The Founding Fathers of the United States had the foresight to imagine their country reaching the level of tyrannical rule which they fought to leave. The right to form, train, and arm militias were the last intended check to balance the power of the new government they had formed. But the phrasing of the 2nd Amendment, in which this right was established, left much to interpretation. Although this interpretation varies widely, United States legislation decidedly favors gun-rights sentiment despite our comparatively horrific history with gun violence. In practical terms, our gun-rights choices lead to more than 30,000 gun-related deaths annually. So why does the United States seem unwilling to alter policy? The gun-control movement’s choices of organization, policy stream, and issue-framing causal stories, lead to limited and less effective legislation than their gun-rights counterparts Australia and the United Kingdom. To combat these issues, policy incrementalization, unified interest groups, and strong issue-framing is necessary.

The United States’ federated government system forces any political movement into battle on multiple fronts. Therefore, organized interest groups are necessary. The movement must not only consider a single level of government—whether it be local, state, or federal—in isolation of all the rest, rather, it must approach them all in harmony. The National Rifle Association (NRA) has embraced these conditions for their fight for gun rights. Their organizational structure involves local chapters planning events and working together, spanning the entire United States (Goss 2006). This gives NRA members the opportunity to act on their beliefs and cause real change all while directly reaping the rewards in their community.

In comparison, the gun-control movement in the United States has not embraced this multi-tiered fight with such fervor. For example, there are many individual groups, such as Americans for Responsible Solutions and Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, which do not have local chapters and encourage participation solely through membership, donations, pledges, and calling members of Congress (“Join Us”) (“About”). These passive forms of participation disconnect the actions from the rewards of support and lead to inaction as shown through the collective action problem.

In the countries of Australia and the United Kingdom, who have implemented successful gun control legislation, the nonexistence of a strong gun-rights advocacy group and the existence of widespread gun-control groups is paramount. Most notably, the unification of hundreds of organizations spanning small community groups to massive political organizations in Australia fueled the fight towards gun control (Peters 2013). In contrast to the United States, this directly capitalized on the federated system in Australia leading to widespread gun-control legislation adoption. The case of the United Kingdom is less applicable to the United States, however, due to the lack of a strong federated government structure. Therefore, organized interest groups must take a different form than is required in the United States or Australia.

The case of Australia highlights another important aspect missing from the organization of the gun-control advocacy movement: the unification across different interest groups. While in the United States, many individual groups have arisen which only focus on different levels of government independently, but also on different causes and effects of the lack of gun control. As noted by Erin Mayo-Adam in her article “Yes, the Parkland Kids Could Change U.S. Gun Policy,” the unification across the Parkland Student, Black Lives Matter, and LGBT groups (to name a few) would be a great leap forward in the fight for gun control (Mayo-Adam 2018). This prediction matches the results seen in Australia through the unification of groups like the Country Women’s Association and the Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project (Peters 2013). With an advancement of this sort, a direct component of the collective action problem will be addressed: helping individuals see the direct impact their participation has on their lives.

Looking at the policy stream for the gun-control movement, there are two main, opposing hindrances preventing widespread benefits. Policy proposals are either too weak in scope and their merits deemed ineffective or too strong and cannot get passed in the first place. Take, for example, the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act where a major loophole existed allowing background checks and waiting periods to be circumvented by gun show sales (Cook et. al. 2013). Thus, “The Limited Impact of the Brady Act” study by Phillip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig showed—as the title suggests—that the Brady Act had no statistically significant impact on firearm-related crime rates. From the evidence, it is clear to see that this policy was ineffective in practice. Although this may have been the only possible policy given the political window, the possible benefits of this policy, if properly implemented, are overshadowed by the negative practical evidence of its current implementation leading to a lack of similar policy proposals.

Strong policy, on the other hand, requires a significant shift in political opinion which often comes with only a very short political window. In the case of the Dunblane shootings in the United Kingdom, there was a significant political shift that occurred quickly after a severely traumatic incident. This allowed a partial ban of handgun to be passed shortly after, and eventually a full ban later (North 2013). Likewise, in Australia, there was a devasting event which created a small political window. Although policy was arguably less incremental, the government acted fast to capitalize on the window. In the United States, however, a similar case existed with the Sandy Hook shootings yet without the accompanying political shift and initial moderate policy. The proposed policy consisted of an expansion of background checks as well as a full ban on assault weapon and high-capacity magazines. The individual aspects of this strong policy had great intentions, but the combination of them into one bill prevented the legislation from seeing the light of day (Weisman 2013). An incremental approach, like that in the United Kingdom, would’ve helped realize the benefits and lead to further adoption.

The gun-control movement suffers from an inherent, issue-framing disadvantage that the gun-rights movement, and similar gun-control movements in other countries, do not have. In the United States, an individual’s “right to keep and bear arms” is considered—and upheld by Supreme Court ruling District of Columbia v. Heller—to be God-given as defined in the Bill of Rights. This poses a substantial up-hill battle for gun-control movements in the United States as they need to argue for limitation or removal of guaranteed right. As of late, the major gun-control advocates frame the issue in terms of a causal story where the main villain is gun-related crimes (Goldberg 2012). The difference relative moral weight between these framings is significant. One focuses on a causal story rooted in the uphold of existing values and liberty and the other the restriction of values to reduce a number and security. In extension, this number, the gun-related crime rate, does not affect most of the population.

In contrast, in both the United Kingdom and Australia, the “right to bear and keep arms” is not specified in their constitution. As a result, this right was never given, it was simply a privilege that existed so long as there wasn’t a problem. Once there was a problem, this privilege could be revoked without moral consequence as a right cannot be taken away by a tyrannical government unless it was first given. Thus, interest groups in these countries formed casual stories with more moral weight focusing on issues of liberty, safety, etc. rather than crime-rates alone.

To overcome the weaknesses of current gun-control efforts, patience, policy incrementalization, a federated/unified structure, and strong issue-framing is necessary. Given that major reformative policy requires a very specific, and often short-lived, political windows of opportunity, a great deal of active waiting is important. During this waiting period, focus should be shifted to funding research to uphold possible policy solutions in preparation. A possible incendiary event to end this waiting period would be a widespread, massive shooting.

The policy stream in preparation should walk the thin line between too weak, with many loopholes, and too strong, with no chance of getting passed. A great solution would include multiple phases of policy suggestions that can be separated into equally effective subparts. That way, if a few are too radical for acceptance with the current political climate, a few may still push through. These few should have enough strength to cause recognizable change, nonetheless. Furthermore, if they fail to pass on the federal level, as is likely given most political climates, focus should be shifted toward individual states, especially those involved in a recent massive shooting. Perhaps focusing on the local governments may not be worth the effort as preemptive laws could bring negative publicity. This capitalizes on the federated system and policy incrementalization.

As mentioned above, another major weakness in United States gun-control groups that is nonexistent in other successful movements is the lack of a federated structure and unification across multiple organized interest groups. As noted with the Parkland Students, a major step forward would simply be organizing collaboration with the Black Lives Matter and LGBT communities (Mayo-Adam 2018). Creating a federated, umbrella organization for all gun-control advocate groups would also help give a single, recognizable name to the movement (like that of the NRA) and encourage active participation and overcome the collective action problem.

Lastly, the focus of the gun-control movement should veer away from a crime-rate-centered causal story. This message is too weak to combat the moral ground the gun-rights movement walks on. Instead, since a multitude of mass shootings occur within schools, the movement should change the message to a focus on the right to safe education. Or, on the other hand, as protected minorities are often targeted in other mass shootings, the message should promote the right of freedom and equality of minority beliefs and lifestyles. Both have significant moral weight.

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