2

A gun gap in voter choice

Groups are real, if they have real effects.

(KURT LEWIN, *cited in Campbell et al., The American Voter, 1960, 296*)

Early studies on voting behavior show that group influence is fundamental to analyses of electoral politics. Yet there are countless political, social, and economic groups that may be important to understanding the dynamics of elections. Which groups are essential? Are gun owners a distinct political group that merits the attention of electoral scholars?

At present, those who study political behavior do not employ gun ownership as a group variable, certainly not as a conventional predictor of vote choice. There is in fact virtually no scholarship on gun ownership and vote choice.[1] Using a framework of group influence developed by the authors of the political science classic *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), this chapter shows that gun owners are a formidable group in electoral politics. The vote choices of gun owners are reliably Republican and notably consistent, and owning more than one gun produces an even stronger propensity to vote Republican. In addition, differences between gun owners' and nonowners' vote choices are increasing. There is a gun gap in vote choice—and it is growing.

1 For exceptions, see Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2017c) and Wolpert and Gimpel (1998).

The Gun Gap. Mark R. Joslyn, Oxford University Press (2020). © Oxford University Press.
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Group influence

In *The American Voter,* Campbell et al. developed two conditions that must be met to establish group influence:

1. A group must exhibit distinctive political behavior or beliefs that differentiate members from nonmembers.
2. The distinctiveness of the behavior or belief increases with attachment to the group.

Campbell et al. were principally concerned with secondary groups that "stand at one remove from the political order" (295). Such groups are not expressly political, like parties, but behave politically. Examples included Catholics and union members. The purpose of the union is to provide for the worker; the Catholic Church offers worship to parishioners. Nevertheless, a distinctive Catholic and labor vote often occurred.

Groups that warrant research attention are those capable of exerting considerable—and consistent—influence on individual members' behavior. Researchers can detect that influence by the distinctiveness of members' voting behavior—compared to nonmembers. The degree of difference from nonmembers, and its variation from one election to the next, provides an empirical basis to evaluate group strength and political influence.

Campbell et al. considered the sources of influence as well. Groups cultivated members' beliefs that helped define expectations about what it meant to be a loyal supporter. Even nonmembers may recognize the group by its distinct patterns of beliefs and political positions. In this way, groups may be seen as reference points to the formation of behaviors and attitudes of members and nonmembers alike. For example, African American's

historically strong and consistent support for Democrats undoubtedly influences individual members' own vote choices. The distinctive African American vote may also encourage similar groups to vote Democrat while discouraging others.

Finally, group members exhibit variation in attachment to the collective. Some members will be intensely drawn to the group, notably committed to the group's values and beliefs and faithful to the collective purpose and interests. Others will be marginally attached, their group identification weak and inconsistent. Researchers may then anticipate the distinctiveness of members' voting behavior and attitudes—relative to nonmembers—by the strength of group identification. If members of the group vote distinctly Republican, for example, we can expect members strongly attached to the group to vote even more distinctly Republican than less committed members.

In sum, group influence turns primarily on the presence of two results:

1. Distinctive political behaviors and attitudes seperate group members from nonmembers.
2. Stronger attachment to the group produces even more distinctive behaviors or attitudes.

This simple formulation can ultimately answer the question posed above: Are gun owners a distinct group that deserve greater consideration by electoral scholars?

A gun gap in Americans' vote choice

To determine the distinctiveness of gun owners' electoral choices, the percentages of households that either do or do not own guns

that vote for Republican candidates were calculated from General Social Survey (GSS) data. The GSS time series begins with President Richard Nixon's 1972 reelection victory. Recall, the previous chapter showed that guns gradually emerged as a partisan issue. The early 1990s legislative battles marked the escalation of party conflict and intensified party sorting among the public.

Figure 2.1 shows that during the 1970s and 1980s the preferences of gun owners and nonowners for president were not that different. The gun gap never climbed above 12 points. A majority of owners and nonowners supported the Republican nominee in 1972, 1984, and 1988. Southern Democrat candidates Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton attracted majority support from households that did or did not own guns in 1976 and 1996, respectively. However, the 2000 election marked a sharper trajectory, and since then there appears to be a growing gun gap. The 2016 difference of 31 points surpassed the largest gaps during

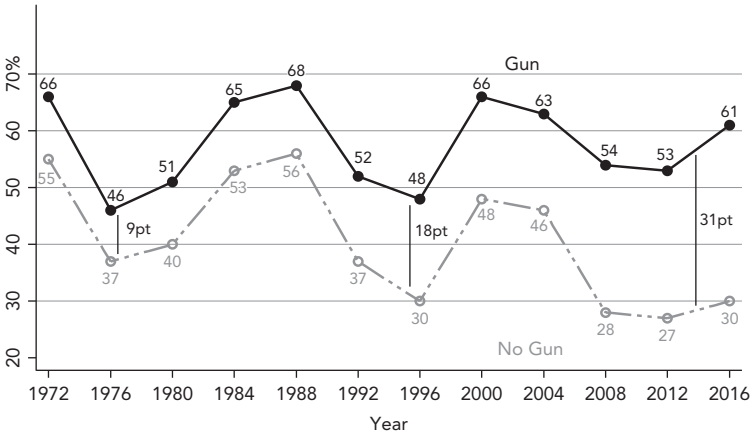

FIGURE 2.1 A growing gun gap in America's vote

Weighted data. Figures are rounded. Percent voting Republican.

Source: GSS 1972–2016, 2018

Barack Obama's victories in 2008 and 2012. Donald Trump's gun gap is in fact over three times larger than in 1976. In addition, in ten of the twelve elections examined, a majority of gun owners cast their ballots for Republicans.

This consistency in vote preference illustrates the electoral strength of gun owners. Even when the country elected a Democrat in 1992, 2008, and 2012, a majority of gun owners were loyal to Republicans. In other words, the larger electoral forces in those years pushing toward a Democrat victory did not overwhelm gun owners' penchant to vote Republican. There are, however, two exceptions. In 1976 and 1996 a majority of gun owners supported the Democrat. Here the larger forces penetrated the group and were strong enough to pull a majority of gun owners to the Democrat camp. Nevertheless, the strength of the group remains detectible in those years by comparing gun owners' vote choice to the population of nonowners. The 9-point spread in 1976 does imply a modest group impact, yet the 18-point difference in 1996 shows the distinctiveness of gun owners even in a challenging electoral environment.

Comparing gaps

It is difficult to determine the significance of the gun gap without a proper standard of comparison. Partisan gaps in vote choice are not a reasonable benchmark. Virtually every group division would appear trivial in relation to differences between Democrats and Republicans. An appropriate yardstick should include secondary groups, those not explicitly political. Several well-known secondary groups that received widespread attention during the 2016 presidential contest—and perennial favorites among analysts—are ideal points of reference to evaluate the size and growth of the gun gap.

For example, Hillary Clinton's historic rise to the Democrat nomination and Trump's controversial comments about women raised serious questions about whether the longstanding gender gap in presidential voting would grow in 2016. Most analysts suspected there would be a large gender gap, perhaps even a gender chasm. They were right: 53 percent of men voted for Trump compared to 42 percent of women. The 11-point gap surpassed the previous record of 10 points in 2000 and 8 points in 1980 (Center for American Women and Politics 2017).

The 2016 campaign also witnessed the emergence of a newer division created by disparities in educational attainment. Trump flatly declared, "I love the poorly-educated!" (Hafner 2016) The largest division between high school graduates and those with advanced degrees did occur in 2016. Trump won voters without college degrees (51 percent) yet registered the worst showing among people with advanced degrees (37 percent) since George H. W. Bush in 1992 (36 percent). However, Trump's percentage among high school graduates was the highest since George W. Bush in 2004. Clinton's impressive performance among the group with advanced degrees, which matched Obama's high of 58 percent, of course influenced these percentages (New York Times 2016). Nevertheless, the 14-point education gap in 2016 was nearly double the second largest disparity of 8 points in 2004.

Finally, in 2016, millennials nearly matched baby boomers for the first time in terms of share of the electorate (Fry 2018). Democrats were especially excited by the prospects, as millennials generally identify with Democrats and preferred many of the policies advanced by Clinton (Pew Research Center 2018). Obama's victory in 2008, and to a lesser extent 2012, attracted many young voters. Similar to Obama, Clinton represented a historic first, and the policy discrepancies between her and Trump appeared favorable to extending the generational gap that had long advantaged Democrats.

Since 1992, the majority of voters aged eighteen to twenty-nine consistently cast their ballots for a Democrat. Before 1992, the youth vote fluctuated between Democrat and Republican. The older age group (sixty-five and up) alternated as well, decisively supporting Nixon in 1972 and Ronald Reagan in 1984. The 2004 victory of George W. Bush marked the first of four consecutive elections that a majority of the older group supported a Republican. Trump continued the trend among the older group, attracting 53 percent of their votes. Trump did perform a bit better than expected among voters aged eighteen to twenty-nine, collecting 37 percent of youth voters—this surpassed both John McCain and Bob Dole's share and matched that of Mitt Romney (New York Times 2016). The 2016 gap between age groups was considerable (16 points) but fell short of the gap in 2012 and was substantially smaller than the largest gap of 21 points recorded in 2008.

Figure 2.2 compares the gun, gender, age, and education gaps. The gender gap reflects the difference between the percentage of men and women voting Republican. The age gap equals the difference between the older age group (sixty-five years and up) and those aged eighteen to twenty-nine. The education gap represents the differences between those with a high school diploma or less and a post-bachelor degree. Positive gaps therefore connote stronger Republican preferences among men than women, for the older age group than the younger one, and among the less educated than the most educated.

The gun gap clearly exceeds the others. For example, in 2016 the gun gap more than doubled the size of the gender gap and surpassed the largest education gap by over 15 points. In addition, the gun gap is reliable and increasing, falling below 10 points only once, in 1976. By contrast, the gender, education, and age gaps exhibit considerable variation, most often fluctuating below 10 points. In sum, the relative size and persistence of the gun gap

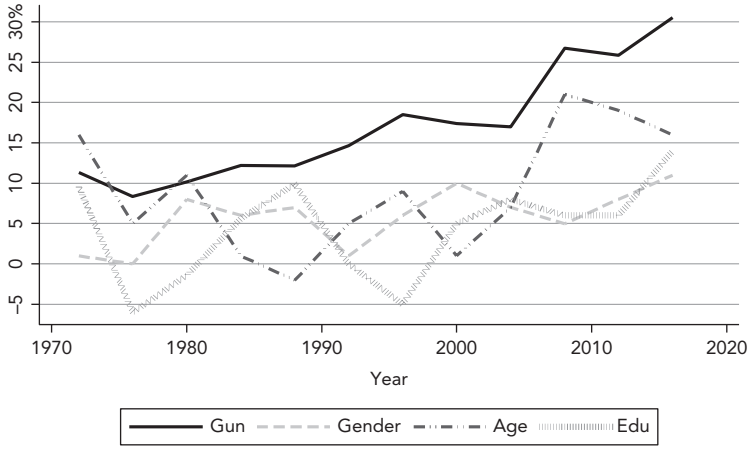

FIGURE 2.2 Gun, gender, age, and education gaps

Source: New York Times exit polls & GSS 1972–2016, 2018

begs the question of why research on gun owners' political behavior and attitudes is so scarce. For all the research on gender, age, and to a certain extent education, there is simply no comparable body of accumulated wisdom on gun owners. The analyses in this and later chapters demonstrate the value of such research.

In any event, it is now important to examine the gun gap with a model that isolates the impact of gun ownership from related variables, especially party identification, to determine whether the differences exhibited are spurious. That is, a multivariate model is necessary to peel away the effects of other variables on vote choice and yield an improved estimate of the impact of gun ownership.

Sorting out the contribution of gun ownership

To this point, the evidence for gun ownership turns on descriptive statistics, which may tell only part of the story. Recall, Figure 1.4 in

Chapter 1 showed that party identification is strongly connected to gun ownership. Compared to Republicans, Democrats and independents are less likely to own guns, and Democrat and independent ownership levels declined over the past several decades. Perhaps, then, the impact of gun ownership exhibited in Figure 2.1 is simply masking the powerful effects of party identification. In addition, there are other variables to consider. Studies link gender to vote choice and gun ownership: compared to men, women are less likely to vote Republican and to own guns. Thus, it is possible that gun ownership is not the cause of differing vote choice but rather serves as an indicator of another variable, such as gender. Similarly, African Americans represent a key Democrat constituency and reliably support gun control measures. Rural residents, those living in the South, Protestants, and conservatives are more likely to possess firearms and prefer Republican candidates. Finally, educational attainment, income, and age are conventional predictors of vote choice and gun ownership. When controlling for these factors, does gun ownership remain an important predictor of support for Republican presidential candidates? The model calculates the change in probability of voting Republican between gun owners and nonowners. Model estimates are displayed in Table 2.1. Numbers in bold identify statistically significant coefficients.

Results demonstrate that ideology and party identification are by far the strongest contributors to vote choice. This can be seen by comparing the change in probability across the different coefficients. For example, the ideology coefficient in 1972 expresses that the probability of an extreme conservative voting for a Republican candidate is 0.55 larger than an extreme liberal. In that same year, Democrats were 0.25 less likely to vote for Nixon than independents while Republicans were 0.33 more likely to vote for Nixon than Independents. Among the "secondary groups" (those not explicitly political), Blacks show

TABLE 2.1 Predictors of voting for Republican presidential candidates (1972–2016)

Variables	*1972*	*1976*	*1980*	*1984*	*1988*	*1992*	*1996*	*2000*	*2004*	*2008*	*2012*	*2016*
Gun owner	–0.01	0.03	**0.05**	**0.04**	**0.04**	**0.06**	**0.05**	**0.08**	0.00	**0.09**	**0.05**	**0.16**
Gender	0.01	0.01	**–0.05**	0.01	0.00	0.01	**–0.05**	0.02	0.00	–0.01	–0.00	**–0.11**
Age	0.03	0.00	**–0.06**	**–0.11**	**–0.09**	**–0.08**	0.05	**–0.22**	0.06	0.01	–0.02	0.13
Education	**–0.14**	**0.12**	–0.06	**–0.18**	**–0.25**	0.03	**0.23**	–0.09	–0.09	–0.06	–0.03	**–0.30**
Democrat	**–0.25**	**–0.31**	**–0.35**	**–0.35**	**–0.37**	**–0.38**	**–0.30**	**–0.44**	**–0.35**	**–0.32**	**–0.30**	**–0.34**
Republican	**0.33**	**0.43**	**0.41**	**0.37**	**0.33**	**0.47**	**0.42**	**0.48**	**0.49**	**0.45**	**0.41**	**0.37**
Ideology	**0.55**	**0.42**	**0.39**	**0.50**	**0.48**	**0.54**	**0.53**	**0.60**	**0.60**	**0.60**	**0.60**	**0.77**
Rural	0.01	–0.04	–0.06	–0.03	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.01	0.03	**0.23**
Protestant	**0.11**	0.02	0.01	0.03	**0.05**	0.04	**0.10**	**0.09**	**0.09**	**0.06**	0.04	**0.12**
Black	**–0.52**	**–0.27**	**–0.48**	**–0.49**	**–0.27**	**–0.37**	**–0.25**	**–0.48**	**–0.43**	**–0.32**	**–0.30**	**–0.40**
Income	**0.15**	0.11	**0.25**	**0.18**	0.08	**0.13**	0.08	–0.08	–005	0.04	**0.14**	**0.37**
South	**0.16**	–0.04	0.00	**0.13**	**0.08**	0.05	0.00	0.06	**0.06**	**0.17**	**0.08**	**0.16**
West	0.01	0.05	**0.09**	0.03	0.01	–0.06	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.00
East	0.01	–0.01	**0.06**	0.03	0.05	**–0.07**	–0.02	**0.10**	–0.06	0.03	–0.01	0.13

Entries are the change in probability of voting for a Republican candidate when a variable increases from its minimum to maximum. Estimates in bold are statistically significant. $p < 0.05$. One-tail.

Source: GSS 1972–2016, 2018

notable strength and consistency in vote choice: in every election, they are less likely than Whites to vote for a Republican.

Aside from ideology, party, and race, gun ownership is the most consistent predictor. Differences between gun owners and nonowners did not reach statistical significance in the 1970s but did so throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Beginning in 1992, the gun gap became more consistent and larger—the exception is 2004. In 2008, the estimated influence of gun ownership doubled the 1984 and 1988 estimates. The 2016 election witnessed the strongest statistical association between gun ownership and vote choice. Gun owners were 0.16 more likely than non-owners to vote for Trump.

Meanwhile, the gender gap appeared significant for the 1980, 1996, and 2016 contests. Divisions between levels of education were not large enough to produce dependably significant coefficients, nor did education show consistency in vote choice. For example, educational attainment was an important predictor in six of the twelve elections, and in these elections the effect size of education was notable (it was strongest in 2016). In four of those elections, education reduced the likelihood of voting for a Republican, but in two more—1976 and 1996—education increased it. Age exhibited a reliable direction of association, but in just five of the twelve elections.

The results thus show that gun ownership is a worthy predictor of vote choice. It can stand by itself, independent of other strong political group variables, and contribute to our understanding of Election Day choice. Among secondary groups, it is a relatively strong and consistent predictor and appears to be growing in influence. Among "secondary groups," only race exhibits a more robust and consistent relationship to vote choice.[2]

2 Table 2.1 model estimates for 2016 show that Trump's victory produced the largest marginal effects not only for gun ownership but also for gender, education, ideology, rural, Protestant, and income. The effects for gender and education mirror the historic gaps shown

A short replication

It can be useful to examine relevant associations with an entirely different dataset. Survey design and methodology vary from one organization to another. These differences can influence data inference and are important enough to consider alternative data when available.[3] Beginning in 2004, American National Election Studies (ANES) included a gun ownership question. The 2004 through 2016 ANES data thus represent an opportunity to replicate findings from the GSS.

The same independent variables were employed for the ANES models.[4] Table 2.2 displays the marginal effect coefficients for gun ownership derived from the fully specified models. Recall the estimates show the change in probability from nonowners to gun owners in voting for a Republican candidate.

Once again, gun ownership did not factor into vote choice in 2004. In 2008, the marginal effect of gun ownership surpassed the GSS estimate as it did for 2012 and 2016. Thus, the effects of gun ownership do appear in the ANES data and are a bit stronger

in Figure 2.2. The estimates in Table 2.1 also demonstrate the unprecedented degree of ideological polarization in 2016. The magnitude of differences in the probability of voting Republican between an extreme liberal and extreme conservative were striking (0.77). Similarly, the 2016 election revealed a new fault line between rural and urban voters and perhaps reignited an existing one between wealthy and poor.

3 For example, the GSS is preferred for the lengthy time series on gun ownership. However, it is less satisfying regarding campaign-specific variables. The GSS is conducted every two years, but in the months before elections. Respondents are asked to recall vote choices from a previous election. The considerable time span between voting behavior and reporting that behavior then raises questions about "recall error," memory lapse, or misremembering. Theoretically, there is no reason to believe gun owners are more or less susceptible to reporting "errors" in vote choice. However, the American National Election Studies (ANES) offers data designed specifically for campaign behavior and attitudes. People are surveyed immediately after the election, generally within a month or two.

4 The rural to urban residence measure was excluded because ANES does not offer a consistent variable across the 2004–2016 elections.

TABLE 2.2 Replication of vote choice model (ANES)—gun ownership coefficients

	2004	*2008*	*2012*	*2016*
Gun ownership	–0.00	**0.19**	**0.09**	**0.17**

Gun ownership coefficients are taken from fully specified model controlling for gender, age, education, party identification, ideology, Protestant, race, income, and region. Bold signifies statistical significance. Entries reflect changes in probability of voting Republicans between gun owners and nonowners.

Source: ANES 2004–2016

than the GSS estimates. This evidence from an entirely different dataset and study design increases confidence in the overall conclusions regarding gun ownership and vote choice.

The curious reader may wonder what happened to the gun gap in 2004. One explanation centers on the 2000 election. Al Gore's loss generated considerable thinking among Democrat leaders about guns and electoral strategy. They believed gun owners' support for Bush in 2000 was key to the GOP victory. Figure 2.1 shows that gun owners supported Bush in large numbers; only Bush senior in 1988 attracted a greater share of the gun owner vote. Democrat leaders therefore sought a moderate, less confrontational tone, a so-called third-way gun strategy (Koppelman 2007). Victory in 2004 could be achieved with a lighter approach to guns, calling for a reasonable balance between gun rights and gun responsibilities.

Compared to 2000, the 2004 presidential campaign witnessed a genuine softening of gun rhetoric. The Democratic Party platform explicitly recognized that Democrats "will protect Americans' Second Amendment right to own firearms." The 2000

platform did not mention the Second Amendment and listed Democrat gun control legislative victories, including the Brady Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban. In 2004, Democrat candidate John Kerry was touted as an accomplished marksman and hunter. Kerry frequently cited his support for the Second Amendment and highlighted the fact that he owned a gun. Kerry invited two dozen journalists on a hunting trip in the all-important swing state of Ohio, where hunting is popular, and the presidential candidate bagged a goose and carried a shotgun (Wilgoren 2004). In short, in 2004 Democrats tried to avoid politicizing gun differences, and the statistical analyses suggest they were largely successful. Kerry did not win, however, and the third-way strategy was largely abandoned thereafter.

Attachment to gun ownership

The next question considers attachment to gun ownership and whether it enhances the association between guns and voting Republican. In other words, does the likelihood of voting for a Republican candidate increase with a stronger attachment to gun ownership? The GSS data do not offer such a measure. However, recall in the previous chapter that the ANES 2016 data included the number of guns owned. That number ranged from one to twenty-plus guns (see Figure 1.2). This can be used as a proxy for attachment to guns and attendant gun culture. Owning more guns implies a deeper connection to gun culture and the political choices of gun owners. Using the same multivariate model as before but applying a measure of the number of guns owned, the probabilities of voting for Trump were calculated across categories of the number of guns owned. To ensure that there were enough gun owners for proper statistical analyses, the original distribution of guns owned was combined into five categories: zero guns,

66 percent; one gun, 10 percent; two guns, 7 percent; three guns, 4 percent; and four or more guns, 13 percent.

Figure 2.3 displays the calculated probabilities drawn from the full model of vote choice. The shaded area represents a 95 percent confidence interval that expresses the range of estimated outcomes. At zero guns, the likelihood of voting for Trump was 0.44. For an otherwise average voter who owns one gun, that likelihood was increased by 0.05. Two guns stretched that probability to 0.54, three guns to nearly 0.60. People who own four guns or more had a 0.64 likelihood of voting Republican, a 45 percent increase from the zero-gun baseline. In comparison to conventional predictors such as education and income, the number of guns owned generated a greater impact on vote choice. Moving from low to high on each variable, guns increased the overall likelihood of voting for Trump by about 0.20. Education decreased

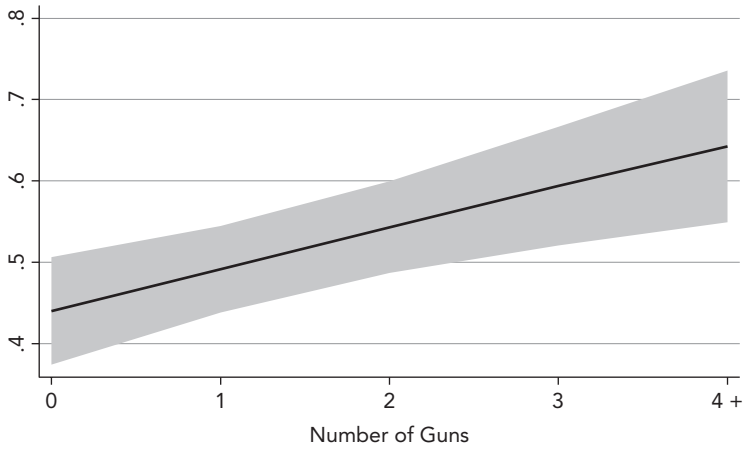

FIGURE 2.3 Probability of voting for Trump and number of guns in household

Source: ANES 2016

that probability by (–0.18), as did income (–0.16)—negative coefficients reflect a decrease in probability of voting for Trump.

Figure 2.3 does strongly imply a connection between gun ownership and Trump's electoral success. It is not simply gun ownership that matters; rather, owning additional guns strengthens the political choices that a single gun favors. The National Rifle Association (NRA) likely understands this point well. Owning twenty-five guns intensifies the bond to the organization and to gun culture and identity well beyond what a single gun can produce. And with that type of devotion, a Republican vote is even more likely.

The large number of guns manufactured and purchased annually often makes headlines because of the connections to crime and violence. With so many guns, something bad will inevitably happen. And this may be true. But while gun control advocates ponder why people desire yet another rifle or handgun, a tangible political effect of more guns owned is reinforcement of the Republican brand. Figure 2.3 makes this clear.

Down the ballot

If gun ownership represents a robust group variable, it should manifest as a predictor of vote choice regardless of political office. Indeed, a group's political strength can be ascertained by how consistent members' vote choices are down the ballot. For example, after voting for a presidential candidate, do gun owners vote for House and Senate Republicans as well?

Table 2.3 displays the percentages of gun owners and nonowners who voted for House and Senate Republicans. The pattern is clear: for every election, gun owners are more likely to vote for Senate and House Republicans than nonowners. Support among gun owners never dropped below a majority, and

TABLE 2.3 Gun ownership and vote choice for Republican House and Senate candidates

	2004		*2008*		*2012*		*2016*	
Office	gun	no gun	gun	no gun	gun	no gun	gun	no gun
House	62	35	56	38	65	41	62	42
Senate	62	32	63	36	60	36	54	35

Entries are percentages of the group voting Republican.

Source: ANES weighted data

percentage differences between groups were generally greater than 20 points. Applying the multivariate model, gun ownership emerged as a significant predictor in seven of the eight contests. The exception was the 2008 House race. That year witnessed the smallest spread between gun owners and nonowners, at 18 points.

Figure 2.4 traces the impact of owning several firearms on voting for Senate Republicans in 2016. In the absence of a gun, voters were notably resistant to a Republican candidate—0.36. However, owning one firearm weakened that resistance, and owning a second weapon took the probability of voting Republican to nearly 0.50. Moreover, it is a good bet that people owning four or more guns will vote for a Republican senatorial candidate. In all, adding guns to the average voter increased the likelihood of voting for a 2016 Republican Senate candidate by approximately 0.22.

In summary, for presidential and congressional elections, gun ownership figures strongly into candidate choice. Gun owners cohere well across different levels of electoral choice, choosing largely Republican candidates for the White House, the House

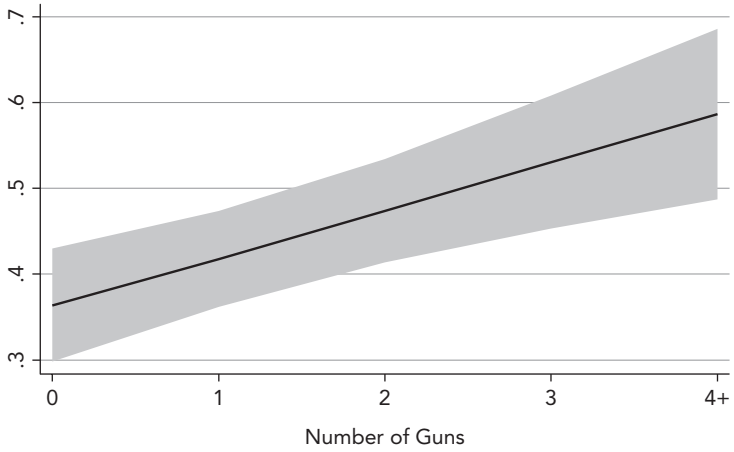

FIGURE 2.4 Probability of voting for Senate Republican and number of guns

Source: ANES 2016

of Representatives, and the Senate. The pattern is striking considering the vastly different electoral environments across decades and within states and congressional districts. For years, gun owners voted Republican and the gap between gun owners and nonowners expanded. A stronger attachment to guns strengthens that vote choice. Owning multiple guns signifies a deeper connection to gun owner identity and thereby increases the likelihood of voting Republican.

Party and gun ownership

To this point, the data show that a gun gap exists *independent* of conventional determinants of vote choice, including the strong effects of party and ideology. Now, an important question centers on party identification. Is there a gun gap for Democrats, for

independents, and for Republicans? In other words, does the gun gap persist *within* party categories?

In Figure 2.5 gun gaps are presented for Republicans, independents, and Democrats. Three results are noteworthy. First, among independents, the gun gaps are impressive. Across every election, a greater percentage of independent gun owners voted for Republican candidates compared to independent nonowners. The average gaps across the twelve elections examined is approximately 15 percent. A record high of nearly 24 percent occurred in Obama's 2008 victory and a low of 7 percent in Carter's 1976 win.

The 2008 election illustrates a broader pattern. On the whole, over 50 percent of independents supported Obama. The independents' disposition in 2008 thus favored Democrats, a preference at odds with gun owners. Independents who owned guns were drawn to McCain even though larger electoral forces drew

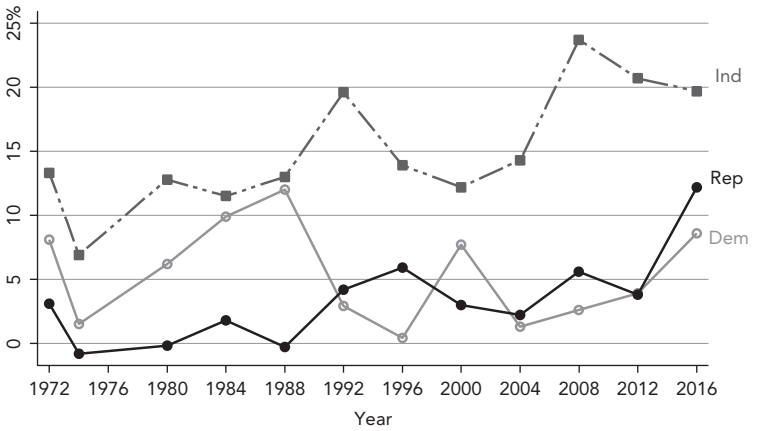

FIGURE 2.5 Gun gaps for each party

Weighted data

Source: GSS 1972–2016, 2018

nonowner independents away from the GOP. Only 25 percent of nonowner independents voted for McCain, while nearly 50 percent of independent gun owners did. In the four elections in which independents favored the Democratic candidate (1992, 1996, 2004, and 2008), the average Independent gun gap was 4 percent larger than when independents sided with Republicans. In these elections, gun-owning independents exhibited impressive resistance to the broader preferences expressed by independents.

Second, some of the gun gaps among Democrats and Republicans are surprisingly large. The Democrat gun gap in 1984 and 1988 reached double digits, and in 1972, 2000, and 2016 it was about 8 percent. In these years, a Republican won the presidency. A relatively large percentage of Democrat gun owners separated from their party and voted Republican. For example, in 1984 and 1988, about 32 percent of Democrat gun owners voted for Reagan and Bush, respectively. These percentages dropped notably in 2000 to 18 percent and in 2016 to 12 percent. These two recent elections show increasing party strength. Only 10 percent of Democrats who did not own guns voted for Bush in 2000, and a small fraction—3.4 percent—of Democrats who did not own guns voted for Trump in 2016. So even within a context of partisan polarization, the gun gap for Democrats is positive and the average across the years is 5 percent.

Finally, at times, gun ownership adds significantly to the Republican propensity to vote for GOP candidates, such as in 1992, 1996, and 2008. These were elections that Democrats won and a smaller percentage of Republicans than expected voted for their party's candidate. For example, in 1996 only 80 percent of Republicans who did not own guns voted for Dole, while 86 percent of Republican gun owners did so. In 2008, 86 percent of Republicans who did not own guns favored McCain compared to 92 percent of Republican gun owners. But in 2016, the presence

of a strong gun rights candidate in Trump, and a strong gun control candidate in Clinton, caused a very large percentage of gun-owning Republicans to support the GOP—96.8 percent. Combined with only modest support for Trump among Republicans who did not own guns—84.6 percent—produced the largest Republican gun gap in the series, 12.2 percent. The particular circumstances of every election cycle are thus important in determining the extent of the gun gap within party categories.

The general results in Figure 2.5 speak to the strong anchoring effects of guns on vote choice. Among Democrats and Republicans the gaps can be considerable. Larger gaps among Democrats demonstrate the resistance of gun-owning Democrats to the influence of their own party: a significant percent will vote for a Republican. Gaps among Republicans, however, are often the result of higher defections among Republicans who do not own guns. Gun-owning Republicans stay the course even though some in their party prefer the opposition. Gun-owning Republicans continue to vote Republican regardless. For independents, owning a gun makes a substantial difference. Independent gun owners are drawn to Republican candidates in large numbers. And, during strong Democrat years, gun ownership helps secure independents to the GOP. In most election cycles, well over 50 percent of gun-owning independents voted for the GOP.

Feelings toward presidential candidates

Vote choice is an appealing measure, but it lacks dimension. Voters must choose, yet that choice conceals much. Did the voter like or dislike both candidates? Did the voter like one candidate but not the other? The answers to these questions may

help us understand more about gun owners and the gun gap. Fortuitously, ANES data include a measure of how people feel about the candidates. Using a scale of 0 to 100, people are asked to rate their feelings toward the candidates. Values below 50 signify less favorable and "colder" feelings. Values above 50 reflect more favorable and "warmer" feelings. A value of 50 means people do not feel particularly cold or warm toward the candidate.

Table 2.4 shows gun owners' average feelings toward the candidates from 2004 to 2016. It is noteworthy that Trump received the lowest average rating among Republican candidates. He is the only Republican whom gun owners rated below 50. Gun owners certainly did not like Clinton either: her 32-point average ranks dead last among Democrats, well below Obama in 2012, at 45.5. The 2016 election thus stands out as the choice among least-liked candidates. While 61 percent of gun owners did cast their ballots for Trump, it does appear that dislike for Clinton weighed in that choice.

The feelings scale also offers variation. The standard deviation reflects the spread of gun owners' feelings. A lower standard

TABLE 2.4 Gun owners' feelings toward presidential candidates

	2016		*2012*		*2008*		*2004*	
Stats	Trump	Clinton	Romney	Obama	McCain	Obama	Bush	Kerry
Mean	45.6	32.1	53.2	45.5	55.1	54.1	64.2	47.7
% at 0	21.7	29.3	10.9	20.3	5.4	9.7	9.9	8.9
% at 100	6.1	2.9	7.6	9.5	4.6	10.3	22.2	5.5
Std. dev.	34.5	32.0	30.2	34.6	24.9	29.6	32.6	27.8

Pre-election average feeling thermometers. Scale 0–100.

Source: ANES 2004–2016

deviation indicates gun owners' feelings tend to be close to the group's average; a higher deviation means feelings are spread out over a wider range. The lower deviation then implies that gun owners are in greater agreement about a candidate than a higher deviation. Trump's standard deviation showed considerable divisions among gun owners. Besides Obama in 2012, Trump's standard deviation was the largest in the series. Trump is frequently deemed a polarizing figure, and this appears true among gun owners as well. Slightly over a fifth of gun owners felt very cold or unfavorable toward Trump, rating him at 0. Four percent felt neither positive nor negative at 50, and 6 percent felt very favorable at 100. The large percentage of gun owners that felt very cold toward Trump at zero is surprising: no other Republican comes close to eliciting this level of negative affect.

Remarkably, gun owners' feelings toward Trump look similar to gun owners' feelings toward Obama in 2012. And feelings toward Trump are far less favorable than feelings toward Obama in 2008. During the 2008 campaign, the NRA warned about Obama's record on guns and announced that he represented "a serious threat to Second Amendment liberties" (Farley 2008). Obama's own comments during the primaries referring to working-class voters as "clinging to their guns and religion" likely stirred negative emotions in some gun owners (Pilkington 2008). However, at the Democratic National Convention Obama expressed a willingness to find common ground, something he often sought throughout his first term: "The reality of gun ownership may be different for hunters in rural Ohio than they are for those plagued by gang violence in Cleveland, but don't tell me we can't uphold the Second Amendment while keeping AK-47s out of the hands of criminals" (Childress 2012).

The data in Table 2.4 suggest gun owners did not perceive Obama as necessarily threatening in 2008 and on average felt

about as favorable toward him as McCain. In terms of legislative results, gun owners' feelings about Obama were validated. He immediately signed legislation that allowed people to openly carry guns in national parks and later a bill that permitted Amtrak passengers to carry guns in checked baggage (Dwyer 2012).[5]

The absence of gun control legislation in Obama's first term stands in contrast to the marked increase in gun sales. Throughout Obama's presidency, some gun owners believed he would crack down on gun ownership, especially semiautomatic rifles. As a result, gun sales soared to record levels. After several high-profile mass shootings, Obama's rhetoric and executive initiatives only heightened gun owners' suspicions. By 2012, gun owners felt increasing anxiety about a second term, and feelings toward Obama dropped nearly 10 points to below the neutral point of 50.

Gun owners were equally skeptical of Trump (Beckett 2016b). He represented the New York wealthy establishment, lived an extravagant urban lifestyle, accumulated a checkered record on gun issues, and was known to make deals. Once elected, could Trump be trusted to protect the Second Amendment and support hunting and sport shooting interests, or would he be more likely to strike deals with Democrats? Those questions were answered in part by the NRA's early endorsement of Trump and the growing realization that Clinton could be the next president. In this regard, the differences in feelings toward candidates, as opposed to average levels, speak to the underlying preference. In 2016, that difference was 13.5 points. In 2012, gun owners favored Romney by 7.7 points and McCain in 2008 by a mere 1.1 points. In the only other Republican victory—2004—the difference in feelings was 16.5 points.

5 The likelihood of Obama realizing passage of gun control measures undoubtedly decreased when Democrats lost the House majority in the 2010 midterm elections.

In sum, Table 2.4 shows that gun owners expressed surprising variation in their feelings toward presidential candidates. They clearly liked Bush: over a fifth of gun owners reported the strongest favorable feelings toward Bush, far better than any other Republican candidate. They were not as enamored with Trump: over a fifth reported a 0 to reflect intensely negative feelings. Only Clinton received that degree of gun owner antipathy. In another surprise, gun owners were favorable toward Obama in 2008. In fact, 10 percent registered the highest favorability score of 100, second only to Bush in the percentage of gun owners willing to express such strong positive emotions. While their feelings for Obama decreased notably four years later, the feeling thermometers reveal that Democratic candidates can elicit positive sentiment from gun owners and in doing so produce gun owner votes.

Nonvoters

So far, the analyses have concentrated on voters, but of course millions of citizens do not vote: in 2016 nearly 40 percent of eligible voters did not cast a ballot. For some presidential elections this percentage was even higher (McDonald 2018). Researchers are interested in nonvoters because they may in fact participate in the future, they represent a significant untapped portion of the electorate, and they are included in most public opinion polls. Furthermore, nonvoters are different than voters. Nonvoters, compared to voters, tend to be younger, make less money, are less educated, are members of a minority group, and are not as strongly attached to parties or ideology (Pew Research Center 2012). In addition, researchers discovered that nonvoters possess different policy and candidate preferences than voters

(Leighley and Nagler 2014). The demographic characteristics of nonvoters do strongly point to a preference for Democrats (Campbell et al. 1960; Bump 2018). According to Pew Research Center study (2012), nonvoters favored Obama over Romney by a wide margin (59 percent to 24 percent) and Clinton over Trump (Leonhardt 2018).

So does the gun gap persist among nonvoters? On the one hand, the gun gap may be even stronger. Nonvoters are not as attached as voters to the party system nor as clearly invested in an ideological worldview. In the absence of strong political predispositions, a greater role for "secondary group" influences such as gun owners can be expected—such as the case of Independents illustrated above. On the other hand, the connection between gun ownership and the Republican Party may be undermined by a less politically committed group of gun owners. Campbell et al. (1960) discovered that nonvoters are more responsive to political stimuli that influenced popular attitudes, such as fashionable candidates and election winners. Gun-owning nonvoters may be attracted to such stimuli, drawn to celebrated figures and prevailing opinion. Indeed, the very characteristics that produce abstention on Election Day could weaken or even change the preference of the nonvoter gun group.

The GSS followed up with people who said they did not vote by asking "Who would you have voted for, for President, if you had voted?" Figure 2.6 compares the gun gap of nonvoters to the gun gap of voters. They are very similar. The trajectory is now a familiar one. In the 1970s and 1980s, differences existed as gun owners supported Republican candidates to a greater degree than nonowners. However, differences were not large. Beginning in 1992, the gun gaps increased. By 2004, the nonvoter gun gap inched ahead of the voter gun gap.

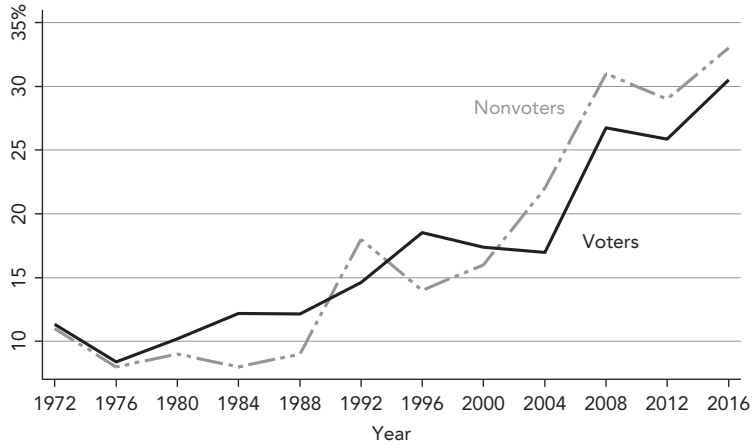

FIGURE 2.6 Gun gaps for voters and nonvoters

Weighted data

Source: GSS data 1972–2016, 2018

In sum, the gun gap among nonvoters is virtually the same as the gun gap among voters. The gun gap has increased over time and grew substantially during the 1990s and 2000s. Even for a group so modestly attached to politics as nonvoters, owning a gun imbues a political effect and consistently draws a preference for Republicans.

Chapter summary

To some, the results in this chapter may seem obvious. Conventional wisdom suggests gun owners are Republicans, so to show that gun owners vote for Republican candidates hardly seems groundbreaking. Yet conventional wisdom must

be examined and critiqued. Yes, gun owners do cast their votes for Republican candidates, but in some years, a majority of gun owners supported the Democrats (1976, 1996). More importantly, the differences in gun owners' and nonowners' vote choices are increasing. There is a growing divide, and not just a partisan divide, but division by gun ownership. In 2016, Trump attracted over 60 percent of the gun owner vote. That was an 8 percentage point increase over Romney in 2012 and 7 percentage points better than McCain in 2008. Since 2004, the gap between gun owners' and nonowners' vote choice for Republicans has nearly doubled. The difference in 2004 was 17 percent; by 2016 it was 31.

And there is more. Support for a Republican candidate rises as the number of guns owned increases. The association is strong and compares well with other established determinants of vote choice such as education and income. Ownership of multiple guns signals a stronger attachment to gun culture and gun owner identity. This in turn strengthens the propensity to support a Republican candidate. This is true at the presidential level as well as for House and Senate races.

In addition, the gun gap can emerge *within* parties. Across election cycles, significant Democrat and Republican gun gaps appeared, demonstrating the strength of guns to influence vote choice even in a context of strong partisan polarization. The influence of gun possession can be seen clearly among independents. The gap between the preference of independent gun owners and nonowners for Republican candidates is especially large. The relatively strong and consistent preference among gun owners represents an important Republican constituency. Trump seemed to recognize this more so than recent GOP candidates. His gun message was explicit and strongly delivered. It resonated with

many gun owners and repulsed nonowners. As a consequence, Trump produced the largest gun gap across the twelve elections examined.

However, we must be careful when classifying gun owners. Probing their feelings toward the candidates shows a great deal of variation and surprising evaluations. Trump was not well liked by gun owners. A stunning proportion of gun owners reported the most negative feelings possible toward Trump; only Clinton prompted more unfavorable feelings. In 2008, gun owners' affective evaluations of Obama were actually better than those for Trump. Recall, Obama generated much anxiety among gun rights interests, who cast Obama as a genuine threat to gun owners. Yet the data showed that gun owners on average were favorable: 10 percent of gun owners in fact reported the most favorable feelings toward Obama.

Finally, the gun gap among nonvoters tracks nearly the same path as the voters' gun gap. If they had voted, nonvoters who owned guns would have consistently supported Republicans. The proportion of nonvoter gun owners who supported Republicans was always larger than the support given by nonvoters generally. The gun gap among nonvoters increased over time, just as it did for voters. Voters and nonvoters differ in many respects, including preferred policy outcomes and candidate preferences. Yet when comparing nonvoters with guns to nonvoters without, that comparison looks strikingly similar to the same comparison among voters.

So let's revisit the two criteria established by the authors of *The American Voter* to identify group influence:

1. A group must exhibit a distinct political behavior that differentiates members from nonmembers. Yes, gun

owners compared to nonowners are distinctive in their vote choice.

2. The distinctiveness of that behavior increases with attachment to the group. Yes, the likelihood of gun owners voting Republican increases with the number of guns owned.