

# Special Issue Editors' Introduction: Gun Politics\*

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The distinctly American fascination with guns and gun culture is perhaps most visible in modern entertainment. Yet, guns and gun-related issues seem to divide people, driving a wedge between rural and urban residents, women and men, less and more educated, conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans. Our present understanding of social and political issues surrounding guns is nevertheless deficient. Journalists detail a notable deterioration in gun ownership (Ingraham, 2016), demonstrate the different social-economic and political differences in people who own guns from those who do not (Bump, 2015), and establish that most guns are owned by a relatively small portion of the population (Beckett, 2016; Ingraham, 2015). But there is so much more to examine.

News coverage of guns is undoubtedly motivated by, or encourages, public interest in guns and gun issues. Indeed, as Figure 1 shows, public interest in guns as a social and political issue is strong, even in reference to abortion, another hot-button issue. The results of our Google Trends search using the terms gun and abortion—limited to news in the United States—indicate that guns garner more attention than abortion. And significant variation in public interest occurs during electoral cycles and dramatic events, such as the tragic shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012. Likewise gun issues continue to be important to voters. In a 2015 Gallup poll, 26 percent of registered voters stated they would only vote for a candidate who shared their views on guns (up from 11 percent in 2000), another 54 percent suggested guns were one of many issues that influence their vote, and just 17 percent reported guns were not a major issue (McCarthy, 2015). By comparison, 21 percent of adults declared they would only vote for a candidate who shared their views on abortion in 2015 (Riffkin, 2015).

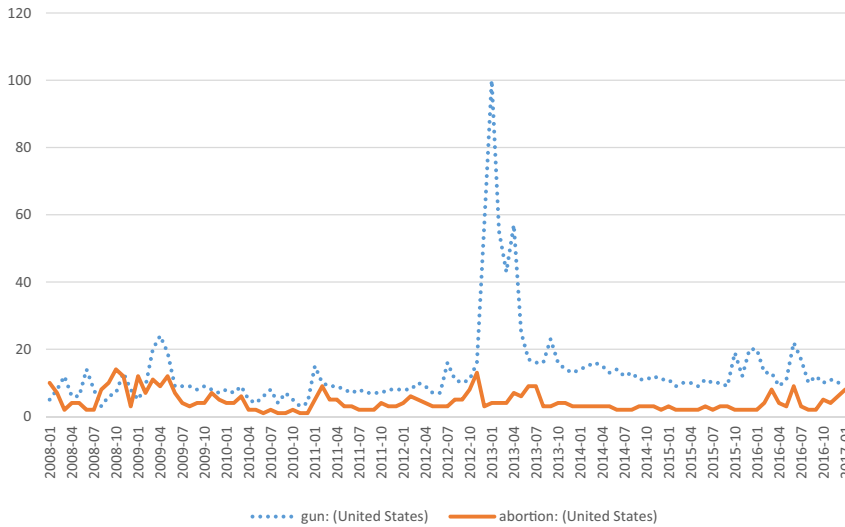
The significant status of guns in our politics and culture, and the strong public interest in guns and gun-related matters, does admittedly heighten expectations concerning scholarly research into the social and political aspects of guns. However, our assessment of that research curbs those expectations. We conducted a search of refereed journal articles archived in JSTOR that mentioned guns in the title and/or abstract.<sup>1</sup> We also searched the programs and submitted papers presented at recent annual meetings of two of the largest political science associations, the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We limited our JSTOR search to articles in economics, political science, psychology, and sociology journals. We reviewed the articles and only include those that were substantively about gun issues in our count.

<sup>2</sup>The APSA past programs were limited to 2015 and 2016. Prior APSA papers only include papers that were uploaded to SSRN. MPSA does not offer a searchable version of past programs prior to 2013. We reviewed the papers listed and uploaded and only include those that were substantively about gun issues in our count.

FIGURE 1  
Google Trends: U.S. News on Guns and Abortion



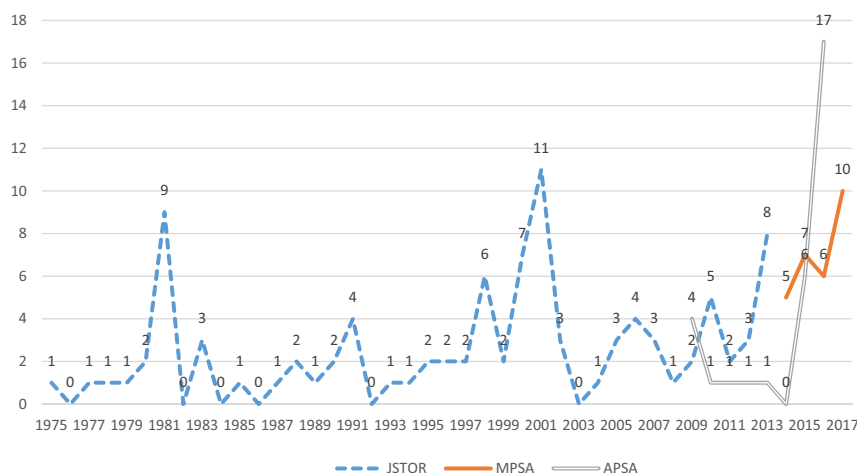
As an indicator of research interest, the pattern of articles published and conference papers proposed depicted in Figure 2 suggests social scientists are in fact investigating guns but output is limited. There are peaks and valleys, but for the most part, with the exception of a recent increase, modest research attention is the norm. Perhaps gun issues are simply too narrow to attract sustained efforts? A quick comparison of APSA conference papers on “single issues” reveals 29 on abortion and 34 concerning gay and lesbian issues. Guns fall far short of either issue, even during the time period that includes several mass shootings.

So what is going on? It could be that social scientists are interested in gun research, but the preferred outlets are not elite conferences nor top-tier refereed journals. We do know significant academic work on gun issues has been published in book form (e.g., Carlson, 2015; Cook and Goss, 2014; Goss, 2010; Kohn, 2004; Spitzer, 1995), most of which is cited by articles in this special issue. However, we suspect that a combination of low interest, perhaps because of a lack of government funding for research on guns, as well as resistance in the academy to publishing work on guns,<sup>3</sup> at least in the form of articles, and fear of retribution from political groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), have contributed to the lack of research (see Schatz, 2017).

Whatever the reason, we believe gun research offers a window to view important cultural and political phenomena and assess recent social and political changes in American politics. Additionally, gun research represents an opportunity to construct and extend theoretical questions in public opinion, political behavior, interest groups and lobbying, the policy process, and representation, just to name a few areas. The intent of this special issue is to showcase various theoretical and methodological approaches to gun research. The focus is on gun politics, an area of research not well developed, yet gun research generally covers the entirety of social science disciplines.

<sup>3</sup>Although anecdotal, social science scholars we have spoken to report unusual treatment by journal reviewers and editors when submitting their work related to guns for publication consideration. Our sense is that some in the academy do not see guns as a legitimate focus of inquiry, regardless of the questions being asked or theories being tested.

FIGURE 2  
Gun-Related Articles and Conference Papers



NOTES: Articles and conference papers that are substantively about guns. Key word search “gun” with each article and conference paper assessed based on title and abstract. Searches in JSTOR database, American Political Science Association (APSA) annual conference program, and SSRN paper database, and the Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) annual conference program. The APSA past programs were limited to 2015–2016. Prior APSA papers only include papers that were uploaded to SSRN. JSTOR search was limited to economics, political science, psychology, and sociology journals.

We expect this special issue and similar research efforts will generate increased interest in researching and teaching about guns, and perhaps reduce the stigma associated with the topic. In short, as guns increasingly appear within our political and social environments, and even literally in our classrooms, we do hope to engage more researchers so that public deliberations about gun matters will be informed by evidence-based social science. In that regard, we solicited articles from scholars around the country whose gun research examines important social science questions. We targeted research that could inform a broader public discussion of guns, and the role of public opinion, interest groups, and the media in this debate.

In “From Play to Peril,” Jennifer Carlson and Jessica Cobb examine how the media frames understanding of guns. The authors probe the history of reporting accidental shooting involving children since the 1800s. Carlson and Cobb find that coverage shifted significantly from viewing firearms accidents as private misfortunes to social problems, which triggered processes of blame attribution. The historical shift in media frames may have contributed to changes in the broader social and political debates over gun control in the United States.

Michael Coates and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz take advantage of variation in state regulation of firearms and examine the migration of guns across state lines. Using a unique data set, Coates and Pearson-Merkowitz discover that guns migrated from states with less regulation to states with more regulation, significantly reducing the intended effects of tougher gun regulations in some states. This “policy spillover” has dramatic implications for those interested in regulating firearms in a federal system.

Building on their previous work of racial resentment and gun attitudes (Filindra and Kaplan, 2016), Alexandra Filindra and Noah Kaplan examine differences in gun attitudes

among whites, blacks, and Latinos. Analyses of a national survey suggests that among all groups gun policy attitudes are shaped by self-interest, being a victim of a crime, and political orientation, with substantively different impacts between groups. Racial prejudice also impacts gun attitudes of Latinos and whites, but only one form of racial prejudice—racial resentment—shapes the gun policy attitudes of blacks. Filindra and Kaplan's analysis indicates that attitudes toward other groups impact attitudes about gun policy, which underscores the complex nature of gun attitudes.

Kristin Goss utilizes Schattschneider's scope of conflict to assess gun control and gun rights groups' attempts to mobilize women. Gross's wide-ranging analysis of survey and contextual data suggests that gun rights groups have gained little ground with women, but gun control groups have also failed to mobilize women to a level where the debate might shift away from protecting gun ownership rights. Thus, neither side has successfully expanded the scope of conflict.

The causal narratives about mass shootings provide the basis for Mark Joslyn and Don Haider-Markel's investigation. They combine attribution theory with motivated reasoning to determine whether gun ownership influences attributions about mass shootings and resulting allocation of blame. They find that both gun owners and nongun owners develop self-serving attributions about mass shootings and this motivated reasoning drives gun policy preferences.

Joslyn and Haider-Markel team up with Michael Baggs and Andrew Bilbo and use General Social Survey data to examine the presidential vote choices of gun owners and nongun owners from 1972 to 2012. They find compelling evidence that gun ownership has increasingly become a potent predictor of vote choice, specifically a preference for Republican candidates among gun owners. They argue that gun ownership appears to create a strong political identity that rivals other group measures typically used to model voting behavior. The evidence suggests gun ownership should be more widely used as an important predictor of political attitudes and behavior.

In "Crime and Partisanship" Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz and Joshua Dyck examine how partisan identity and context shape attitudes about guns. They employ individual-level survey data to demonstrate that while the attitudes of independents are shaped by the context in which they live, context does not influence the attitudes of Democrats or Republicans. The evidence suggests that partisans are motivated to downplay the reality of their lived experience when it comes to attitudes about guns and violence.

Gary Reich and Jay Barth turn to the recent explosion of state-level policies on guns and examine whether the lobbying efforts of the NRA are conditioned by the demand for guns in the states. Reich and Barth's analysis suggests that the influence of NRA lobbying on policy deregulation increases as the demand for guns in a state increases. Their findings have long-term implications for gun policy in the states.

And Robert Richards explores the dynamics of representation on gun legislation in Congress. Richards hypothesizes that the influence of lobbying efforts on legislator co-sponsorship and voting on gun legislation is independent of the influence of the size of the gun constituency in a representative's district. The analysis confirms the hypothesis, showing an independent impact of lobbying and constituency influence. The study reveals long-term implications for the representation of narrow and broad interests in Congress.

We expect that the breath of the studies in this collection will inspire more researchers to examine the patterns of politics around guns, but also inspire researchers to focus on the implications of guns in our society. And, as public health scholars and others seek new ways to fund research on guns, we hope that policy debates can be informed by the findings of robust empirical research.

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