

# Does “Politicizing” Gun Violence Increase Support for Gun Control? Experimental Evidence from the Las Vegas Shooting

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*Objective.* Gun control advocacy regularly escalates in the aftermath of a mass shooting. But is the American public more susceptible to pro-gun-control arguments in the wake of mass gun violence? *Methods.* We analyze a survey experiment fielded immediately before and after the 2017 Las Vegas shooting. *Results.* Pro-gun-control arguments were not effective at increasing support for or confidence in expanded background checks before or after the Las Vegas shooting. Anti-gun-control arguments were less effective at reducing support for expanded background checks after the Las Vegas shooting. *Conclusion.* Even the largest mass shooting in American history was insufficient to mobilize public opinion on gun control in a way that would affect federal policy.

On October 1, 2017, a gunman killed 58 concertgoers from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay resort in Las Vegas. Though it was the deadliest event of its kind in American history, this massacre was just one of more than a hundred mass shootings in the United States in the last three decades (Stanford Mass Shootings in America, 2017). Consistent with the historical pattern, the Las Vegas shooting intensified news coverage and policy discussion related to gun control (Towers et al., 2015), yet there was no significant policy response at the federal level. Congressional action to restrict the sale of bump stocks (like the one used by the shooter) stalled, and there was no progress at reviving broader gun control reform efforts (Cobler, 2017). In short, proponents of gun control were once again unable to use the aftermath of a mass shooting to enact changes aimed at preventing gun violence.

In this study, we investigate one possible contributor to this policy gridlock: the inability of gun control advocates to persuade citizens to support stricter gun laws. Although mass shootings are opportunities for interest groups to capitalize on the attention given to gun violence, we argue that they do not enable gun control proponents to decisively swing public opinion in favor of more or stronger firearms regulations. Competition between pro- and anti-gun-control argument frames and the force of motivated reasoning make it difficult to move public opinion on the issue, even when gun violence is highly salient. The effect of mass shootings on the persuadability of citizens is simply not strong enough to shift opinion in a way that meaningfully impacts the policy-making process.

The relative immutability of Americans’ gun control attitudes is well established. Historically, polls have shown spikes in support for stricter gun control measures after major mass

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shootings, but these spikes have generally dissipated quickly (Gallup, 2017). What is not well understood is whether or how the attitudinal influence of pro- and anti-gun-control arguments changes in the aftermath of a mass shooting—that is, under the conditions when these arguments are most commonly presented. The limited amount of attention paid to this question is striking in light of the fact that gun control advocates tend to escalate their efforts in the periods immediately following high-profile incidents of gun violence, seemingly under the impression that these are opportune times to mobilize public support.

Our contribution to this inquiry is a unique experimental design that offers insights into the dynamics of the gun control debate in the wake of mass gun violence. We initially designed our experiment to test the effects of pro- and anti-gun-control arguments on gun control attitudes, varying the argument frames to mimic contemporary positions in the debate. Because the Las Vegas shooting occurred in the middle of our data collection, we are able to leverage it as an organic manipulation of the salience of gun violence. Thus, by varying the arguments presented and the salience of the issue, we can test whether these public appeals common to the gun control debate shape public opinion in the political environment where they are most often advanced: the aftermath of a mass shooting.

Critically, by modeling our arguments after actual claims made by proponents and opponents of gun control and administering our experiment within days of the deadliest mass shooting in American history, we are able to test the effectiveness of these arguments in a way that is realistic and heavily biased toward finding significant effects. If any mass shooting could cause the American public to rally behind gun control, surely the Las Vegas massacre would be it. Despite our “stacking the deck” in favor of confirming this expectation, we find scant evidence to support the notion that gun control advocates are more persuasive following a mass shooting. By demonstrating that the standard arguments in favor of stricter gun control fail even this seemingly easy test of their persuasiveness, we improve our understanding of how and why the gun control debate, as it is carried out in the public sphere, is failing to drive policy changes at the federal level.

## The Politics of the Gun Control Debate

Since the 1999 Columbine shooting, the United States has experienced a series of high-profile mass shooting events. In parallel, it also has seen repeated, unsuccessful efforts to strengthen federal gun control regulations. Two responses to the Sandy Hook shooting—the Assault Weapons Ban of 2013 and the bipartisan Toomey-Manchin amendment, which would have expanded background checks to private firearm sales—died in the Senate (Blake, 2013; O’Keefe and Rucker, 2013). When the Toomey-Manchin amendment resurfaced in 2014 after the shooting in San Bernardino, California, it earned even fewer votes than it did initially (Mimms, 2015). Likewise, even with the outcry over the sale of bump stocks following the Las Vegas massacre, congressional action intended to restrict their sale stalled (Cobler, 2017). While the Trump Administration did move to ban bump stocks following the Parkland shooting in 2018, this represented an exception to its overall stance on guns rather than a wholesale change (Elinson, 2018).

The decision to emphasize gun control in the aftermath of a mass shooting aligns with the scholarly literature on the policy-making process. Mass shootings are the kind of external shocks that many theories of policy making predict lead to policy change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Birkland, 1998; Hurka and Nebel, 2013; Kingdon, 1984; Sabatier and Weible, 2007). A mass shooting increases the salience of the issue of gun violence, providing an opportunity for entrepreneurs in the gun control policy stream to pursue their policy

goals (Jones and Jenkins-Smith, 2009; Kingdon, 1984). The institutional barriers to gun control reform—most notably the singular power of the NRA and increasing resistance to gun control measures in the Supreme Court—are substantial (Kleck, 2012; Richards, 2017; Steidley and Colen, 2017). However, even with these barriers in place, conventional models of the policy-making process would still predict that the aftermath of a mass shooting would provide a unique opportunity to overcome such obstacles.

Although the institutional opportunities and obstacles of gun control policy making are well understood, less is known about the public opinion effects of the appeals and arguments that typically follow mass shootings. There are ample reasons to suspect that the aftermath of a mass shooting may be a tragic but useful opportunity for gun control advocates to make their case to the public. Mortality salience—the state of being reminded of one's own impending death—can powerfully influence both attitudes and behaviors (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986; Huddy et al., 2002). In particular, threats of indiscriminate violence such as mass shootings or terrorism have been demonstrated to shape attitudes toward related policies (Davis and Silver, 2004; Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014; Montalvo, 2007), especially for individuals who experience the threat most directly (Gartner, 2008; Huddy et al., 2002; Newman and Hartman, 2017). With copious news stories focusing on the number of dead and wounded, speculating on the motivations of the perpetrator, and reporting harrowing personal accounts, media coverage of gun violence may well raise the anxieties of its audience. In an effort to capitalize on these emotions, proponents of stricter gun control may believe that it is the right time to assert the need for stronger measures.

Relatively little research on mortality salience has focused on responses to major incidents of gun violence. However, the same patterns of mortality salience may be at play in this context. Pearson-Merkowitz and Dyck (2017) find that local gun crime rates condition the attitudes of political independents toward assault weapon bans. Additionally, Newman and Hartman (2017) observe local spikes in support for making it more difficult to obtain firearms in areas near where mass shootings occur. If this logic is generally applicable to death primes, and if intense coverage of tragedies like the Las Vegas shooting nationalizes the issue of gun violence, gun control advocates may be wise to tie their persuasive efforts to particular mass shootings.

Despite these reasons to believe that the periods following mass shootings may be the best times for gun control advocates to persuade the public, other factors in the gun control debate may complicate the dynamics of public responses to these arguments. First, efforts to move public opinion on matters of gun control interact with elements of partisan political identity. Modern attitudes about gun ownership and firearms regulation are tightly linked with social and political identities (Melzer, 2009). As such, there are strong partisan and ideological divisions in how citizens respond to gun violence and attempts to curb Second Amendment rights, as motivated reasoning affects information processing and decision making (Joslyn and Haider-Markel, 2013; Kunda, 1990; Pearson-Merkowitz and Dyck, 2017). This motivated reasoning may even be augmented by mortality salience, which can cause individuals to engage in “worldview defense” by solidifying existing attitudes (Castano et al., 2011; Gaines et al., 2007). It is therefore possible that pro-gun-control arguments following mass shootings will fail to sway both Democrats (who already support stricter gun control) and Republicans (who will reflexively argue against regulatory action that conflicts with their preexisting attitudes).

Additionally, the advantages of arguing for stricter gun control after mass shootings may be reduced by framing effects. As with many issues, incidents of gun violence can be interpreted and portrayed in different ways, which affect how members of the public

respond to the underlying event (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001). In the wake of a mass shooting, opponents of gun control often attempt to undercut supporters' arguments by contending that the proposed policy changes would not have prevented the latest mass shooting had they been implemented beforehand. This strategy includes pointing out that the Las Vegas and Orlando shooters passed background checks (Connor and Dilanian, 2017; Winter and Connor, 2016), that the Sandy Hook and San Bernardino shooters used straw purchasers to obtain weapons (Balsamo, 2017; Hermann and Rosenwald, 2012), and that none of the aforementioned perpetrators were on an FBI watch list at the time of their respective shootings (Schwartz et al., 2015; Winter and Connor, 2016). Gun control advocates may regard such a rebuttal as a distraction from the merits of the policies, but highlighting these limitations may nevertheless create counterframes that defuse arguments for reform (Chong and Druckman, 2011).

Finally, it is not clear that a mass shooting, while locally relevant, can be nationalized to mobilize support for a federal policy response. Threats to physical security and public safety like terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and mass shootings have demonstrated potential to change political attitudes (Huddy et al., 2002). However, there is a spatial and contextual component to this potential: individuals with the most proximate exposure to the events tend to drive the observed effects (Newman and Hartman, 2017). The sense of being under threat after a mass shooting might make individuals more likely to support additional gun control measures, but, because such events are generally very localized, it is also feasible that they will discount the threat if it is geographically or socially distant. If so, mass shootings may have minimal national impact on attitudes toward gun control.

In sum, the evidence that mass shootings are prime opportunities to change public opinion on gun control measures is at best incomplete. Massacres like the Las Vegas shooting may capture media and public attention, but it is not clear that their aftermaths are opportune times to move public opinion on gun control. While there is some reason to expect that increased salience and threat make persuasion more possible in these circumstances, motivated reasoning, framing, and spatial and contextual factors may attenuate these effects.

## Hypotheses

Our approach to generating hypotheses in this project is somewhat unusual. While our expectations are informed by research on public opinion and political psychology, our primary intention is to understand the dynamics of the contemporary gun control debate as it is presently carried out in the American public sphere. That is, we seek to test what we perceive as the "folk theory" of political psychology guiding the actions of gun control advocates—namely, that the public is more receptive to pro-gun-control arguments in the aftermath of a mass shooting. Consequently, we are not formulating new hypotheses from new theory so much as articulating hypotheses that appear to be taken for granted in the public discourse but have yet to be tested scientifically.

The follow-up to instances of mass gun violence adheres to a clear pattern. Following the event, gun control proponents call for one or more concrete policy responses, such as expanded background checks, banning high-capacity magazines and bump stocks, or preventing people on watch lists from purchasing firearms. Opponents respond with appeals to Second Amendment rights and with claims that the new policies would do little to stop future shootings. For example, in the wake of Las Vegas shooting, the National Rifle Association released a statement saying: "Banning guns from law-abiding Americans based

on the criminal act of a madman will do nothing to prevent future attacks” (National Rifle Association, 2017). This stance echoed its response to the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting: “Expanding background checks at gun shows will not prevent the next shooting, will not solve violent crime and will not keep our kids safe in schools . . . The sad truth is that no background check would have prevented the tragedies in Newtown, Aurora or Tucson” (National Rifle Association, 2013). This rhetoric is often matched by that of Republican elected officials. For instance, Florida Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) explained his vote against new gun control proposals after the 2015 Orlando nightclub shooting by arguing that “[n]one of these crimes that have been committed . . . would have been prevented by the expanded background checks” (CBS This Morning, 2015).

Past research on framing suggests that public policy attitudes, including gun control attitudes, can be influenced by selectively worded arguments that emphasize particular considerations (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997). This principle seems to motivate both proponents and opponents of stricter gun control policies to tailor their arguments in hopes of influencing public attitudes. It follows that we should expect individuals who encounter pro-gun-control arguments to have more positive attitudes toward specific gun control policies, such as the oft-advocated (albeit nebulous) proposal of “expanded background checks.” Conversely, individuals faced with anti-gun-control arguments should feel less positively about policies that would further restrict the sale and possession of firearms. These expectations comprise our first and second hypotheses:

- H<sub>1</sub>:** Exposure to pro-gun-control arguments will increase positive attitudes toward expanded background checks.
- H<sub>2</sub>:** Exposure to anti-gun-control arguments will decrease positive attitudes toward expanded background checks.

Second, evidence from political psychology suggests that mortality salience—the state of being reminded of one’s own impending death—can exert considerable influence on political attitudes and behaviors (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986; Karol and Miguel, 2007; Koch and Nicholson, 2016). In particular, mass shootings have been shown to increase gun control support among those who live near where shootings occur (Newman and Hartman, 2017). Although these effects are often heightened by geographic proximity to the event that generated the mortality salience (Huddy et al., 2002; Newman and Hartman, 2017), the nationalization of mass shootings by news media—especially major mass shootings—suggests that a highly salient event that highlights the negative consequences of lax gun control might render the public more positively disposed toward increased restrictions. This constitutes our third hypothesis:

- H<sub>3</sub>:** The occurrence of a mass shooting will increase positive attitudes toward expanded background checks.

Finally, the aftermaths of mass shootings are frequently marked by new or renewed calls for stricter gun control policies. This pattern of political advocacy evinces a belief that the public will be more susceptible to pro-gun-control arguments when a mass shooting has suddenly brought the issue of gun control to the fore. Opponents of gun control often accuse proponents of “politicizing” tragedies, but the regularity with which the gun control debate is reinvigorated after mass shootings suggests that such a strategy is perceived to be especially effective by gun control proponents. It is not difficult to reason why: a major event has starkly reminded the public of what happens when firearms fall into the wrong hands, underscoring the dangers of the status quo and the importance of

TABLE 1  
Treatment Assignment

Group	Pre-Shooting	Post-Shooting
Pro, background checks	142	141
Pro, common sense	132	130
Con, Second Amendment	122	118
Con, ineffectiveness	118	141
Control	123	120

effective policy responses. We infer that proponents of gun control expect their arguments to be particularly effective (and their opponents' arguments particularly *ineffective*) in the aftermath of a mass shooting, making it an ideal time to push for stricter gun control policies. These expectations form our fourth and fifth hypotheses:

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Pro-gun-control arguments will be more effective at increasing positive attitudes toward expanded background checks in the aftermath of a mass shooting.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** Anti-gun-control arguments will be less effective at decreasing positive attitudes toward expanded background checks in the aftermath of a mass shooting.

## Data and Methods

Beginning in September 2017, we recruited workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk to answer a brief online survey about political issues.<sup>1</sup> In the first batch, 663 participants completed the survey between September 26 and October 1, with the final participant submitting the survey just after 11:05 AM Pacific Daylight Time. Approximately 11 hours later, the Las Vegas shooting occurred, prompting us to recruit a second batch of 707 new participants who took the survey between October 2 and October 9.<sup>2</sup>

Upon agreeing to take the survey, participants were randomly sorted into one of four treatment groups or a control group. Participants in the treatment groups viewed a three-sentence argument for or against stricter gun control. If the argument was for gun control, it either advocated for an expanded system of background checks or called for "common sense gun reform." In keeping with the style of the contemporary gun control debate, both pro-gun-control arguments made explicit reference to recent high-profile mass shootings in Orlando and San Bernardino as a justification for the policy change. If the argument was against gun control, it either appealed to Second Amendment rights or claimed that increased regulations would not deter determined individuals from obtaining guns. Participants assigned to the control group viewed no argument. The distribution of treatment assignments is provided in Table 1.

The precise construction of our arguments is critical to interpreting the results of our experiment. Our pro-gun-control arguments refer to specific shootings and offer at least a

<sup>1</sup> Participants were paid 5 cents for successfully completing the survey. Though this payment is small, the use of MTurk in social research is well-validated (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012; Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner, 2015). Moreover, MTurk workers have shown to be superior to traditional subject pool samples in terms of representativeness and attentiveness (Hauser and Schwarz, 2016; Huff and Tingley, 2015). To ensure response quality, we embedded a simple attention check in our survey, requiring a specific response to a multiple-choice question, indicating that participants were reading carefully. Participants who failed this check were removed.

<sup>2</sup> We did not reinterview participants from the first batch of surveys because our IRB approval only covered a cross-sectional survey design.

vague proposal for a policy response. On the other hand, our anti-gun-control arguments do not mention a specific shooting and rely on an appeal to the Second Amendment and an argument about the ineffectiveness of gun regulations. Thus, the arguments are not precise mirror images of one another and may to some degree appear imbalanced. However, this choice was intentional on our part. We wanted our arguments to closely reflect the actual rhetoric from gun control advocates and opponents in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, which was broadly similar to that which followed the Las Vegas shooting and others. Our frames were crafted for verisimilitude rather than maximum persuasiveness. Thus, if we are guilty of poor argumentation in our attempt to nudge positive attitudes toward expanded background checks, the leading voices campaigning for stricter firearms regulations are equally culpable.

Following the application of the treatment, participants were asked whether they favored, opposed, or neither favored nor opposed expanding background checks for gun purchases. Those who indicated favoring or opposing the policy were asked to indicate whether they favored or opposed it a great deal, moderately, or a little. All participants were then asked how effective they thought expanding background checks would be at reducing mass shootings in the United States (on a five-point scale ranging from “not effective at all” to “extremely effective”) and how important they considered “reducing mass shootings” and “protecting gun rights” to be (on five-point scales ranging from “not at all important” to “extremely important”).<sup>3</sup> Finally, participants answered a battery of standard demographic questions.<sup>4</sup>

Purging the survey data of participants with non-American or duplicate IP addresses and participants who failed the rudimentary attention check embedded in the demographic questions attenuated our sample to 1,287 participants, 637 recruited before and 650 recruited after the Las Vegas shooting. Compared to the 2016 American National Election Study Time Series, our sample includes a greater proportion of women (66.9 percent, compared to 52.8 percent in the ANES), whites (80.9–71.7 percent), and four-year college graduates (49.8–38.6 percent), and has a lower average age (37.3–49.6) and household income (\$62,648.46–\$71,941.51, based on mid-range estimates). In terms of political leanings, our sample (43.7 percent Democratic, 30.1 percent Republican, 26.2 percent independent) was less partisan than the 2016 ANES (45.7 percent, 40.7 percent, and 13.6 percent, respectively), as well as more liberal (45.8 percent liberal, 33.3 percent conservative, and 20.9 percent moderate compared to 31.2 percent, 41.7 percent, and 27.1 percent, respectively).<sup>5</sup>

To assess the effects of argument frames and salience on gun control attitudes, we estimated three ordinary least squares regressions, one for each of our measures of “positive attitudes”—support for expanded background checks, anticipated effectiveness of expanded background checks at reducing mass shootings, and perceived importance of reducing mass shootings.<sup>6</sup> For each of these measures, higher values indicate greater support for expanded background checks, beliefs in their effectiveness, and perceived importance of reducing mass

<sup>3</sup>These two importance questions were presented to respondents in random order.

<sup>4</sup>Specific question wordings can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>5</sup>Although whether participants were surveyed before or after the shooting was not randomly assigned, the pre- and post-shooting samples were similar in average age (37.3 vs. 36.7) and income (\$60,733 vs. \$63,601), as well as in the percentage of participants who were women (69.3 percent vs. 64.7 percent), college educated (52.1 percent vs. 47.5 percent), white (79.7 percent vs. 82.2 percent), Democratic (44.6 percent vs. 42.8 percent), Republican (32.0 percent vs. 28.3 percent), liberal (45.7 percent vs. 45.8 percent), and conservative (34.5 percent vs. 32.2 percent). Replication data are available upon request.

<sup>6</sup>Strictly speaking, the extent to which participants consider reducing mass shootings to be an important issue need not represent positivity toward expanded background checks. Participants might regard mass shootings as a major problem, but prefer it be addressed via alternative means, either within the realm of gun



TABLE 2  
Determinants of Gun Control Attitudes (All Participants)

Variable	Support	Effectiveness	Importance
Post-shooting	−0.207 (0.231)	−0.305* (0.146)	0.244* (0.108)
Pro argument 1 (common sense)	−0.291 (0.225)	−0.470** (0.143)	−0.001 (0.105)
Pro argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.365 (0.320)	0.408* (0.203)	−0.049 (0.149)
Pro argument 2 (background checks)	−0.160 (0.221)	−0.263 (0.141)	0.101 (0.103)
Pro argument 2 × Post-shooting	0.022 (0.314)	0.046 (0.200)	−0.091 (0.146)
Con argument 1 (Second Amendment)	−0.557* (0.230)	−0.401** (0.146)	−0.120 (0.107)
Con argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.520 (0.327)	0.321 (0.208)	−0.025 (0.153)
Con argument 2 (ineffectiveness)	−0.871*** (0.232)	−0.758*** (0.147)	−0.019 (0.108)
Con argument 2 × Post-shooting	0.804* (0.322)	0.686*** (0.204)	0.015 (0.150)
Constant	6.041*** (0.162)	3.122*** (0.103)	4.350*** (0.075)
Number of observations	1,287	1,286	1,282
$R^2$	0.02	0.02	0.02

Standard errors in parentheses; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

shootings. Although these measures are not so highly correlated in our data as to merit analyzing them as a single construct (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.63$ ), each represents a parameter that gun control advocates would want to increase as part of their policy-making efforts: a public that views expanded background checks as a desired and impactful reform targeting a vital issue should be more amenable to increased firearms restrictions.

## Results

The results of three ordinary least squares regressions are displayed in Table 2. Each regression includes an indicator variable for whether the participant was surveyed after the Las Vegas shooting, indicator variables for exposure to each of our four arguments, and interaction variables to assess whether the persuasiveness of any of the arguments was conditional on whether the participant was exposed to it before or after the shooting.

We find no support for our first hypothesis that exposure to pro-gun-control arguments increases positive attitudes toward expanded background checks, regardless of whether the argument in question referenced generic “common sense” reforms or expanded background checks specifically. None of the main coefficients for either pro argument is positive and

control (such as banning certain firearms or accessories) or outside of it (such as increased funding for mental health programs). For the purposes of our analyses, we treat this measure as an indicator of positive attitudes toward expanded background checks on account of its statistical and theoretical correlation with support and anticipated effectiveness.



statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ); indeed, only one of the six is positive at all. Surprisingly, the “common sense” argument in favor of gun control significantly *reduced* belief in the effectiveness of expanded background checks as a prophylactic against mass shootings. For two of our three measures, this observed futility of pro-gun-control arguments is likely due in part to ceiling effects: the average support for expanded background checks in our sample was 5.74, and the average importance rating of reducing mass shootings was 4.45. Thus, this finding represents a mixed bag for proponents of stricter gun control: overall, attitudes toward expanded background checks are positive, but pro-gun-control arguments are unlikely to make them more positive.

In contrast to our unsupported first hypothesis, we do find support for our second hypothesis that exposure to anti-gun-control arguments decreases positive attitudes toward expanded background checks. On average, participants who encountered an anti-gun-control argument exhibited significantly less support for expanded background checks and significantly less optimism about their effectiveness at reducing mass shootings. This impact was evident whether the argument appeals to the philosophical principles of the Second Amendment or the pragmatic concerns of gun control’s ineffectiveness at stopping determined criminals, although the effects of the latter argument were somewhat stronger. Neither argument lowered the perceived importance of reducing mass shootings; the coefficients for each argument on importance did not approach statistical significance. As was the case for our first hypothesis, assessing our second hypothesis yields good news and bad news for opponents of stricter gun control: overall support for expanded background checks is high, but shrewd argumentation can both depress it and foment pessimism about the effectiveness of said policy reform at reducing mass shootings.

So far, we have found no evidence that positive attitudes toward expanded background checks can be increased by pro-gun-control arguments (although anti-gun-control arguments can reduce them). Can mass shootings, by bringing the direst consequences of lax gun control laws to the fore, render the public more positively disposed toward increased firearms restrictions, as our third hypothesis suggests? If any act of gun violence can influence gun control attitudes, the Las Vegas shooting—the deadliest in United States history—ought to have this potential. Contrary to our third hypothesis, the direct effects of the Las Vegas shooting on positive attitudes toward expanded background checks are mixed. Compared to participants surveyed before the shooting, post-shooting participants were not significantly more or less supportive of expanded background checks, were significantly less optimistic about the effectiveness of expanded background checks at reducing mass shootings, and gave significantly higher ratings of the importance of reducing mass shootings. Although proponents of gun control often redouble their efforts to advance stricter firearms regulations in the aftermath of a mass shooting, our results indicate that this is not necessarily a more opportune time to do so. Individuals may be more likely to prioritize reducing mass shootings as a policy issue, but they are also less likely to regard expanded background checks as an effective solution.

Does the recent occurrence of a mass shooting influence the strength of pro- and anti-gun-control arguments, as our fourth and fifth hypotheses suggest? For both hypotheses, our answer is a qualified yes. The “common sense” pro-gun-control argument, which significantly *lowered* the perceived effectiveness of expanded background checks at reducing mass shootings before the Las Vegas shooting, has no significant impact on perceived effectiveness after the shooting; however, given that its pre-shooting effect was to reduce positive attitudes toward expanded background checks, this finding is a case of the shooting making an argument less ineffective rather than more effective. Both anti-gun-control arguments reduced support and perceived effectiveness among

TABLE 3  
Determinants of Gun Control Attitudes (Democrats)

Variable	Support	Effectiveness	Importance
Post-shooting	0.094 (0.222)	−0.205 (0.191)	0.043 (0.133)
Pro argument 1 (common sense)	−0.248 (0.207)	−0.602*** (0.179)	−0.127 (0.123)
Pro argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.077 (0.309)	0.480 (0.267)	0.026 (0.185)
Pro argument 2 (background checks)	0.015 (0.197)	−0.206 (0.170)	0.029 (0.117)
Pro argument 2 × Post-shooting	−0.370 (0.295)	0.018 (0.255)	−0.026 (0.176)
Con argument 1 (Second Amendment)	−0.328 (0.211)	−0.275 (0.182)	−0.346** (0.126)
Con argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.180 (0.309)	0.161 (0.267)	0.216 (0.186)
Con argument 2 (ineffectiveness)	−0.431 (0.231)	−0.567** (0.200)	−0.225 (0.138)
Con argument 2 × Post-shooting	−0.088 (0.322)	0.392 (0.278)	0.063 (0.193)
Constant	6.661*** (0.144)	3.516*** (0.124)	4.661*** (0.086)
Number of observations	562	562	559
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.03	0.03

Standard errors in parentheses; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

participants who encountered them before the shooting, but these effects are almost entirely wiped out by the interactive effects of the shooting. Thus, although the direct effects of the Las Vegas shooting on positive attitudes toward expanded background checks are limited and mixed, the shooting does appear to have rendered pro-gun-control arguments (slightly) stronger and anti-gun-control arguments weaker. However, the end result of these interactive effects is that no arguments, pro or con, significantly manipulate positive attitudes toward expanded background checks in the aftermath of a mass shooting.

Partisanship and Responses to the Gun Control Debate

The aforementioned findings suggest that gun control proponents who view the aftermath of a mass shooting as the most opportune time to marshal public opinion in favor of their preferred policies are unlikely to be as successful as they hope to be. The occurrence of a mass shooting increases the public’s perceived importance of the issue of gun violence but makes them more pessimistic about the capacity of expanded background checks to achieve this goal. Support for expanded background checks is generally high, but pro-gun-control arguments demonstrate no capacity to increase it either before or after a major mass shooting (although anti-gun-control arguments become less effective in the aftermath).

Do these general observations hold when partisanship is taken into account? Past research on public opinion regarding gun control has established the power of party identification to condition responses to information and frames (Joslyn and Haider-Markel, 2013; Pearson-Merkowitz and Dyck, 2017). It is therefore possible that mass shootings, pro-gun-control

TABLE 4  
 Determinants of Gun Control Attitudes (Republicans)

Variable	Support	Effectiveness	Importance
Post-shooting	−0.004 (0.471)	0.040 (0.252)	0.592** (0.184)
Pro argument 1 (common sense)	−0.164 (0.473)	−0.091 (0.254)	0.267 (0.184)
Pro argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.351 (0.654)	0.227 (0.350)	−0.343 (0.255)
Pro argument 2 (background checks)	−0.271 (0.484)	0.010 (0.259)	0.146 (0.188)
Pro argument 2 × Post-shooting	−0.271 (0.673)	−0.488 (0.360)	−0.198 (0.262)
Con argument 1 (Second Amendment)	−0.427 (0.476)	−0.109 (0.255)	0.298 (0.185)
Con argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.080 (0.682)	0.046 (0.365)	−0.383 (0.265)
Con argument 2 (ineffectiveness)	−0.357 (0.466)	−0.237 (0.250)	0.267 (0.181)
Con argument 2 × Post-shooting	0.929 (0.660)	0.159 (0.354)	−0.204 (0.257)
Constant	5.118*** (0.354)	2.324*** (0.190)	4.059*** (0.137)
Number of observations	388	388	387
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.06

Standard errors in parentheses; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

arguments, or the interaction between them may increase positive attitudes toward expanded background checks for a partisan or nonpartisan subset of our sample in a way that would be difficult to detect using our previous models. To determine whether this is the case, we re-estimated each of our three models three times—once for the 562 Democrats in our sample, once for the 388 Republicans, and once for the 337 independents.<sup>7</sup> Tables 3, 4, and 5 present the results of our Democratic, Republican, and independent models, respectively.

Consistent with the state of the literature on partisanship as a perceptual screen, the Democrats, Republicans, and independents in our sample exhibited heterogeneous reactions to our treatments. Democratic participants, who in general entered our sample with the most positive attitudes toward expanded background checks, could not be made to feel more positively toward expanded background checks by either the incident in Las Vegas or the pro-gun-control arguments presented to them. Several arguments could cause them to view expanded background checks as a less effective remedy for mass shootings or reducing mass shootings as a less important issue, but each of these negative effects was severely attenuated by the Las Vegas shooting, after which no significant changes in attitudes were found.

Intriguingly, the overall effect of the Las Vegas shooting on the perceived importance of reducing mass shootings appears to be driven primarily by Republicans, who on average

<sup>7</sup>Independents who leaned Democratic or Republican were treated as Democrats and Republicans. We estimated separate models for each group rather than interact partisanship with our treatment variables to avoid the presentational and interpretational challenges of a triple interaction.

TABLE 5  
Determinants of Gun Control Attitudes (Independents)

Variable	Support	Effectiveness	Importance
Post-shooting	−0.262 (0.501)	−0.480 (0.305)	0.355 (0.274)
Pro argument 1 (common sense)	−0.165 (0.501)	−0.480 (0.305)	0.032 (0.274)
Pro argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.243 (0.682)	0.144 (0.416)	0.030 (0.374)
Pro argument 2 (background checks)	−0.403 (0.497)	−0.722* (0.303)	0.219 (0.272)
Pro argument 2 × Post-shooting	0.423 (0.672)	0.355 (0.411)	−0.135 (0.367)
Con argument 1 (Second Amendment)	−0.778 (0.523)	−0.761* (0.318)	−0.154 (0.286)
Con argument 1 × Post-shooting	0.605 (0.709)	0.363 (0.432)	−0.076 (0.388)
Con argument 2 (ineffectiveness)	−1.293** (0.493)	−1.162*** (0.301)	0.212 (0.270)
Con argument 2 × Post-shooting	1.011 (0.661)	1.015* (0.403)	−0.014 (0.361)
Constant	5.778*** (0.366)	3.222*** (0.223)	4.000*** (0.200)
Number of observations	337	336	336
$R^2$	0.03	0.06	0.04

Standard errors in parentheses; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

rated reducing mass shootings half an interval higher on the five-point importance scale if they were surveyed after the shooting rather than before. This increase is not merely due to the absence of a ceiling effect: Republicans and independents in the pre-shooting control group both rated the importance of reducing mass shootings roughly at 4 (very important) on the scale, but independent ratings of issue importance did not significantly increase in the aftermath of the shooting. However, with the exception of this direct effect of the shooting on the perceived importance of reducing mass shootings, Republicans were entirely unfazed by the pro- and anti-gun-control arguments presented to them, regardless of whether they were surveyed before or after the shooting.

Among independents, the importance of reducing mass shootings was unaffected by either the occurrence of a mass shooting or exposure to pro- or anti-gun-control arguments. Comparable to the sample as a whole, independents' support for and anticipated effectiveness of expanded background checks were significantly reduced by certain arguments, but these reductions were mostly nullified among those who were surveyed after the shooting. Thus, although our observed treatment effects varied considerably with participants' partisan identities, none of these variations constituted a hidden persuasive effect of pro-gun-control arguments.

## Conclusion

The fact that proponents of stricter gun control policies choose to intensify their efforts in the wakes of mass shootings suggests a belief that their arguments for policy reforms will

be more effective when the problem of gun violence is especially salient. Our experimental results offer little evidence to justify such a belief. Pro-gun-control arguments fail to increase positive attitudes toward firearms restrictions in the form of expanded background checks, even when a major mass shooting dominates the national news. From the perspective of gun control advocates, it seems the best that can be hoped for is that counterarguments from their political opponents will be less impactful on public opinion when a nationally salient tragedy has brought the issue of mass shootings to the fore.

When constructing and fielding our experimental design, we did not anticipate that our data collection period would be punctuated by the largest mass shooting in American history. Consequently, several aspects of our design are not ideally suited to the research environment we encountered. Although some of these limitations of our design are due to unforeseeable characteristics of the Las Vegas shooting and its aftermath, all have the potential to influence our results and thus deserve rumination. Perhaps the most obvious limitation of our experiment is that it is centered on a single policy proposal—the call for “expanded background checks.” It is possible that the observed futility of our pro-gun-control arguments is policy-dependent, and that measuring attitudes toward bump stock bans or some other policy would have yielded greater estimates of the effects of pro-gun-control arguments on public opinion.<sup>8</sup> However, we stress that the high rates of public support across party lines for expanded background checks have thus far not been met by policy action at the federal level. If positive attitudes toward expanded background checks are sufficiently high so as to defy the abilities of pro-gun-control arguments or mass shootings to increase them (and yet fail to spur substantial policy responses), we doubt that public opinion on other policies can be stoked to the point of arousing policy action.

Throughout, we have treated support for expanded background checks, anticipated effectiveness of expanded background checks at reducing mass shootings, and perceived importance of reducing mass shootings as equal within the broader category of “positive attitudes” toward expanded background checks. We cannot adjudicate based on our data how important each of these is to mobilizing the public in the politics of gun control. It may be that some of the tradeoffs and null effects we observe are “worth it” to gun control proponents—that is, perhaps they would willingly adopt an argument strategy that reduces anticipated effectiveness of a policy so long as it raises the perceived importance of the issue. Answering this question requires the perspective of gun control advocates and experts in the policy-making process for firearms restrictions. What we can say is that none of the arguments tested in our experimental design is a panacea for increasing positive attitudes toward expanded background checks.

There may be a combination of mass shooting, policy proposal, and rhetorical strategy that would prompt major gun policy change at the federal level.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, if the deadliest mass shooting in American history is insufficient to mobilize public opinion on an already popular proposal to expand background checks to legislative effect, prospects are grim for any substantial changes to national firearms regulations in the United States.

<sup>8</sup>One possibility is that proponents of gun control make a strategic miscalculation by advocating for relatively modest policy changes. An incremental approach may be less likely to draw the ire of gun control opponents than would, for example, an Australian-style ban on semiautomatic weapons (Peters and Watson, 1996). However, if the public (rightly or wrongly) perceives such watered-down policy proposals as unable to prevent or reduce mass shootings, they may decline to rally in support of them. Thus, the challenge of gun control policy making in the United States may put supporters of gun control in a Catch-22: any policy moderate enough to be palatable to gun control opponents would seem to the public to be too toothless to be a worthwhile response to mass gun violence.

<sup>9</sup>The public response to the Parkland shooting has lasted longer than responses to other mass shootings, but this increased national attention has thus far failed to translate into major policy changes.

Opponents of gun control will undoubtedly continue to decry attempts to “politicize” gun violence for as long as proponents choose to make their case in the aftermaths of mass shootings, but the strategy of tying gun control arguments to major tragedies is unlikely to stoke public opinion enough to prompt major reform.

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## Appendix

### Argument and Question Wordings

*Pro Argument 1 (Common Sense)*: We must take measures to reduce mass shootings like Orlando and San Bernardino. *We should implement common sense gun reform* to keep guns out of dangerous hands. Americans demand we take action to address the problem of mass shootings, and this will help make us safer. [*No emphasis in original survey.*]

*Pro Argument 2 (Background Checks)*: We must take measures to reduce mass shootings like Orlando and San Bernardino. *The existing system of background checks should be expanded* to keep guns out of dangerous hands. Americans demand we take action to address the problem of mass shootings, and this will help make us safer. [*No emphasis in original survey.*]

*Con Argument 1 (Second Amendment)*: Further gun regulations *represent an attack on our Second Amendment rights*. Americans have a constitutional right to bear arms to protect their homes and their families. These policies will only restrict gun rights without making Americans any safer from mass shootings. [*No emphasis in original survey.*]

*Con Argument 2 (Ineffectiveness)*: Further gun regulations *would do nothing to reduce mass shootings*. Determined individuals will still be able to obtain guns even with stricter laws. These policies will only restrict gun rights without making Americans any safer from mass shootings. [*No emphasis in original survey.*]

*Support*: Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose expanding background checks for gun purchases? [*If favor:*] Do you favor that a great deal, moderately, or a little? [*If oppose:*] Do you oppose that a great deal, moderately, or a little?

*Effectiveness*: How effective do you think expanding background checks would be at reducing mass shootings in the United States? [Extremely effective; very effective; moderately effective; slightly effective; not effective at all.]

*Importance*: How important is the issue of reducing mass shootings to you? [Extremely important; very important; moderately important; slightly important; not at all important.]

*Partisanship*: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a . . . [Strong Democrat; Democrat; Independent Leaning Democrat; Independent; Independent Leaning Republican; Republican; Strong Republican].