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Gun Politics Aren't About Guns

Abstract

"Gun control is one of a handful of issues that seems to stir up so much passion on both sides of the aisle that it's almost impossible to have a rational conversation on the topic."

Posting about the gun violence debate from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/gun-politics-arent-about-guns/>

Keywords

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Gun Politics Aren't About Guns

 [all in allthings.org/gun-politics-arent-about-guns/](http://allthings.org/gun-politics-arent-about-guns/)

Donald Roth

Gun control is absolutely about guns. From Obama's recent [executive order regarding gun control](#) to active [debates about the merits of open carry regulations](#), the specifics of the gun control debate are all about guns: who can have them, where they can be used, and what kinds can be purchased. However, gun politics aren't about guns at all. Political victory is all about being able to mobilize one's supporters, and mobilizing means getting people to care enough to get up out of their chairs. An old sales maxim says, "logic makes people think; emotion makes people act," and gun control is one of a handful of issues that seems to stir up so much passion on both sides of the aisle that it's almost impossible to have a rational conversation on the topic. It's inevitable that gun control is one of those rallying issues that is featured regularly in presidential politics.

Despite surprisingly broad consensus on some gun control measures ([an October, 2015 poll by Gallup showed 86% of Americans favor universal background checks](#)) and a general consensus that gun violence is a serious issue that no one should be happy about, actual political efforts to make changes on this front routinely stall out. In October, David Auerbach lamented on *Slate* that [statistics don't seem to work](#) in moving the debate forward. He's right, but as we move into a presidential election season, positive change is less and less the purpose of much of what we hear. Instead, statements skew toward emotional appeals that generate electoral votes, and this means that many arguments will be crafted to play to and cultivate specific market demographics while leveraging the fear that drives an "us v. them" worldview. Ultimately, if we are going to talk about what actual meaningful progress in this area looks like, I think it's important that we examine what these political narratives are seeking to appeal to so that we can reject some of the false distinctions at play and see where these political appeals are actually talking past one another to address the very different lived experiences of their respective constituencies.

The Gun Rights Advocate

The Gun Rights Advocate stereotype is well-developed in the public consciousness and even has several celebrities that seem to embody its excesses. To the public eye, this is Ted Nugent, or someone like him: a loud, Southern, white man draped in camouflage and American flags preaching an odd mix of extreme patriotism and deep suspicion of government. To be sure, parts of this stereotype are born out demographically, but according to a [2014 Pew Research Center study](#), several features of this stereotype may not be representative. Gun ownership is actually about as common across the Midwest and Western states as it is in the South. Similarly, while far more people who identify as Republican or conservative have guns in their homes (40-50%), nearly a quarter of liberal and Democrat homes also have them. However, it is true that a large percentage of gun owners are white, while guns are about twice as prevalent in rural over urban households. Overall, though, the stereotype fails to capture just how broad the gun-owning populace is.

The Gun Control Advocate

The Gun Control Advocate stereotype is comparatively a little less clearly defined, but it has some discernible features, particularly when viewed through the lens of those opposed to it. To the other side, gun control advocates are urban, Northeastern liberals who are personally afraid of guns and who seek to foster an oppressive and interventionist government system on the backs of a disarmed populace. Again, aspects of this are true in the sense that gun ownership is much less common in the Northeastern United

States and urban centers in general, and liberals are less likely to own guns. At the same time, certain demographics, such as African Americans, are much less inclined overall to own guns but suffer from a [vastly disproportionate amount of gun violence](#). In that context, being afraid of guns isn't cowardice, it's common sense. Overall, however, buying the assumption that gun ownership (or lack thereof) correlates to some degree with opinions on this issue. The fact that, even where they're most common, only around half of all households own guns suggests that people concerned with gun control are distributed quite broadly throughout the population.

A Way Forward?

When looking at these two stereotypes, it's easy to see why the gun control debate breaks down while gun politics flourish. For one, the statistics are far from clear. While gun bans in countries like Australia were [excellent](#) at lowering the rate of homicides by firearm, the overall homicide rate there has remained [relatively flat](#). While the homicide rate in the United States is [much higher](#) than other developed countries, homicide and violent crime rates have been [decreasing dramatically](#) across the country for decades. Finally, while many metropolitan areas have homicide rates comparable to violence-plagued countries like Mexico, more rural regions like Iowa have homicide rates comparable to the idealized European averages.¹

At the same time, the political messages sent by citing some of these statistics are more unambiguous, and the same message often plays totally differently to each side. The example of Australia, mentioned earlier, plays to one side as an easy solution to drastically reduce gun violence, but to the other, the practicalities of the law are unworkable in the American context and seem to prove that the government wants to seize their guns.² For gun control advocates, a fear of violence too easily morphs into a fear of rednecks, then gun owners in general, which easily translates into action for the Democratic political cause. At the same time, a vast majority of gun owners associate their [firearms with a feeling of safety](#) and a sense of agency or ability to resist evil, be it government tyranny or invading criminals. The threat of taking away guns from these people therefore translates into a feeling of invasion and being made personally less safe, and that easily translates into action for the Republican cause.

Ultimately, the two sides are largely speaking past one another to address different concerns, and that plays into big wins in terms of voter mobilization for each party. However, gun politics don't necessarily help any of us. If guns are partly a proxy for deeper concerns, how can we address those issues together? Perhaps we have to focus on some of these deeper concerns without slipping into the absolutist rhetoric that comes too easily. Programs like [Operation Ceasefire](#) seem to have had an awful lot of success, even if they've been [strategically excluded](#) from aspects of the political discussion around gun control. Strategic intervention strategies like this one build off of the reality that it's a small group that's causing the lion's share of the harm, and they leverage community and police resources to target high-risk individuals *before* violence occurs. Most importantly, it works, with Boston's project and its imitators seeing 30-60% reductions in various homicide rates. These types of solutions get at root issues while avoiding fears of government encroachment because they work at energizing and leveraging communities, and that makes them particularly attractive ways of addressing this issue. We need more programs that do this: offer solutions to gun issues without falling into gun politics.

What other ideas are out there? How else can we engage communities in getting involved in the work of reducing violence and making us safer? How do we advocate for these solutions without playing into stereotypes? Share your ideas and the programs you'd like to champion in the comments below.

Footnotes

1. For reference, the most current homicide rate (homicides per 100,000) for [Chicago](#) is 15.1, while [Mexico](#) is 18.9, [Iowa](#) is 1.5, while the European averages can be seen [here](#). ↩
2. The Australian buyback program ended up seizing around 20% of the country's privately-owned firearms, which in Australia was a few hundred thousand. This would be around 60 million in the U.S. Similarly, gun ownership was only permitted upon a showing of need, which, does not include self-defense in Australia. ↩