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Understanding gun culture

What began as a necessity of agriculture and the frontier took hold as a sport and as an ingredient in the American imagination.
(HOFSTADTER 1970)

Guns are an exquisite combination of metal and design. In fact, a gun is an engineering achievement of considerable distinction, and modern gunsmiths must be proficient in technical matters of computer, mathematical, and material sciences.

However, a gun is much more than steel and craftsmanship: it is a tool constructed to kill, and every year Americans wielding guns wound and kill thousands of people. The injuries and deaths typically arouse public passions, disrupt many lives, and can sometimes influence political affairs. In addition, flashpoint events such as mass shootings and terrorist attacks inflame public debate about guns and intensify efforts to find legislative solutions. For these reasons, most social scientific research examines guns in connection with criminal activity and violence.

Yet violence is only one consequence of guns, albeit a notably important one. A determined research focus on what guns do—kill—necessarily diverts attention away from what guns represent. This is a key and often overlooked point (Kahan and Braman 2003). Without question, guns elicit intense emotions because they empower criminals, terrorists, and others who pursue violent ends. It is equally true that guns draw passions because they give power to ordinary citizens. For some people, guns

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represent freedom, safety, and strength. For others, guns promise mayhem, bloodshed, and vulnerability. Guns may symbolize independence or foreshadow repression; they may signify personal protection and self-determination or be vivid reminders of deliberate aggression and power. Indeed, gun ownership represents an approximate cultural marker, signaling to others what kind of person you may be and often which groups you belong to.

How people interpret guns draws attention to what scholars label "gun culture" and "gun owner identity." While there is not a universally accepted definition of gun culture, its existence, and its value for understanding contemporary debates about gun control and gun rights, is not disputed. Only by understanding why guns are meaningful to their owners—and nonowners as well—can we begin to appreciate the significance of guns in shaping people's political attitudes and behaviors.

Gun culture

The United States is distinctive among developed countries in gun ownership and levels of gun violence. Americans own more guns per capita than any other country: a whopping 120 guns for every 100 residents. There are more than 393 million owned firearms in the United States, nearly half the entire global stock of civilian guns (Ingraham 2018). In 2016, the United States ranked thirty-first in the world in deaths due to gun violence per 100,000 residents at 3.85. Compare this figure to England (0.07), Germany (0.12), and Canada (0.48) (Aizenman 2017).

In 1970, historian Richard Hofstadter attributed America's high levels of gun ownership and gun violence to an entrenched gun culture. He observed Americans' longstanding attachment to guns and the connection of guns to the early colonial days. Guns

are thus firmly rooted in our culture. Distinguished gun scholar Robert Spitzer (2012) pointed to the considerable cultural mythology found in books, television, and movies that helped shape gun culture. The imagery of the cowboy sharpshooter defending a town against lawless renegades remains a powerful symbol of personal responsibility, competence, and independence.

Modern films exploit the cowboy ethos, placing gun-toting heroes such as Dirty Harry, Rambo, and James Bond in familiar archetype individualistic roles. Guns are a means to dispense justice and equality. They also protect individuals, families, and communities from violent perpetrators. Guns are more than mere tools; rather, they are emblematic of power, individual agency, influence, and authority.

In 2014, the film *American Sniper* met with immediate success and grossed the highest amount ever for a war movie (McClintock 2015). The film follows the military tours of U.S. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle. The plot is a familiar one. A father teaches his boy how to shoot and hunt. That boy later becomes a ranch hand and rodeo cowboy, and then enlists in the military. To millions , Chris Kyle is the promise of American gun culture, an example of how an unusually skilled person can benefit his fellow soldiers and country by using a gun.

Approaches to gun culture

There are three basic methodological approaches to understanding gun culture:

1. The first approach is ethnographic. It offers in-depth interviews that probe the thinking and experiences of gun owners.

2. The second approach examines individual-level survey data to distill major predictors of gun ownership and the attitudinal and affective elements of gun culture.
3. The third approach traces the historical roots of gun culture and considers how gun culture developed and changed over time.

The common thread among these three approaches is the meaning and identity people derive from guns.

Ethnography

Guns, gun owners, and gun culture are not the same. That may seem obvious, but connections are often drawn for political purposes. A gun is of course an object. A culture includes stories, symbols, rituals, and worldviews that people engage and follow (Cook and Goss 2014, 157). Skillful leaders and advocacy groups connect objects to larger principles and worldviews to garner support and strengthen attachment to a group. For example, the gun becomes the chief symbol of a larger gun culture composed of gun owners. The gun acquires meaning and stands for a variety of values that animate a larger worldview. To be sure, a gun owner may despise gun culture, or not even be consciously aware of it. Alternatively, some nonowners may appreciate gun culture. However, in general, gun culture and gun ownership are strongly linked, and each helps us understand the other.

In *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*, author Scott Melzer observed the tendency of National Rifle Association (NRA) chief executive Wayne LaPierre to highlight the cultural features of gun ownership. LaPierre argues that gun ownership reflects a

set of values that are empowering and essential to good citizenship. LaPierre asked, rhetorically, "What is gun culture?"

> To millions of Americans, especially those who own firearms, the term refers to America's traditional bedrock values of self-reliance, self-defense, and self-determination. To others, most of whom dislike firearms and do not own them, the term is pejorative. (Melzer 2009, 29)

LaPierre's vision of gun culture appears to be widely accepted by NRA members and many gun owners as well. Through formal interviews of gun enthusiasts, Kohn (2004) concluded, "For shooters, guns signify American core values: freedom, independence, individualism, and equality" (17). A recent Pew Center Research report on gun owners' attitudes confirmed Kohn's observations (Parker et al 2017). Approximately three quarters of gun owners surveyed believed a right to own a gun was essential to their own sense of freedom. Only 35 percent of nonowners felt similarly.

Researchers also note the connection between gun ownership and democracy. In *Gun Show Nation: Gun Culture and American Democracy*, Joan Burbick observed, "Gun ownership is part and parcel of democratic citizenship" (xx). Similarly, Kohn found that gun ownership allowed people to consciously commit to what they perceived as the "American way," which includes strong patriotism and a concept of citizenship that venerates engagement in civic life. For many gun owners, guns are a tangible expression of their civic spirit.

Some gun owners take seriously their rights to arm and defend themselves and their communities. If necessary, one must defend democracy and personal liberties. This so-called citizen-soldier ideal surfaces repeatedly in interviews of gun enthusiasts

and corresponds well to Spitzer's (2012) militia/frontier ethos as a distinguishing feature of gun culture. The citizen-soldier tradition dates back to the state-based militias that fought for American independence. Guns made it possible for ordinary citizens to defend their communities and stand as a barrier against tyranny. "Brave individualists made America, and they did so with firearms" (Cook and Goss 2014, 156). Similarly, westward expansion and taming the frontier "necessitated an armed citizenry ready and willing to use their Winchesters, Smith & Wessons, Remingtons, and Colts to defend hearth and home at a time when allegedly the only reliable justice came from the barrel of a gun" (Spitzer 2012, 11).

While the militia/frontier ethos embellishes the historical import of firearms, there nevertheless remains a strong belief in gun culture that citizen-soldiers—and their guns—are a pivotal force in the development of the United States. The NRA astutely exploits this belief and strengthens it among gun owners. The NRA's magazine, *American Rifleman*, often carries stories of violent criminals thwarted by vigilant gun owners. Real-life heroes are people who use guns to defend themselves and their communities (O'Neill 2007). The NRA's advocacy frequently taps the public's distrust of government and extols the Second Amendment as the one thing standing against a tyrannical government. The NRA in fact refers to the Second Amendment's "right to keep and bears arms" as America's first freedom because it protects all others in the Bill of Rights (Cook and Goss 2014, 158).

Jennifer Carlson's (2015) research builds on the citizen-soldier ideal of civic responsibility. Interviewing sixty gun carriers from Michigan, Carlson asserted that owning a gun is a way of "practicing a particular civic duty, a way to 'take back' one's city" (6). In a context of deteriorating economic conditions and uneven police protection, gun owners adopted a model of citizenship

Carlson labeled "citizen-protector." People own and carry guns to "actively assert their authority and relevance by embracing the duty to protect themselves and police others" (10). They (primarily men) turn toward guns to help them cope with the shifting currents of economic and social change. Given genuine anxieties associated with limited economic opportunities, elevated crime, and flagging police efficacy, the Hollywood symbol of an independent, heroic gunman resonates strongly.

In Angela Stroud's *Good Guys with Guns*, she observed that even privileged men see safety as central to why they carry guns. Men want to protect their families, and guns offer confidence. Such men are the "good guys," embodying the American virtues of self-reliance and courage. They use a weapon for noble purposes and if necessary to fend off the "bad guys." Female gun carriers also feel empowered and seek guns as "equalizers" against criminals. Though a declining socioeconomic context helped define Carlson's interpretation of gun carriers' motivations, both Stroud and Carlson argue that guns yield useful symbolic value to individuals in any circumstances.

Dan Baum's entertaining *Gun Guys* (2013) identified the symbolism of guns to the gun "tribe." Guns represent the worldview that "valued the individual over the collective, vigorous outdoorsiness over pallid intellectualism, certainty over questioning, patriotism over internationalism, manliness over femininity, action over inaction" (264). Baum added that the gun tribe "invested it [the gun] with supernatural powers—to stop crime, defend the republic against tyranny, turn subjects into citizens, make boys into men" (264).

In sum, there appears to be a common language and shared value structure among gun owners. The values that underlie gun culture are those closely connected to American political culture generally—freedom, self-determination, and civic responsibility.

The ethnographic research on gun culture demonstrates these connections are key to assessing why guns are meaningful to their owners. Gun owners draw on these values to engage in politics. Their enthusiasm for guns "infuse[s] their core values into their day-to-day lives" (Kohn 2004, 17).

Population surveys

In general, a survey-based method seeks to quantify and systematize understanding of gun culture and gun owners. It offers a necessary complement to ethnographic approaches and in many ways validates and extends findings. For example, Kahn and Braman (2003) found that certain cultural views had significant effects on people's opinion about gun control. Those with individualistic orientations exhibited stronger support for gun rights policies than people with egalitarian orientations. Cultural orientations were some of the strongest predictors of a person's attitude toward gun rights policies. Importantly, gun policies are not simply evaluated based on the policy's proposed consequences—reducing crime, for instance. Rather, individuals support a policy based on how it expresses their cultural orientations (also see Celinska 2007).

Research by Kleck, Gertz, and Bratton (2009) developed additional cultural-based measures. The authors reviewed a literature that suggested that while guns may symbolize violence, they might also come to represent "almost any disliked attribute of social groups that are believed to be more likely to own firearms and oppose gun controls" (497). Gun control laws may then function as statements against gun owner culture, declaring it inferior and outdated. In this way, the clash over gun control is a "stigma contest" where competing groups try to impose laws

that define the other side as morally inferior. To the extent that this is true, gun control supporters express antipathy toward gun owners by employing negative stereotypes. Kleck et al. in fact discovered that stereotypes were very strong predictors of gun control attitudes.

In a more recent study, Mencken and Froese (2017) directly pursued the relationship between gun owners and their guns. Assuming that a gun culture exists, the gun itself should be a primary source of important feelings and beliefs. Gun owners were therefore asked to identify how guns made them feel about themselves and their standing with others. The authors discovered that gun owners believed guns improved their sense of control in life and enhanced feelings of safety, confidence, and responsibility. In addition, gun owners perceived increased respect from family and their communities. Consequently, guns engendered positive feelings and improved gun owners' sense of self and connection to others.

The authors labeled this cluster of feelings "gun empowerment." They found that women and non-Whites felt least empowered by owning a gun. White men who experienced economic distress reported the highest levels of empowerment. Similar to Carlson's (2015) assessment of Michigan gun owners, guns seemed to restore a sense of control that had been stripped away by economic changes. In addition, nearly half of the highly empowered group thought violence against the government might be necessary. By contrast, only about a fifth of the least empowered group reported insurrectionist thoughts. Gun empowerment also influenced opinion about gun policy. Among the least empowered, 74 percent opposed arming teachers and 40 percent opposed concealed carry laws. By contrast, only 30 percent of the high empowerment category opposed arming teachers and a mere 11 percent opposed concealed carry.

In sum, the survey-based research systematically explores the concept of gun culture and begins to map the beliefs and values that compose it. Without question, there is variation among gun owners in their attachment to individualistic orientations and feelings of empowerment. Moreover, that variance signals that gun owners are not a monolith. Yet the feelings and beliefs shared by many gun owners do imply group influence. Even nonowners appear to recognize the existence of gun culture, and some do so by employing negative stereotypes of gun owners.

Mencken and Froese (2017) summarize the consequence of the gun culture:

> It is not just money from gun manufacturers shaping gun legislation; it is the cultural solidarity and commitment of a subgroup of Americans who root their identity, morality, and patriotism in gun ownership. This is gun culture in action. (22)

How many gun owners?

The survey-based approach generates evidence to answer the essential question of how many Americans own guns. The resolution of this question is fundamental for how we conceive gun owners and their weight in democratic processes. For example, a sizeable and growing number of gun owners would leave a lasting impression; a modest, fringe group in decline would not. Are Americans embracing guns or turning away from them?

As it turns out, the actual number of gun owners is very difficult to determine. Most states do not require gun registration and at present there is not a national system. In fact, federal law prohibits a national registry, and eight states ban gun registries. In addition, sales data are not reliable. Licensed gun dealers

are required to maintain purchase records, but the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) must destroy background checks after twenty-four hours, so one cannot compare the background check information with the records kept by the gun dealer (Giffords Law Center 2019a). In addition, private sellers may legally sell under federal law—the so-called gun show loophole—and are not required to maintain records. Additionally, tracking is complicated by the fact that during its long life, a gun may be traded, passed down through generations, or possibly stolen and reappear in a private collection.

Researchers have therefore relied on public opinion surveys. Surveys offer *estimates* of the gun owner population, and like many other aspects of gun politics, these estimates are hotly disputed. Debates often devolve in a firestorm of numbers, each side advancing its own interpretations and challenging the alternatives (Lott 2016). There are several reasons why estimates might differ—including question wording, interviewing method, and sampling error.

With these caveats in mind, Figure 1.1 displays the estimates of gun households from the University of Chicago National Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS) and the Gallup Corporation. Both firms benefit from extensive experience in survey research and are the only two organizations that archive over forty years of gun ownership estimates. The GSS identifies a gun household if the respondent answers "yes" to the question, "Do you happen to have in your home (or garage) any guns or revolvers?" Gallup's question is similar: "Do you have a gun in your home?"[1]

1 Starting in 1980, GSS asked a personal gun ownership question. Personal ownership declined from 28.1 percent in 1980 to 22.4 percent in 2014. Gallup began asking a personal ownership question in 2000. Twenty-seven percent said they personally owned a gun in 2000, 30 percent in 2014.

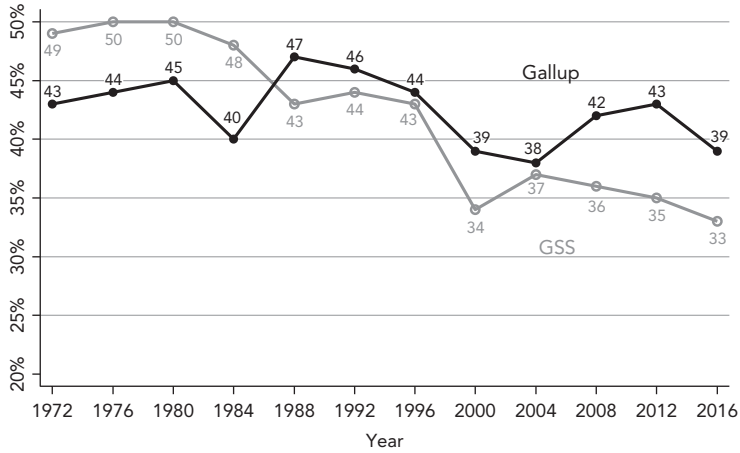

FIGURE 1.1 Percentage of gun-owning households

Source: Gallup and GSS

In 1972, the GSS found about half of households declared a gun present. By 2016, this figure dropped to about one third. The Gallup figure started six points lower than GSS in 1972 but ended six points higher in 2016. Factoring in the margin of errors for both surveys, estimates are comparable. However, GSS does exhibit a notable decline in gun-owning households, while Gallup is relatively steady. In 2017, Pew Center Research published a report that estimated gun-owning households at 42 percent (Parker et al. 2017).

Determination of a trend does depend on the period in question. If we focus on years from 2000 to 2016, the number of gun-owning households appear stable. In 2000, GSS reported the number of gun-owning households at 34 percent; the figure was 33 percent in 2016. Gallup registered 39 percent in 2000 and again 39 percent in 2016. On the other hand, if we set the starting point at 1988, a distinctive downward trend appears.

It is noteworthy that misreporting about sensitive topics, such as gun ownership, is common. For some questions, respondents simply feel embarrassed (Tourangeau and Smith 1996) or fear being judged, which leads them to modify answers in an attempt to align with social norms (Tourangeau and Yan 2007). In this regard, gun owners might perceive ownership as a social stigma and hence be less likely to identify themselves (Wallace 2017).

Ludwig, Cook, and Smith (1998) discovered that married women underreported guns in the home. The authors speculated that perhaps some women were simply unaware that their spouse owned a gun. Furthermore, since most guns belong to men, women may be reluctant to "inform" on their spouses. Alternatively, because women generally hold less favorable attitudes toward guns, they may be especially sensitive to prevailing opinion. That is, women may report socially desirable answers or the expected responses for women—no guns in the household. On the other hand, it could be that men simply overreport gun ownership.

The literature does not offer definitive answers (see Smith, Laken, and Son 2014 for an extended discussion) but raises key questions about response effects. Are there real or perceived impediments to disclosing gun ownership? Is gun ownership underreported? In a Zogby Analytics (2015) survey, respondents were asked, "If a national pollster asked you if you owned a firearm, would you determine to tell him or her the truth or would you feel it was none of their business?" Thirty-five percent of gun owners felt it was none of the pollster's business (see also Lott 2015).

A recent study discovered that refusals to answer the gun ownership question correlated with social-political variables associated with firearm possession (Urbatsch 2018). Republicans in particular were more likely than Democrats and independents to refuse. The author speculated that conservative media might be responsible: broadcasts primarily aimed at Republicans are

more likely to raise the potential of government confiscation programs, firearms bans, and the threat of an elected antigun political figure (Gore 2008). In addition, Smith, Laken, and Son (2014) identified strong gun owner traits—hunters, less supportive of gun control, rural, and male—among the pool of refusers. Based on these characteristics, the authors concluded that nearly 80 percent of refusers were gun owners (5).

Table 1.1 documents the percentage of refusals to the GSS and Gallup gun ownership questions. Noteworthy is the rise from the 2000–08 period to the 2010–16 period: Gallup's "no opinion" and GSS's refusal categories doubled in average size. Though the actual number of gun owners who did refuse is unknown, it is clear from the aforementioned evidence that gun owners have more reasons than nonowners to disregard the question. Higher refusals and "no opinion" responses are thus likely to skew gun ownership data down.

Everything considered, noted gun scholar David Yamane (2017b) offered a fitting summary to the question of how many gun owners there are: "We do not know with any certainty

TABLE 1.1 Gallup "no opinion" and GSS "refusals" to gun ownership questions

Years	*Gallup (%)*	*GSS (%)*
1970s	2.00	0.75
1980s	1.75	0.60
1990	1.40	0.58
2000–08	1.30	1.28
2010–16	2.70	2.90

Source: Gallup (no opinion) and GSS (refusals). Cells are period means.

the number of gun owners. At least 40 percent of American households probably have guns."

The distribution of guns among gun owners

Another important yet elusive question of gun research concerns the number of guns owned. Seldom do survey respondents entertain questions about the number of guns owned. However, in 2015, researchers at Harvard and Northwestern commissioned a national survey that included a large sample of gun owners (Azrael et al. 2017). The National Firearms Survey (NFS) focused on the features of America's gunstock, notably its size and composition. The average number of firearms claimed was nearly five, though just about 60 percent of gun owners reported one (28 percent) or two (31 percent) guns. Rifles and shotguns made up most of the gunstock. The study also reported that over the past twenty years handguns represented the majority of new gun purchases. Handguns now represent 42 percent of total guns owned, increasing 9 percent from two decades ago.

In 2016, for the first time, the American National Election Survey (ANES) asked respondents, "How many guns do you or anyone else living here own?" (Figure 1.2). Comparable to the NFS, half of gun households reported owning one (29 percent) or two (21 percent) guns. About 12 percent owned three guns. Another 29 percent of gun households claimed between four and ten guns, while 3.5 percent owned twenty or more guns.

This last group, labeled in the media as "America's gun superowners," includes a sizeable number of collectors (Beckett 2016). Like other collectibles, guns are appreciated for their craftsmanship, aesthetic value, investment potential, and connection to historical eras (Stenross 1990). Collectors are fully aware of their own gun fascination. One collector explained his gun

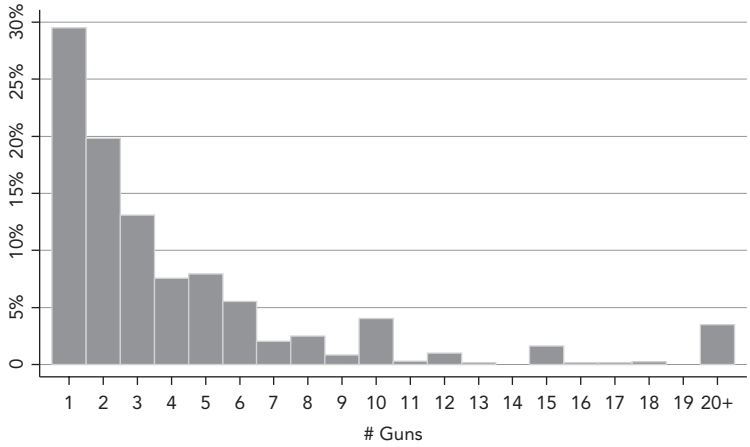

FIGURE 1.2 Number of guns

Source: ANES 2016

accumulation: "Some of them were just pretty. It's kind of like man jewelry, for lack of anything better to call it." A woman who owned nearly thirty guns said, "You know, it's kind of like tattoos: you can't have just one." (Beckett 2016).[2]

Many collectors are wary to disclose their gun collection, fearing theft and government intrusion. Refusals and underreporting may thus be likely among the so-called super-owners. Given the sheer number of firearms manufactured and sold annually, a significant community of gun collectors exists. For over twenty years now, the NRA has sponsored an annual gun collector's show that draws thousands of attendees and bestows over $10,000 in cash and prizes (Beckett 2016). These shows reflect the development and interest in gun collection and

2 To be sure, owning multiple guns may also be a result of inheritance. Proper storage helps preserve guns, and it is not uncommon for a gun to survive multiple generations in one family.

offer opportunities for members of over 120 gun collector clubs across the United States to meet regularly.

Who owns a gun?

Public surveys also produce a consistent picture of gun owners. Gun owners tend to be White, male, rural, older, Republican, and Protestant; to have higher incomes; and to live in the South and the West. Though these variables are stable predictors of ownership, firearm possession does not cut a precise path through society. It sinks deep and is scattered broadly across the demographic spectrum. For example, a recent Pew Center Research report (Parker et al. 2017) found that 44 percent of men live in gun-owning households. However, 40 percent of women do as well. Fifty percent of Whites, nearly a third of African Americans, and just over a fifth of Hispanics declare a household gun. Forty-one percent of households with high school education or less and 37 percent with a bachelor's degree or more possess a firearm. A gun is present in about 60 percent of rural households and 41 percent of suburban homes.

Group differences do exist, but, in many cases, they are not as large as suspected. Even for groups seldom associated with gun ownership—Hispanics, African Americans, the highly educated—a substantial percentage of these group members nevertheless live in a gun-owning household. The image of gun owners as—well, pick the stereotype—uneducated, male, country hicks, stockpiling guns for the ultimate disaster scenario—may well be accurate. However, the odds are reasonably good that one will encounter a gun-owning suburban woman, or a Midwestern gun owner who is well educated, is African American, and lives in the city.

Hunting and sport

Researchers often divide gun owners by how they use guns. Spitzer (2012) noted a second primary element (beside the militia/frontier ethos) of gun culture that included hunting and related sports shooting (8–9). Hunting has of course existed since the beginning of the country. As the country evolved and urbanization spread, the "utilitarian" attitude toward hunting declined (Kellert 1988). Now, 11.5 million people hunt, approximately 5 percent of the adult population, which is about half what it was fifty years ago (Rott 2018). Nevertheless, hunting traditions do survive and remain popular in rural states. In addition, nearly 75 percent of Americans approve of legal hunting, even though they may not personally participate (Responsive Management 2018). In some locations, hunting season serves as an important source of revenue. And because hunting remains popular, certain school districts still concede an unofficial holiday or "deer day" on opening day of hunting season.

The vast majority of hunters come from hunting families. Hunters are initiated early, most before age twenty, and generally by a father or father figure. Many hunters recall fondly that afternoon their father, grandfather, or other family member taught them how to use a gun (Joy 2018). In those moments, guns bridge generations and serve as veritable rites of passage into adulthood (Littlefield and Ozanne 2011).

There are, however, structural changes that continue to press down the overall numbers of potential hunters. Chief among these changes are the decline in farming and rural populations, shifts in social attitudes, and the variety of recreational activities available to rural residents (Spitzer 2012, 10). Figure 1.3 presents the proportion of households—overall, rural, and urban—that have at least one hunter. The overall proportion declined from

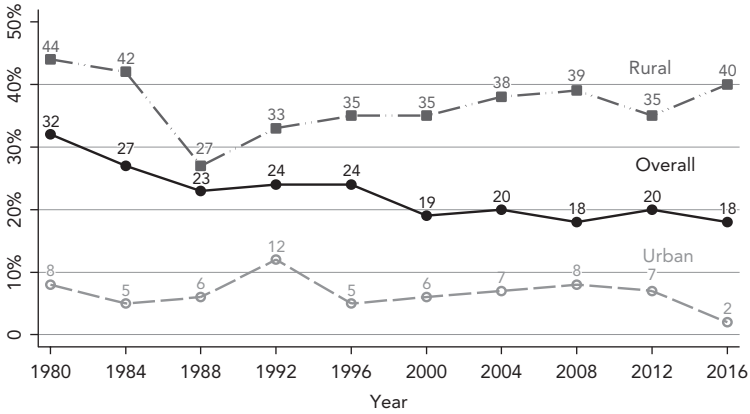

FIGURE 1.3 Percentage of hunting households—overall, rural, urban

Note: Rural = counties with no towns >10,000. Urban = central city of 12 largest standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs)

Source: GSS

32 percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 2016. The drop confirms the efficacy of the structural changes identified by Spitzer. Though the proportion of rural hunting households remains fairly steady at approximately 40 percent, most urban areas now include only a small fraction of hunting households.

In his comprehensive review of gun culture , David Yamane (2017a) observed that while many still hunt to harvest game meat, an increasing number of hunters simply enjoy it as sport, as a way to exhibit shooting skills and experience the outdoors. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, nearly 40 percent of gun owners cited hunting as a major reason for ownership. Another 30 percent reported sport shooting. A large part of gun culture is serious leisure (Stebbins 2001). Shooting is an activity that requires specialized training, repetition, and significant resources and time commitments. It is not unusual to expend a

hundred dollars' worth of ammunition at the local gun range. There are thousands of gun ranges across the United States, and millions participate in target shooting. The trade association for the gun industry, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (2019), estimated that $10 billion is spent annually on target shooting. In short, people find pleasure and enjoyment in target practice, refining their shooting skills and engaging with a larger community of gun owners (Weeks 2013).

Self-defense

Yamane (2017) highlighted the recent increase in what he calls "the culture of armed citizenship." Most gun owners today say they own a firearm for personal protection, but this was not always the case. In 1999, 26 percent of gun owners said the main reason they owned a gun was for protection. For a near majority, hunting topped the list. Fourteen years later, 48 percent of gun owners said they owned a gun for protection. Similarly, in 1994, the National Institute of Justice firearms survey found that 46 percent of respondents owned a gun primarily for protection against crime. At that time, recreation was the most common motivation for gun ownership (Cook and Ludwig 1997). Twenty-six years later, the NFS revealed that the primary motivation for ownership for nearly two in three gun owners was protection against people (Azrael et al. 2017).

When allowed to name multiple major reasons for gun ownership, 67 percent of Pew Center respondents in 2017 chose protection. At 38 percent, hunting was a distant second. In addition, a large proportion of gun owners—76 percent—say having a gun in their household makes them feel safer. A majority keep a loaded gun easily accessible to them at home (Parker et al. 2017). A recent Gallup poll showed that 74 percent of gun owners felt

that if more Americans carried concealed weapons—and passed background checks and had proper training—the United States would be safer (Newport 2015).

The shift toward personal protection occurred as laws that regulate the use and carry of firearms were liberalized. Beginning in the 1980s, many states relaxed restrictions on concealed handguns, moving from "may issue" laws to "shall issue" ones. "May issue" laws grant authorities greater discretion to reject applicants, but "shall issue" laws require authorities to grant permits to anyone meeting statutory requirements (Grossman and Lee 2008). Thirty-eight states generally require a permit, eight have "may issue" laws, thirty have "shall issue" laws, and twelve states allow individuals to carry concealed weapons without a permit (Giffords Law Center 2019).

As a result, the number of permit holders has increased considerably. Though it is difficult to evaluate the actual numbers, a United States Government Accountability Office report (2012) estimated that there were 8 million active permit holders. Two years later that number had jumped to 11 million, and in 2017 it stood at 16 million (Lott 2018). Permit holders in some states, and in some counties, represent a significant proportion of the population.

The gun culture therefore continues to change. Some elements, such as hunting, declined, while others, such as "armed citizenry," emerged. The rise in personal protection as the main reason for gun ownership undoubtedly spurred interest in handguns. According to GSS data, in 1976, rifles and shotguns were the most popular firearms, making up just over half of the gunstock. Only one in five gun owners kept a handgun. In 1994, rifles and shotguns still made up a majority of the gunstock. By 2016, however, handguns were preferred (Turkewitz and Griggs 2016).

A lingering question concerns the factors that contribute to changes in gun culture. Of course, gun owners' attitudes and behaviors are fundamental, yet attitudes and behavior develop from circumstances. Hunting declined in part because of social-economic changes that decreased rural populations and limited available hunting lands. The attitudes of hunters assumed a subordinate role. Similarly, rising crime certainly affected people's sense of safety and demand for personal protection. The loosening of state laws that regulated firearm use and carry also appeared to hasten the rise of an "armed citizenry." In each instance, gun culture adapted to prevailing conditions.

Forces that Shape Gun Culture

The final research approach is primarily concerned with the institutions that shape and strengthen gun culture. The development of gun culture turns largely on three institutions that benefit from it. The NRA and the gun industry are motivated to influence a culture that literally sustains them. A third institution, the Republican Party, benefits from the participation of gun owners in electoral and legislative politics. In many ways, the NRA, the gun industry, and the Republican Party produced and refined a powerful political group of gun owners.

The NRA

Considered among the most influential lobbying groups in Washington, DC, the NRA advocates strongly for gun rights. Founded in 1871, the NRA started primarily as a hobbyists' group, promoting hunting and marksmanship. By the mid-1970s, the NRA explicitly advanced a political agenda, establishing a

lobby —the Institute for Legislative Action—in 1975. A year later, a political action committee called the Political Victory Fund emerged (Lacayo 2001). These structural changes signaled a genuine commitment of time and resources to political advocacy.

The direct turn toward politics resulted from internal changes in the organization's leadership. Labeled the Cincinnati Revolt, intense resistance to federal regulations (the Gun Control Act of 1968) among some NRA members grew and culminated in the ousting of the old leadership at the annual meeting in 1977. The leadership change marked the NRA's "no compromise' interpretation of the Second Amendment, a significant expansion of membership, and explicit coalitions with Republican politicians (Winkler 2011). The NRA realized its members represented a crucial resource to tip political outcomes. It thus launched unprecedented member recruitment and mobilization programs. By 1980, the NRA supported Ronald Reagan, its first endorsement of a presidential candidate. From the late 1970s to 2000, the NRA directed its political resources to Republican candidates. In 2000, the NRA fully embraced that partisan commitment, reflecting its view that Republicans were the friendliest to the gun rights agenda (Spitzer 2012, 97).

The NRA's influence—perceived and real—is felt every election cycle. Some credit the NRA with flipping the House of Representatives in 1994 from long-time Democrat to Republican control. Others point to the NRA's attacks on Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election as a cautionary tale for antigun candidates. Gore lost his home state of Tennessee by a whisker. Evidently, mobilized NRA supporters denied Gore victory. If he had won Tennessee, the Florida recount would not have been necessary. While the empirical evidence of the NRA's influence is spotty, the belief in its electoral and legislative power nevertheless lingers (Waldman 2012).

The NRA claims five million members and calls itself "America's longest-standing civil rights organization" (Cook and Goss 2014, 190; Gilson 2018). The laser focus on a single issue distinguishes its advocacy and draws comparison to religious commitment (Spitzer 2012, 110). As the group's executive vice president told *Time* magazine, "You would get a far better understanding if you approached us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world" (Baum 2013, 264). The passions of NRA members are in part linked to the organization's increasingly ideological nature. The NRA is often noted as the singular voice in articulating, refining, and forging a gun owner identity.

Matthew Lacombe (2019) analyzed patterns of communication in the *American Rifleman* magazine, which NRA members receive as part of their membership. Gun regulations are conveyed as threats to members' freedoms. Stricter gun laws are presented as attacks on gun culture, and members are urged to take action. The NRA is skillful in connecting gun culture to political affairs, making owners' interests salient but vulnerable, and thereby effectively politicizing a gun owner identity. As we shall see in Chapter 3, gun owners often heed the call when asked to protect their identity.

An us-versus-them narrative is common. In *American Rifleman*, gun owners are described as law-abiding, peaceful, courageous, freedom-loving, and patriotic, loyal to community and country. Those who threaten gun culture are cowards, elitists, cynical, urban, and propagandists. According to Lacombe, this language is identity forming and leads to politicization of that identity.

Finally, the NRA and its affiliates are favorably structured to disseminate the identity language. Organizations exist in every state and gun ranges exist in most communities. These spaces encourage interaction with other gun owners and thus offer opportunities to build gun culture. Furthermore, the NRA is not

simply a lobbying organization but offers educational programs. Its firearms training programs attract more than one million participants annually (NRA 2019). The training sessions have several purposes, including reinforcement of gun culture. Jennifer Carlson (2015) experienced the NRA's concealed carry courses herself and observed that "the NRA attaches a particular set of civic rights, duties and responsibilities to the lawful carrying of guns . . . gun training reshapes gun culture from the group up by presenting and promoting an alternative model for citizenship—the citizen protector—that centers on the moral capacity to use lethal force to protect both self and others" (28).

The NRA, then, is a force in the formation and politicization of gun culture. It lobbies for legal structures that protect and encourage gun rights. It provides an electoral organization to help gun rights candidates win office. And it cultivates and disseminates a gun owner identity.

The gun industry

The connection between gun makers and the NRA is a pragmatic one. The gun makers supply the essential product that produces a gun owner—the key NRA constituent. The NRA in turn lobbies to maintain a viable market free from regulations that might dampen gun sales. Manufacturer and lobby are thus similarly motivated to develop and celebrate gun culture. They seek ways to increase sales, capitalize on events and trends that expand gun rights, and protect common political interests (Cook and Goss 2014, 200–202).

To make a profit, gun manufacturers must sell guns. The overriding question, then, is how manufacturers can maintain and increase demand. The answer, in part, is gun culture. In *The Gunning of America* (2016), Pamela Haag points out the obvious yet often

discounted role of gun makers in fashioning gun culture. As the country evolved, the Wild West became domesticated, and farming produced relative abundance, the practical value of guns declined. Gun makers had to reimagine their product; the gun needed to serve a different purpose. To sell guns, they required an emotional value. For Haag, Americans' deep attachment to guns was not by chance. Rather, people were committed to guns because they were "invited to do so by those who made and sold them at the moment when their products had shed much of their practical, utilitarian value." Haag added, "What was once needed now had to be loved" (xviii).

Therefore, the pitch to sell guns evolved, and gun manufacturers were active in developing a product people loved. Early on, Samuel Colt introduced affordable pocket revolvers and sold them by exploiting Americans' idolized view of the frontier (Braswell 2016). Colt employed celebrity endorsements and famous artists to market guns and to create a desirable brand. He promoted depictions of his firearms in action, a pistol brandished during a buffalo hunt and the rifle prominently fired before a gathering of Native Americans (Anderton 2013). A famous frontier saying, "God created men, Colonel Colt made them equal," served as excellent advertising.

From the beginning, the demands of commerce influenced gun culture. Guns were paired with cherished symbols and time-honored values, and they still are today. As noted previously, guns are symbols of freedom and independence; they offer strength, security, and safety. Indeed, gun makers quickly realized that direct appeals to people's fears could be profitable.

In 2005, Smith & Wesson declared a new marketing campaign stressing "safety, security, protection, and sport" (Siegel 2018). Sales rose swiftly thereafter, led by growth in handguns. Advertisers turned as well to women, who represented the

fastest-growing segment in the gun market. The promotion is personal safety and self-defense, and it is also about female empowerment. Ads promised gun ownership and counteracted victimhood.

The NRA also recognized the untapped female market. In 2013, the organization launched NRAWomen.TV with the tagline, "Armed and Fabulous" (Sonenshein 2016). The NRA's woman-centric messaging focuses on empowerment, equality, and personal safety. It offers instructional shooting courses for women who want to learn how to hunt and shoot with other women. An assortment of female-focused accessories and apparel followed (Silverman 2016). In a March 2016 speech, NRA chief executive Wayne LaPierre declared, "All of America's women, you aren't free if you aren't free to defend yourself."

Gun manufacturers capitalized on the citizen-soldier/military ethos as well. Marketing appeals to the "inner soldier" fueled success in selling military-style weapons (CBS News 2017). A weapon made for the military by Armalite (Armalite Rifle—AR) was fashioned for the average buyer by Colt Industries. The AR-15 semiautomatic rifle became the most popular in the United States (Heath, Hansen, and Willingham 2017).

Perhaps the most effective advertising is the entertainment industry. Firearms are featured in many box office hits. Gun makers acknowledge there is no better way to brand and sell their products than in movies (Baum and Johnson 2016). Consider John Wayne's Winchester, Dirty Harry's .44 Magnum, Bruce Willis's Beretta in *Die Hard*, and more recently the Glock in *The Dark Knight Rises*; people love their cowboys, cops, and superheroes. The appearance of the Beretta and Glock in blockbuster action films certainly bolstered awareness and sales of the handguns (Murphy 2013).

The irony here is rich. The NRA regularly assails Hollywood executives and actors as elitist liberals who despise guns and gun owners while producing movies that sell violence. Hollywood in turn blames the NRA and the gun industry for rejecting gun laws and perpetuating gun violence. They appear as bitter enemies—but the relationship does yield benefits (Baum and Johnson 2016).

However, even Hollywood takes second place to political figures in influencing gun sales. Anxious about President Obama's repeated attempts to introduce federal gun control measures, gun enthusiasts purchased millions of dollars' worth of firearms and ammunition during his two terms. Gun production more than doubled in Obama's eight years in office, and gun manufacturers' stock prices rose accordingly (Smith 2017). High-profile mass shootings, such as the one at the nightclub in Orlando, Florida, produced similar jumps in sales due to worries about future gun regulations.

In 2016, the gun industry and the NRA used Hillary Clinton's candidacy to spur record-breaking sales. The NRA developed ads that warned about Clinton and her push to "take away your guns." It reminded gun owners that after the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre, both Obama and Clinton acted aggressively in attempting to pass laws purported to reduce gun violence—including proposed bans on assault rifles and national background check initiatives (Mukherjee 2017). Once Obama departed and Clinton lost, fear of gun restrictions disappeared. Gun sales slumped, and gun manufacturers' stock prices dropped substantially. Though gun owners' fears were not realized, these episodes do underscore the emotional foundation of gun sales. They also demonstrate the strong connection between gun sales and political affairs (Health, Hansen and Willingham 2017).

Republican Party

Though gun commerce and advocacy moved swiftly to affect gun culture, the Republican Party was slower to grasp its possibilities. In fact, Democrats' early federal gun control initiatives helped focus Republicans on the promise of a gun owner constituency. As a response to rising crime and the assassinations of President Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., gun control supporters were able to pass the Gun Control Act of 1968. This act represented the foundation for subsequent federal laws and placed significant limits on gun access and sales. Nearly twenty years later, in an attempt to neutralize the 1968 measures, Republicans and conservative Democrats passed the Firearm Owners' Protection Act. The bill's passage marked a significant victory for the NRA and its grassroots efforts. It also was the first in a series of legislatives clashes over gun regulations that grew increasingly intense and manifestly partisan.

In 1993, under newly elected Democrat Bill Clinton, Congress passed the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act. The act mandated federal background checks on firearms purchasers and imposed a five-day waiting period after purchase. This last provision ended when the instant background system was implemented in 1998.

Congress followed up the Brady Bill with the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994. The legislation in part reflected growing public concerns about mass shootings and gun violence associated with semiautomatic weapons. As a result, this ban prohibited the manufacture of specific semiautomatic weapons as well as certain large-capacity ammunition magazines. The ban applied only to weapons manufactured after enactment. The ten-year ban passed following a close vote in both chambers. Congress refused to extend the act in 2004.

Table 1.2 shows that the 1968 act attracted widespread support. In fact, an impressive percentage of House Republicans supported it. However, twenty-five years later, the Brady Bill vote reflected a party sort on gun control. The divisions resurfaced a year later on the Assault Weapons Ban and were repeated thereafter for every gun control measure. The Republican Party moved to ally itself with gun rights interests while Democrats largely assisted gun control forces.

The alignment has been evident in party platforms and presidential election dynamics across the last several decades. Starting in the 1970s, the Republican platform increasingly emphasized the Second Amendment and opposition to specific gun laws. In 1976, for example, it read, "We support the right of citizens to keep and bear arms" (Spitzer, 2012, 124). Every platform since that time has included statements about the Second Amendment and the constitutional right to own a gun. In 2000, the Republican platform cited the importance of self-defense and emphasized opposition to gun licensing and registration. In 2004, the GOP platform recognized Second Amendment rights and talked about "a right which antedated the Constitution and was solemnly confirmed by the Second Amendment" (Republican Party Platform 2004). In addition, Republicans were careful to "honor the

TABLE 1.2 Party support in House on key gun control laws

Gun Control Measures	*% Democrats (yes)*	*% Republicans (yes)*	*Difference*
Gun Control Act 1968	66	79	13
Brady Bill 1993	72	31	41
Assault Weapons Ban 1994	69	21	48

great American tradition of hunting" and "applaud[ed] effort[s] by the Bush Administration to make more public lands available to hunters, to increase access to hunting clinics and safety programs for children and adults, and to improve opportunities for hunting for Americans with disabilities." The 2008 platform recognized the pro–gun rights *D.C. v. Heller* judgment by the Supreme Court and did so again in 2012. Republicans often stressed self-defense; in 2016 the platform stated, "Lawful gun ownership enables Americans to exercise their God-given right of self-defense for the safety of their homes, their loved ones, and their communities" (Republican Platform 2016, 12). Republican platforms thus extolled the key elements in gun culture, including Second Amendment rights, self-defense, hunting, and opposition to government gun regulations.

As consistent as Republicans were in expressing gun ownership free from government regulation, the Democrats were similarly consistent in support of government regulations of guns. From 1968 onward, Democrats urged federal and state legislation to control gun use. Often the platforms proposed bans on specific guns—in 1972 and 1976 a ban on "Saturday night specials", a 1992 ban on assault weapons—and later urged reinstitution of the expired ban on assault weapons (2000–2016). The 2000 platform may have been the most aggressive toward gun control, celebrating Al Gore's record of standing up to the gun lobby, the past success of the Clinton administration on gun control (notably the Brady Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban), and calling for mandatory gun locks, a host of federal programs that regulated gun purchases, and enforcements of existing gun laws. Gore's close defeat in 2000, and the belief that the NRA played a role in that loss, led to a moderate 2004 platform that called for protecting people's Second Amendment rights. In fact, the 2008 and 2012 platforms recognized the right to bear arms but stated,

"We believe that the right to own firearms is subject to reasonable regulation" (Democrat Platform 2012). In 2016, references to the Second Amendment disappeared altogether and were replaced by "We can respect the right of responsible gun owners while keeping our communities safe" (Democrat Platform 2016). The platform then listed a series of actions to prevent gun violence, including stronger background checks and keeping "weapons of war"— such as assault weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines—off the streets. A new wrinkle in 2016 called for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to secure the necessary resources to study gun violence as a health issue.

The party divide on guns is therefore significant and increasing. Gun issues now appear regularly on center stage, capturing space in party platforms and party primaries, at presidential debates, and in federal and state legislative chambers. Spitzer (2014) observed that "in the past several decades the political parties have split on the gun issue rather than ignored the issue or mimicked the views of the opposition party" (127). Democrats and Republicans perceive an advantage on guns, carving out distinctive positions that seem to grow more dissimilar with each election cycle. In 1968, Democrat and Republican legislators were quite the same on gun control; actually, a greater percentage of Republicans voted for the 1968 bill. Within 25 years, however, the parties sorted: many fewer Republican legislators, and far more Democrats, now vote for gun control. Prior to the 1980s, the Republican Party contained a moderate wing in the Northeast and the Democrats a conservative wing in the South, but more consistent Republican and Democrat lawmakers replaced those wings. Today, attitudes about guns and party identification are woven tightly together, both at the elite and mass level.

For example, in 2000 the Pew Research Center asked Americans which is more important, "protect the right of

Americans to own guns, or control gun ownership?" Though a general question, it nevertheless does a good job of separating gun control and gun rights supporters. Thirty-eight percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats answered "protect gun rights," an eighteen-point split. Moreover, both parties reported majority support for control of gun ownership. By 2016, that minor split widened into a canyon: Just over three in four Republicans said it is more important to protect gun rights, while 22 percent of Democrats felt similarly. Strong majorities in each party therefore support opposing positions on guns. The fifty plus—point gap is about as large as there is in public opinion data (Enten 2017). The Pew Center asked questions about health care, global warming, abortion, wealth and taxes, and same-sex marriage, yet none produced such a wide partisan split. Only a question that gauged support for Trump's wall along the U.S.–Mexican border generated greater partisan division (a fifty-nine-point gap).

Perhaps the most striking example of partisan sorting is gun-owning households. In 1976, 54 percent of Republicans, 50 percent of independents, and 48 percent of Democrats reported guns in their houses. In short, gun ownership was bipartisan. That changed in successive decades: twenty years later, 42 percent of independents and 38 percent of Democrats owned guns. The decline continued, and by 2016, only 24 percent of Democrats and 32 percent of independents owned guns. By contrast, Republicans' ownership levels were steady. In 2016, 50 percent of Republicans owned guns. That is only 4 percent lower than in 1976.

It may seem odd that a single household item can be so tightly wrapped in politics. On the other hand, guns are unique because they are a constitutionally protected product and extolled as a fundamental right of all citizens. Nevertheless, partisan differences

in gun ownership were not always significant, nor as large and growing as they now appear.

The trajectory of the gun issue seems to follow a process called issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson 1989). As noted, gun policy first drew national attention in 1968. The legislative battle did not generate notable partisan divisions; rather, divisions flared occasionally but developed gradually, and by the early 1990s party elites were divided on gun legislation. According to issue evolution, after elites take sides, the public soon follows. Notable party divisions in ownership began in the early 1990s. A partisan sort occurred as people changed attitudes and behavior to match party positions. Figure 1.4 shows one behavior that closely followed party position is gun ownership.

People's party affiliation is then a strong marker of gun ownership. In fact, after Nate Silver (2012) examined the phenomenon, he declared that gun ownership "is a more powerful predictor of a

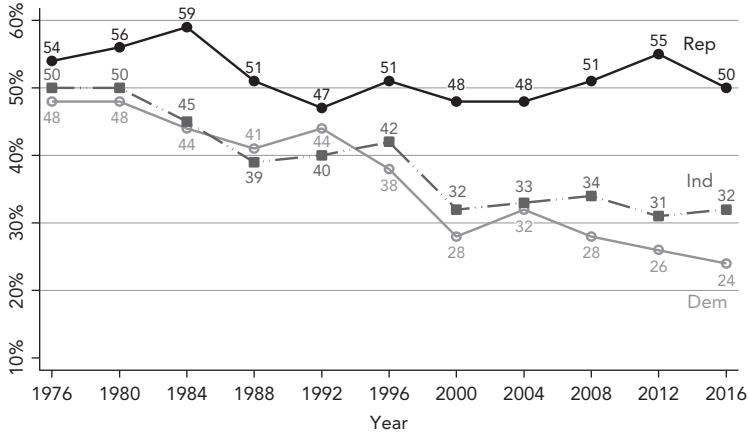

FIGURE 1.4 Growing partisan divide in gun ownership

Source: GSS

person's political party than her gender, whether she identifies as gay or lesbian, whether she is Hispanic, whether she lives in the South or a number of other demographic characteristics."

Expectations for vote choice

This discussion of gun culture ultimately leads to an expectation about gun owners' political choices and attitudes. The values and beliefs associated with gun culture fit well with the Republican Party. As documented in this chapter, Republicans shifted toward gun rights in the early 1990s. They opposed many gun control bills, and Republican identifiers followed suit. Meanwhile, the Democrats sought greater restrictions on guns, which ran counter to the Republican impulse toward personal freedoms. The parties diverged, and their partisan members adjusted to the new lines of conflict. Perhaps no other change demonstrates this party sort as well as gun ownership. Gun ownership was once bipartisan, but not any longer. Guns today can deliver a lifestyle and political identity. They represent symbolic currency for their owners, which itself is cultivated and exploited by organizations like the NRA and gun manufacturers.

Gun ownership therefore reflects strong dispositions that are expected to impact political preferences. Individualism, freedom, and self-sufficiency are themes echoed in Republican rhetoric and represent the values found in gun culture. Republican Party platforms champion the Second Amendment and highlight the traditions of hunting and sport shooting. The GOP legislative agenda is closely linked to gun rights and is attentive to gun owners. The communications from the NRA and the gun industry reinforce this connection.

By contrast, people who are hostile toward guns, including refusing to own a firearm, are likely to support the Democratic Party. Democrats have led the way on gun regulations. They view restrictions on gun ownership as sensible, not an obstacle to personal freedom. They believe that limits improve safety and beget greater social solidarity. Guns are not conceived as a means of empowerment; rather, they are seen as destabilizing and represent a threat to society. Given that far fewer Democrats and independents are gun owners, and a majority of Republicans own guns, differences between gun owners' and nonowners' political choices should be considerable. That difference should also have widened in the late 1980s and 1990s, the time when the two parties began to compete on gun issues.

In the next chapter, I test this expectation and show a growing gun gap: an increasing percentage of gun owners voted Republican while a decreasing percentage of nonowners did the same. In subsequent chapters, the gap between gun owners and nonowners emerges across an array of political behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes. In every case, gun ownership functions much the same as other important political identities and groupings. It represents a predisposition powerful enough to be a consistent predictor. Furthermore, it is not merely a predictor at a single point in time, or for a single attitude or behavior. Rather, gun ownership predicts several different attitudes and behaviors across time.