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Whatever happened to the ‘missing movement’?

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**Gun control politics over two decades of change**

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### **Introduction**

In April 1999, a catastrophe befell the leafy suburbs of Denver. Two heavily armed teenagers went to their high school and killed 12 fellow students and a teacher while injuring two dozen others. The shooting at Columbine High School followed a string of similar mass shootings in schools and other presumptively safe spaces. The Columbine shooting horrified the nation and felt like a tipping point in American gun politics. The response was immediate and far-reaching.

Families got involved. Parents of Columbine victims found their voices as advocates, and after a shooting four months later at a Jewish community center in California, mothers in particular had had enough. Taking advantage of the first generation of Internet tools, such as listservs and websites, moms mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to march on Washington and in scores of cities and towns across the country. Unfolding on Mother’s Day 2000, the Million Mom March combined images of playful maternalism and fearless womanhood to demand policy change.

Wealthy donors got involved. Everyday people sent small contributions to gun control groups, but big money flowed, as well. A tech billionaire supplied millions of dollars to create a new, pragmatic gun control group (Americans for Gun Safety) that sought to break the political logjam on firearms policy.

The President got involved. Bill Clinton flew to Colorado to console the families and the community. After returning to Washington, he continued advocating privately and publicly for stricter gun laws over the following year, the last of his final term.

Congress got involved. A bill to tighten federal gun laws – specifically by expanding the national background check system to some private firearm transfers – surged to the top of the Congressional agenda. The measure failed to pass.

States got involved. Colorado and Oregon (which also had endured a traumatic high school shooting) put private-sale background checks on the popular ballot. Both measures passed by a wide margin.

For those favoring stricter gun laws, the legacy of Columbine was mixed. A lot of people got involved in advocacy for gun regulation. Incremental policy change occurred at the state level. And then gun control dropped from the public agenda.

Thirteen years later, another catastrophe befell the nation, this time in quaint Newtown, Connecticut. Here the mass shooting unfolded at an elementary school, and the victims were 20 first-graders and 6 educators. As with Columbine, the massacre felt like the brutal culmination of a series of mass shootings that had come before – most recently at a Congress member’s meet-and-greet in Arizona (2011), at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin (2012), and inside a movie theater in Colorado (2012), to name a few. As with Columbine, the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School horrified the nation and was broadly interpreted as a tipping point. As with Columbine, the response was immediate and far-reaching.

Families got involved. The parents and other relatives of the victims went en masse to Washington to testify for stricter gun laws. They formed an organization to work on school-based strategies to prevent another such tragedy. Mothers around the country mobilized, this time using ‘Internet 2.0’ tools. As with moms who had organized more than a decade earlier, this group of female activists creatively combined maternalism with ‘bad ass’ womanhood to take on the nation’s powerful gun lobby and advocate for policy reform.

Wealthy donors got involved. As before, a tech billionaire supplied tens of millions of dollars to create a new, pragmatic gun control group (Everytown for Gun Safety) that sought to break the political logjam on guns.

The President got involved. Just as Bill Clinton had, Barack Obama went to the families’ side to console them, then turned his bully pulpit and political capital toward the cause of strengthening gun laws.

Congress got involved. After years of moldering, a background check bill returned to the top of the agenda. After several months of hearings and intense media attention, the U.S. Senate failed to pass the measure, ensuring that it would not even be considered in the House.

States got involved. Again, states put private-sale background checks on the popular ballot and before state legislatures. This time, 11 states enacted changes, either instituting or expanding background check requirements ([Keneally, 2017](#)).

For those favoring stricter gun laws, the legacy of Sandy Hook – like Columbine – was decidedly mixed. A lot of people got involved in advocacy for gun regulation. Incremental policy change occurred at the state level. And then gun control dropped from the public agenda.

Gun politics in America can be reminiscent of the movie ‘Groundhog Day,’ with each day just like the one before. And yet, notwithstanding the parallels to Columbine, much actually did change in gun politics and policy after Sandy Hook, and even before. The conventional wisdom holds that ‘nothing ever changes’ after mass shootings: public outrage is followed by public action and then by a swift reaction from foes of gun control ([Spitzer, 2018](#)). Lawmakers lie low until the fury subsides, and all returns to normal. Upon closer inspection, it appears that ‘things can change’ after high-profile events, but the story of change is complex, often unfolding gradually and outside the media spotlight. This more nuanced story may be unsatisfying to pundits, who thrive on simplified narratives, and to advocates on both sides of the American gun debate, who must continue to fire up their base. But the nuanced story is in keeping with the way the American policy process typically works.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I describe the state of the gun control movement at the end of the 20th century. It was a movement that had faced considerable hurdles but was struggling to emerge. I then discuss how the rebranded gun violence prevention movement sought to overcome its predecessor’s challenges. In both sections, I focus on three critical factors: patrons, frames, and strategies. After reviewing how these three elements have evolved in ways favorable to supporters of stricter gun laws, I review important developments on the gun rights side. While gun regulation supporters were gaining steam, so were their opponents. I conclude with brief thoughts on the state of the great American gun debate 50 years after the modern push for gun control began.

### **The missing movement for gun control in America**

The Columbine tragedy, along with other high-profile mass shootings around that time, drew scholarly and media attention to gun politics in America. Most of this work focused on the strength of gun rights advocates as engaged citizens, organizers of collective action, and framers of public discourse and debate. Efforts to strengthen gun control laws were doomed to fail because gun rights forces were indomitable, even after especially heart-wrenching events.

Indeed, America’s gun rights organizations historically have enjoyed great strengths, both inherent in their enterprise and as a result of strategic choices they have made. Participating in any organization entails money, time, and energy. To recruit and sustain members, organizations seek to lower these costs either directly, by subsidizing membership dues, or indirectly, by providing benefits to individuals. Gun rights groups have been able to do both exceptionally well ([Goss, 2006](#); [Patterson and Singer, 2006](#); [Spitzer, 2018](#)).

In the formative decades of the National Rifle Association (NRA), for example, public policy provided a financial incentive for gun owners to join. Becoming a member of the NRA was required to purchase surplus military weapons at a cut rate, and the NRA ran government-subsidized gun clubs and shooting competitions. Even beyond these policy benefits, the NRA has a bevy of incentives that it can offer to potential members. These incentives fall into three categories: material, solidary, and purposive ([Wilson, 1995](#); [Patterson and Singer, 2006](#)). Material incentives include magazines and discounts on products and services especially valuable to gun hobbyists. Solidary incentives include the ability to join in fellowship with other sportsmen and gun rights advocates. Purposive incentives connect individual gun ownership to the defense of liberty and country. These structural advantages stem from the organization's identity as a hobbyist organization and its skill at strategically leveraging understandings of American exceptionalism.

But as every sports fan knows, a good starting advantage doesn't guarantee victory. The winning team is only as strong as the losing team is weak. Like sports, political struggle demands an understanding of both the winning team's strengths and the losing team's weaknesses. My 2006 book, *Disarmed*, dug into the weaknesses of gun control organizations by systematically assessing conventional explanations while subjecting the gun control case to a cross-issue, historical analysis. This exercise revealed that, actually, the absence of a vigorous gun control movement was not a foregone conclusion. There had been numerous 'movement moments' in which the factors that social movement theory would expect to produce a social movement were firmly in place. Yet no vigorous movement for gun control had arisen. The historical analysis suggested that conventional explanations for the gun control movement's weakness were missing important elements. To better understand why movements not only arise but also, importantly, fail to do so when expected, the study generated a cost-benefit theory of mass mobilization. The theory hypothesized that movements arise when advocates both socialize (or spread) the costs of individuals' engagement *and* personalize the benefits of participation.

The theory identified three mechanisms by which movements historically have socialized costs and personalized benefits. The first way was by securing resource patrons – whether individual donors, government agencies, or civil society organizations. By assuming some of the movement's costs, patrons free movements to focus on their missions, as opposed to fund raising, and lower the costs borne by individual members. With respect to gun control, however, a combination of restrictive public policies and changes in the larger interest group environment had constrained the flow of money and other resources that might have allowed momentum to build.

The second mechanism was framing. Using historical case studies, I argued that movements for social reform seemed to converge on a narrative centered on children and the need to protect them. These understandings produce collective-action frameworks that draw mothers as advocates and envision the state as a protective father ([Carlson and Goss, 2017](#)). By tapping into the everyday emotions and experiences of parenthood, such maternal frames personalize the benefits of movement participation. While most movements for social regulation had focused on children, gun control organizations had focused on crime. The crime frame made the solution the province of law enforcement experts. By framing gun control as a self-evident ‘problem’ that experts would solve, gun control groups missed an opportunity to link their cause to broadly shared civic values.

The third mechanism was organizational strategy. The early gun control movement sought bold reforms, such as handgun bans, and focused its attention on Congress. This strategy had a policy logic but was not conducive to movement building. These efforts produced few wins upon which to build and lent credence to gun rights groups’ worst fears. In other issue domains, successful movements had worked incrementally, building policy upward from the local level to the state and then national levels, and outward through a series of modest reforms that cumulated to a comprehensive policy regime. These strategies changed the cost-benefit calculus by increasing the expected incremental payoff of participation while reducing the personal costs. To be sure, incremental strategies aren’t for everyone; people may not be excited to join a movement that takes a long, slow view. But history has been friendly to such pragmatic approaches.

*Disarmed* had a subtitle: *The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America*. While national and state organizations strived for stricter gun laws, they had not come together to form a true social movement in the way that other reform efforts had. The ‘missing-ness’ showed up in multiple ways. Gun control groups lacked the mass engagement that other issue organizations enjoyed; the media seldom reached out to gun control groups as authoritative sources for the pro-regulation perspective; key supporters of stronger gun laws bemoaned the tepidness of collective action for gun control; and the term ‘gun control movement’ failed to gain resonance in the way that, say, ‘pro-life movement’ had ([Goss, 2006](#)). There were all sorts of reasons to expect a fulsome gun control movement in America, but it had not arrived.

To be sure, the 1990s offered glimpses of a movement struggling to emerge, and these glimpses provided limited yet important opportunities to test the cost-benefit theory. The Million Mom March deployed a child-protection framework that drew people to the cause and sustained their involvement ([Goss, 2003](#)). Gun control groups that found opportunities to move incrementally

succeeded in growing their base and enacting policy ([Goss, 2006](#)). These small tests of the theory suggested that it was promising. But it remained a theory.

A year and a half after Columbine, and six months after the Million Mom March, opportunities to test the theory abruptly evaporated. A gun-friendly administration came to power in Washington. And after the September 11 terrorist attacks reordered politics, gun control vanished from the public agenda. With people and elected officials focused on external threats, America was in no mood to tighten regulations on the means of self-protection. Gun control groups suffered major policy setbacks, including the expiration of a federal assault weapons ban (in 2004) and the passage of a federal law that largely immunized firearms manufacturers and dealers from lawsuits (2005). At the state level, lawmakers eased restrictions on obtaining a license to carry concealed guns in public places. In this environment, the already ‘missing movement’ for gun control was even less in evidence. Gun control groups struggled to maintain themselves as revenues plummeted.<sup>1</sup> Privately, advocates portrayed the 2000s as a period of setbacks, reflection, and regrouping. This judgment did not change with the election of a Democratic president and Congress in 2008.

And yet, a decade later, gun politics looks very different from the quiescent 2000s. Here I review three of the most important changes: the emergence of a robust and apparently sustainable movement for gun regulation, a growing legal and cultural accommodation to guns in public life, and a strong alignment of gun politics with partisan politics writ large.

### **The gun violence prevention movement**

Although separated by some 13 years, the Columbine and Sandy Hook massacres bequeathed similar political dynamics. As noted, donors, moms, presidents, Congress, and state lawmakers mobilized for stricter gun laws, with limited success. But viewed with a broader lens over a period of years, the post-Sandy Hook movement looks considerably more robust and sustainable than that which struggled to arise after Columbine. The gun control movement is arguably no longer missing.

Sandy Hook marked a critical point in the emergence of the newly reconstituted ‘gun violence prevention movement,’ but its roots stretched back earlier. The modern history of the movement reflects a series of focusing events and strategic choices that have built upon one another. As the third decade of the 21st century approached, the movement’s field had been well tilled, and new activists and organizations were joining. Movement organizations at last were making strides toward solving the three issues that *Disarmed* had identified, bringing the gun control movement into line with historical antecedents in other issue domains.

The first issue was a lack of external patronage. Here, the role of billionaire Michael Bloomberg deserves special attention. Bloomberg, who co-founded Mayors Against Illegal Guns in 2006, pledged \$50 million toward gun reform in 2013. That same year, the Mayors group merged with a nascent organization of mothers to become Everytown for Gun Safety. We cannot see how much Bloomberg has donated to this organization because donors to nonprofit social welfare groups are not required to be publicly disclosed. But it is perhaps telling that, according to tax filings, the organization's revenues increased more than fourfold from 2012 to 2013, rising to \$37 million that year, and then to \$53 million in 2016.<sup>2</sup> The post-Sandy Hook era brought a surge in contributions to other gun reform groups, as high-profile shootings often do, but Everytown's one-year increase of \$28 million in revenue dwarfed those of other groups. The Brady groups' combined revenues increased by \$3 million between 2011 and 2013 (a jump of 52%); the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence's, by \$730,000 (up 92%). Such windfalls were significant for these relatively small organizations, which had struggled mightily through the doldrums period, but these gains paled in both the dollar and percentage increase enjoyed by Everytown. It would be unusual for a new organization to enjoy the revenue tsunami that Everytown experienced without significant help from one or more top-dollar patrons.

Elite patrons, along with small-dollar donors, did not offset the financial advantage enjoyed by the NRA and other gun rights groups, but the revenue gap narrowed. The NRA and the three other prominent national gun rights groups (the National Association for Gun Rights, Gun Owners of America, and the Second Amendment Foundation), together with their charitable affiliates, had combined revenues of nearly \$437 million in 2016. The six nationally prominent gun violence prevention groups, together with their charitable affiliates, had combined revenues of just under \$95 million – or about 22% of the gun groups' total.<sup>3</sup> But this figure constituted real gains from a decade earlier, when national gun violence prevention groups had about 3% of the combined revenues of their gun rights counterparts (Goss 2006).

A second major change in the gun violence prevention movement is the reframing of guns as a threat to children and families. This understanding has been propelled by two developments: the emergence of a powerful grassroots organization of politically engaged mothers and the development of a critical mass of family members and survivors of mass shootings who are devoting their lives to gun control advocacy. Again, focusing events were critical here. When a young gunman killed 32 students and teachers at Virginia Tech in 2007, and injured many more, parents of the victims mobilized. Quietly, they worked with Congress to secure federal legislation to improve

reporting of records to the databases that support the national instant background check system. Equally important, these parents, along with some of the surviving students, became a nucleus of victim advocates who would provide both a support system and an organizational template for survivors to mobilize after future mass shootings, including those in Tucson (2011) and Aurora (2012). While the early gun control movement had struggled to include victims in nationally prominent roles, the new gun violence prevention movement has incorporated them as paid staff members and spokespeople. Everytown maintains a survivors' network totaling well more than 1,000 members. While not all nationally prominent advocates are survivors of mass shootings or family members of victims, many are, and they are demonstrating a staying power that typical advocates for gun control historically lacked.

As I noted in *Disarmed*, maternal activism has a long and storied history in American social reform. After a series of school shootings in the late 1990s, and then at a Jewish day care center in 1999, a suburban mother and part-time television publicist organized the Million Mom March for stricter gun laws. Unfolding in Washington and in scores of cities and towns across the country, it was the largest gun control protest in history. Chapters of mom-activists formed out of that organizing effort and were absorbed within the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, then the largest and best-known gun control group. The moms' groups remained active for several years, but in the aftermath of 9/11, and with two wars and fears of terrorism dominating the public agenda, the mothers were organizing in hard times. Nevertheless, they had figured out how to draw in women by creatively combining maternal, egalitarian, and feminine identities ([Goss and Heaney, 2010](#)). The march organizers had developed a collective action framework capable of mobilizing modern women for gun control.

When the Sandy Hook shooting occurred, another Middle American mother took to the Internet to start organizing women for gun reform. This founder, Shannon Watts, had much in common with the Million Mom March founder, Donna Dees-Thomases. Both were white suburban mothers in their forties who had professional backgrounds in public relations. Both were horrified by the shootings of small children. Both thought in terms of a 'million mothers' – Watts' initially called her fledgling group 'One Million Moms for Gun Control.' And both saw the Internet as a critical tool for identifying other women who shared their outrage and uniting them across geographic bounds. However, there were key differences. The Internet that Dees-Thomases used was one of websites and email listservs. Watts had social media, especially Facebook, which allowed for the creation of virtual communities. Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, as the group came to be



called, quickly established local chapters that worked offline on typical political activities, such as letter-writing, protests, and visits to lawmakers. Importantly, however, Moms Demand quickly developed an elaborate online organization, including private Facebook groups. Facebook and other social media tools allowed members, often unknown to one another outside this virtual space, to share ideas, cheer one another on, boost sagging spirits, and build community around shared identities. These online spaces helped organizers to keep the movement moving between offline actions. Another social media tool, Twitter, allowed leaders such as Watts to contribute constantly to elite debate about firearms and to push out memes depicting ‘bad ass’ mothers ready to do battle with the mighty (mostly male) gun lobby.

Moms Demand Action enjoyed another advantage that the Million Moms had not. In late 2013, one year after its founding, it merged with another organization, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, to form Everytown for Gun Safety. Watts and the co-founder of Mayors, Michael Bloomberg, announced the merger on national television. While the merger and rapid growth of Everytown was not without internal friction and external controversy, five years later Moms Demand, under Watts’ volunteer leadership, retained a good deal of autonomy and recognition as the grassroots army of the gun violence prevention movement. After a shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, the group saw a surge of 140,000 new volunteers (up from 60,000 four months earlier) and 150 new chapters ([Kohn, 2017](#); [Stuart, 2018](#)). A fast-growing Students Demand Action affiliate also formed.

Grounding the gun violence prevention movement in a language of child protection brought it broad resonance, especially with middle-class, predominantly white mothers. As *Disarmed* noted, nationally prominent gun control groups tended to be white, while gun violence affects people of color disproportionately. Both Moms 1.0 and Moms 2.0 sought to close the racial divide, but faced cultural, geographic, and other difficulties in doing so. The shootings of unarmed African American youths while they went about their daily lives provided an opportunity to bridge these divides. Three cases stand out: Trayvon Martin, shot dead while coming back from a Skittles candy run in his father’s gated community; Jordan Davis, shot dead while playing music in a car with his friends; and Hadiya Pendleton, who became an accidental victim of a gangland shooting a week after performing for President Obama’s second inauguration. The mothers of these young people assumed prominent positions as ‘mothers of the movement’ simultaneously advocating for racial justice and gun violence prevention. Davis’s mother, a former flight attendant, became Moms Demand’s national spokesperson and, as of this writing (summer 2018), is a Democratic nominee for Congress.

At the grassroots level, the modern gun violence prevention movement is largely a movement of women. This gender dynamic is not a surprise: Women have fueled movements for social regulation throughout American history ([Goss, 2006](#), [2013](#)). Women also have been significantly more amenable to gun regulation than have men ([Smith, 1984](#); [Goss, 2006](#); [Goss and Skocpol, 2006](#)). Gun rights groups have sought to solve their ‘woman problem’ by framing firearms ownership as a means of feminist empowerment and protection against male violence. The gun industry has developed products tailored to women’s bodies and tastes. Yet the vast majority of gun owners still are men, with no discernible increase among women from the 20th century into the 21st century ([Goss, 2017](#)). What is more, being a woman has remained a reliable predictor, all else being equal, of support for stricter gun laws ([Goss, 2017](#)). While female gun subcultures certainly exist (see, for example, Browder, in this volume), evidence suggests that the world of gun enthusiasts remains predominantly male just as its activist-critics are predominantly female.

### **Strategy: The gun violence prevention movement’s pragmatic turn**

In *Disarmed*, I showed how early gun control advocates had pursued a bold strategy, one that made sense given the policy logic and politics of the day but one that, in hindsight, appeared at odds with the way that social reform typically happened in America and with the conservative winds that were beginning to blow. I termed the bold approach the ‘rational national’ strategy: ‘rational’ in the sense that effective policy should lack obvious loopholes; and ‘national’ in the sense that state-by-state patchworks tend to be only as strong as their weakest link.

This policy-centric approach had political ramifications that ended up hobbling the development of a vibrant and sustainable grassroots gun control movement. One ramification was that gun control advocates, with their talk of bold national policies, threatened large numbers of everyday citizens who owned guns and used them responsibly. Gun rights groups such as the NRA built a political machine around this threat, making subsequent gun control activism even more difficult to sustain. Besides fueling an anti-gun-control force, the rational-national approach also limited the movement-building aspirations of gun control advocates themselves. If comprehensive federal policy was the only approach that would do any good, gun control groups wondered what use there was in building organizational capacity at the state level. Maintaining chapters required staff and financial resources, which national gun control groups often lacked. As one early strategy document noted, chapters and their volunteer activists would have a ‘driving need for activity’ that the national organization would have to meet ([Goss, 2006](#)). Providing local organizations with things to do became even

more challenging as states passed NRA-supported laws ‘preempting’ cities and towns from regulating firearms; preemption laws deprived local activists of local policy measures around which they might mobilize ([Goss, 2006](#)).

By the 2010s, however, the gun violence prevention movement had abandoned the rational-national strategy in favor of policy incrementalism. Having failed to secure national legislation after Columbine, and having been forced into serious reflection during the subsequent doldrums decade, national gun control groups quietly embraced political pragmatism. Instead of a singular focus on federal policy, these groups would invest in state-based organization building and campaigns. Instead of advocating for comprehensive policies, groups would pursue incremental improvements to existing laws and the enactment and enforcement of measures targeting people at heightened risk of misusing guns.

In the new gun violence prevention movement, different organizations played different roles. Moms Demand Action, working alongside cadres of survivor advocates, formed the grassroots base of volunteer activists. They would be the ones showing up at lawmakers’ town halls, legislative hearings, and protests. They would go on television to speak movingly and authentically about America’s unusual problem with gun violence and, importantly, to construct gun violence as a problem affecting innocent children. The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, which had begun in the mid-1970s as the National Coalition to Ban Handguns, turned to states as laboratories for changing the politics of guns. Its sister organization, the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, sponsored the Consortium on Risk-Based Firearm Policy, which produced a blueprint for state-level reforms grounded in good social-science research.

A movement that had been deeply divided over whether to ban handguns had quietly come together around a common policy agenda centered on improving and expanding the federal background check system, stripping domestic abusers of firearms, and providing a legal mechanism for police and family members to remove guns from individuals at demonstrable risk of doing harm to themselves or others. While national gun control policy has stalled at the federal level – even after the Sandy Hook tragedy, Congress failed to expand background checks to private transfers – the states have been quietly enacting laws high on the gun violence prevention movement’s agenda. Often these laws have come in response to citizen group pressure following nationally galvanizing mass shootings or locally salient tragedies. Between 2004 and 2014, 38 states enacted at least one law aimed at restricting firearm access to the severely mentally ill ([Goss, 2015](#)). Between 2008 and 2017, the number of laws restricting domestic abusers’ access to firearms nearly doubled.<sup>4</sup> There was a

tripling in the number of states requiring a background check at the critical moment when a gun is purchased.<sup>5</sup> States began moving toward allowing police or family members to petition for the temporary removal of a dangerous person's firearm. States with so-called extreme risk protection orders quadrupled, while growing numbers of states were poised to enact such measures.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, states were not rushing to outdo each other in the strength of their gun laws. In most states, gun laws remained relatively lax by global standards. But in the 2008–2018 period, a state-by-state accretion of modest, consensus-based measures was in evidence. These developments defy the conventional wisdom that tragic events seldom spur a policy response.

In *Disarmed*, I portrayed the three elements critical for movement sustainability – patronage, good framing, and incremental strategy – as distinct forces. However, the emerging gun violence prevention movement has made clear that they are more clearly interdependent than the model appreciated. The pragmatic strategy of small wins appears to have attracted patrons, who in turn encourage such approaches. The maternal framework also goes hand-in-hand with policy pragmatism. The idea of mothers as practical problem solvers has broad cultural resonance; they can credibly portray modest policy reforms as a mom's everyday common sense. Having locally rooted activists has encouraged policy innovation tailored to local political contexts. These developments, spurred by mass shootings and endemic violence, have broadened the base of gun violence prevention activists.

### **Gun rights challenges to the new gun violence prevention movement**

Evidence that the gun violence prevention movement is moving should not obscure a fundamental reality: these groups are David to the gun lobby's Goliath. National gun rights groups in 2017 had revenues that were five times those of national gun violence prevention groups. After stalling in the 2000s, the NRA and its foundation saw a massive jump in revenues in 2007 (probably as a result of the Virginia Tech shooting) and, after falling back for a few years, enjoyed another surge in the 2011–2017 period, when mass shootings, a resurgent gun violence prevention movement, and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign created a threatening political environment. The NRA's membership, measured by the combined circulation of its magazines, fell in the 2000s but rebounded after 2007. By 2016, the NRA's revenues were up 60% in real terms from 2001, and its membership exceeded 3.5 million people.

The 2000s and 2010s were also fruitful years for gun rights groups, entrenching policy arrangements that will be difficult for gun violence prevention groups to undo. Even as gun control organizations secured state laws aimed at presumptively dangerous categories of people, gun rights groups secured

state laws normalizing guns in public spaces. In the early 1990s, the majority of states either barred people from carrying concealed firearms in public or strictly regulated the licenses to do so. By 2018, the situation was reversed. All states allowed concealed carry, and fewer than one in five states strictly regulated licensing ('may issue' states). More to the point, nearly a quarter of states had done away with permits entirely. States also normalized guns in public spaces by enacting Stand Your Ground laws, which extend the right of self-defense to places outside the home. In 1991, no states had such laws; by 2017, half did. These controversial laws were interpreted as a response to neoliberalism and the shrinking of state capacity alongside the privatization of public functions ([Carlson, 2015](#); Light in this volume) and to the changing status of men in society (Blanchfield in this volume; Messner in this volume). The push to allow guns in formerly off-limits spaces continues unabated. Between 2003 and 2017, 11 states decided to require that public universities allow guns on campus, though some place-based restrictions (e.g., inside dormitories) were permitted. Shootings in public elementary and high schools increased pressure to allow certain licensed adults to carry weapons inside those institutions, as well.

In state capitals and in Congress, measures to relax restrictions on concealed carry have been a top priority of the NRA and other gun rights groups. At the local level, however, the push to normalize guns in public life has been the province of a relatively new type of gun rights group. Small, volunteer-led, and politically vocal groups with names like the Virginia Citizens Defense League and Open Carry Texas spread to more than half the states from the 1990s through the 2010s ([Cook and Goss, 2014](#)). These scrappy neo-populists see the professionally staffed gun rights groups, especially the NRA, as too establishment oriented and willing to compromise. Public opinion surveys show no shift toward pro-gun groups' policy views – only about 4–8% of Americans in any given year would loosen firearm laws, and this share has held steady for nearly three decades ([Jones, 2018](#)). However, these groups' influence shows up in the willingness of state lawmakers to respond to their policy demands. Gun rights groups are now better described as pro-gun groups ([Cook, 2013](#)).

The emergence of these organizations signals a subtler shift in America gun culture, from one that appreciated firearms as sporting goods to one that sees them as civic goods. Indicators of this shift abound. Protection has overtaken hunting as the main reason why Americans own guns ([Goo, 2013](#)). By 2017, Americans were almost twice as likely to cite the protection rationale as they were in the late 1990s, even though crime had declined significantly since that time ([Igielnik and Brown, 2017](#)). The shift in gun culture also shows up in the reading habits of NRA members, who receive

their choice of several gun-themed magazines. In the late 1990s, one-third chose *American Hunter*, but two decades later, that fraction had dropped to about one-quarter.<sup>7</sup> The fraction of households that have a gun has slowly declined since the 1970s, yet firearms sales are booming – a pattern likely explained by existing owners stockpiling more and more weapons ([Cook and Goss, 2014](#)). One study found that gun owners possess, on average, just shy of 5 firearms; and just 14% of gun owners own half of all firearms in America ([Azrael et al., 2017](#)).

The pro-gun movement also has seen public support for gun control weaken over time. The fraction of Americans who say they want gun laws to be made more strict fell by about 20 percentage points between the early 1990s and 2010s ([Jones, 2018](#)), while the share of Americans who prioritized gun rights over gun control rose by almost the same amount after 2000 ([Pew Research Center, 2017](#)). [Cook \(2013\)](#) attributes this development to research suggesting that guns are commonly used in self-defense, a claim that most criminologists find to be wildly exaggerated.

Another, complementary explanation is that Americans' social identities are becoming more and more neatly organized along partisan lines ([Mason, 2018](#)), and attitudes toward guns have become part of this sorting. The Pew Research Center's question on whether individuals would prioritize controlling firearms or protecting gun owner rights illustrates the trend. In 2000, Democrats were about 21 percentage points more supportive than Republicans of the gun control position, but by 2016 that gap had opened up to a staggering 58 percentage points.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, being a good Republican requires supporting gun rights, while being a good Democrat means supporting gun regulation. Data from a different opinion barometer, the General Social Survey, reveals that two key subgroups – Democratic men and Republican women – are responsible for much of the sorting, with the former becoming more supportive of gun control and the latter, of gun rights ([Goss, 2017](#)). Even more strikingly, analysis of survey data shows that people's political party affiliation is a strong predictor of their position on gun policy even after controlling for myriad other factors, *including whether they own a firearm* ([Cook and Goss, 2014](#)).

This sorting is reflected at the organizational level, as well. Gun organizations have become key components of the Republican Party's activist base. The NRA, for example, had been tilting toward the GOP at least since endorsing Ronald Reagan for President in 1980. But the gun organization's move into the Republican camp became complete in the 2010s. In 1990, 64% of the NRA's campaign contributions went to Republicans, but by 2016, that figure was nearly 100%.<sup>9</sup>

All of the pro-gun trends – in attitudes, laws, patterns of ownership, and organizational capacity – point to a core conclusion. Even with urbanization and demographic diversification, which might undermine America gun culture, the pro-gun movement is going strong. The growing accommodation to guns in public life poses considerable challenges to the gun violence prevention movement, even as its resource base and grassroots organization expand and even as it enjoys policy victories that were rare even a few years before. Perhaps most interesting is how the gun issue has come to define larger schisms in American politics and society. To be sure, the issue long has divided people along lines of geography and culture – in the early 1970s, the *Wall Street Journal* identified a gun-loving ‘bedrock’ America at odds with a gun-hating ‘cosmopolitan America’ ([‘Understanding Gun Control,’ 1972](#)). But almost a half-century later, the battle lines appeared even more sharply drawn and the gun issue even more deeply incorporated into political parties and partisanship. The growth in both the gun violence prevention and pro-gun movements, coupled with these larger political dynamics, portends an escalation of the American gun war with little promise of resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Author's analysis of Form 990 informational tax returns for the two most prominent gun control advocacy groups: the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (and its affiliated Center) and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (and its affiliated Educational Fund). In real terms, Brady's revenues in 2010 were about 40% the 2001 total; the Coalition's 2010 revenues were about 25% the 2003 total. (The Coalition's 2001 and 2002 Form 990s were unavailable.)

<sup>2</sup> The 2012 figures represent the combined revenues of Everytown's predecessor organizations, Mayors Against Illegal Guns Action Fund (the social welfare group) and United Against Illegal Guns Support Fund (the aligned public charity). The 2013 figures represent the combined revenues of Everytown for Gun Safety Action Fund (the social welfare group) and Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (the public charity).

<sup>3</sup> The six groups, in order of combined revenues, are Everytown for Gun Safety (and its support fund), the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (and its affiliated center); Giffords (and its affiliated law center); the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (and its affiliated educational fund); Sandy Hook Promise; and the Violence Policy Center.

<sup>4</sup> Author's calculations from the State Firearms Law Database ([www.statefirearmlaws.org/state-state-firearm-law-data](http://www.statefirearmlaws.org/state-state-firearm-law-data)), Michael Siegel, MD, Principal Investigator.

<sup>5</sup> Author's calculations from the State Firearms Law Database.

<sup>6</sup> Author's calculations from the State Firearms Law Database and press accounts.

<sup>7</sup> Figures calculated from the NRA's semi-annual reports to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, now the Alliance for Audited Media.

<sup>8</sup> Author's analysis of Pew data.

<sup>9</sup> Open Secrets analysis of 'Party Split' available at [www.opensecrets.org/orgs/summary.php?id=d000000082&cycle=A](http://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/summary.php?id=d000000082&cycle=A). Accessed June 27, 2018.