# Introduction

## *The neglected gun gap*

Just a day short of his 100th as president, Donald Trump received a roaring ovation from thousands of gun owners at the National Rifle Association's (NRA) annual convention. He thanked them for their considerable support and added, "You came through for me, and I am going to come through for you" (Wagner and Viebeck 2017).

On Election Day 2016, gun owners did strongly support the Republican candidate: 61 percent cast their ballots for Trump. This exceeded Mitt Romney's performance among gun owners in 2012 by about 8 percent and improved on John McCain's by 7 percent. In addition, the NRA spent more than three times as much money to help Trump as it did in support of Romney. The NRA's total allocation made it the sixth-largest-spending political action committee in the 2016 election cycle (Schuppe 2016).

This book introduces the "gun gap" to the study of American politics. The gun gap refers to differences in political behavior and attitudes between gun owners and those who do not own a gun. It is a phenomenon that election analysts and scholars typically overlook or attend to only modestly. This is a mistake. The gun

*The Gun Gap*. Mark R. Joslyn, Oxford University Press (2020). © Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190064822.001.0001

gap is a necessary explanation for an impressive range of political behaviors and attitudes, including voter choice and political participation, assessments of personal safety, preferences for various gun control policies, and support for the death penalty and other punitive measures.

In addition, the gun gap is growing. In the 1970s and 1980s a voter choice gun gap appeared but differences between owners and nonowners' choice for president were fairly small. By the 1990s, it had widened considerably to nearly 20 points. The early 1990s witnessed a significant rise in Congressional activity regarding gun control with the passage of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act and the Assault Weapons Ban. The legislative battles signaled the beginning of a partisan sort, as people's positions on gun control increasingly aligned with their party identification. Party affiliation is now in fact a strong marker of gun ownership. The Trump victory in 2016 yielded the largest voter choice gun gap in recorded history at 31points.

This book also demonstrates that variation across gun owners' attitudes and behaviors can be as consequential as differences between those who own guns and those who do not. Though a notable difference existed between gun owners and nonowners' likelihood of voting for Trump in 2016, those differences expanded considerably with the number of guns owned. Thus gun ownership matters—but how many guns owned often matters more. This pattern holds true across many of the political behaviors and attitudes examined here. In this way gun ownership operates much like other important political identities and groupings. Group members exhibit distinctive behaviors and attitudes that nonmembers do not. And stronger attachments to the group produce even greater distinctions in those behaviors and attitudes.

## What about gun owners?

Despite gun owners' support for Trump in 2016, the flurry of postelection assessments about the voting blocs that mattered most in determining Trump's unexpected victory did not include gun owners. Rather, many analysts concentrated on voting patterns associated with gender, age, and education. To be sure, these groupings are important and demonstrate the political influence of substantial divisions in the electorate. Yet the absence of gun owners in postelection analyses seems at odds with the persistent tumult over guns generally and Trump's strong embrace of the NRA specifically. Perhaps gun owners were overlooked because for the last twelve presidential elections a majority voted Republican in ten of them. It could also be that since Bill Clinton's reelection in 1996, the average vote share of gun owners for a Republican candidate is nearly 60 percent. Consistency and distinctive one-party support may breed neglect.

However, it is noteworthy that women are reliably one-party supporters as well, a majority preferring the Democrat candidate in every election since 1992. Similarly, a majority of young people voted Democrat in 2004 and continued to do so for every election thereafter. The educated? Well, in 1992 a majority of postgraduates voted for Bill Clinton. That educated majority favoring Democrats repeated six more times, and in 2016 nearly 60 percent voted for Hillary Clinton (New York Times 2016).

Perhaps gun owners' political behavior receives relatively little attention because of the curious fact that national exit polls do not regularly ask voters about gun ownership. Exit polls are of course helpful in developing a comprehensive understanding of the candidates, campaign dynamics, and voters' attitudes and

choices that shaped an electoral outcome. If the vote choices of gun owners are not documented, then they cannot be evaluated.

Notably, gun owners are not a small group at the margins of electoral politics. In 2016, approximately 40 percent of households reported having a gun (Gallup 2018). And a significant proportion of gun owners claim NRA membership (Parker et al. 2017). In an illuminating analysis about party identification and gun ownership, Silver (2012) noted that the exit poll question about gun ownership was dropped in 2012. Yet it did appear in 2000, 2004, and 2008. In 2018, gun ownership reappeared in some midterm exit polls.

Fortunately, the General Social Surveys (GSS) and American National Election Studies (ANES) do include questions on gun ownership. The ANES's gun question goes back to 2004, whereas the GSS has asked the same gun ownership question since 1972. Many of the analyses in this book rely on GSS data and to a lesser extent on ANES data.

The omission of gun owners is particularly baffling considering the prominent role of gun politics in the 2016 election. Like few elections before it, 2016 featured gun policy as an important and potentially explosive issue (Zornick 2016). Indeed, the gun rights and gun control movements had perhaps two of the strongest respective presidential candidates imaginable.

In spring 2016, the Pew Research Center found that 72 percent of registered voters said gun policy was very important to their vote—at the time two points ahead of immigration (Pew Research Center 2016). In contrast, in 2012 and 2004, not even half of registered voters believed guns were important to their vote (Pew Research Center 2012). In addition, neither candidate in 2016 appeared to have the edge: 45 percent of voters preferred Trump's approach to gun policy while 46 percent preferred Clinton's.

The horrific shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016, where forty-nine people were killed and fifty-three wounded, intensified the spotlight on guns. It also offered voters a preview of the candidates' vastly different approaches to gun violence. Trump emphasized the national security implications of the shooting while Clinton acknowledged terrorism but gun access as well. Ten days after the shooting, House Democrats staged an extraordinary sit-in to draw attention to failing gun legislation and to press Republican leaders to schedule votes on gun control bills (Drabold 2016).

These flashpoints preceded a general election campaign in which Trump repeatedly accused Clinton of trying to strip away gun rights. He railed against her proposals to tighten gun laws and impose restrictions on gun sales. He highlighted his own NRA membership and boasted about his son's hunting expeditions. Trump clowned, "I get a little concerned about all the guns my boys have . . . they have a lot" (Minter 2016).

The NRA endorsed Trump very early in the election cycle, perhaps as motivated by the threat of a Clinton presidency as by affection for Trump. Speaking at the annual NRA convention, Trump stoked the fears of members: "The Second Amendment is under threat like never before . . . Crooked Hillary Clinton is the most anti-gun, anti-Second Amendment candidate ever to run for office." He later added, "The Second Amendment is on the ballot in November. The only way to save our Second Amendment is to vote for a person that you all know named Donald Trump" (Jaffe 2016). Trump then reminded the crowd that the next president would select at least two Supreme Court Justices, and they could trust him to nominate a person who believed the Second Amendment protected the individual's right to bear arms.

As unequivocal as Trump was in opposition to most gun control laws, Clinton was equally clear on the need for expanded

measures. Clinton's campaign website offered a comprehensive gun reform plan (Clinton 2016). A notable portion of the Democratic National Convention was dedicated to victims of gun violence. And in the third presidential debate, Clinton stated, "We have 33,000 people a year who die from guns. I think we need comprehensive background checks, need to close the online loophole, close the gun show loophole." She later added:

> I understand that Donald's been strongly supported by the NRA, the gun lobby's on his side, they're running millions of dollars of ads against me. And I regret that, because what I would like to see is for people to come together and say of course we're going to protect and defend the Second Amendment, but we're going to do it in a way that tries to save some of these 33,000 lives that we lose every year. (Politico 2016)

It turns out Clinton's position on guns is a harbinger of the 2020 presidential campaign. After dozens of mass shootings in recent years, gun control appears poised to take center stage in the 2020 Democratic presidential race. The Democrats' persistent fears that gun restrictions would tip elections to Republicans seems to have vanished. Many early Democrat presidential contenders have proposed sweeping plans to curb gun violence that include serious restrictions on gun access. Now, more than ever, the political choices of gun owners merit scrutiny.

## Political behavior research

While it is puzzling that not a single 2016 exit poll included a gun ownership question, decades of serious research in political behavior have also ignored gun owners. As we shall see in the chapters

to follow, the most significant research on guns appears in sociology, criminal justice, and to a lesser extent psychology. Recent ethnographies and survey-based research answer many important questions about gun ownership, gun culture, and its social consequences. Yet this nascent literature also exposes the large void created by political scientists' neglect of gun ownership and the political behavior and attitudes it produces.

Possibly this oversight happened because gun owners did not represent a serious political group until the 1980s and 1990s. When the seminal works on political behavior were first published (in the 1940s and 1950s), other divisions such as class, race, and ideology occupied researchers. Furthermore, at that time, there were many more homes with guns. Yes, the NRA existed, but it did not pursue political agendas as intensely as it does today. Hunting was still broadly popular and gun ownership was bipartisan (Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2017a). In short, guns were not political.

Yet starting in the late 1970s, politicization of gun ownership began, and it turned notably sharper in the early 1990s. Gun interests moved to the right of the political spectrum and found a natural home in the Republican Party. By contrast, Democrats presented a case for control of gun ownership, initiating federal legislation that regulated access and use. Gun rights and gun control interests aligned with Republicans and Democrats, respectively. A gun gap followed, revealing substantial differences between owners' and nonowners' political behavior and attitudes. The gap grew slowly but consistently across the decades. Since 2000, it has widened considerably, and this book explores that gap and its dynamics in detail.

Political scholars may have overlooked the gun gap because they thought it merely reflected growing partisan polarization. This is reasonable: as noted, people's stances on gun issues have

increasingly aligned with party positions. But that should not prevent research on American gun owners and their political choices. While parallels exist, attachments to political parties and guns are not the same. In fact, in some cases those attachments generate opposing political preferences. Gun owners are a distinctive group that exhibits systematic patterns of political choice and preference. This book shows that gun ownership exerts an independent effect on vote choice, voter turnout, and several other important political attitudes and policy preferences.

Researchers' interests also tend to accommodate changing political circumstance. For example, the 1980 election witnessed an unprecedented difference between men's and women's preferences for president. Gender gap studies in voter choice arrived thereafter and spawned an immense literature that continues to thrive today (Kittilson 2016). The 2004 election revealed an emerging urban–rural divide that drew attention to rural voters (Gimpel and Karnes 2006). And the historic victory of Barack Obama in 2008 renewed study of African American voters and race politics generally.

The 2016 presidential election should mark the beginning of research on the gun gap. Again, the percentage of gun owners voting for a Republican presidential candidate in 2016 was 31 points greater than the percentage of nonowners voting for a Republican. Across four decades, that is the largest gun gap recorded. Something is going on.

The voter choice gun gap in 2016 was also significantly larger than differences in vote choice between men and women, young and old, and well educated and less educated. Moreover, 2016 witnessed a sizeable gun gap in voter turnout: 11 percent more gun owners reported voting on Election Day than nonowners. Like the vote choice difference, the 2016 voter turnout gun gap reflects a strong political current that has been flowing for

many years. Considering that roughly 40 percent of American households have a gun, now seems to be a good time to examine gun owners more closely.

## Overview of the book

The basics of gun culture are outlined in Chapter 1. The extant literature is broad, intersecting many diverse fields. The purpose here is to identify several research approaches to gun culture, discuss quantitative measures of gun ownership, and develop expectations about gun owners' political behaviors and attitudes.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce gun ownership to the most advanced theoretical and empirical fields in political behavior—voter choice and voter turnout. The idea is to place gun ownership among conventional determinants of political behavior and examine its relative performance. Can this new variable contribute to an established and notably developed literature concerning fundamental political behaviors?

A framework of group influence developed in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) guides the analyses. Using GSS and ANES data, Chapter 2 demonstrates two key empirical regularities. First, compared to nonowners, gun owners are distinctive in their vote choices: they reliably vote Republican. In addition, the gun gap is growing. Since 2004, the divide between the vote choices of gun owners and nonowners has nearly doubled. Second, the more guns an individual owns, the more likely he or she is to vote Republican. Owning multiple guns signal stronger attachments to gun culture and gun owner identity. Throughout the book, owning multiple guns is shown to increase the chances of a given behavior or attitude beyond what a

single gun produces. In this respect, purchasing a gun or guns is an act of some political consequence.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that gun owners are more likely to participate in electoral politics than nonowners. The GSS reported vote and the ANES validated vote measures provide an empirical foundation for the analyses. In addition, gun owners exhibit significant activity in gun organizations and interest in gun policies. Gun owners who owned several guns showed the highest rates of electoral participation and gun policy activism. Both individual and institutional factors motivate gun owners and contribute to the gun gap in political participation.

If Chapters 2 and 3 are prospecting in an established mine, the theoretical work in Chapters 4 and 5 is pioneering. The focus turns to people's beliefs about personal safety and the relationship to gun ownership. This is not a developed area of research. Yet without question personal safety stirs the emotions on both sides of the gun debate. The analyses are punctuated with personal stories to illuminate theoretical connections and ground empirical findings.

Gun owners generally feel safer around guns while nonowners feel threatened. There are two reasons for this difference. First, simply, gun owners are familiar with the weapon; nonowners are not. Gun owners handle guns, shoot them, and consider different styles, brands, and designs. Gun experiences are generally positive and connected to valued social activities and relationships. Nonowners do not experience guns in this way. They might see a gun while visiting another person's home, or in a movie or on the nightly news. Second, the social milieu of gun owners reinforces their dispositions toward feeling safer with a gun. Guns are prevalent among friends and relatives of gun owners, but this is not the case for nonowners. In short, guns are normalized in a gun owner's social world and often absent in a nonowner's.

In addition, Chapter 4 shows that assessments of personal safety are strong predictors of gun policy preferences. Those who feel safe around guns support gun rights legislation. Those who feel threatened and not safe around guns prefer stricter gun regulations. Given the experiential and social differences that produce distinctive assessments of personal safety, and the importance of personal safety to gun policy preferences, it is not surprising that gun policy debates often end in stalemate.

Chapter 5 digs deeper into questions of guns and personal safety. It demonstrates that people's feelings toward gun owners powerfully determine their assessments of personal and public safety. If people like gun owners, they believe concealed carry improves public safety and guns are not threats to personal security. If people dislike gun owners, they feel threatened by guns and disapprove of concealed carry policies. An interpretation of this finding suggests that people are not necessarily threatened by guns but rather by people who own guns. The implications of the analyses are considered in some detail.

The two remaining substantive chapters return to the approach in Chapters 2 and 3, inviting the reader to examine the role of gun ownership within notably mature fields of inquiry. Chapter 6 features the number of gun owners in the United States—not the actual number, but people's estimations of the actual number. Estimates of the size of minority groups were first examined several decades ago by researchers concerned with citizens' political innumeracy. It turns out most people overestimate the gun owner population and also forecast an increase in ownership in the next decade. While these factual misperceptions are interesting, they do have consequences for policy preferences. Controlling for the effects of many other social and political variables, those who overestimate the number of gun owners—which includes many

non-owners—are significantly more supportive of gun rights policies.

Chapter 7 analyzes gun owners' support for the death penalty. Typically, gun ownership is not included in the conventional list of predictors of death penalty preferences. Yet the difference in support between gun owners and nonowners is now larger than between men and women and matches the gap between Whites and Blacks. In general, the gun gap in capital punishment reflects gun owners' broader preferences for punitive measures. While in recent years overall support for the death penalty has decreased, that decline would undoubtedly be much larger if gun owners were not as strongly committed to capital punishment.

The concluding chapter summarizes two central contributions of the book. First, gun owners are a group that merits research attention, and there is much work yet to be done. Second, important variation within the gun owner population exists. Once a gun gap is established, there are secondary divisions captured by the number of guns owned that reveal the power of gun culture and gun owner identity. If one gun increases the probability of a given behavior, four or more guns will sharply increase those probabilities.

Finally, regardless of one's own political desires, it is important to recognize the fact that guns are here to stay. Both sides of the gun debate agree that the significant roles guns play in social and political life are a unique feature of American culture. It therefore makes sense to learn more about guns and begin to grasp the political behavior and attitudinal consequences of gun ownership.

Nevertheless, I took up this project only after much deliberation. I have never owned a gun or been involved in gun politics. The book does not try to advance one side of the gun debate or the other. But a deep dive into the neglected area of gun owners'

political behavior and attitudes could be mistaken for activism and ensnare this book in the tangle of what Haag (2016) referred to as the extraordinary "polemical undergrowth" that characterizes gun debates. While this may happen in any event, my interest is as a scholar of political behavior, nothing more.