

Symbols of Safety: The Impact of Gun ownership, Regional cultural legacies, and Political  
identity on Support for Permit Requirements

Jenna Needham

The College of New Jersey

**Abstract**

Why do Americans hold such divergent views on gun permits, and what cultural meanings shape those opinions? This study applies a symbolic interactionist framework to examine how gun ownership, regional background, political identity, and trust in government influence support for laws requiring a police permit to purchase a firearm. Using nationally representative data from the 2022 General Social Survey, we conducted logistic regression analyses to test the effects of these factors based on our dataset of 1,274 respondents. Contrary to popular belief, both gun owners and non-owners show strong support for permit laws, suggesting that ownership alone does not predict opposition. Political identity is the most powerful predictor: Democrats and Independents are significantly more likely to support permits than Republicans. Regional variation is nuanced, with foreign-born respondents notably more supportive than U.S.-born participants, while U.S. regional effects are less consistent. Trust in government spending and fear of crime also shape attitudes: distrust reduces support, while fear increases it. These findings challenge simplistic narratives about gun attitudes and suggest that cultural identity, emotion, and political alignment mediate public opinion. For policymakers, the study highlights the need for culturally responsive messaging that appeals to symbolic values, like responsibility and safety, rather than relying solely on partisan frames or statistical arguments. By uncovering how Americans interpret the meaning of guns and regulation, this research offers a nuanced roadmap for more effective policy communication and legislative strategy.

## 1.0 Introduction

Gun permits have been a prominent area of discussion in recent decades and many associate them with controlling guns and violence across the U.S. But, despite these laws, support for these permits differs strongly among gun ownership, one's region of origin, political identity, and one's trust in the government. This study seeks to uncover the specific mechanisms through which gun ownership, one's region of origin, political identity, and one's trust in the government exert their influence on support for gun permit law. We aim to provide empirical evidence into how these independent concepts contribute to shaping societal views. The results of this study will contribute to symbolic interactionism and its beliefs. Findings will be of interest to sociologists, policymakers, and the public because it highlights how personal experiences with firearms shape opinions on regulation. Public attitudes on gun permits, shaped by ownership, identity, and region, drive legislation and political debate amid America's gun-violence crisis. These findings offer actionable insights for policymakers: support for gun permits is shaped not just by ownership status, but by broader cultural and political identities, especially regional traditions, partisan alignment, and trust in government. Tailoring policy messages to these factors may be more effective than relying on generalized appeals to safety or regulation.

Prior studies highlight the role of gun ownership in molding permit support via mechanisms such as serious-leisure attachments and protective motivations. One's region of origin, by contrast, is expected to affect permit support by means of narratives of self-reliance and the rural-urban continuum. Lastly, political identity may affect permit support because partisan framing shapes perceptions of government overreach versus public-safety benefits. Our study leverages logistic regression models to analyze data from the 2022 General Social Survey (GSS), aiming to explain these relationships. Specifically, this study investigates whether support for permit requirements is influenced by gun ownership, region of origin, political affiliation, and trust in government.

Theoretically, I take a symbolic interactionist approach to my research question. This means that individuals' interpretations of the meanings attached to firearms and regulatory symbols shape their beliefs and behaviors. This perspective furthermore guides my understanding of how the aforementioned mechanisms work by focusing on how identity and shared symbols mediate responses to policy. This research further advanced my understanding of this approach by demonstrating that ownership identity alone does not uniformly predict attitudes, prompting a refinement of symbolic interactionism to incorporate structural and contextual moderators.

The expected outcome of our analysis is to provide a detailed understanding of how symbolic attachments to firearms, regional cultural narratives, partisan identities, and trust in government collectively influence support for permit requirements. By identifying and discussing the specific mechanisms at play, this research will enrich sociological scholarship by quantifying the interactions between symbolic and structural factors in attitude formation. Furthermore, findings offer crucial insights for policymakers and public-safety advocates,

enabling them to craft targeted strategies that balance public safety imperatives with respect for cultural and partisan contexts.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Gun Ownership and Support for Gun Permit Law***

This study is grounded in symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes how individuals construct meanings through social interactions and symbols, thus shaping their identities and behaviors. Under this lens, guns are not merely tools, but potent symbols imbued with personal cultural and political significance. Through examination of the symbolic meanings of gun ownership, region of origin, political identity, and trust in government, their influence on gun laws can be unearthed.

The symbolic meanings attached to gun ownership—ranging from leisure identity to cultural heritage—powerfully shape individuals' support for permit requirements. Over the past two decades, researchers have emphasized the psychological and identity-forming aspects of firearm use. Stebbins (2001) introduced the distinction between “serious” and “casual” leisure, arguing that activities like target shooting and hunting foster deep personal and social identities. These consist of how serious leisure activities can create attachments that can translate into opposition to regulations perceived as threatening these practices. Similarly, Murray et al. (2015) document how target shooting provides psychological satisfaction and social belonging, suggesting that guns have become symbols of personal enrichment and group membership, which indicates owners tend to resist stricter permit laws. Anderson and Taylor (2010) extend this by explaining that enthusiasts of so-called “dangerous activities”, which include skydiving, bungee jumping, or gun collecting, negotiate social stigma and reinforce identity through shared practices. Thus, they position permit requirements as external threats to their own culture.

Despite strong identity attachments, some studies find no direct link between gun ownership and life satisfaction, pointing to broader social contexts as additional drivers of permit attitudes. Hill et al. (2020) challenge the assumption that guns inherently enhance life satisfaction, finding no link between ownership and well-being. This raises questions about whether identity alone drives opposition to permits or if other factors explain this relationship. Moreover, macro-level analyses by Grossman and Lee (2008) reveal that state-level policy shifts (e.g., “shall-issue” laws) are shaped not only by owners' identities but by regional crime rates and urbanization patterns, thus suggesting that broad social contexts can mitigate or amplify the effects of identity. Duque et al. (2020) add further nuance by showing that regional homogeneity and social tolerance interact with ownership rates to shape perceptions of gun-related threats, such as active-shooter risks, which in turn influence public attitudes toward gun regulation, including permit requirements.

Variations in owners' motivations, especially self-defense versus recreational use, produce different levels of support for permit laws. Wright (1983) criticizes gun control strategies that ignore illicit markets, arguing that owners' perceptions of regulatory fairness shape policy support. Shepherd et al. (2018) also find that owners motivated by protecting themselves are more inclined to endorse expanded access, such as being able to carry guns on

school campuses. Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2018) add that overestimations of the prevalence of those who own guns, which are typically driven by personal identity, views, and social networks, foster resistance to regulation by framing permits as disproportionate responses to a seemingly nonexistent threat.

## ***2.2 Region of Origin and Support for Gun Permit Law***

Regional cultural legacies—especially “Southernness” and the rural–urban continuum—strongly determine collective attitudes toward gun permit requirements. Brennan, Lizotte, and McDowall (1993) demonstrate that Southerners are significantly less supportive of registration and permit requirements than Northerners, reflecting a cultural framing of guns as markers of regional identity. For example, they found that Southerners, regardless of gun ownership, were 16% less likely to support permits than Northerners. This pattern was particularly strong among shotgun owners in the South, whose resistance to regulation stems not only from ownership but from the symbolic cultural meaning of firearms as part of Southern heritage. Midwesterners also showed lower levels of support for permits, while Westerners exhibited no statistically significant patterns, though the authors note that the West’s history of frontier settlement and self-reliance remains a promising area for future research. These regional differences suggest that public opinion on gun regulation cannot be fully understood without accounting for historical and cultural narratives tied to geography.

Recent studies map a clear rural–urban gradient in permit support: urban residents favor stricter regimes, remote rural communities resist them, and intermediate areas display mixed views. Ceccato et al. (2024) maps support for gun control along a continuum from urban to more remote rural areas. Urban residents face higher concentrations of gang-related violence and tend to favor stricter permit regimes. By contrast, remote rural communities—where hunting and farm-use are more normative—resist permit laws as they view them as unnecessary intrusions. In intermediate rural areas, ambivalence arises from mixed perceptions of both recreation and rising crime. Holbrook (2019) finds that young adults in rural Ohio have cultural norms that view handguns as essential tools, thus reinforcing support for minimal barriers for guns. Similarly, Middlewood (2021) documents how political participation among rural gun owners mobilizes narratives of self-defense and distrust of distant authorities, thus translating into organized opposition to permit requirements. Jiobu and Curry (2001) further link institutional confidence in the South and West to resistance against permit laws, in contrast to the Northeast’s higher trust and permit support.

## ***2.3 Political Identity and Support for Gun Permit Law***

Strong Republican identification frames permit requirements as ideological battlegrounds over government overreach and personal freedom. Molina (2021) highlights that individuals with strong Republican identification perceive mandatory permits as government overreach, aligning with broader Republican preferences for limited federal control. Molina finds that even evidence of public-safety benefits is often dismissed if it is attributed to Democratic-led initiatives. Middlewood (2021) expands on this further by emphasizing that pro-gun organizations such as

the NRA reinforce narratives that link permit requirements to threats against democracy and individual liberty, thereby mobilizing conservative constituents to oppose stricter laws.

However, substantial variation exists among Republicans—moderates and urban GOP members can accept permit laws if framed as protective rather than restrictive. Molina (2021) notes that moderate Republicans or Republicans from more urban or diverse districts may accept framed permit laws that emphasize more protective—rather than restrictive—rationales. For example, some GOP interviewees in Molina’s study expressed support for permits when discussed as tools to prevent firearms from reaching criminals, rather than as a blanket restriction on law-abiding citizens. This suggests that there is a spectrum of support and opposition within the Republican Party, where framing and local context mediate attitudes toward regulation.

#### ***2.4 Trust in Government and Support for Gun Permit Law***

Low trust in government efficacy leads individuals to favor personal firearm solutions over collective regulatory mechanisms like permit systems. Donohue (2003) links beliefs about inefficient or overly expensive crime-control spending to support for right-to-carry and permit laws by arguing that distrust in the government’s capacity to protect citizens incentivizes reliance on owning guns. Jiobu and Curry (2001) also note that low confidence in federal institutions among Western and Southern populations correlates with strong opposition to permit requirements.

Along with this, the fear of victimization and other emotional drivers also add on to an individual’s distrust in the government. Duggan (2000) shows that while self-reported fear of walking alone at night increases support for concealed carry, empirical analyses reveal that higher gun prevalence does not reduce—and may in fact increase—violence. Christopoulos (2023) and McDowall et al. (2024) both find that defensive gun use is rare and does not lower homicide rates substantially, which suggests that fear-driven permit support rests more on perception rather than data. Mattaini (2012) cautions that focusing on policy in regards to permits may overlook broader systemic factors such as poverty or mental health, thus stressing the tensions between trust and crime prevention based on evidence.

Drawing on these sources, the present study aims to explore quantitative analyses to operationalize each mechanism—gun ownership, region of origin, political identity, and trust in government—as independent variables predicting support for permit requirements. While the analysis is primarily statistical, symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical lens to interpret how these variables may carry socially constructed meanings. For instance, regional gun ownership may not only reflect behavior but also signal identity and cultural values. The findings will clarify which symbolic and structural aspects most powerfully influence attitudes toward gun permits, thereby contributing to ongoing debates through multiple statistical tests.

#### ***Hypothesis Statements***

Concerning the preliminary research done for this study, I believe there will be enough statistical significance to reflect my  $H_0$  hypothesis, and support my  $H_1$ ,  $H_2$ , and  $H_3$  hypotheses.

H<sub>0</sub>: There will be no relationship between: gun ownership and support for permit requirements (1), political identity (2), and region of origin (3) and finally, (4) one's perception of trust in the government.

H<sub>1</sub>: There will be a relationship between gun ownership and support for permit requirements, in which respondents who own a gun will be moderately less likely to favor permit requirements than non-owners.

H<sub>2</sub>: There will be a relationship between political identity and support for permit requirements, in which Democrats will be strongly more likely to favor permits, Independents will be moderately more likely, and Republicans will be moderately less likely to support them.

H<sub>3</sub>: There will be a relationship between one's region of origin and support for permit requirements, in which foreign-born respondents will be moderately more likely to favor permits, while residents of the East South Atlantic and Mountain regions will be moderately to strongly less likely than those from other regions.

H<sub>4</sub>: There will be a relationship between trust in government spending, personal safety perceptions and support for permit requirements, in which respondents who believe the government spends "too much" on crime prevention will be moderately less likely to favor permits, those who believe it spends "too little" will be moderately more likely, and those who feel afraid to walk alone at night will be moderately more likely to support permit requirements than those who do not feel afraid.

### **3.0 Data and Methods**

#### **3.1 Data**

This study utilized data from the 2022 General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey designed to track social trends and public opinion in the U.S. The GSS surveys adults aged 18 and older utilizing a full-probability sampling design, ensuring that the dataset reflects the U.S. population. In 2022, the GSS employed a combination of face-to-face interviews and probability sampling methods to gather responses. Probability sampling methods, such as stratified random sampling, were used to ensure that every non-institutionalized adult in the U.S. had a known and non-zero chance of being selected. This approach helps minimize bias and ensures the sample represents diverse demographic groups, including variations in age, gender, race, and geographic location. The initial sample included 4,149 respondents; however, my dataset consists of only 1,274 cases due to various limitations in the data collection process.

The reduction in sample size is due to several factors. First, missing data played a role, as some respondents did not answer key questions, making their cases unusable. This could have occurred for several reasons, such as a lack of knowledge on the topic, discomfort with the question, becoming tired due to over-questioning, or simple oversight. Regardless, these cases need to be excluded to ensure accuracy and consistency in the dataset. Second, the GSS uses a ballot rotation system, in which respondents are assigned to one of three ballots—Ballot A, B, or C. In 2022, only Ballots A and C included the variables I examined, which further reduced the sample size. Lastly, some individuals selected "Don't Know" or refused to answer, leading to

their exclusion from the final dataset. As such, these factors explain the discrepancy between the total GSS sample and the number of observations in my dataset.

### ***3.2 Variables Used***

This study examines the relationship between gun ownership and attitudes toward gun control, specifically whether individuals support or oppose requiring a police permit to purchase a firearm (specifically under the category for Support Gun Permits). The dependent variable, support for gun permits, is operationalized using responses to the question: “Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?” which used the variable, *gunlaw*. Respondents could answer either “Favor” or “Oppose.” A majority—73%—favor such a law, while 27% oppose it, indicating strong overall support for requiring police permits. The variable utilized from the GSS was *gunlaw*.

To assess symbolic attachments to firearms, I examined Gun Ownership, based on whether respondents reported having guns or revolvers in their home, using the GSS variable *owngun*. About 33% answered “Yes,” while 66% answered “No.” I created a dummy variable, coding gun ownership as 1 and non-ownership as 0, to simplify analysis in regression models.

To explore the impact of regional cultural identities, I used the variable *region* based on where respondents lived at age 16 (*reg16*) to measure Region. Categories were recoded and thus collapsed to match major U.S. regions: 10% of respondents were classified as Foreign, 16% as Northeast, 22% as Midwest, 32% as South, and 21% as West. This variable reflects early-life regional influences on gun policy attitudes.

Partisan identities were measured using the variable *Political Identity*, and used the variable *partyid* from the GSS. This variable was recoded, and respondents were grouped into four categories: Democrat (34%), Independent (19%), Republican (43%), and Other (4%) based on their answers to the question, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?” (the variable being named *partyid* in the GSS). These reflect respondents’ general partisan self-identification and were used to assess how political affiliation relates to support for permits.

Trust in government was measured through views on Government Spending on Crime via the variable *nacrim* on the GSS. Respondents were asked whether the government is spending “Too Little” (73%), “About Right” (19%), or “Too Much” (8%) on halting crime. No recoding was needed. Finally, Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood was used to assess perceived personal safety via the variable *fear* on the GSS. Respondents were asked if there was any area within a mile of their home where they would be afraid to walk alone at night. About 41% said “Yes” and 59% said “No.” This variable was used as a proxy for fear of crime, which may influence support for gun regulation.

### ***3.3 Analytic Strategy***



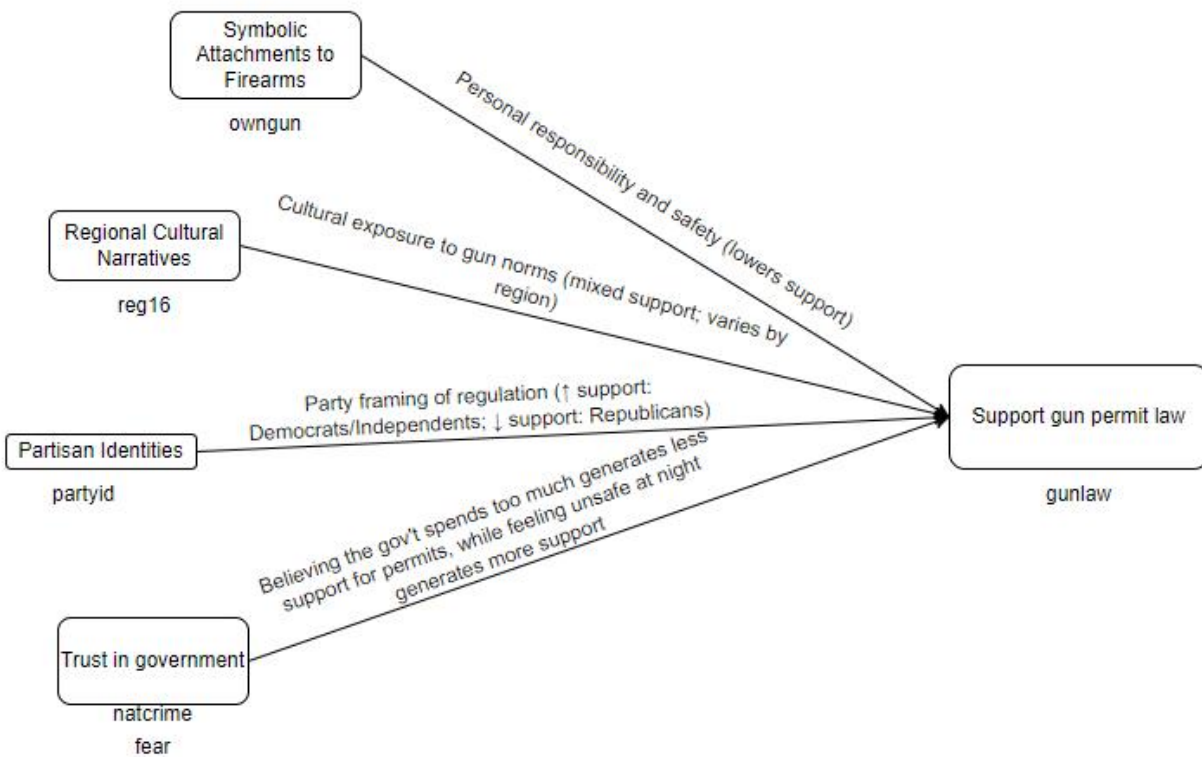


Figure 1

To examine how symbolic attachments to firearms, regional cultural narratives, partisan identities, and trust in government influence support for permit requirements, I employed binary logistic regression. This approach is appropriate because my dependent variable—whether a respondent favors or opposes requiring a police permit to buy a gun—is binary (1 = favor, 0 = oppose). Logistic regression estimates the probability of favoring permits based on various independent factors, such as gun ownership, political identity, region of origin, and perceptions of crime and safety.

Different models were used in order to isolate and test one key independent concept at once. Model 1 includes only gun ownership, model 2 adds region of origin, model 3 adds political identity, model 4 incorporates trust in government and fear of crime. This allows for clearer interpretation of how each concept affects the outcome, both independently and in tandem.

To visualize the theoretical relationships behind these variables, I constructed a conceptual model (see Figure 1). This model shows the hypothesized pathways between symbolic mechanisms and attitudes toward gun permits, illustrating how each independent concept contributes to shaping perceptions of gun regulation, in regards to the literature. The mechanisms (e.g., symbolic responsibility, cultural narratives, and personal safety) align with symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes how meanings are socially constructed through identity, experience, and context.

To assess potential multicollinearity—a statistical issue that arises when independent variables are highly correlated with one another—I examined Table 2, which displays Pearson correlation coefficients among all variables used. Multicollinearity can inflate standard errors, reduce model reliability, and make it difficult to isolate the unique effect of each variable.

While a few variables are naturally related, such as owning and not owning a gun, which are opposite categories, most of the relationships between variables are fairly weak. For example, although party identity categories like Democrat and Republican overlap in expected ways, this does not create problems for the analysis. Relationships between regions of origin and trust in government are especially weak, suggesting that these variables are not closely tied and are measuring different concepts. Similarly, gun ownership shows only slight connections to fear of crime or political identity, reducing concern that these variables are interfering with each other. Based on these patterns, there is no indication of serious multicollinearity affecting the model.

This strategy supports the research’s symbolic interactionist framework by quantifying how identity-based and emotional meanings, such as feeling responsible for one’s safety or trusting government actions, are statistically associated with support for regulatory measures. The regression approach is well-suited to test these relationships across the full dataset and within key subgroups, offering both theoretical and empirical insight into the cultural foundations of gun policy attitudes.

#### 4.0 Results

Model 1 from Table 3 shows the relationship between gun ownership and support for permit requirements. Relative to those who refused to disclose ownership status (the reference group), both gun owners and non-owners show significantly greater support for requiring police permits. Specifically, owning a gun is associated with a strong, positive effect ( $\beta = 2.040$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $OR \approx 7.7$ , meaning gun owners are about 7.7 times more likely to support permits), while not owning a gun yields an even stronger, positive effect ( $\beta = 2.842$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $OR \approx 17.1$ , so non-owners are over 17 times more likely to support permits). These findings contradict the idea that gun owners resist regulation; instead, both owners and non-owners appear to view permits as symbols of responsibility and safety.

Model 2 from Table 3 introduces region of origin. Being foreign-born shows a strong, positive relationship with support for permits ( $\beta = 0.994$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $OR \approx 2.7$ ), indicating immigrants are about 2.7 times more likely than Western-raised respondents to favor permit laws. In contrast, respondents from the Northeast ( $\beta = 0.229$ ), Midwest ( $\beta = -0.145$ ), and South ( $\beta = -0.070$ ) do not differ significantly from Westerners (all  $p > .05$ ), suggesting weak or no effects for those U.S. regions. In simple terms, nativity, rather than U.S. regional background plays the bigger role: foreign-born individuals are substantially more supportive of gun permits, perhaps reflecting different cultural norms around government-led safety measures.

Model 3 from Table 3 examines political identity. Compared to “Other” party members, Democrats show a very strong, positive effect ( $\beta = 1.688$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $OR \approx 5.4$ ), meaning they are over 5 times more likely to support permits. Independents also display a strong, positive effect ( $\beta = 0.918$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $OR \approx 2.5$ ), meaning they’re about 2.5 times more likely to back permit

requirements. Republicans do not differ significantly from the reference ( $\beta = 0.428$ ,  $p > .05$ ; OR  $\approx 1.5$ ), indicating a weak, non-significant effect. This demonstrates that Liberal-leaning identities (Democrat, Independent) frame permits as public-safety tools, whereas Republican views are more mixed.

Model 4 from Table 3 adds trust in government and fear of crime. Believing the government spends too much on crime prevention shows a moderate, negative effect ( $\beta = -0.560$ ,  $p < .05$ ; OR  $\approx 0.57$ ), meaning these respondents are about 43% less likely to support permits than those who think spending is “too little.” Reporting fear of walking alone at night yields a moderate, positive effect ( $\beta = 0.436$ ,  $p < .01$ ; OR  $\approx 1.55$ ), so fearful individuals are roughly 55% more likely to favor permit requirements. Perceiving spending as “about right” is non-significant ( $\beta = -0.215$ ,  $p > .05$ ; OR  $\approx 0.81$ ). This means that distrust in government capacity reduces support, while personal fear increases it—highlighting how emotional and symbolic cues shape policy attitudes.

### 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This study applies a symbolic interactionist framework to explore how my mechanisms—gun ownership, region of origin, political identity, and trust in government—shape support for gun permit requirements. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, guns and permit laws act as socially constructed symbols, shaped by experience, group identity, and emotional cues. The findings confirm that attitudes toward regulation are not simply based on gun ownership or party lines, but instead reflect deeper meanings attached to responsibility, trust, and belonging.

One of the clearest findings challenges the common belief that gun owners are categorically opposed to permit requirements. In fact, our multivariate model shows that both gun owners (OR  $\approx 7.7$ ) and non-owners (OR  $\approx 17.1$ ) are significantly more likely to support permit laws than respondents who refused to disclose ownership status. This undermines the idea which is frequently drawn from symbolic identity literature (e.g., Stebbins 2001; Murray et al. 2015) that ownership inherently translates to opposition. These findings refine the theory by showing that ownership identity is more complex: for some, permits symbolize responsible citizenship and reinforce their identity as law-abiding gun users (Shepherd et al. 2018), rather than pose a threat to that identity. The reference group—those who refused to answer ownership questions—showed the lowest support for permits, which prior research (e.g., Jiobu & Curry 2001; Holbrook 2019) links to heightened distrust in institutions or political defensiveness. This small but meaningful group may be motivated by privacy concerns or anti-government sentiment, rather than ownership per se. This suggests that opposition to permits is not necessarily symbolic of gun ownership, but of a broader resistance to state oversight.

Contrary to expectations from earlier studies (e.g., Brennan et al. 1993; Ceccato et al. 2024), U.S. regional background did not significantly affect support for permits in this study. Respondents from the Northeast, Midwest, and South did not differ significantly from Westerners. However, foreign-born respondents were 2.7 times more likely to support permits than U.S.-born respondents. This highlights a more global cultural dimension—nativity—as the more potent symbolic influence. Immigrants may bring norms that emphasize government-led

safety or collective responsibility, aligning with symbolic interactionist theories that tie regulatory attitudes to culturally inherited meanings. This also suggests a shift from regionally defined gun cultures to more globally influenced ones.

Political identity emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor of support. Democrats were over five times more likely to support permit laws than respondents affiliated with “Other” parties, and Independents were 2.5 times more likely. Republicans, by contrast, did not differ significantly. These findings expand on prior research (Molina 2021; Middlewood 2021) showing that Democrats increasingly view permits as symbols of public safety and government legitimacy. The lack of significant difference among Republicans suggests that their coalition may be more internally diverse with some viewing regulation as overreach, others as a necessary safeguard.

In symbolic terms, political identity functions as a filter that shapes the meanings assigned to regulation. For many Democrats, gun permits may symbolize responsible citizenship and collective safety, while Republicans may experience more ambivalence as they see both freedom and safety as competing values.

Trust-related factors also played a significant role. Respondents who believed the government spends “too much” on crime prevention were 43% less likely to support permits (OR  $\approx 0.57$ ), while those who feared walking alone at night were 55% more likely to support them (OR  $\approx 1.55$ ). These findings echo Donohue (2003), who argued that skepticism toward public safety spending is tied to individualist solutions like gun ownership. Fear, in contrast, appears to promote support for permits as symbolic reassurances, even if, as Duggan (2000), Christopoulos (2023), and McDowall et al. (2024) argue, permits do not empirically reduce crime. This supports symbolic interactionist claims that emotional cues like fear or distrust act as meaning-making mechanisms. Even without evidence that permits prevent violence, individuals may favor them because they represent safety, responsibility, or control in uncertain environments.

Together, these results demonstrate that support for gun permits is mediated by identity-based and emotional symbols. Gun ownership itself does not predict opposition to regulation, rather, it is how that ownership is interpreted. Foreign-born status is a stronger predictor than U.S. regional background, suggesting a cultural shift away from internal geographic distinctions. Political identity frames permits through symbolic narratives of safety versus overreach. Finally, personal emotions, especially fear and distrust, powerfully shape how people interpret the meaning of gun laws.

These findings offer a contribution to symbolic interactionist theory by highlighting how structural factors (e.g., nativity, political party) interact with interpretive ones (e.g., fear, trust). They also have direct implications for policy: rather than relying on universal appeals to safety or rights, messaging around gun permits should be tailored to resonate with people’s identities and emotional frameworks. A strategy that emphasizes responsible ownership, community safety, and pragmatic regulation may build broader consensus than one rooted in abstract partisanship.

### ***5.1 Limitations and Future Research***

There are several methodological limitations to consider. First, the use of self-reported survey data from the GSS introduces potential for social desirability bias, especially on sensitive topics like gun ownership. This would mean that respondents may underreport or overreport their gun ownership status based on how they believe it will be perceived by others, leading to inaccuracies in the data. Consequently, the actual prevalence of gun ownership could be either higher or lower than reported, potentially skewing findings related to demographic correlations or attitudinal trends. Second, because the data was collected at only one point in time, we can't make any strong claims about cause and effect between ownership and attitudes. Third, although political affiliation was controlled for, key sociodemographic variables such as race and gender were not included in the model, which may overlook important subgroup differences and limit the generalizability of the findings. Including these variables in future models would align with best practices and help clarify how intersecting identities shape attitudes toward gun policy. Finally, future research would benefit from longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to improve validity and capture shifts in opinion over time. Longitudinal studies follow the same people across years, revealing how views change. For instance, how gun owners' support for permits evolves after policy changes. Mixed-methods combine surveys with interviews, offering both statistical trends and deeper insights into why attitudes shift.

This study demonstrates the four symbolic mechanisms—gun ownership, one's region, political party, and trust in government—all combine to shape support for gun permits in nuanced ways. Contrary to common belief—and nuanced by prior research such as Celinska (2007), Brennan et al. (1993), and Joslyn & Haider-Markel (2018)—gun owners do not uniformly oppose permits. Celinska shows that individualistic values linked to gun ownership often reduce support for regulation, while Brennan et al. report regional resistance, particularly in the South. Joslyn & Haider-Markel highlight that identity-based misperceptions of gun prevalence fuel opposition to regulation. However, this study finds that non-owners are even more supportive of permits, and that gun ownership alone cannot explain these attitudes, which are also shaped by cultural region, political identity, and trust in government. Cultural beliefs by region, for example “Southernness” and Mountain-region self-reliance continue to decrease support, while Democratic affiliation emerges as the clearest predictor by party. Finally, distrust in government spending and fear when walking alone at night combine to influence permit attitudes more powerfully than empirical assessments of gun use for defensive reasons.

As policymakers debate reforms for gun permits, these findings suggest that messaging tailored to cultural and emotional contexts—emphasizing efficiency, public safety, and community trust—may be more effective than blanket arguments about rights or regulations about guns. For example, in rural areas where gun ownership is seen as a symbol of self-reliance and heritage (Middlewood 2021; Holbrook 2019), reframing permit systems as tools for protecting individual autonomy rather than restricting it may reduce resistance. Similarly, in regions with high fear of crime, such as among those afraid to walk alone at night (Duggan 2000; McDowall et al. 2024), public messaging might benefit from highlighting how targeted permitting improves safety outcomes without broad disarmament.

Future research should look more towards longitudinal research and studies in order to trace how shifts in media framing, policy changes, or personal experiences reshape symbolic attachments over time. Qualitative interviews could also unpack the subtleties of narratives by regional framing for specific Political parties. Using data from different sources other than the GSS might also result in more developments and detail concerning gun permits. Finally, extending this framework to other firearm policies such as assault-weapon bans or universal background tests would also test the generalizability of these symbolic mechanisms, further enriching and developing theory and practice in the field.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	Description
<b>Support Gun Permits</b>		Would R favor or oppose a law where a person would need to obtain a police permit before they could buy a gun?
Favor	0.73	Supports Gun Permits (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Oppose	0.27	Opposes Gun Permits (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
<b>Symbolic Attachments to Firearms</b>		
<b>Gun Ownership</b>		Does R have in their home any guns or revolvers?
Yes	0.33	R's household has a gun (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
No	0.66	R's household does not have a gun (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
<b>Regional Cultural Identities</b>		
<b>Region</b>		In what state or foreign country was R living when they were 16 years old?
Foreign	0.1	R was a foreigner at age 16 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Northeast	0.16	R lived in the Northeast region of the U.S. at age 16 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Midwest	0.22	R lived in the Midwest region of the U.S. at age 16 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
South	0.32	R lived in the Southern region of the U.S. at age 16 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
West	0.21	R lived in the Western region of the U.S. at age 16 (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
<b>Partisan Identities</b>		
<b>Political Identity</b>		Does R usually think of themselves as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?
Democrat	0.34	R thinks of themselves as a Democrat (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Independent	0.19	R thinks of themselves as an Independent (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Republican	0.43	R thinks of themselves as a Republican (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Other	0.04	R thinks of themselves as belonging to another party (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
<b>Trust in Government</b>		
<b>Government Spending on Crime</b>		In R's opinion, is the U.S. government spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on halting the rising crime rate?
Spending Too Little on Halting Crime	0.73	R thinks that the government is spending too little money on halting the rising crime rate (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Spending About Right on Halting Crime	0.19	R thinks that the government is spending about the right amount of money on halting the rising crime rate (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
Spending Too Much on Halting Crime	0.08	R thinks that the government is spending too much money on halting the rising crime rate (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
<b>Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood</b>		Is there any area right around here--that is, within a mile--where R would be afraid to walk alone at night?
Yes	0.41	R believes that they would be afraid to walk alone at night (1 = Yes; 0 = No)
No	0.59	R believes that they would not be afraid to walk alone at night (1 = Yes; 0 = No)

n = 1274

**Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Variables Used in the Analysis of Support Gun Permits (with Standard Errors): GSS 2022 Dataset**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Support Gun Permits</b>							
Favor (1)	1.00	-1.00	-0.16	0.19	0.20	-0.17	-0.02
Oppose (2)	-1.00	1.00	0.16	-0.19	-0.20	0.17	0.02
<b>Symbolic Attachments to Firearms</b>							
<i>Gun Ownership</i>							
Own Gun (3)	-0.16	0.16	1.00	-0.97	-0.11	0.16	-0.01
Do Not Own Gun (4)	0.19	-0.19	-0.97	1.00	0.13	-0.18	0.01
<b>Regional Cultural Narratives</b>							
<i>Region of Origin</i>							
Foreign (5)	0.13	-0.13	-0.15	0.15	0.03	-0.06	0.05
Northeast (6)	0.03	-0.03	-0.06	0.06	0.03	0.01	-0.04
Midwest (7)	-0.05	0.05	0.06	-0.05	0.01	0.01	-0.03
South (8)	-0.06	0.06	0.09	-0.10	-0.04	0.03	0.02
West (9)							
<b>Partisan Identities</b>							
<i>Political Identity</i>							
Democrat (10)	0.20	-0.20	-0.11	0.13	1.00	-0.35	-0.62
Independent (11)	-0.17	0.17	0.16	-0.18	-0.35	1.00	-0.42
Republican (12)	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.01	-0.62	-0.42	1.00
Other Party (13)	-0.10	0.10	-0.04	0.02	-0.14	-0.10	-0.17
<b>Trust in Government</b>							
<i>Government Spending on Crime</i>							
Spending Too Little on Halting Crime (14)	0.05	-0.05	0.02	-0.01	-0.02	0.10	-0.02
Spending About Right on Halting Crime (15)	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.03	-0.07	0.02
Spending Too Much on Halting Crime (16)	-0.07	0.07	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	-0.05	0.00
<i>Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood</i>							
Yes (17)	0.12	-0.12	-0.13	0.13	0.08	-0.08	-0.01
No (18)	-0.12	0.12	0.13	-0.13	-0.08	0.08	0.01

**Note: N = 1274**



**Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Variables Used in the Analysis of Support Gun Permits (with Standard Errors): GSS 2022 Dataset**

	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<b>Support Gun Permits</b>							
Favor (1)	-0.10	0.13	0.03	-0.05	-0.06	-0.01	0.05
Oppose (2)	0.10	-0.13	-0.03	0.05	0.06	0.01	-0.05
<b>Symbolic Attachments to Firearms</b>							
<i>Gun Ownership</i>							
Own Gun (3)	-0.04	-0.15	-0.06	0.06	0.09	-0.01	0.02
Do Not Own Gun (4)	0.02	0.15	0.06	-0.05	-0.10	0.01	-0.01
<b>Regional Cultural Narratives</b>							
<i>Region of Origin</i>							
Foreign (5)	-0.07	1.00	-0.15	-0.18	-0.23	-0.17	-0.02
Northeast (6)	0.02	-0.15	1.00	-0.23	-0.29	-0.22	0.05
Midwest (7)	0.02	-0.18	-0.23	1.00	-0.36	-0.27	0.00
South (8)	-0.03	-0.23	-0.29	-0.36	1.00	-0.35	0.03
West (10)	0.05	-0.17	-0.22	-0.27	-0.35	1.00	-0.06
<b>Partisan Identities</b>							
<i>Political Identity</i>							
Democrat (11)	-0.14	0.03	0.03	0.01	-0.04	-0.01	-0.02
Independent (12)	-0.10	-0.06	0.01	0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.10
Republican (13)	-0.17	0.05	-0.04	-0.03	0.02	0.00	-0.02
Other (14)	1.00	-0.07	0.02	0.02	-0.03	0.05	-0.10
<b>Trust in Government</b>							
<i>Government Spending on Crime</i>							
Spending Too Little on Halting Crime (14)	-0.10	-0.02	0.05	0.00	0.03	-0.06	1.00
Spending About Right on Halting Crime (15)	0.02	0.03	-0.05	0.00	-0.02	0.04	-0.80
Spending Too Much on Halting Crime (16)	0.14	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.48
<i>Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood</i>							
Yes (17)	-0.02	0.04	-0.01	-0.04	-0.03	0.05	0.03
No (18)	0.02	-0.04	0.01	0.04	0.03	-0.05	-0.03

**Note: N = 1274**

Dataset	15	16	17	18
<b>Support Gun Permits</b>				
Favor (1)	-0.01	-0.07	0.12	-0.12
Oppose (2)	0.01	0.07	-0.12	0.12
<b>Symbolic Attachments to Firearms</b>				
Gun Ownership				
Own Gun (3)	0.00	-0.02	-0.13	0.13
Do Not Own Gun (4)	0.01	0.02	0.13	-0.13
<b>Regional Cultural Narratives</b>				
Region of Origin				
Foreign (5)	0.03	-0.01	0.04	-0.04
Northeast (6)	-0.05	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Midwest (7)	0.00	-0.01	-0.04	0.04
South (8)	-0.02	-0.01	-0.03	0.03
West (9)	0.04	0.04	0.05	-0.05
<b>Partisan Identities</b>				
Political Identity				
Democrat (10)	0.03	-0.01	0.08	-0.08
Independent (11)	-0.07	-0.05	-0.08	0.08
Republican (12)	0.02	0.00	-0.01	0.01
Other (13)	0.02	0.14	-0.02	0.02
<b>Trust in Government</b>				
Government Spending on Crime				
Spending Too Little on Halting Crime (14)				
Spending About Right on Halting Crime (15)	-0.80	-0.48	0.03	-0.03
Spending Too Much on Halting Crime (16)	1.00	-0.14	-0.03	0.03
Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood	-0.14	1.00	-0.01	0.01
Yes (17)				
No (18)	-0.03	-0.01	1.00	-1.00
<b>Note: N = 1274</b>	0.03	0.01	-1.00	1.00

Table 3. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Support of Gun Permits (with Standard Errors): GSS 2022 Dataset

	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Intercept	-1.540	(0.637)*	-2.302	(0.733)**
<b>Symbolic Attachments to Firearms</b>				
Gun Ownership				
Yes	2.040	(0.645)**		
No	2.842	(0.642)***		
<b>Regional Cultural Narratives</b>				
Region of Origin				
Foreign			0.994	(0.323)**
Northeast			0.229	0.226
Midwest			-0.145	0.197
South			-0.070	0.183
West (Reference)			0.994	(0.323)**
<b>Partisan Identities</b>				
Political Identity				
Democrat				
Independent				
Republican				
Other (Reference)				
<b>Trust in Government</b>				
Government Spending on Crime				
Spends About Right				
Spends Too Much				
Spends Too Little (Reference)				
Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood				
Yes				
No (Reference)				
<b>Model Summaries</b>				
R-Squared				
Total N		0.039		0.090
Note: * — p < .05; ** p — < .01		1274		1274

Table 3. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Support of Gun Permits (with Standard Errors): GSS 2022 Dataset

	Model 3		Model 4	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Intercept	-2.281	(0.707)**	-2.254	(0.740)**
<b>Symbolic Attachments to Firearms</b>				
Gun Ownership				
Yes				
No				
<b>Regional Cultural Narratives</b>				
Region of Origin				
Foreign				
Northeast				
Midwest				
South				
West (Reference)				
<b>Partisan Identities</b>				
Political Identity				
Democrat	1.688	(0.3238)***		
Independent	0.918	(0.3093)**		
Republican	0.428	0.324		
Other (Reference)				
<b>Trust in Government</b>				
Government Spending on Crime				
Spends About Right			-0.215	0.171
Spends Too Much			-0.560	(0.238)*
Spends Too Little (Reference)				
Afraid to Walk at Night in Neighborhood				
Yes			0.436	(0.142)**
No (Reference)				
<b>Model Summaries</b>				
R-Squared	0.079		0.100	
Note:* — p < .05; ** p — < .01	1274		1274	

**Bibliography**

- Anderson, Leon, and Jimmy D. Taylor. 2010. "Standing Out while Fitting In: Serious Leisure Identities and Aligning Actions among Skydivers and Gun Collectors." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39(1):34-59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241609343291>.
- Brennan, Pauline G., Alan J. Lizotte and David McDowall. 1993. "Guns, Southernness, and Gun Control." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 9(3):289-307  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/guns-southernness-gun-control/docview/61352310/se-2>.
- Ceccato, Vania, Patryk Mentel, Ned Levine, and Manne Gerell. 2024. "Shootings across the Rural–Urban Continuum." *Crime Science* 13(1):20.
- Christopoulos, Konstantinos. 2023. "Associations between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in US States." *Journal of Urban Health* 100(4):651-656. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-023-00734-x>.
- Donohue, John J., I.,II. 2003. "The Final Bullet in the Body of the More Guns, Less Crime Hypothesis." *Criminology & Public Policy* 2(3):397-409. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2003.tb00003.x>.
- Duggan, Mark. 2000. More Guns, More Crime. National Bureau of Economic Research  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/reports/more-guns-crime/docview/1820771443/se-2>.
- Duque, Richard B., Elisha James LeBlanc, and Robert Rivera. 2019. "Predicting Active Shooter Events: Are Regional Homogeneity, Intolerance, Dull Lives, and More Guns Enough Deterrence?" *Crime & Delinquency* 65(9):1218-1261.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128718793615>.
- Grossman, Richard S., and Stephen A. Lee. 2008. "May Issue versus Shall Issue: Explaining the Pattern of Concealed-carry Handgun Laws, 1960–2001." *Contemporary Economic Policy* 26(2):198–206. doi:10.1111/j.1465-7287.2007.00094.
- Hill, Terrence D., Benjamin Dowd-Arrow, Amy M. Burdette, and Tara D. Warner. 2020. "Gun Ownership and Life Satisfaction in the United States." *Social Science Quarterly* 101(5):2121-2136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12860>.
- Holbrook, April D. 2019. "Handgun Owning during Emerging Adulthood: Predictors and Consequences." Order No. 27539307 dissertation, Bowling Green State University, United States -- Ohio  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/handgun-owning-during-emerging-adulthood/docview/2317912068/se-2>.

- Jiobu, Robert M., and Timothy J. Curry. 2001. "Lack of Confidence in the Federal Government and the Ownership of Firearms." *Social Science Quarterly* 82(1):77-88  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/lack-confidence-federal-government-ownership/docview/60477426/se-2>.
- Joslyn, Mark R., and Donald P Haider-Markel. 2018. "Motivated Innumeracy: Estimating the Size of the Gun Owner Population and its Consequences for Opposition to Gun Restrictions." *Politics & Policy (Online)* 46(6):827-850. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12276>.
- Mattaini, Mark A. 2012. "GUNS: THE DATA TELL US .." *Behavior and Social Issues* 21:1-4. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/bsi.v21i0.4346>.
- McDowall, David, PhD., Brian Wiersema B.A., Colin Loftin PhD. and Richard McCleary PhD. 2024. "Levels and Changes in Defensive Firearm use by US Crime Victims, 1987–2021." *American Journal of Public Health* 114(12):1384-1387  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/levels-changes-defensive-firearm-use-us-crime/docview/3131897457/se-2>.
- Middlewood, Alexandra T. 2021. "A Silver Bullet: Gun Ownership and Political Participation in Rural America." *Great Plains Research* 31(2):159-171  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/silver-bullet-gun-ownership-political/docview/2585486650/se-2>.
- Molina, Ruth Y. 2021. "Gun Control: Republican Views for Common Ground." Order No. 28773823 dissertation, Walden University, United States -- Minnesota  
<https://login.tcnj.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/gun-control-republican-views-common-ground/docview/2599097014/se-2>.
- Murray, D. W., Martin, D., O'Neill, M., and Gouge, T. J. (2015). Serious leisure: the sport of target shooting and leisure satisfaction. *Sport in Society*, 19(7), 891–905.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2015.1067780>
- Shepperd, James A., Gabrielle Pogge, Joy E. Losee, Nikolette P. Lipsey, and Liz Redford. 2018. "Gun Attitudes on Campus: United and Divided by Safety Needs." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 158(5):615–624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2017.1412932>.
- Stebbins, Robert A. 2001. "Serious Leisure." *Society* 38(4):53–57.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-001-1023-8>.
- Wright, James D. 1995. "Ten Essential Observations on Guns in America." *Society* 32(3):63–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02693310>.