun control – but have thus far been unable to match its influence (Draper 2013).

On its face, then, the case of the NRA suggests that alternative routes to interest group power exist. But what might the NRA’s particular route be? Existing accounts suggest that a

¹ The NRA was a top-15 outside spending group in the 2012-2016 elections. From 1998-2016, it spent around \$2.2M/year on lobbying. However, comparable campaign contributing groups – including the League of Conservation voters and the Service Employees International Union – appear to have far less influence, and the NRA spends much less on lobbying than other influential groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, which have spent up to \$100M in a single year. Finally, the NRA spends relatively little (just over \$1M in 2016) on direct contributions to candidates; it would be expected to spend much more on these sorts of contributions if it sought to “buy the votes” of legislators (Center for Responsive Politics n.d.).

crucial factor is the political intensity of the minority of Americans who oppose gun control. This includes substantial evidence that gun owners are more politically engaged than gun control proponents (Grossmann 2012), more likely to write letters or donate money (Schuman and Presser 1981; Parker et al. 2017), more likely to join the relevant advocacy organization (Goss 2006), and more likely to vote based on this issue (Joslyn et al. 2017; Aronow and Miller 2016).

This engagement gap clearly affects gun control policy. Its impact was evident as early as the 1930s, when the NRA led a letter-writing campaign against the first attempt at federal gun control (NRA 1934; Kennett and Anderson 1975). It was equally evident in the critical 1965-1967 period when gun owners, again encouraged by the NRA, flooded policymakers with letters opposing a proposed gun control bill (Harris 1968). And recent accounts, as well as recent events, confirm that many policymakers remain highly responsive to the pressure they receive from pro-gun constituents (Draper 2013). Indeed, policymakers – perhaps as a result the frequency with which gun owners contact them – vastly overestimate opposition to gun control among their constituents (Broockman and Skovron 2018).

If the NRA's political influence rests in large part on the activism of gun owners, the natural next question is *whether* and *how* the NRA has sought to cultivate, maintain, and harness this behavior on behalf of its policy agenda. Indeed, why is the NRA so effective at outside lobbying? Whereas predominant explanations of group influence fit well with what have been described as the first two faces of power – how groups prevail in open, visible political conflict and how they control the policy agenda (Dahl 1961; Bachrach and Baratz 1962) – they do not fit as well with the third – the power to shape the political opinions, identities, and preferences of others (Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1982) – which, difficult to observe and measure, has been given less attention in the study of American politics (Pierson 2016). Yet the third face warrants further

investigation in order to understand how groups may also build influence by gradually altering mass behavior over time in less visible ways.

Social Identities as Interest Group Resources

To this end, I argue that the NRA uses *ideational* resources to build influence via *mass* channels. A major source of its political power is its alteration of the preferences and behavior of members of the mass public, whose political behavior, in ways just described, then affects policy outcomes. One such pathway involves the cultivation of a *politicized group social identity*. A politicized group identity enhances a group's ability to influence politics via outside lobbying by increasing the political salience and intensity of opinions held among group members, making it easier to mobilize them to engage in various forms of political participation.

The political intensity of gun owners, I will argue, is a product of their adoption of a politicized gun-owner social identity. Moreover, the NRA – through its membership communications and programs – has played a crucial role in creating this identity, disseminating it, and connecting it to politics. The NRA has then leveraged this social identity to mobilize political action on its behalf by portraying the identity as under threat.

This emphasis on group identities advances the study of interest groups by extending a classic literature on groups' use of solidary (Clark and Wilson 1961) or expressive (Salisbury 1969) incentives to overcome collective action problems related to the recruitment and retention of members. This research differed from Olson's (1965) emphasis on the selective *material* incentives groups use to overcome collective action problems by arguing that they can also offer social and psychological benefits. Related research finds that individuals are more responsive to these incentives if they perceive their interests as threatened (Hansen 1985; Wilson 1995).

Whereas work in this tradition has focused on the provision of non-material benefits to

recruit and *retain* members, my analysis goes further by arguing that the creation of a group identity not only makes group membership appealing, but also enhances a group's ability to mobilize members into political action. Just as perceived threat encourages individuals to join groups, it also motivates individuals to take political action, which can then lead to group policy influence. By relating the solidary benefits a group offers to its policy influence, this identity-driven approach connects literatures on group formation and group influence.

Social Identity Theory

Scholarship on social identity indicates that when a particular identity is politically salient for a group, it shapes group members' behavior in ways that can have profound impacts on political outcomes. Indeed, in their study of U.S. democracy, Achen and Bartels (2016) conclude that social identity is the primary driver of mass political behavior and a defining feature of U.S. politics. Other seminal work has similarly found that social identities shape issue preferences and political participation in myriad ways, from voting to racial views to partisan frames to rural consciousness (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Dawson 1994; Green et al. 2002; Cramer 2016). Social identity has even been previously connected to gun politics by studies focused on gun policy preferences and racial prejudice (Filindra and Kaplan 2015, 2017) and the electoral impact of gun ownership (Joslyn et al. 2017). However, little is known about the connections between *organized interest groups* and the construction of *group social identities*.

Despite the lack of explicit attention to this topic, Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides insights into how groups might construct identities. It indicates that to create a group social identity, an interest group would attempt to distinguish group members from others based on a set of positive characteristics that apply to members and a set of negative characteristics that apply to opponents. According to SIT,

individuals categorize people into groups and identify with some of those groups in order to make sense of complex social situations and reduce uncertainty (Bruner 1957; Oakes 1987; Hogg and Mullin 1999). Further, individuals desire a *positive* self-concept, which motivates them to emphasize positive qualities of their group's identity. Those positive qualities may be contrasted with negative qualities of out-groups – especially when a group feels threatened – but positive in-group feelings are generally a more prominent part of group identity than negative out-group feelings (Turner 1982; Hogg 2000b; Allport 1954; Brewer 1999; Balliet et al. 2014).

Second, after cultivating a collective identity, a group would need to *politicize* it – to connect it to politics and make it politically salient for members. Understanding identity salience – when and why a particular social identity is relevant – is crucial to understanding how identity shapes behavior because individuals have multiple, overlapping social identities, some of which are more important than others both generally and in a given context. Identity salience is a product of two factors: *accessibility* (i.e., which identities does one value and frequently employ?) and *fit* (which identities are relevant to the situation currently being confronted?) (Bruner 1957; Oakes 1987). After making its identity *accessible* by frequently emphasizing positive in-group and negative out-group characteristics, it could make its identity *fit* in political contexts by framing government policies and other political contests (a) in terms of their impacts on the identity and values of the group (as opposed to their specific, technical effects) and (b) as battles between the “good” in-group and “bad” out-groups (Simon and Klandermans 2001).

Third, and finally, a group would attempt to maintain identity salience and mobilize members into political action by portraying the identity as under constant threat from out-groups. If they believe their identity is threatened, group members will be highly motivated to take action (Ellemers 1993; Monroe et al. 2000; Nauroth et al. 2015).

Expectations

A number of narrower, case-specific expectations can be derived from this theoretical framework. **First**, to *create* a collective group identity and make that identity psychologically *accessible*, I expect the NRA's communications to members to emphasize a set of positive characteristics that apply to gun owners (the in-group) and a set of perceived negative qualities that apply to gun control supporters (the out-group). I expect the political discussions of gun rights supporters – as revealed in letters to editors – to adopt the same set of characteristics to describe the in-group and out-group. **Second**, to *politicize* the gun-owner identity – to make it psychologically *fit* in political contexts – I expect the NRA to portray the gun control debate as a battle between competing identities and the values associated with them. I expect gun rights supporters to use similar identity frames when discussing gun regulation, describing it in terms of its impacts on their lives and identities rather than in terms of its likelihood of achieving particular policy goals. **Third**, to *disseminate* the identity, I expect the NRA to use politically-focused identity appeals in its firearms programs. **Fourth**, to *mobilize* political participation, I expect the NRA to portray the gun-owner identity as under threat and to connect threat to explicit calls to action on its behalf. And I expect gun owners to be highly responsive to such calls.

Data and Methods

To assess whether the NRA has worked to cultivate and utilize a social identity along these lines, I focus first on what the NRA says to members. Do its appeals exhibit evidence of identity-building and identity-based political mobilization efforts? For evidence that gun owners have adopted this identity and that it is politically salient for them, I then look at the political discussions and behaviors of people who oppose gun control, and, as a point of reference, compare them to people who support gun control.

My analysis of NRA communications focuses on editorials from the *American Rifleman*, the NRA's official journal, which has been published under its current name since 1923. NRA membership includes a *Rifleman* subscription and the journal has long been the primary means through which the organization communicates with members. I created an original digital corpus of the *Rifleman*, including all issues of the monthly magazine from 1930 and 2008 – over 900 total. Editorials appear in the front of each issue, are generally authored by the NRA's top official, and are typically the only section in which the NRA directly addresses members; their content is thus a strong indicator of the NRA's priorities.

Letters to the editor from four major regional newspapers are then used to test whether the ideas advanced in NRA editorials are subsequently deployed by the NRA's supporters. Letters to the editor are especially useful because they are written by the specific population of interest here: ordinary citizens who are politically engaged (elites' and NRA officials' letters are excluded). Their statements are treated as generally representative of the broader universe of politically active gun owners.² Analyses include all letters about gun control appearing in *The New York Times*, *Arizona Republic*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Chicago Tribune*³ during

² Editors non-randomly select which of all submitted letters appear in print, so printed letters are not necessarily representative of all submitted letters. But this does not appear to add bias to the analyses to follow: (1) There are no consistent, statistically significant differences across papers in any of the following analyses, (2) qualitative comparisons of letters to editors with randomly selected letters to presidents (discussed below) reveal the use of very similar arguments; and (3) research finds that letter selection policies do not bias the opinions that appear in print (Hill 1981) and that a strong majority of editors try to select, often proportionately, letters for print that represent the range of views present in all submitted letters (Hynds 1991).

³ These four newspapers were selected primarily to achieve geographic diversity. Further, each newspaper is one of the most prominent within its region, each has existed for the entirety of the period of study, and each has extensive digital archives. When the analyses presented below are separated by newspaper, no consistent, statistically significant differences emerge across papers, which suggests that the selection of other newspapers would not alter the findings.

the same 1930-2008 period – over 3,200 in total.⁴ These sources are complemented by original data collected from several presidential archives, including mail statistics tallying the number of letters pertaining to gun control during particular periods as well as which stances they took.⁵ Existing data on the political participation of gun owners are also used throughout.

Rifleman editorials are analyzed using automated topic modeling, more specifically the Structural Topic Model (STM). I estimated a model⁶ that fits the *Rifleman* editorials into 6 topics.⁷ Table 1 lists each topic’s “Highest Probability” words – the words most likely to appear within a topic – and “FREX” words, which are words that are both common (*F*requent) and *EX*clusive to each topic. They are useful in identifying topics’ substantive, semantic meanings because they not only frequently appear in a topic but also are relatively distinct to that topic.

I also calculated the proportion of each document pertaining to each topic, which enabled me to read prototypical documents for each. In Table 1, the topics are labeled based on close readings of example documents and their Highest Probability and FREX words. Four of the topics, outlined in red, pertain to gun control. The output of the topic model (discussed in greater

⁴ I searched ProQuest and newspapers’ own online archives for “(gun OR firearm) AND (law OR legislation).” ProQuest searches were limited to letters to the editor. In newspaper archives (which lack section-specific search functions) I added, “AND (letter).” I then manually eliminated false positives that were not letters to the editor or did not discuss gun control.

⁵ Letters to presidents are *not* included in the dataset used for the quantitative analyses that follow. Nonetheless, because both types of letters are attempts at persuasion in favor of policy stances, qualitative analyses of letters to presidents help validate that the arguments contained in letters to the editor are not unique to such letters but are rather representative of the political appeals made by those who take public action on gun control.

⁶ I included “Year” as a “prevalence” covariate – to account for topical prevalence changing over time – and “Author” as a “content” covariate – to account for different authors discussing the same topics using slightly different words.

⁷ There is not a single set of criteria to use to determine a “correct” number of topics. Following other applications, I specified models with more and less topics and “evaluated their semantic coherence and exclusiveness independently from each other” (Bauer et al. 2016, 9). I also used the STM R package’s `selectModel` function to confirm that the topics identified here as a whole are not artifacts of modeling choices. Finally, I used the `topicQuality` function to examine the semantic coherence of each topic; all topics scored well.

depth in the appendix) enabled the systematic selection of a subset of documents related to gun control for closer analysis. This subset was created by adding up the proportion of each editorial comprised of the four gun control-related topics. Editorials are included in the subset if the four gun control-related topics combined comprise two thirds or more of their content; 422 (of 872) such editorials were identified. I then manually coded these editorials, along with all of the letters to the editor, along number of dimensions, described below.⁸

Topic Label	Words
1 <i>Shooting Sports and Military Preparedness</i>	<i>FREX</i> : rifl, train, marksmanship, war, program, shooter, match, game, civilian, fire
	<i>High Prob</i> : nation, rifl, associ, shoot, program, train, will, war, time, servic
2 <i>Membership Programs and Benefits</i>	<i>FREX</i> : nra, member, membership, futur, generat, perri, editori, hold, help, nras
	<i>High Prob</i> : nra, member, year, can, one, take, now, will, million, come
3 <i>Gun Regulation</i>	<i>FREX</i> : citizen, registr, propos, possess, weapon, regist, purchas, honest, author, govern
	<i>High Prob</i> : firearm, citizen, state, arm, gun, use, govern, person, nation, weapon
4 <i>Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns</i>	<i>FREX</i> : law, feder, control, crime, handgun, crimin, bill, owner, legisl, court
	<i>High Prob</i> : gun, law, feder, legisl, control, polic, crimin, crime, bill, firearm
5 <i>Second Amendment</i>	<i>FREX</i> : citi, amend, vote, liberti, hous, presid, second, ban, magazin, declar
	<i>High Prob</i> : right, american, will, power, amend, peopl, citi, polit, constitut, bear
6 <i>Americanism and Guns</i>	<i>FREX</i> : hunt, men, safeti, board, respons, hunter, educ, cours, recreat, accid
	<i>High Prob</i> : america, will, men, hunt, american, safeti, peopl, hunter, respons, one
Note: Words are stemmed.	

Identity Cultivation

I first use the *Rifleman* editorials to assess my **first** expectation that the NRA uses its

⁸ The codebook used for this is contained in a supplementary appendix. A research assistant coded a random sample of 10% of all NRA editorials, pro-, and anti-gun letters (356 documents total). The overall rate of agreement was 87% (including an average of 86% across both document types and coding categories). The overall Cohen's kappa was .73, indicating strong agreement (Landis and Koch 1977).

membership communications to *cultivate* a group identity. Each gun control related editorial was coded based on whether it utilizes *identity-forming language*, operationalized as the use of (1) positive characteristics to describe gun owners and/or (2) negative characteristics to describe an out-group who is perceived as a threat to gun rights. Table 2 shows that 80% of editorials use identity-forming language of some sort, indicating that NRA editorials very frequently use language that would be expected from a group engaging in identity building.

	Identity-Forming Language	In-Group Positive	Out-Group Negative
<i>NRA Editorials</i>	80% (338/422)	55% (232/422)	66% (280/422)
<i>Pro-Gun Letters</i>	64% (1366/2135)	43% (909/2135)	38% (813/2135)
<i>Anti-Gun Letters</i>	39% (401/1018)	7% (71/1018)	36% (362/1018)

Note: The “Identity-Forming Language” column depicts the portion of editorials or letters that discuss either in-group positive or out-group negative characteristics, or both. The “In-Group Positive” and “Out-Group Negative” are more specific and depict the extent to which each type of identity-forming language is used.

The letters to the editor were coded the same way in order to assess the extent to which a collective identity exists among gun owners. As Table 2 shows, a substantial 64% of pro-gun letters use identity language, a finding consistent with the existence of a gun-owner social identity. This is less than the 80% rate in NRA editorials, but it is not unexpected. The average letter to the editor is only 168 words compared to 754 words per editorial, and editorials are far more expressive. Moreover, given my theoretical expectation that it is the NRA that is developing and cultivating this identity, its writings are expected to exhibit these specific language characteristics at a greater rate than the writings of its targets.

As a point of reference, I compare the pro-gun letters to letters written by gun control supporters, who presumably do not share a collective identity and thus should use identity-based

language much less frequently.⁹ As Table 2 shows, pro-gun writers do indeed use identity-based language at a substantially and significantly greater rate than anti-gun writers – 64% vs. 39%.

Revealingly, the second and third columns of table 2 show that pro- and anti- gun letters use negative out-group language at similar rates, but that pro-gun letters use in-group positive language far more frequently than anti-gun letters. Closer inspection reveals that the primary driver of the relatively high rates of out-group negative language in the anti-gun letters is the shared perception of a pro-gun villain: the NRA. This pattern provides additional evidence of a gun-owner social identity. Whereas pro-gun writers perceive both an “us” – an in-group – and a “them” – one or more out-groups – anti-gun writers lack an “us” and, therefore, a relevant group identity. This finding aligns with research indicating that positive feelings towards an in-group are a more prominent aspect of group attachment than negative feelings toward out-groups (Allport 1954, Brewer 1999, Balliet et al. 2014).

Public opinion polls support this finding. Half of gun owners, as of 2017, say that owning a gun is either very or somewhat important to their overall identity, with even higher rates among NRA members (Parker et al. 2017). Other research identifies a strong issue identity on gun control among pro-gun Republicans, which predicts individual’s preferences and behavior even when controlling for party and ideology (Mason 2017). This fits well with additional evidence that gun ownership is tied to one’s social network (Kalesan et al. 2016).

The NRA’s use of identity-forming language, however, combined with the apparent existence of a group identity among gun owners, do not by themselves demonstrate that the NRA has actually played a role in cultivating a collective identity. To demonstrate that the NRA is

⁹ Anti-gun letters (which refer to different in-groups and out-groups than NRA editorials and pro-gun letters) were coded based on whether they describe gun control supporters collectively using positive characteristic and/or gun control opponents using negative characteristics.

responsible for cultivating the identity that exists among gun owners, the identity language used by pro-gun letter writers should, first, closely align with the language used in NRA editorials and, second, mostly originate in NRA materials before being adopted by its supporters.

To assess these expectations, I first examined the content of the editorials and letters that contain identity-based language. In the *Rifleman*, in-group positive editorials describe gun owners as average citizens who obey the law and love America. The 10 most frequently used descriptors of gun owners in its editorials are: law-abiding, peaceable, patriotic, courageous, honest, average citizen(s), ordinary citizen(s), brave, freedom-loving, and reputable. At least one of these words or phrases appears in 80% of editorials that use in-group positive language.

As expected, the pro-gun letters to the editor use very similar characteristics to describe gun owners. One or more of the terms in the set described above appears in 79% of pro-gun letters that use in-group positive language, nearly identical to the 80% in the *Rifleman*. As a point of reference, only 13% of anti-gun letters with identity-forming language use at least one of these words, and often do so only when referencing the ways that gun owners describe themselves. Given that most of the in-group words defined above are not inherently related to gun ownership, the close alignment between the NRA editorials and the pro-gun – but not anti-gun – letters lends additional support to the notion that there is a connection between NRA appeals and the appeals of gun rights supporters.

NRA editorials with negative out-group language vary more than those positively describing the in-group. The perceived opponents of gun rights consist of several distinct groups, the three most prominent of which are politicians, the media, and lawyers. Politicians are described as: bureaucrat(ic), reformer(s), big city, urban, elitist, special interests, tyrannical, and “F” troop (politicians who have received “F” ratings from the NRA). At least one of those words,

and/or politician(s), appears in 48% of editorials that use out-group negative language. The media is described as: liar(s), coward(ly), elitist, phony, cynical, devious, shameless, and propaganda/propagandists. At least one of those words, and/or media, appears in 65% of editorials that use out-group negative language. Lawyers as: greedy, fat-cat, opportunist(s), big city, urban, elitist, phony, cynical, and liar(s). At least one of those words, and/or lawyer(s), appears in 42% of editorials that use out-group negative language. A set of more general characteristics is used to portray gun regulation proponents as un-American, including: fanatic(s), extreme/extremists, radical(s), hysterical, anti-liberty, Communist(s), tyrannical, globalist, and internationalist. Finally, gun control supporters are described as “anti-gunners” and “the gun ban crowd.” At least one of the terms described here appears in 86% of editorials that use out-group negative language.

There is again a clear, but smaller, relationship between the NRA’s and pro-gun writers’ descriptions of out-groups. At least one of the words described above appears in 37% of pro-gun letters with out-group negative language (versus 25% in anti-gun letters with identity language): the politicians subset appears in 12%, the media in 19% and lawyers in 6%.

To assess whether the NRA is responsible for disseminating the identity language that both it and its supporters use, I identified the origination of the most distinctive in-group and out-group descriptors and measured the extent to which their use in pro-gun letters is predicted by their use in the *Rifleman*.¹⁰ Examining the origination of the most distinctive identity phrases provides a useful test of my claim that the NRA is the primary *source* of the gun-owner social identity. Whereas both the NRA and letter writers might borrow common in-group or out-group

¹⁰ I used Google’s Ngram Viewer to measure the distinctiveness of each of the most frequently used in-group positive/out-group negative phrases. The more frequently a word is used in the Google corpus, the less distinctive it is.

descriptors such as “brave” or “radical” from general discourse, shared use of very uncommon terms in general discourse (e.g., “anti-gunner”) – and the origination of such terms in NRA materials – would demonstrate more clearly that the NRA’s communications are, indeed, responsible for its subsequent usage by supporters.

As Table 3 shows, of the 5 most distinctive identity-forming phrases used by the NRA and its supporters, 80% originated in *Rifleman* editorials and then later appeared in letters.

TABLE 3. Origination of Most Distinctive In-Group/Out-Group Phrases and Results of Lagged Linear Probability Model Predicting the Presence of Each Phrase in Pro-Gun Letters to the Editor

Phrase	First appearance in an identity-framing document	Significant Effect in a Lagged Year	<i>Rifleman</i> 1 Year Lag	<i>Rifleman</i> 2 Year Lag	<i>Rifleman</i> 3 Year Lag
			Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)
<i>Anti-gunners</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (December 1975)	✓	—	—	0.219 (0.020)
<i>Average citizens</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (February 1936)	×	—	—	—
<i>Freedom-loving</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (May 1944)	×	—	—	—
<i>Ordinary citizens</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (March 1948)	✓	—	0.303 (0.083)	—
<i>Law-abiding</i>	<i>New York Times</i> (September 1931)	✓	0.203 (0.050)	0.249 (0.020)	—

Note: Dependent variables are binary variables indicating whether a phrase appeared in a pro-gun letter to the editor in a given year for each year in the dataset (1930-2008). Separate models were estimated for each phrase. The independent variables presented in the table for each model are lagged binary variables indicating whether the phrase appeared in a *Rifleman* editorial in each of the three previous years. Also included in each model, as controls, was a binary variable indicating whether a phrase appeared in the *Rifleman* in the same year, as well as lagged binary variables indicating whether the phrase appeared in a pro-gun letter to the editor in each of the three previous years. All coefficients for variables included in the table that are significant at the p<0.1 level are included.

To further measure this relationship, I estimated linear probability models in which the dependent variable is usage of each phrase in pro-gun letters to the editor and the primary independent variables are lagged measures of usage in the *Rifleman*.¹¹ I controlled for

¹¹ Dichotomous variables (indicating whether a phrase appeared in each year) were used to address problems related to cross-time differences in the number of total documents per year, which make the use of absolute counts of phrases by year or proportion of documents with phrases by year untenable. I use a linear probability model rather than a logit or probit model, which generally produces similar results as maximum-likelihood models while requiring fewer assumptions and/or potentially arbitrary modeling decisions (Angrist and Pischke 2009: 102–7).

contemporaneous *Rifleman* usage and included lagged measures of the dependent variable to control for past usage in letters. As Table 3 shows, lagged *Rifleman* usage predicts usage in the letters for 60% of the phrases, even when controlling for past usage in the letters.¹² These results are consistent with NRA supporters having adopted a gun owner identity created by the NRA.

Identity Politicization

To assess my **second** expectation – that the NRA has *politicized* the social identity described above – I first examine the extent to which it has made identity frames a centerpiece of its discussion of gun regulations. To do so, it would be expected to discuss such regulations in terms of their impact on the identities and values of gun owners, rather than exclusively in terms of their likelihood of achieving particular policy goals or of improving society in abstract terms.

The first column of Table 4 lists the proportion of documents that directly discuss policy. The second column depicts the extent to which those documents frame policy in social identity terms; that is, the extent to which gun regulation is discussed in terms of its impact on the lifestyles and/or values of gun owners or, in the case of anti-gun letters, on the lifestyles and/or values of the letter writers. The overwhelming majority of NRA editorials (90%) discuss policy. As expected, of those documents, a large proportion (74%) frame policy in identity terms.

The results of a penalized likelihood logistic regression do not substantively differ from those produced by the linear probability model. See the online appendix for additional discussion.

¹² As a robustness check, I also reversed the direction of these models to measure whether lagged usage of phrases in pro-gun letters predicts usage in the *Rifleman* (while controlling for past use in the *Rifleman* and contemporaneous use in letters). All results are null and/or inconsistent with just one exception (“anti-gunners,” for which the 3-year lagged variable is significant.)

	Policy Discussion	Identity Frame
<i>NRA Editorials</i>	90% (380/422)	74% (283/380)
<i>Pro-Gun Letters</i>	96% (2054/2135)	54% (1110/2054)
<i>Anti-Gun Letters</i>	95% (967/1018)	23% (224/967)

Note: The denominators in the “Policy Discussion” column are all documents within each category. The denominators in the “Identity Frame” column – which captures the proportion of policy-discussing documents that use identity frames – are all documents that discuss policy within each category.

Pro-gun letter writers are expected to similarly frame policy discussion in identity terms. As table 4 shows, 54% of pro-gun letters that discuss policy do indeed frame it in identity terms. This proportion is, as before, smaller than the corresponding proportion in the *Rifleman* (74%), which is again to be expected, yet still substantively large on its own terms and large relative to anti-gun letters: as shown in the third column of Table 4, the latter frame policy discussion in identity terms less than half as often. Whereas pro-gun letters tend to focus on the impacts that gun regulations have on the lives of gun owners, anti-gun letters more frequently focus on potential crime reduction and typically do so in abstract (as opposed to personal) terms.

But we still want to know whether the frames used by gun rights supporters are both very similar to the NRA editorials’ frames and *responsive to them*. To ascertain this relationship, I developed an original technique utilizing time-series cosine similarity scores to measure the over-time responsiveness of the two sets of documents to each other.¹³ NRA editorials and pro-gun letters were broken into separate time buckets of varying lengths based on the year in which they were published.¹⁴ Then, for each grouping (and separately for the subset of documents with

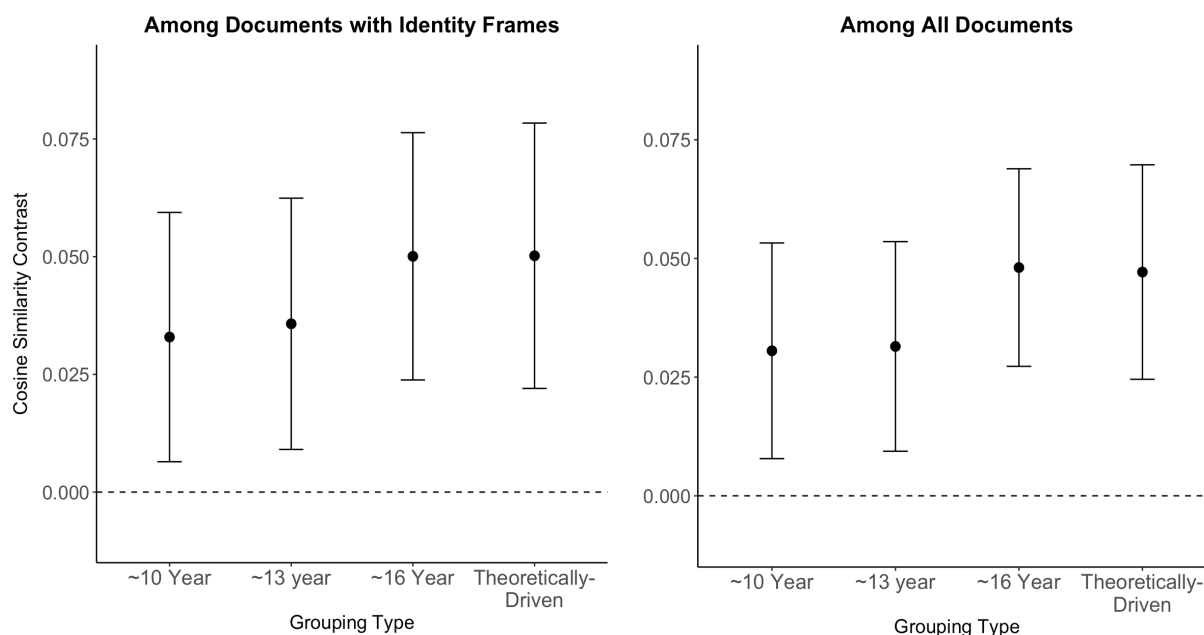
¹³ Cosine similarity, often used for plagiarism detection, is a technique for measuring the similarity of two texts or two groups of texts. It compares a vector of word frequencies from one text/group of texts to a vector of word frequencies from another text/group of texts by measuring the angle between the two vectors. Scores range from 0 (no common language) to 1 (identical).

¹⁴ These break points are identified in figure 1 and explained in the supplementary appendix.

identity frames), I measured the aggregate cosine similarity of lagged *Rifleman* editorials from each period and pro-gun letters to the editor from the following period (e.g., the similarity of NRA editorials from the 1930s and pro-gun letters from the 1940s, NRA editorials from the 1940s and letters from the 1950s, and so on), which are referred to as lagged *Rifleman* scores. I then reversed this procedure to calculate lagged letter scores, measuring the similarity of lagged pro-gun letters from each period and *Rifleman* editorials from the following period. To identify the causal impact of NRA editorials on pro-gun letters, I subtracted the lagged letter scores from lagged *Rifleman* scores for each period, calculated the average difference within each grouping, and then bootstrapped confidence intervals for each estimate.

This procedure enabled me, first, to eliminate potential spurious responsiveness related to the fact that both sets of documents discuss gun control (meaning that high cosine similarity scores would be expected even in the absence of true responsiveness) and, second, to identify the influence *Rifleman* editorials have on pro-gun letters, above and beyond any reverse effects that the letters have on the editorials. A statistically significant positive average difference would indicate that the contents of pro-gun letters systematically respond over time to the contents of *Rifleman* editorials. As Figure 1 shows, the average difference between the lagged *Rifleman* scores and the lagged letter scores is positive and significant for every time grouping, both within the subset of documents with identity frames and in all documents. This strong quantitative evidence of systematic responsiveness of pro-gun letter writers to NRA editorials supports the notion that the NRA is the source of the politicized social identity described in this paper.

FIGURE 1: Average Cosine Similarity Responsiveness



Note: Cosine similarity contrast is the cosine similarity score of the Rifleman at t_i and pro-gun letters at t_{i+1} minus the cosine similarity score of the letters at t_i and Rifleman at t_{i+1} . Grouping type describes the approximate size and nature of the time buckets compared for analyses. The theoretically-driven grouping uses time breaks that correspond to important moments in the history of the gun debate: 1930-1945, 1946-1962, 1963-1976, 1977-1991, and 1992-2008. The average cosine similarity contrast for each grouping was calculated by averaging the cosine similarity differences described above across periods. Confidence intervals are 1000 iteration bootstrap estimates.

Qualitative analyses validate these findings, revealing further evidence of pro-gun letters responding to NRA editorials. In early decades, the NRA tied gun control to Communism, framing proposed laws as existential threats to gun owners – because gun confiscation and the imprisonment of gun owners, it was said, was the ultimate goal of Communist-based gun control schemes – and to America itself. The April 1948 editorial, for example, argues:

The pattern of Communist action is now well established...[In Communist states] all shooting clubs were closed by legal decree. All privately-owned small arms were taken into “safekeeping” by the police...all patriotic citizens had been disarmed when the arms registration lists were seized by Hitler's Fifth Column...How can anyone, squarely facing the contemporary record, seek or support laws which would require American citizens to register their privately owned firearms with any municipal, state, or federal agency?...Who will guarantee that the registration lists of arms owned by reputable, loyal Americans will not, now or in the future, fall into the hands of disreputable, disloyal persons?...General firearms registration fits perfectly into the established pattern of Communist action and is...the typical example of police state psychology.

As expected, letters to the editor during this period echoed – in delayed fashion – these

concerns. A February 1955 letter printed in the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, specifically cites the NRA while opposing gun legislation that the Chicago city council was considering:

...This law, of course, would hurt no one except the honest citizen, sportsman, and target shooter...The National Rifle association has traced these laws back to their source on a great many occasions and found a very large percentage of them inspired by the Communist party. All are vigorously supported by the Communists, as such disarming of private, honest citizens is a major aim of any organization which advocates the overthrow of a government by force...I will always vigorously oppose any proposal which penalizes the right of an honest man to keep arms free of police dictatorship...

Use of these themes lingered throughout the Cold War, with numerous letters to President Johnson invoking comparisons to Communism to oppose gun control. A June 1968 letter to the White House, for example, says, “those who now clamor for anti-gun laws...are...seeking to disarm the American people, which is one of Communism’s major objectives. Otherwise, Americans could resist being hauled before firing squads or being dragged from their homes at nite [sic] as is done in Russia, by Communist agents, & as they want to do here.”¹⁵

More recently, the NRA’s identity frames have often been tied to the Second Amendment.¹⁶ NRA editorials associate an individual rights view of the Second Amendment with a number of positive values and characteristics, including patriotism, self-sufficiency, and the American tradition. Second Amendment defenders are law-abiding, freedom-loving, average citizens who are skeptical of the urban elite, while opponents are elitist radicals who disrespect American traditions and want bureaucrats to embrace foreign, un-American collectivist policies.

As expected, letters to the editor written after the NRA began emphasizing the Second Amendment identity frame utilize similar themes, as do letters to presidents.¹⁷ To take but one example, a letter writer to the *Arizona Republic* in February 2000 wrote:

¹⁵ LBJ Library, WHCF LE-JL 3, Box 94.

¹⁶ See the discussion of the *Second Amendment* topic in the appendix for evidence of this.

¹⁷ E.g., see George H.W. Bush Library, WHORM FG051.

I was very disappointed in your editorial Wednesday opposing House Bill 2095...I am a member of the National Rifle Association, not because I am a “gun lover” any more than I support the First Amendment because I am a “newspaper and magazine lover.” I am an NRA member because I believe strongly in the rights of law-abiding citizens to arm and defend themselves against dangerous criminals and governments, just as I believe in a free press... Please accept the fact that we cherish Second Amendment freedoms for the same good reasons that we cherish First Amendment freedoms.

Identity Dissemination

To assess my **third** expectation – that the NRA has used its programs to *disseminate* the gun-owner identity discussed above – I examine the nature and content of these programs. Are they apolitical, focused solely on providing participants with firearms-related skills? Or do they simultaneously push politically framed, NRA-crafted ideas of what it *means* to be a gun owner?

Aside from being the preeminent pro-gun political group in the U.S., the NRA is also the preeminent firearms organization more generally. NRA programs draw over 1 million annual participants, and the group has long been the main provider of firearms programming in the U.S.¹⁸ Its shooting sports and military surplus weapons programs, first offered in the early 1900s, were expanded in the 1950s to include hunting services aimed at World War II veterans (NRA 1963, NRA 1972). More recently, it has become the primary – and often the *only* – source for (often legally-required) concealed carry training (Carlson 2015, 64). As its offerings have expanded, NRA membership – often required for participation – has ballooned.¹⁹

Although NRA programs are nominally devoted to helping individuals develop firearms-related skills, analysis reveals that, throughout its history, the NRA has simultaneously – and intentionally (NRA 1931b; Johnson 1953; Edson 1954; LaPierre 2005) – used them to spread the

¹⁸ See <https://firearmtraining.nra.org/>

¹⁹ From 3,500 in 1921 to (following expansion of the surplus firearms program) 10,700 in 1925 and 54,000 in 1940, to (following post-WWII growth) 267,000 in 1955 and 325,000 in 1960, to (following continued growth) 1 million in the mid-1970s, to (following further expansion of offerings) 3.5 million in 1995 to its current reported membership of approximately 5 million (Scofield 1951; NRA 1960a; Spitzer 2016, 94-95. See <https://membership.nra.org/>).

politically focused identity revealed in the *Rifleman*. Since joining the NRA as a result of its programming has always meant receiving a subscription to the *Rifleman*, all of these new members have been, to some extent, exposed to the NRA's identity appeals.

But beyond its written appeals, the NRA injects politically-focused identity appeals into the programs themselves. Its oldest programs, focused on marksmanship, associated gun ownership with patriotism, citizenship, courage, and responsibility; junior marksmanship programs were both advertised as endowing children with positive personal qualities and used to incorporate new members into its social group (NRA 1932; NRA 1933; NRA 1965). The NRA also associated participation in its shooting matches with several key identity characteristics.

Take, for example, the August 1932 editorial's description of match participation:

Riflemen of America, you are pointing the way for cowards and for weaklings as you have always done. By your attendance at those regional shoots...by your fighting support of your National Association...you are showing the nation as you have shown it often in the past that you are its most courageous sons. That from your ranks spring leaders, not followers!

In 1934, the NRA converted rifle clubs that participated in its matches into organized units to oppose restrictive legislation; these politicized clubs took their guidance in the form of information and strategy from NRA headquarters (Goddard 1934; Cupps 1970). The *Rifleman* also explicitly connected these programs to opposition to gun regulation (NRA 1931a).

By 1960, following its post-war growth and facing changing social conditions, the NRA anticipated a renewed push for gun control following two quiet decades. The May 1960 *Rifleman* editorial discusses the NRA's "Centennial Plan" (outlining its goals for the last decade of its first century), describing how its programs would spread a politicized gun-owner identity that could help preempt legislation by cultivating a favorable attitude towards guns. NRA programs would combat growing gun control efforts, arguing that "The future of firearms in America depends to a large degree upon the willingness of gun owners to establish and promote educational

programs for the use of firearms in the home, on the range, and in the field” (NRA 1960b).

More recently, the NRA has spread its identity through concealed carry training courses, which include a focus on gun culture itself rather than focusing solely on firearms skills. Jennifer Carlson, who embedded herself in NRA concealed carry courses, argues, “NRA gun training reshapes gun culture from the ground up...”²⁰ and notes, “Rather than prioritize hands-on defensive training, these courses teach gun carriers that they are a particular kind of person – a law-abiding person willing to use lethal force to protect innocent life” if necessary (2015, 28). These courses, which are often legally required to obtain a concealed carry license, promote the same identity advanced by the *Rifleman*: tying gun ownership to personal responsibility, good citizenship, and civic virtue. Carlson shows how concealed carry can increase the psychological *accessibility* of the gun-owner identity – when individuals carry guns, they are constantly reminded of the identity that goes along with them (Carlson 2015, chapter 3). Similarly, Melzer (2009), through interviews, finds that at least some NRA members join exclusively to participate in NRA programs and then later become politically active (Melzer 2009, 181, 185).

Identity, Threat, and Political Mobilization

To assess my **fourth** expectation – that the NRA uses the gun-owner identity to *mobilize* political action on its behalf – I first examine the extent to which it (a) depicts the identity as threatened and (b) connects depictions of the threat to explicit calls to action.

About two thirds (66%) of NRA editorials portray gun rights as threatened and over one third (36%) contain calls to action. To further quantify this relationship, I estimated a logistic regression in which “Call to Action” is the dependent variable and “Threat” is an independent variable (along with “Policy Discussion” and “Identity-Building Language”). As shown in Table

²⁰ Carlson uses “gun culture,” but what she describes can clearly be considered a group identity.

5, *threat* is a highly significant predictor of calls to action.

TABLE 5. Logistic Regression Predicting Calls to Action				
	B (SE)		z-value	p-value
(Intercept)	-3.007	(0.551)	-5.454	<0.001
Threat	1.975	(0.324)	6.104	<0.001
Identity-Building Language	0.439	(0.366)	1.200	0.230
Policy Discussion	0.627	(0.496)	1.265	0.206
Null deviance: 551.58 on 421 degrees of freedom. Residual deviance: 475.88 on 418 degrees of freedom. AIC: 483.88.				

These threat-based calls to action appear to be successful: All available data indicates that gun rights supporters participate frequently and intensely, particularly relative to gun control supporters. Moreover, their participation appears to often be in response to NRA appeals. As early as 1934, when hearings began on what would become (in far weaker form) the National Firearms Act (NFA), NRA members – led by the NRA – inundated Congress with letters opposing the bill. The February *Rifleman* editorial contained an explicit, identity-laden call to action, which was followed the next month by another editorial, entitled “Keep Those Letters and Telegrams Coming,” imploring members to act. The NFA passed, but only after it was, as then-Assistant Attorney General Joseph Keenan described it, “emasculated” by the NRA. Members of Congress were reportedly furious with the NRA for mobilizing its members (Kennett and Anderson 1975, 208-211; DeConde 1998, 143; NRA 1934a; NRA 1934b).

Later, when a number of gun laws were proposed in the 1960s, the NRA again used identity-based appeals to urge members to contact their members of Congress. It sent a special bulletin in April 1965 encouraging all members to tell their friends and family to join them in writing, along with instructions on how to write effective letters. It warned that, “If the battle is lost, it will be your loss and that of all who follow you.” Members responded dramatically. In the

month prior to the bulletin, President Johnson received only 50 letters, many of which were in support. The following month, he received around 12,000 letters, nearly all of which were in opposition.²¹ Similarly, a member of Congress received 3,000 letters, only three of which were supportive of the legislation (Harris 1968, 127-128).

A similar dynamic occurred following President Bush's decision, in March 1989, to halt the import of assault weapons after a schoolyard shooting in Stockton, California. The April *Rifleman* included both an editorial focused on the topic and a special cover insert that reads:

Last year anti-gunners said criminals use handguns. So they conspired to ban handguns. This year they say criminals use semi-autos. So they're conspiring to ban semi-autos. What they really want is a ban on *all* guns...Your guns. And if we don't act now, they'll have their way...70 million law-abiding gun owners should say, 'Enough is enough! Leave our rights alone!'

Following the NRA's appeal, Bush was contacted 143 times that month in support of the ban – and 4,000 times in opposition. In May 1991, the *Rifleman* included a similar insert opposing the Brady Bill. During the second half of April – likely right after members received the May issue – Bush was contacted 5,242 times in opposition to the bill and only 92 times in favor of it.²²

More recent participation rates are captured in public polling. Evidence dating to 1978 and as recent as 2017 indicates that gun rights supporters are much more likely to engage in non-voting political participation – including letter writing, phone calls, and donations – than gun control supporters. Notably, NRA members are even more likely than other gun owners to contact public officials, suggesting that the NRA mobilization efforts are an important driver of gun owner participation (Schuman and Presser 1981, 44; Parker et al. 2017). Further, a remarkable 71% of individuals who favor less strict gun laws are unwilling to ever vote for political candidates who support gun control; among those who favor stricter laws, only 34%

²¹ LBJ Library, Mail Summaries, Box 1.

²² George H.W. Bush Library, WHORM WH004-01, Boxes 5-6.

refuse to vote for candidates who do not share their gun preferences (Aronow and Miller 2016).

Moreover, recent scholarship demonstrates that participation among gun owners seems to be driven by both threat and identity. In Melzer's (2009) previously mentioned interviews with NRA members, many told him that they believe gun rights are deeply threatened and said that information the NRA provides them affects their political behavior. Another recent study found that those who score higher on identity measures pertaining to gun ownership demonstrate a much greater intention to engage in non-voting political participation than others (Mason 2017).

Notably, NRA leaders openly acknowledge that the organization's power is intimately tied to its members' actions, and, further, they recognize that the NRA's ability to mobilize those members into action is tied to the deep personal meaning associated with gun ownership. David Keene, a former NRA president, told legal author David Cole that the NRA's power is not a product of its money but instead of the votes it delivers. Keene then said, "The difference between the NRA and other groups is that we've developed a community [and] when they see Second Amendment rights threatened they vote. They do whatever they need to do." Kayne Robinson, a former president and executive director of the NRA, emphasized the importance of threat, saying, "The most important thing motivating the members is the threat. Understanding the gravity of the threat is what produces action" (Cole 2016, 142, 143, 145).

Conclusion and Discussion

This study demonstrates that the NRA has used both its membership communications and training programs to strategically cultivate a distinct gun-owner identity and that it has politicized this identity by framing gun control policies as not merely ill-conceived, but as existential threats to gun owners and the things they collectively value. Further, I have presented evidence that the NRA's social identity has taken hold among gun owners and that this identity

informs how they view, and mobilize against, gun control legislation.

Can we say that the NRA's efforts constituted the *only* driving force in the cultivation, politicization, and activation of a gun-owner social identity, above and beyond proximate factors, background conditions, and endogenous relationships between the NRA and its members? We cannot. But the evidence presented here leaves one hard-pressed to construct an alternative account that does *not* place the NRA at the center of the action, as a crucial driving force behind the formation and politicization of a gun-owner social identity. The strong relationship between the identity terms used to describe gun owners in NRA editorials and pro-gun letters – and the systematic over-time responsiveness of the latter to the former – demonstrate clear congruence between the meaning the NRA associates with gun ownership and the meaning gun owners associate with it. The NRA's centrality within the firearms community renders it better positioned than any other group to disseminate this identity, and it has done so, strategically injecting politically-focused identity appeals into its communications and programs. Finally, the timing of gun owners' responses to the NRA's calls to action – and the heightened responsiveness of NRA members to those calls relative to all gun owners – provide compelling evidence that its efforts have had tangible impacts on mass-level political participation.

Over the years, the NRA surely co-opted and expanded some identity themes – such as those related to rural life and military service – that already existed among other groups. The objective of this study is not to discount those dynamics but to identify and specify the NRA's singular role in articulating, disseminating, expanding, and interrelating otherwise distinct themes and using them to cultivate a devoted, politically active membership.

These findings extend existing studies that connect the political behavior of gun owners to important identities (e.g., Joslyn et al. 2017 and Filindra and Kaplan 2017, 2015). Beyond gun

politics, they suggest the importance of studying the ways that interest groups can utilize the third face of power by developing ideational resources – such as group identities – to advance their agendas. Such identities can be powerful “outside lobbying” tools, enabling groups to influence politics by altering the preferences and behavior of members of the mass public. Finally, group identities can be thought of as solidary or expressive benefits that groups can use to not just to recruit and retain members but also to influence policy outcomes.

Can other single-issue interest groups – including those that *support* gun control – work assiduously, like the NRA has, to cultivate social identities and then turn those identities to their political advantage? The NRA is distinctive in that it is not just an interest group, but also a provider of educational and social programs. Its programs (as well the existence of an industry that is eager to cater to its members) provide the NRA with advantages that other groups cannot easily replicate. Nonetheless even if other groups cannot adopt the NRA’s model outright, they can learn lessons from it. They can encourage members to meet each other in person and develop programs that offer opportunities to interact (rather than, for example, interactions based solely on fundraising appeals). Groups can also tap into existing social networks and tie their issues to identities related to those networks, as anti-abortion groups have done (Munson 2008). Finally, groups can frame their appeals to members in ways that prime existing identities, even if those identities are not explicitly related to the group’s mission. In their most successful moments, gun control groups have just done this, framing gun control as child protection, thereby tapping into powerful parental identities. This approach, which was used by the Million Mom March, has been shown to increase participation on behalf of the gun control cause (Goss 2006). Additional research might help further develop our understanding of how and under what conditions groups can build, utilize, and sustain politicized social identities.

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Appendix: Topic Model

In order to select a subset of NRA editorials for closer analysis, I analyzed the *Rifleman* corpus utilizing automated topic modeling, which uses algorithms to infer the topics of documents within corpora based on word frequency and word co-occurrence. Analysts specify a number of topics and then the model estimates both what those topics are and the proportion of each document that belongs to each topic. This study uses the Structural Topic Model (STM), a mixed-membership, probabilistic topic modeling approach similar to Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). STM improves upon LDA by allowing for the flexible incorporation of document-level covariates (Roberts et al. 2014). More specifically, STM uses regression to incorporate covariates that are believed to influence (1) “the frequency with which a topic is discussed” (topical *prevalence* covariates) and/or (2) “the words used to discuss a topic” (topical *content* covariates) (Roberts et al. 2014, 4). For example, analysts can account for the possibility that different authors discuss the same topics using somewhat different words. The inclusion of covariates during the topic estimation process allows analysts to subsequently examine the effects of those covariates on topical prevalence.

I estimated a model that fits the editorials into 6 topics,²³ and includes “Year” as a “prevalence” covariate – to account for topical prevalence changing over time – and “Author” as a “content” covariate – to account for different authors discussing the same topics using slightly different words. Table 1 lists each topic’s “Highest Probability” words – the words most likely to appear within a topic – and “FREX” words, which are words that are both common and *exclusive*

²³ There is not a single set of criteria to use to determine a “correct” number of topics. Following other applications, I tried specifications with more and less topics and “evaluated their semantic coherence and exclusiveness independently from each other” (Bauer et al. 2016, 9). I also used the STM R package’s `selectModel` function to confirm that the topics identified here as a whole are not artifacts of modeling choices. Finally, I used the `topicQuality` function to examine the semantic coherence of each topic; all topics scored well.

to each topic. They are very useful in identifying the substantive, semantic meanings of topics because they not only frequently appear in a topic but also are relatively distinct to that topic. I also calculated the proportion of each document comprised of each topic, which enabled me to read prototypical documents for each topic. In table 1 (reproduced from the main text), I have named the topics based on close readings of example documents and their Highest Probability and FREX words.²⁴

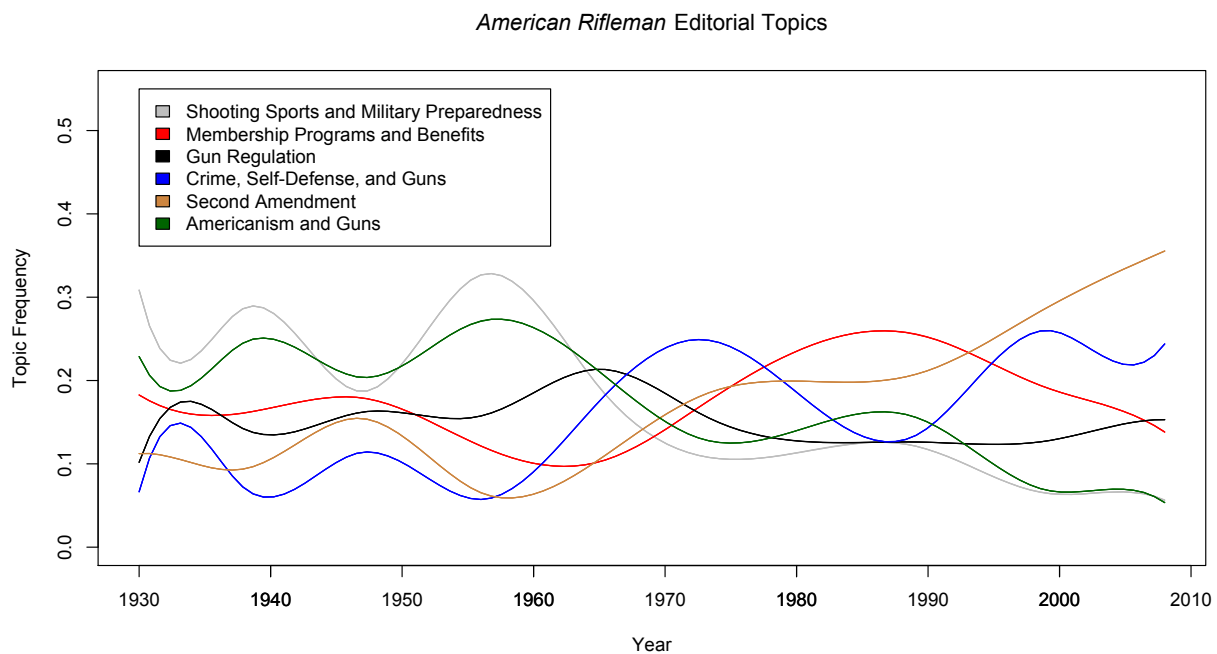
Topic Label	Words
1 <i>Shooting Sports and Military Preparedness</i>	<i>FREX</i> : rifl, train, marksmanship, war, program, shooter, match, game, civilian, fire
	<i>High Prob</i> : nation, rifl, associ, shoot, program, train, will, war, time, servic
2 <i>Membership Programs and Benefits</i>	<i>FREX</i> : nra, member, membership, futur, generat, perri, editori, hold, help, nras
	<i>High Prob</i> : nra, member, year, can, one, take, now, will, million, come
3 <i>Gun Regulation</i>	<i>FREX</i> : citizen, registr, propos, possess, weapon, regist, purchas, honest, author, govern
	<i>High Prob</i> : firearm, citizen, state, arm, gun, use, govern, person, nation, weapon
4 <i>Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns</i>	<i>FREX</i> : law, feder, control, crime, handgun, crimin, bill, owner, legisl, court
	<i>High Prob</i> : gun, law, feder, legisl, control, polic, crimin, crime, bill, firearm
5 <i>Second Amendment</i>	<i>FREX</i> : citi, amend, vote, liberti, hous, presid, second, ban, magazin, declar
	<i>High Prob</i> : right, american, will, power, amend, peopl, citi, polit, constitut, bear
6 <i>Americanism and Guns</i>	<i>FREX</i> : hunt, men, safeti, board, respons, hunter, educ, cours, recreat, accid
	<i>High Prob</i> : america, will, men, hunt, american, safeti, peopl, hunter, respons, one
Note: Words are stemmed.	

I also estimated the relationship between topical prevalence (the outcome variable in this case) and “Year” (the input variable) to model how each topic varies over time. All 6 topics are

²⁴ The FREX and Highest Probability words are generally intuitive descriptors of the semantic meaning of each topic. *Americanism and Guns* is the only exception; however, after reading numerous example documents, I am confident I have appropriately labeled its semantic meaning. The difficulty of interpreting its FREX and High Probability words may be a result of it having more content variation over time than other topics.

plotted together in appendix figure 1 (excluding confidence intervals for simplicity).²⁵ The topics vary over time in sensible ways. *Shooting Sports and Military Preparedness* is relatively high around World War II, reflecting both the environment of the time and the NRA’s original mission of developing the marksmanship of American men. It declines following the post-war period and does not pick back up during later wars, likely because by those wars the organization had expanded its mission beyond marksmanship and its formal government ties had weakened. *Membership Programs and Benefits* has upticks during the post-war period – when the NRA rapidly expanded membership by recruiting WWII veterans – and in the mid-1980s and early-1990s when it sought to generate revenue via membership growth amidst financial struggles. The remaining four topics – which are politically relevant – are discussed below.

Appendix Figure 1: Frequency of *American Rifleman* Editorial Topics over Time



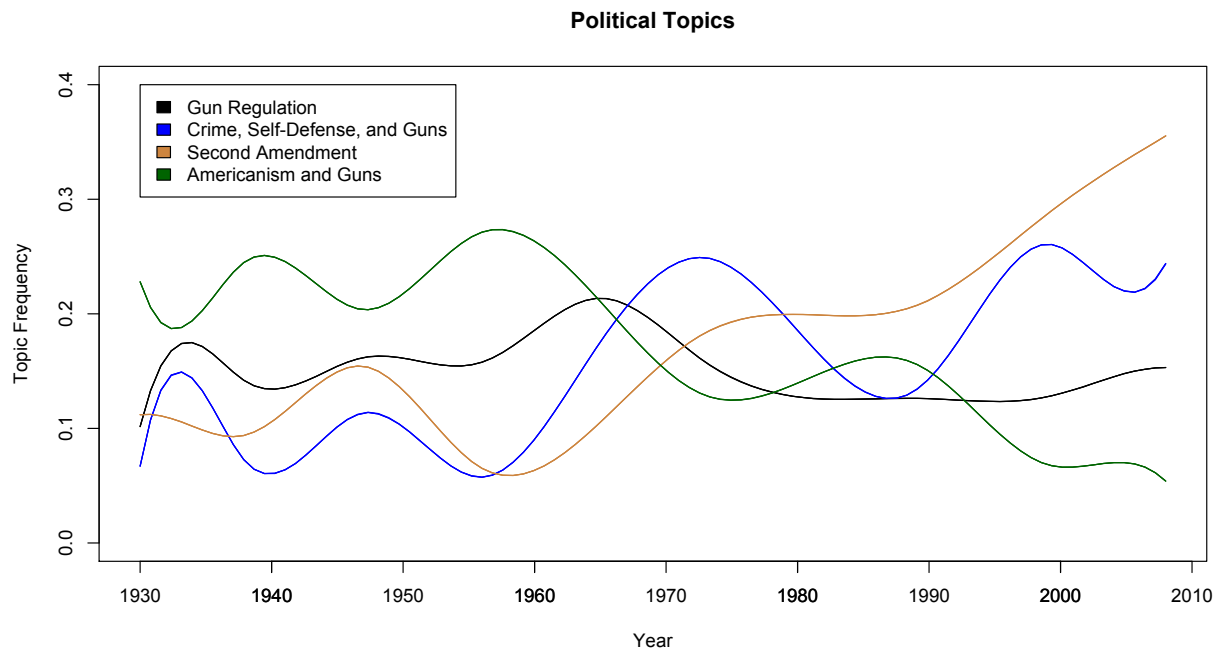
Overview of Gun Control Topics

²⁵ Topic-specific plots below include 95% confidence intervals.

Here, I briefly discuss the four gun control related topics (outlined in red in table 1).

Appendix figure 2 is a graph of only these topics (again, excluding confidence intervals). The constancy of the NRA’s attention to politics is notable; although the relative prominence of each topic changes over time, politics nonetheless receives substantial attention throughout the entire period of study. And, with almost no exceptions, editorials discussing gun regulation oppose it.²⁶

Appendix Figure 2: Frequency of Political *American Rifleman* Editorial Topics over Time



Gun Regulation (appendix figure 3) addresses gun legislation in more general terms than other topics. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its generality, it is positively correlated with the *Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns* topic (correlation coefficient = 0.49). It is more stable over time than other topics – perhaps also due to its generality – and peaks during the 1960s, when gun regulation was debated and eventually enacted following several high profile assassinations.

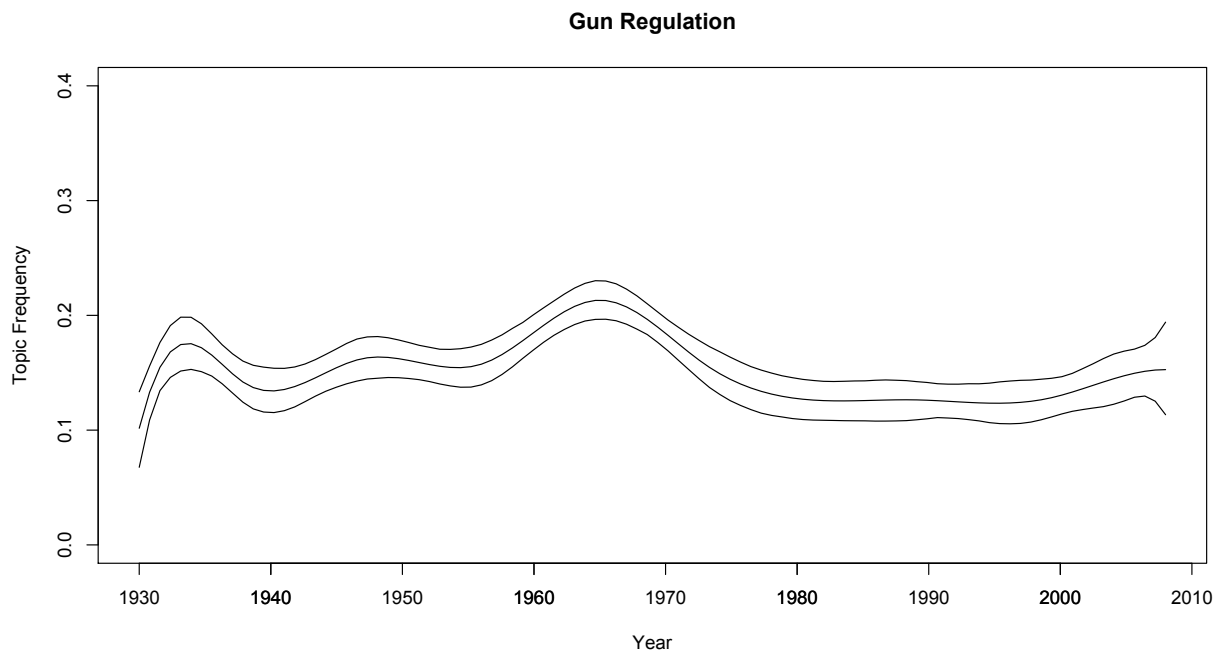
The January 1966 editorial, entitled “A Suggestion to Congress,” is measured as a highly

²⁶ This finding contradicts popular claims that the NRA used to be apolitical and/or supportive of gun control. A thorough analysis of the *Rifleman* makes clear that the NRA consistently voiced its strong opposition to gun legislation beginning in the 1930s.

representative example:

When Congress reconvenes...one of the questions to be answered...is what legislation, if any, is needed to further control firearms in interstate commerce...Major attention has been given to "mail-order guns" and "destructive devices". Unfortunately, most of the proposed legislation has the wrong emphasis. It tends to harass the law-abiding citizen, while it would fail in its avowed purpose of denying firearms to those who violate the law. Unfortunately, also, much of the debate has been based upon emotion rather than reason, and upon impression rather than fact. This has led to gun control confusion and misunderstanding. Our Federal Government is one of limited or delegated powers... The right to keep and bear arms is a fundamental personal freedom of the people of the United States of America. It should not be denied to citizens of good repute so long as they use them for lawful purpose.

Appendix Figure 3: Frequency of Gun Regulation over Time

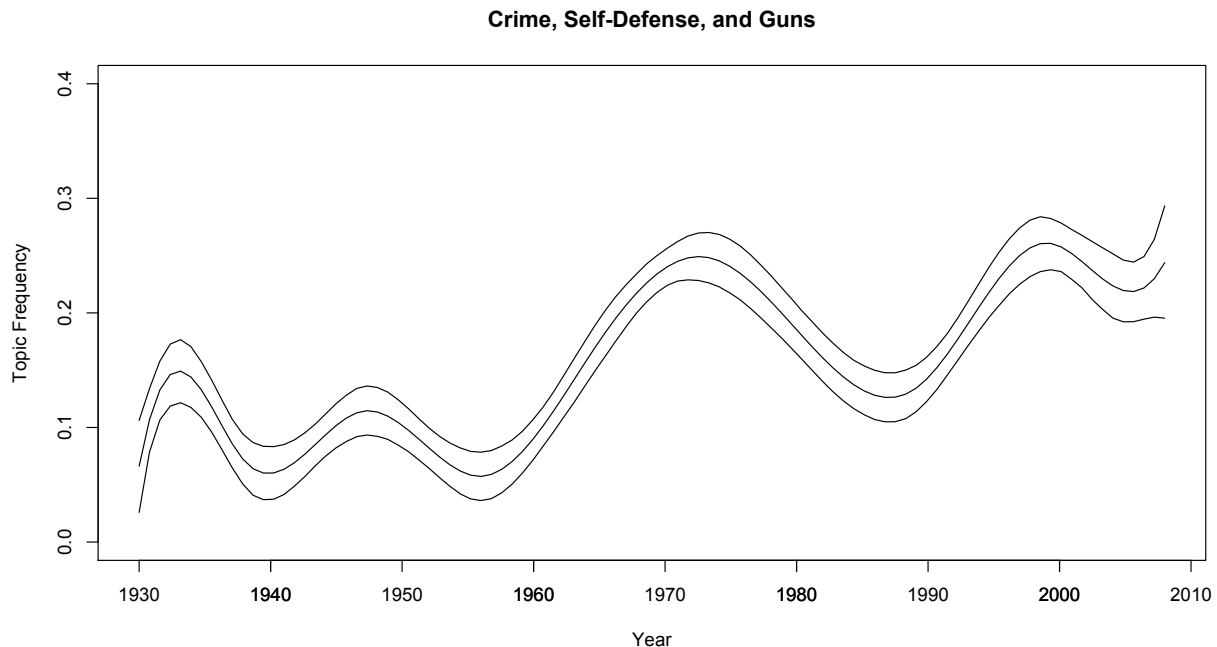


Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns, (appendix figure 4), argues that guns are a *solution* to rather than a *cause* of crime and that gun regulation makes crime easier and self-defense more difficult. It advocates for harsh sentencing in lieu of restricting access to guns. It peaks at three points: During (1) debates over gun regulation aimed at gangsters in the 1930s, (2) the rise of “law and order” politics in response to high crime rates in the 1960s and early 1970s, and (3) during the Clinton years, when both crime control and gun regulation were salient issues.

The June 1997 editorial, in which Wayne LaPierre argues that new regulations would be unnecessary if existing regulations were better enforced, is measured as a highly representative example:

“Gunrunning.” It's Chuck Schumer's latest national media ploy and his biggest fraud yet. ... Schumer's office released what the media called a "Congressional study" which he claimed showed a flow of guns from states with "weak" laws to states with "strong laws." The assertion that some states have weak gun laws and others have strong laws is patently false... With his meaningless calls for new gun control, Charles Schumer would make it more difficult for peaceable people - you and me - to own and use firearms: Making the innocent pay the price for the guilty, when he won't make the guilty pay anything... So, why is it that [Schumer] has never demanded that tough existing laws be enforced? Because - like his anti-gun soulmate, Bill Clinton - he knows the truth. Because if current Federal laws were enforced, and if the public knew that there were such laws, the call for gun control would be pointless... Chuck Schumer, Janet Reno, Bill Clinton and their allies at the Washington Post and the New York Times and the national networks have to keep the lie alive. And every day they refuse to enforce the law - every day they keep the lie alive - innocent people suffer under the anvil of violent crime.

Appendix Figure 4: Frequency of *Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns* over Time



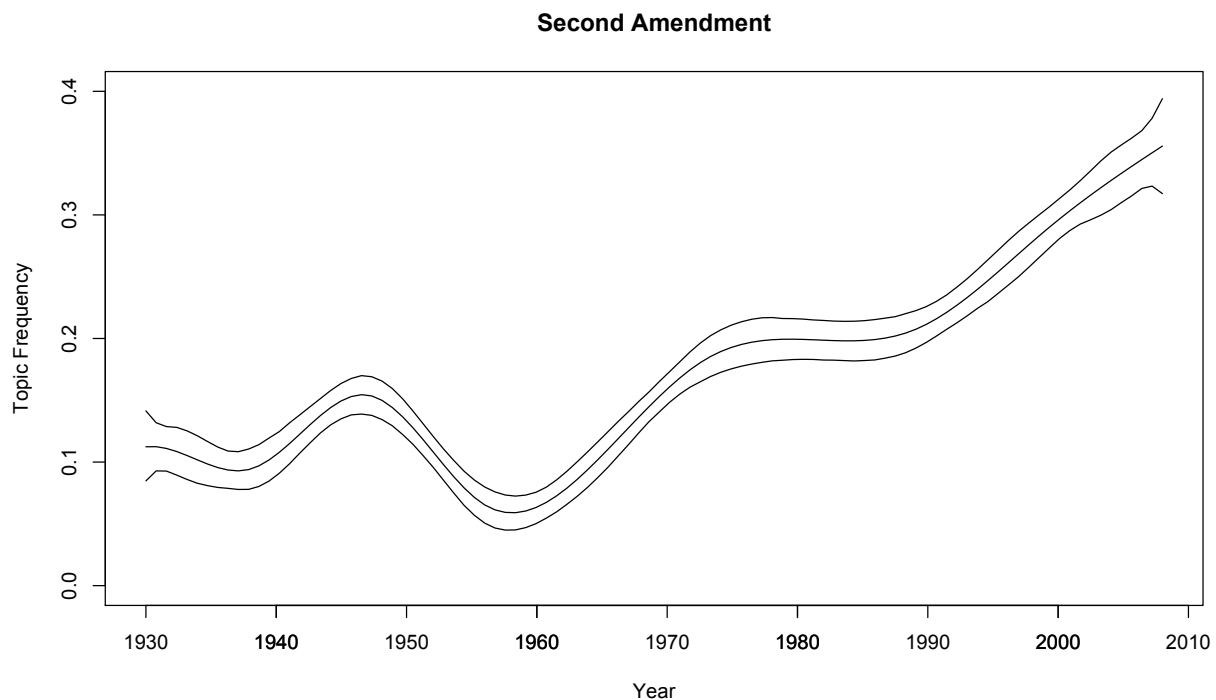
Second Amendment (appendix figure 5) advocates for an individual rights interpretation of the Second Amendment. The Second Amendment, it argues, is critical to freedom because it enables the people to defend themselves against an abusive state: Gun rights are the freedom that

makes all other freedoms possible. The topic has gradually – and very notably – increased in prominence since around 1960.

The editorial from August 1989 is a representative example:

The right to own and use firearms is the preeminent individual right. Without the ability to physically defend the other provisions of our Constitution from encroachment, the remainder of the Bill of Rights become privileges granted by the government and subject to restrictions at the whim of government... Whereas the Framers dreamed of a strong citizenry who could remove any threatening government, modern collectivists attempt to reduce the Second Amendment to a measure of the “sporting use” of firearms... Self-defense, defense of country, and resistance to tyranny (the Second Amendment's triune) are not abstract principles. The right of the people to keep and bear arms guarantees the rest of our freedoms.

Appendix Figure 5: Frequency of the *Second Amendment* over Time



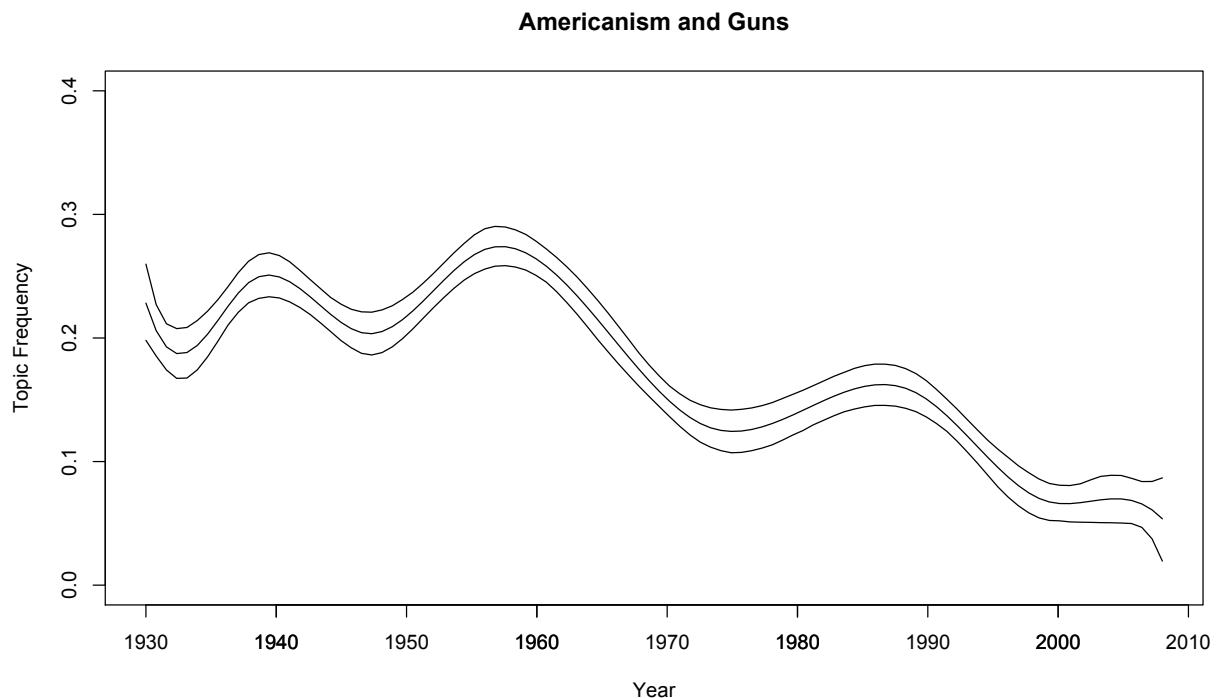
Americanism and Guns (appendix figure 6) peaks earliest and describes the centrality of guns throughout U.S. history and their importance to the American tradition. It was frequently used as a frame through which to oppose gun regulation attempts – including the Federal Firearms Act of 1934 and the National Firearms Act of 1938 – and to rally support for war preparation measures involving civilian firearms training. It advocates limited government and

hawkish foreign policy positions, and has been used to oppose gun regulations aimed at hunters and to more generally highlight the connection between gun owners and outdoor recreation.

The July 1947 editorial is a representative example. Written in celebration of Independence Day, it connects the American Revolution to contemporary (in 1947) battles against Communism and Fascism, and argues that perceived overreach by government officials is anti-American:

The American Declaration of Independence was, in fact, a declaration of the principles of a form of government in which the majesty of the individual was recognized as the only foundation on which the majesty of the State properly could rest... Americans, that is your heritage!... Today all over the world, Communism, Fascism, Nazism, Socialism feed upon and fertilize one another. All over the world the dignity of Man is being subordinated to the majesty of the State... America is not untouched by the disease. American statesmen lack a clear chart to guide them on a consistent course toward the establishment of truly representative forms of government... Money alone will not do it. Armed might alone will not do it... [The] principles set forth in the American Declaration of Independence...lighted the path to real freedom for the common man in 1776. They will do the same in 1947 if America itself leads the way in putting the State back into its proper relationship with the Citizen of the State - the State the servant of man, not man the servant of the State.

Figure 6: Frequency of *Americanism and Guns* over Time



Appendix: Cosine Similarity Responsiveness and Linear Probability Models

To measure the extent to which the content of pro-gun letters to the editor – especially those that frame identity in policy terms – is responsive to the content of NRA editorials, I created an original technique that utilizes time-series cosine similarity scores to measure the over-time responsiveness of two sets of documents to each other. Cosine similarity, often used in plagiarism detection software, is a bag of words technique for measuring the similarity of two texts or two groups of texts. It compares a vector of word frequencies from one text or group of texts and compares them a vector of word frequencies from another text or group of texts by measuring the angle between the two vectors (which makes it useful for comparing documents or document sets of different lengths). It ultimately produces a similarity score ranging from 0 (no common language) to 1 (identical).

I first broke the NRA editorials and pro-gun letters to the editor into separate time buckets of various lengths based on the year in which they were published – 8 buckets of ~10 years of documents, 6 buckets of ~13 years, 5 buckets of ~16 years, and 5 buckets of uneven lengths with break points based on important, theoretically-driven moments in the history of the NRA.²⁷ Then, for each grouping (and separately for all documents versus only those with identity frames), I measured the aggregate cosine similarity of lagged *Rifleman* editorials from each period and pro-gun letters to the editor from the following period (e.g., the similarity of

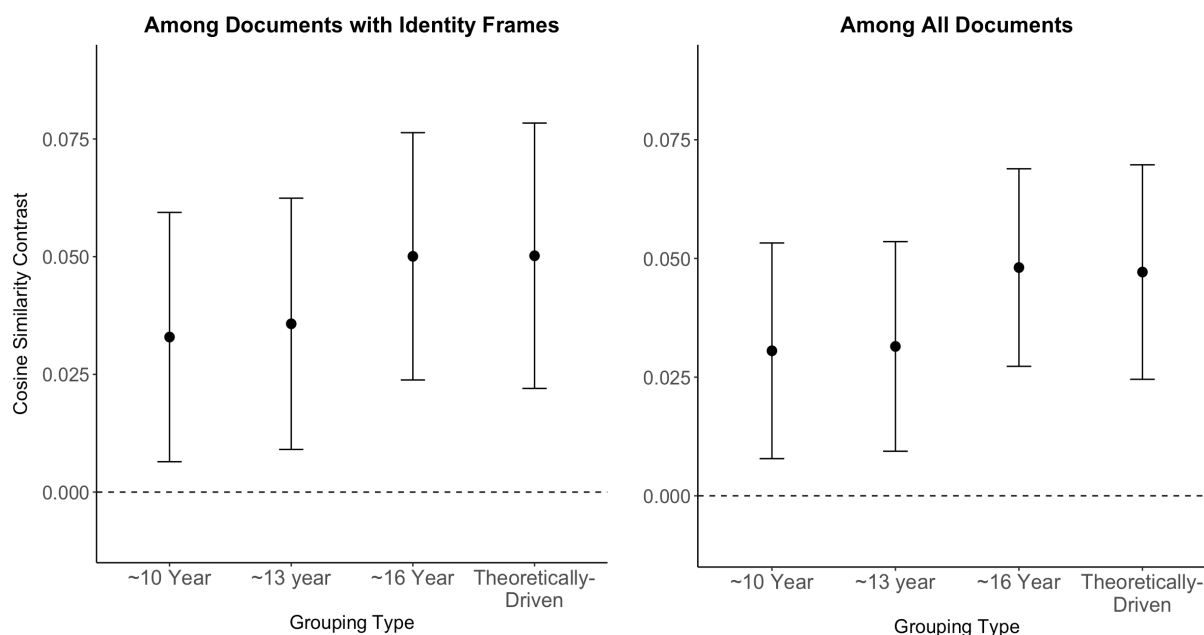
²⁷ As figure 1 shows, the theoretically-driven time periods are 1930-1945, 1946-1962, 1963-1976, 1977-1991, and 1992-2008. The first cut-point (1945/1946) corresponds to end of World War II, at which time the NRA diversified its programmatic offerings to appeal to veterans of the war. The second cut-point (1962/1963) corresponds with the return of gun control to the national agenda following high-profile political assassinations (the first of which, John F. Kennedy's assassination, occurred in 1963) and rising crime rates. The third cut-point (1976/1977) corresponds with the takeover of the NRA by a group of activist members at the 1977 annual meeting, which led to important changes to the organization. The last cut-point (1991/1992) corresponds to beginning of Wayne LaPierre's tenure as the NRA's top executive and his authorship of its editorials.

Rifleman editorials from the 1930s and pro-gun letters from the 1940s, then the similarity of *Rifleman* editorials from the 1940s and letters from the 1950s, and so on), which are referred to as lagged *Rifleman* scores. I then reversed this procedure and calculated lagged letter scores by measuring the similarity of lagged pro-gun letters from each period and *Rifleman* editorials from the following period. To single out the causal impact of *Rifleman* editorials on pro-gun letters, I subtracted the lagged letter similarity scores from lagged *Rifleman* similarity scores for each period, calculated the average difference within each grouping, and then bootstrapped confidence intervals for each estimate.

This procedure enabled me, first, to eliminate potential spurious responsiveness related to the fact that both sets of documents are about gun control (meaning that high cosine similarity scores would be expected even in the absence of true responsiveness)²⁸ and, second, to identify the influence the *Rifleman* editorials have on the pro-gun letters, above and beyond any reverse effects that the letters have on the editorials. A statistically significant positive average difference would indicate that the contents of pro-gun letters systematically respond over time to the contents of *Rifleman* editorials. As figure 1 shows, the average difference between the lagged *Rifleman* scores and the lagged letter scores is indeed positive and significant for every time grouping, both within the subset of documents with identity frames and in all documents.

²⁸ To deal with this further, aside from removing a standard set of stopwords from the corpus prior to analysis, I also removed some case-specific stopwords that are likely to appear in many documents in the corpus but do not provide useful information about the substantive contents of the documents or differences between document types (e.g., letter, columnist, gun, firearm, etc.).

FIGURE 1: Average Cosine Similarity Responsiveness



Note: Cosine similarity contrast is the cosine similarity score of the Rifleman at t_i and pro-gun letters at t_{i+1} minus the cosine similarity score of the letters at t_i and Rifleman at t_{i+1} . Grouping type describes the approximate size and nature of the time buckets compared for analyses. The theoretically-driven grouping uses time breaks that correspond to important moments in the history of the gun debate: 1930-1945, 1946-1962, 1963-1976, 1977-1991, and 1992-2008. The average cosine similarity contrast for each grouping was calculated by averaging the cosine similarity differences described above across periods. Confidence intervals are 1000 iteration bootstrap estimates.

Separately, I also measured the responsiveness of pro-gun letter writers to NRA appeals by estimating linear probability models in which the dependent variable is usage of each phrase in pro-gun letters to the editor and the primary independent variables are lagged measures of usage in the *Rifleman*. I controlled for contemporaneous *Rifleman* usage and included lagged measures of the dependent variable to control for past usage in letters.

Dichotomous variables (indicating whether a phrase appeared in each year) were used to address problems related to cross-time differences in the number of total documents per year (particularly in letters to the editor), which make the use of absolute counts of phrases by year or proportion of documents with phrases by year untenable. Absolute counts are problematic because they misleadingly make the relative use of phrases seem to increase during years in which gun control was salient and, as a result, a large number of letters were printed. Proportions

are problematic as well, however, because they misleadingly make the relative use of phrases seem high in years in which gun control was *not* salient and, as a result, few letters were printed; the proportion of letters with a particular phrase in such a year may be higher than in years with more letters, even if only one or two letters use the phrase. The use of dichotomous variables addresses both of these issues. I use a linear probability model rather than a logit or probit model, which generally produces similar results as maximum-likelihood models while requiring fewer assumptions and/or potentially arbitrary modeling decisions (Angrist and Pischke 2009: 102–7). As a check, I also estimated the relationship between the variables in the dataset using a Firth penalized likelihood logistic regression (Firth 1993), which is appropriate here as it helps with the problems of separation and rare outcomes. The results do not substantively differ from those produced by the linear probability model.

As Table 3 shows, lagged *Rifleman* usage predicts usage in the letters for 60% of the phrases, even when controlling for past usage in the letters. These results are consistent with NRA supporters having adopted a gun owner identity created by the NRA.

TABLE 3. Origination of Most Distinctive In-Group/Out-Group Phrases and Results of Lagged Linear Probability Model Predicting the Presence of Each Phrase in Pro-Gun Letters to the Editor

Phrase	First appearance in an identity-framing document	Significant Effect in a Lagged Year	<i>Rifleman</i> 1 Year Lag	<i>Rifleman</i> 2 Year Lag	<i>Rifleman</i> 3 Year Lag
			Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)	Coefficient (p-value)
<i>Anti-gunners</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (December 1975)	✓	—	—	0.219 (0.020)
<i>Average citizens</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (February 1936)	✗	—	—	—
<i>Freedom-loving</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (May 1944)	✗	—	—	—
<i>Ordinary citizens</i>	<i>American Rifleman</i> (March 1948)	✓	—	0.303 (0.083)	—
<i>Law-abiding</i>	<i>New York Times</i> (September 1931)	✓	0.203 (0.050)	0.249 (0.020)	—

Note: Dependent variables are binary variables indicating whether a phrase appeared in a pro-gun letter to the editor in a given year for each year in the dataset (1930-2008). Separate models were estimated for each phrase. The independent variables presented in the table for each model are lagged binary variables indicating whether the phrase appeared in a *Rifleman* editorial in each of the three previous years. Also included in each model, as controls, was a binary variable indicating whether a phrase appeared in the *Rifleman* in the same year, as well as lagged binary variables indicating whether the phrase appeared in a pro-gun letter to the editor in each of the three previous years. All coefficients for variables included in the table that are significant at the p<0.1 level are included.

As a robustness check, I also reversed the direction of these models to measure whether lagged usage of phrases in pro-gun letters predicts usage in the *Rifleman* (while controlling for past use in the *Rifleman* and contemporaneous use in letters). All results are null and/or inconsistent with just one exception (“anti-gunners,” for which the 3-year lagged variable is significant.)

Appendix: Coding Rules

Rifleman Editorials

1. Policy Discussion

- 1.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial discusses government gun policy/regulation of some kind, whether in broad/general or narrow/specific terms. This could include discussion of specific pieces of legislation, but might also consist of more general discussion of gun policy/regulation that does not mention a specific piece of legislation. Gun legislation/regulation does not need to be the topic of the editorial, but rather just needs to be mentioned. This includes discussion of the purpose of the Second Amendment and lawsuits aimed at gun manufacturers.

2. Identity Frame for Legislation

- 2.1. Within editorials that discuss policy, coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial frames legislation in social identity terms. Legislation is framed in social identity terms if it is discussed in terms of its impact on the lifestyles and/or values of gun owners (as opposed to being discussed only in terms of its estimated technical, policy impacts). For example, an editorial focused on crime that is framed in identity terms might argue that gun control reduces the ability of Americans to protect themselves and their families from criminals, whereas a similar editorial that is not framed in identity terms might argue that a proposed law is unlikely to successfully reduce the use of guns by criminals. Editorials that use both types of arguments should be coded 1. Not included as identity-frames are discussions of inconveniences a law might cause for gun owners without accompanying discussion of: (1) how those inconveniences might threaten the values of gun owners or their ability to protect things they value, or (2) discussion of how the laws might lead to outright personal disarmament/confiscation of firearms (which goes beyond inconvenience).

3. Use of Identity Forming Language (In-group Positive or Out-group Negative)

- 3.1. In-group positive is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial uses positive attributes/adjectives to describe gun owners.
- 3.2. Out-group negative is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial uses negative attributes/adjectives (or comparisons to negative groups) to describe members of an out-group who are portrayed as a threat to gun rights due to its support for gun regulation. Criminals who misuse guns are *not* considered an out-group.

4. Threat

- 4.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial portrays gun rights and/or gun owners' identities as under threat.

5. Calls to Action

- 5.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial contains a call to action on behalf of the protection of gun rights/against gun regulation. These consist of actions such as (but not limited to) contacting policymakers or speaking with others about gun rights. They can also include calls to act (or not act) in certain non-political ways because of the potential political impacts of those actions (e.g., practice gun safety while hunting this fall because if there are hunting accidents people will call for new gun control laws). Non-political calls to action that aren't in some way connected to politics as in the example above should *not* be coded 1 (e.g., practice gun safety while hunting

(period.)

Letters to the Editor

1. Policy Discussion

1.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter discusses government gun policy/regulation of some kind, whether in broad/general or narrow/specific terms. This could include discussion of specific pieces of legislation, but might also consist of more general discussion of gun policy/regulation that does not mention a specific piece of legislation. This includes discussion of the purpose of the Second Amendment and lawsuits aimed at gun manufacturers.

2. Identity Frame for Legislation

2.1. Within letters that discuss policy, coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter frames legislation in social identity terms. For letters written in opposition to gun control, legislation is framed in social identity terms if it is discussed in terms of its impact on the lifestyles and/or values of gun owners (as opposed to being discussed only in terms of its estimated technical, policy impacts). For example, a letter focused on crime that is framed in identity terms might argue that gun control reduces the ability of Americans to protect themselves and their families from criminals, whereas a similar letter that is not framed in identity terms might argue that a proposed law is unlikely to successfully reduce the use of guns by criminals. Letters that use both types of arguments should be coded 1. For letters written in support of gun control, legislation is framed in identity terms if it is discussed in terms of impact on the lifestyles and/or values of the letter writers themselves (rather than, for example, exclusively in terms of their potential impact on crime rates without including mention of personal connections to crime). For example, a letter focused on crime that is framed in identity terms might talk about how the letter writer's life has been negatively impacted by gun violence, whereas a similar letter that is not framed in identity terms might only mention that studies have shown that gun control laws reduce overall levels of gun violence.

3. Use of Identity Forming Language (In-group Positive or Out-group Negative)

3.1. In-group positive is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter uses positive attributes/adjectives to describe either gun owners (in the case of pro-gun letters) or gun control advocates (in the case of anti-gun letters).






3.2. Out-group negative is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter uses negative attributes/adjectives (or comparisons to negative groups) to describe members of an out-group who either support gun regulation (in the case of pro-gun letters) or oppose gun regulation (in the case of anti-gun letters). Criminals who misuse guns are *not* considered an out-group.

Appendix: Coding Examples

To supplement the coding rules described above, this section provides three example documents that illustrate the coding procedure in action. The first is a *Rifleman* editorial, the second is a pro-gun letter to the editor, and third is an anti-gun letter to the editor.

Words and phrases that are relevant to the coding dimensions described above are underlined. Following the legend depicted below, the color of the line beneath each of these words and phrases indicates the coding dimensions to which they pertain.

Legend:

- : In-group positive language
- : Out-group negative language
- : Identity frame for legislation
- : Threat
- : Calls to action

standing guard



Wayne LaPierre

NRA Executive Vice President

Soon, U.S. Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman will attempt to put private sales of firearms between peaceable Americans—you, me, our families and friends—under the total control of the Federal government. And they threaten to do it through a legislative back door.

If you now legally sell, trade or buy a firearm in commerce with a relative, friend or neighbor, you are the target. Our very culture is the target. Innocent, honest commerce between gun owners has been part of our culture since the beginnings of this nation.

To pry that back door open, the McCain-Lieberman gun control ticket—now joined by New York gun prohibitionist Senator Charles Schumer—is riding a propaganda machine with mega-bucks radio and television “advertising” paid for by their billionaire backer Andrew McKelvey through his anti-gun rights lobby, Americans for Gun Safety (AGS).

McCain has told the media that McKelvey’s advertising blitz (which features Senators McCain and Lieberman pitching their gun control scheme) is a precursor to finding a suitable piece of totally unrelated legislation as a host for his private firearm sales prohibition.

The ads, which first aired in Washington, D.C., are designed to scam the public into believing the McCain-Lieberman-Schumer scheme would prevent terrorists or criminals from obtaining firearms from private individuals—for now, at gun shows.

It is a big lie that would do Joseph Goebbels proud.

Under current, tough Federal law, there is no criminal firearm commerce anywhere in the nation that involves violent convicted criminals or illegal aliens or terrorists that is not already illegal. It is a Federal crime for such people to attempt to acquire any firearm from any source. Possession of any gun by such people is a crime. Their presence at a gun show with the intent to acquire a firearm is a Federal crime.

McCain and AGS want those gun owners who don’t attend gun shows to believe they are unaffected by this scheme. But this will ultimately touch every one of us.

The “gun show loophole” doesn’t exist—except as a propaganda tool for the anti-gun-rights crowd.

After the “gun show loophole,” there will

be the “living room loophole,” or the “gun club loophole.” Their ultimate “loophole” is the Second Amendment.

What McCain, Schumer, Lieberman and their axis are really after is lock-tight Federal control of all now-unregulated legal private commerce in firearms. This is the slippery slope to universal gun owner registration and to selective ownership bans.

No matter what they call it, the McCain-Lieberman-Schumer legislation would criminalize transfers that are now perfectly legal under existing Federal gun law between law-abiding people who buy, sell or trade guns.

Their so called “loophole” is so elastic it can include private sales in private homes where a few people might gather to buy, sell or trade guns.

You can bet the Brady Campaign (HCI), the Violence Policy Center and AGS have amendments at the ready to expand “gun show” provisions. In their world, if you buy, sell or trade a gun as a private intrastate matter—without registering with the government as part of a permanent database—you would be a criminal.

There is no doubt that if this “gun show” legislation were ever enacted, those events would fast become history—a memory.

Shutting down gun shows—events where Americans freely associate around a cause and where political discussion and political organizing is an integral activity—is no problem for McCain. It fits with his philosophy of using government to muzzle dissent and silence free speech.

With his so-called campaign finance reform law—now being challenged by NRA and a host of groups and individuals fighting to save the First Amendment—John McCain has made paid political speech by associations such as NRA aired on TV and radio against a candidate for

Federal election a criminal act—if such ads are run 30 days prior to a primary and 60 days before a general election.

So when your friends and neighbors ask or talk about the “gun show loophole,” set them straight. What our enemies are really after is the “freedom loophole.”

Every gun control group, every anti-gun-rights politician and most of the media are reading off the same page. They are demanding that Congress give John McCain another victory. But we must demand—especially in this critical election year—that any such legislation be stopped in its tracks.

Write, call or e-mail your Senators and Members of Congress and tell them: No gun control. No gun show bans. No private sales ban. No transfer ban. If you do it now, and keep up the heat, we can stop the AGS-McCain-Schumer-Lieberman machine cold.



So when your friends and neighbors ask or talk about the “gun show loophole,” set them straight. What our enemies are really after is the “freedom loophole.”

For the latest about legislation in your NRA visit: www.mynra.org

Pro-Gun Letter: *Chicago Tribune*, 21 July 1995:

Certainly, all persons of good conscience and character are heartened to see the decline in gun-related crimes committed in Chicago. Unfortunately, your July 6 editorial titled "A dividend of life from gun control?" ruins the good cheer by launching into a baseless anti-gun diatribe.

Amusingly, the editorial opens by criticizing politicians for accepting credit where none is due, and then proceeds to do that very thing. By linking a drop in the number of confiscated weapons with the observed drop in gun crimes, it is fatally flawed by its mistaking of coincidence for correlation. In reality, legal gun sales are nearing all-time highs, which would suggest an increase in the number of "guns on the street."

Although your liberal interpretation of statistics is troublesome, the most disturbing aspect of the editorial is that, like most anti-gun arguments, it fails to draw a distinction between criminals and law-abiding citizens. On the behalf of law-abiding, gun-owning citizens everywhere, I will take this opportunity to draw that distinction.

A guy who is about to do a drive-by shooting, hold up a liquor store or commit capital murder is hardly impressed by the fact that possessing an unregistered weapon is a felony. In fact, he probably can't even spell felony. Is he worried about having his vehicle confiscated? Doubtful, as it is probably stolen anyway. Is he worried about going to jail for possessing the unregistered gun? Why would he be? If our friend is arrested for some violent crime, felony possession of a firearm will probably reside well down on the list of his offenses.

On the other hand, the law-abiding gun owner is interested mainly in protecting his/her home and family. However, due to the Illinois legislature's cowardly denial to allow free exercise of the innate right of self-defense, our law-abiding citizen now must fear the police as well if he/she ventures out in public while armed. Upstanding citizens should not have to make the choice between risking jail in the name of self-defense and risking injury or death at the hands of a criminal. However, the fact that the law-abiding citizen will probably choose to remain law-abiding is just what the criminal is banking on. The law-abiding will remain law-abiding, while the lawless will remain lawless. Therein lies the distinction.

In denying the connection between toughened gun laws and the apparent drop in Chicago's gun crimes rate, I gladly place myself in the category of, as the editorialist puts it, a "perverter of the 2nd Amendment." Rather than attribute the drop to silly, unenforceable gun laws, I'd like to hope that people are just deciding not to kill, or that the most violent offenders have managed to kill each other off, or maybe that good police work is to be credited.

I am even more hopeful that what we are seeing is the beginning of the triumph of the law-abiding citizen over the lawless elements in our society. Gun sales to law-abiding citizens are at an all-time high. Concealed-carry and "three-strike" laws are passing in state after state. Pistol ranges are packed, and purveyors of self-defense training are doing a land-office business. Maybe the crooks are just scared?

Anti-Gun Letter: *Chicago Tribune*, 13 May 2000

I would like to respond to Christopher Morley's May 10 letter, "Moms against guns," criticizing the Million Mom March, which is planned for Sunday to support stricter gun control.

Mr. Morley offered up much of the same misinformation we always hear from America's gun culture, namely that gun ownership makes us safer.

Although I have sympathy for Mr. Morley as a victim of crime, and wouldn't challenge his claim that he successfully defended himself with a firearm, numerous studies show his case to be the exception, not the rule.

Guns kept for self-defense are more likely to result in tragedy for their owners and their families than for the criminals they are intended to defend against.

Mr. Morley asks why gun-control literature is disseminated in schools. But there is no conspiracy here. Schools are where the victims are. America's children pay a heavy price in death and serious injury for the gun lobby's misguided interpretations of the 2nd Amendment. In four years of teaching in a Chicago Public School on the South Side, three of my students were killed in incidents involving guns; two were murdered by other children, and one was killed while playing with a gun.

Other students shared tragic stories of injuries, lost loved ones and the general mayhem of gun violence, which makes their neighborhoods unlivable.

During a gun-control rally at the Daley Center a couple of years ago, the family members of those who lost loved ones to gun violence brought pairs of shoes belonging to the victims, placing them on display for all to see. The large number of shoes belonging to children provided a shocking and powerful statement on this issue.

It is time that Americans organize and demand stronger restrictions on the manufacture, sale and possession of deadly weapons. Illinois citizens support stricter gun laws. But in return for campaign contributions from the gun lobby, many politicians continue to oppose sensible gun laws.

That is why we must continue the fight for legislation like the Safe Neighborhoods Act, waiting periods, trigger locks, background checks, the licensing of gun ownership, and an eventual ban on concealable handguns and assault weapons.

I hope that the Million Mom March will bring out the all the moms, families, teachers, doctors, police officers, social workers, ministers, youth counselors and other concerned citizens who have had enough with America's mad devotion to guns.