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Guns, identity, and nationhood

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ABSTRACT The article provides a theoretical perspective on the symbolic meaning of the right to bear arms in modern America, especially among its conservative movement. Neglecting this issue, scholarship on gun symbolism has commonly focused on guns possessed by offenders in inner-cities, such as juveniles or gang members. Offering a multi-disciplinary and comparative outlook, the article explains how guns have become symbols of a worldview under which armed patriots must stand ready to defend America from “tyranny,” “big government,” “socialism,” and other existential threats. In particular, the U.S. conservative movement does not merely perceive the right to bear arms as a means of self-defense against criminals, but as a safeguard against an oppressive government that “patriots” may have to overthrow by force. The article examines the hypothesis that guns foster a sense of belonging in this conception of nationhood. This worldview is not solely limited to politicians, elites, or activists, as it can encompass rank-and-file conservatives. Group identification can rest on sharing radical beliefs that enhance cohesion, including rallying against perceived threats. This mindset helps explain resistance to elementary reforms to regulate firearms. If one believes that an unbridled right to bear arms is not only key to protecting the United States, but also key to what it means to be an American, concessions on gun control become difficult to envision. While conservatives in other Western democracies tend to support significant gun control, a key dimension of American exceptionalism is the relative normalization of a conservative identity in which firearms have acquired a peculiar symbolic value.

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Introduction

America stands polarized over the right to bear arms, which may be conceived as a protection against criminals or against the government. The second conception plays a prominent and intriguing role in the modern debate over gun control. Illustratively, in *Duncan v. Bercerra*, a 2017 case, U.S. District Judge Roger Benitez granted a preliminary injunction against a California law barring high-capacity gun magazines. His opinion described the Second Amendment as indispensable to “the safety of the Republic,” quoting Judge Alex Kozinski approvingly: “[T]he simple truth—born of experience—is that tyranny thrives best where government need not fear the wrath of an armed people. . . . [F]ew saw the Third Reich coming until it was too late. The Second Amendment is a doomsday provision, one designed for those exceptionally rare circumstances where all other rights have failed where the government refuses to stand for reelection and silences those who protest.”

While legal scholars disagree about how to interpret the Second Amendment (e.g., Posner, 2008; Winkler, 2013), this article does not seek to resolve that question. Rather, we will explore the hypothesis that guns are symbols of a peculiar conception of nationhood and identity. Drawing upon the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, among other sources, we will consider how guns are objects that can foster a sense of belonging. This symbolic value helps explain why gun control has sparked extraordinary opposition in conservative America. If one believes that the right to bear arms is not only key to safeguarding the United States from “tyranny,” but also key to what it means to be an American, concessions on gun control become difficult to envision.

A dated yet noteworthy study suggested that people are impervious to statistical information on guns because guns are symbols whose meaning transcends empirical evidence (Kahan and Braman, 2003), just as historical evidence can hardly change the conviction in an unbridled, “original” constitutional right to bear arms (Greene, 2010). Although empirical, factual, and historical evidence is not futile per se (e.g., Cook and Ludwig, 2003), this symbolic dimension has led some experts to be skeptical of efforts to change America’s gun culture (e.g., Kohn, 2004). If neither legal reform nor cultural change are on the horizon, the outcome is perhaps the status quo.

This article argues that constant social clashes over elementary gun control have become a facet of “American exceptionalism,” the notion that the United States is an “exception” to international standards,² especially compared to other Western democracies: European nations, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.³ These social clashes are tied to another dimension of American exceptionalism predominantly concentrated in the modern conservative movement: a fierce suspicion of government (Jouet, 2017). Opposition to gun control is rooted in this societal context, as is the notion that an armed citizenry is a bulwark against America’s transformation into a dictatorship.

These mindsets have intricate historical roots. Some 18th century Americans construed the right to bear arms as a means of defense against an authoritarian government—an attitude influenced by resistance to British rule. Others feared that uncontrolled armed militias could lead to chaos and believed that the birth of the American republic provided peaceful means to resolve grievances. Overall, the Founding Fathers and contemporary citizens appeared to have heterogeneous views on these issues that did not simply mirror those of 21st century Americans on opposite sides of the gun debate (Cornell, 2006; Hofstadter, 1970; Winkler, 2013).

Whether a “free country” needs armed citizens may be a quintessential American debate, as numerous democracies have emerged throughout the world despite lacking a U.S.-style right to

bear arms. Even in America the conception of this right has not been static, as we will see that its proponents have grown more radical in condemning gun control as a matter of principle since approximately the 1980s. The symbolic importance of firearms in this period has been under-studied and under-theorized.

The article will offer a multidisciplinary, comparative, and theoretical perspective on the interrelationship between guns, identity, and nationhood. First, I will provide an overview of American exceptionalism in this field. Second, I will consider the modern tendency to frame the right to bear arms as a protection against the “tyranny” of “big government.” Third, I will explore how firearms have acquired intriguing symbolic dimensions in this societal context.

Guns and American exceptionalism: an overview

The United States has the highest number of guns per capita worldwide with 120.5 firearms per 100 residents, namely over one gun per person on average. As of 2017, there were over 393 million guns in American civilian hands (Karp, 2018). Gun ownership has surged in prior decades (Krouse, 2012; Small Arms Survey, 2003). It still varies widely across the population. The General Social Survey reports that 35 percent of households own guns. The rate among Republicans is over twice that of Democrats, whose rate of ownership has markedly declined since the 1990s (NORC, 2019). On the other hand, Gallup has a higher estimate with 46 percent of households possessing at least one gun within their home or adjacent property (Gallup, “Guns”).

The proliferation of firearms, which are easily acquired legally or illegally, is a major reason why the rate of intentional homicide in America is huge compared to other Western democracies. It stands approximately four times higher than in France or the United Kingdom, and five times higher than in Australia or Denmark. Contrary to conventional wisdom, crime rates as a whole are not exceptionally high in America, as they usually fall within the range of Western nations for offenses like theft, robbery, and assault (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, multi-year datasets, 2019). Rather, it is America’s high homicide rate that stands out in the West. This peculiarity is tied to firearms, which were the cause of 73 percent of U.S. homicides in 2016 (F.B.I., 2019). America’s rate of homicide by firearm is very high by Western standards (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008–2010).

Canada offers a stark contrast to the United States. Both nations had a frontier culture for part of their histories, which involved armed settlers and clashes with indigenous populations. Nevertheless, guns are less sacrosanct in modern Canada, whose gun rights movement may be interpreted as either more moderate or less successful than its U.S. counterpart. This helps explain why the rate of firearm ownership in Canada is 3.47 times lower than in America (Karp, 2018). The rate of homicide by firearms is also approximately six times lower in Canada, based on 2009 comparative data (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2016), although it has risen since then (Statistics Canada, 2018). Canada is in the midst of a social debate over gun control that both converges and diverges from the U.S. debate. In 2012, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper repealed a controversial national registry for long-guns on a party-line vote (2012) (Brown, 2012). Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party later considered a national handgun ban. But a government report found stakeholders “strongly polarized” on this issue (Public Safety Canada and Hill+Knowlton Strategies, 2019). It largely focused on the views of activists and self-selected participants in a public consultation, rather than a random sample (White and Cardoso, 2019). Still, according to historian R. Blake Brown,

partisan polarization over guns in Canada has increased (Brown, 2018). Trudeau ultimately opted against a national handgun ban and, at the time of writing, had mainly proposed banning assault rifles (White et al., 2019). That being noted, Canadian laws are stricter and with fewer loopholes than in America (e.g., Masters, 2016; RCMP, 2017).

Tellingly, America's powerful gun rights movement has succeeded in passing peculiar "right-to-carry" (RTC) state laws allowing people to carry concealed handguns. Statistical evidence indicates that the harmful effects of these laws outweigh their benign effects. Contrary to the gun movement's claims, "[t]here is not even the slightest hint in the data . . . that RTC laws reduce violent crime," according to a study by John Donohue, Abhay Aneja, and Kyle Weber. Rather, RTC laws were associated with 13–15 percent higher aggregate violent crime rates 10 years after adoption (Donohue et al., 2019).

America's day-to-day gun violence has received less media attention than mass shootings like those at Columbine High School (1999), Virginia Tech University (2007), Sandy Hook Elementary School (2012), the Las Vegas Strip (2017), and Parkland's Stoneman Douglas High School (2018). Even such tragedies have not led to a genuine social consensus on how to perceive gun violence, much less how to address it.

Certain gun control advocates defend positions that seem radical by American historical standards, such as banning all firearms (Winkler, 2013). Some, including former Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, have suggested repealing the Second Amendment (Stevens, 2018), which would require either a constitutional convention or super-majority votes in Congress and state legislatures. Such sweeping proposals stand no chance at present.

However, the views of American gun control proponents are not radical by international standards. Virtually no other country recognizes a constitutional right to bear arms like the United States (Elkins et al., 2009). Banning or strictly controlling firearms is especially the norm in other Western democracies.⁴

A majority of Americans, 63 percent, want gun laws to be "more strict." Revealing the difficulty in finding common ground for concrete policies, 51 percent are also "against a law which would make it illegal to manufacture, sell or possess semi-automatic guns known as assault rifles." But there appears to be a consensus on background checks on all gun sales, as 92 percent of Americans favor this measure (Gallup, "Guns"), which the gun lobby has successfully blocked.

The gun lobby, including the National Rifle Association (NRA), opposes regulation and claims that more guns make society safer (e.g., Lichtblau and Rich, 2012). Partisan polarization in the American public's perception of the NRA reached a record level in 2018 (Gallup, 2018). While 87 percent of Republicans view the NRA favorably, only 15 percent of Democrats do so. Overall, half of the American public, 49 percent, perceives the NRA favorably, a drop from 58 percent in 2015 (Gallup, 2019).

Competing views of guns have sparked litigation. For decades, courts had generally adopted the "militia theory" of the Second Amendment, which denies an individual right to bear arms since the amendment refers to arming a "well regulated Militia" like the National Guard. Over time, the gun movement has become increasingly radical in rejecting the "militia theory" and defending an unbridled individual right to bear arms (Winkler, 2013; Hofstadter, 1970).

In 2008, the Supreme Court's groundbreaking *Heller* (2008) decision largely abandoned the "militia theory" and adopted a relatively broad interpretation of the Second Amendment in a 5-4 vote. The majority therefore struck a ban on handguns in the District of Columbia.⁵ Ironically, the NRA did not bring this suit and tried to stop it for fear that the Justices would embrace a

narrow view of the Second Amendment, which the Supreme Court had not yet definitely interpreted and whose meaning is ambiguous. The lawsuit ultimately was a victory for the gun rights movement. The George W. Bush administration had supported its constitutional interpretation, rejecting the "militia theory" of the Second Amendment that the Justice Department had long adopted, thereby revealing a paradigm shift in conservative America (Winkler, 2013).⁶

Gun rights advocates and their opponents demanding stricter gun control have turned the issue into a significant "culture war." In a sign of the times, the influential NRA aired an ad where its spokesperson Dana Loesch denounced protests by anti-Trump and anti-gun liberal activists. The video concluded with Loesch emphatically declaring: "The only way we stop this, the only way we save our country and our freedom is to fight this violence of lies with a clenched fist of truth. I'm the National Rifle Association of America and I'm freedom's safest place" (NRA TV, 2017).

Framing the right to bear arms as a safeguard against government tyranny

Before examining the symbolic dimensions of guns, we will consider the sociopolitical context in which they arise. Gun right advocates in modern America stand out in the West not merely because of their uncompromising opposition to regulation, but also because of how they frame the right to bear arms as a safeguard against government "tyranny." It was not always so.

For much of American history, a right to bear arms coexisted with significant restrictions on gun ownership. As Adam Winkler describes, the Founding Fathers "barred large portions of the population from possessing firearms, required many gun owners to register their weapons, and even conditioned the right on a person's political leanings." In the Far West, whose gunslingers are romanticized, regulations often required people to leave their firearms with local authorities before entering a town. Black people, slave or free, were also widely barred from owning weapons and forcibly disarmed. Even the NRA, an organization founded in 1871 to promote marksmanship and recreational shooting, tended to embrace gun control during much of the 20th century (Winkler, 2013).

In 1977, hardline members of the NRA gained control of the organization and proceeded to vehemently lobby against practically all firearm regulations, denouncing them as government overreach. At the time of this change of leadership, the NRA insisted that an individual right to bear arms was necessary for self-defense in light of rising crime rates. Nowadays, the NRA and other proponents of the right to bear arms commonly frame it as indispensable to protecting "freedom" against a tyrannical government (Winkler, 2013).

The radicalization of the gun rights movement parallels a paradigm shift in American conservatism. Since approximately the 1980s, the Republican Party has adopted increasingly hardline positions on a host of issues. In particular, its opposition to "big government," from regulation to taxes, has become visceral and uncompromising (Jouet, 2017).⁷

In addition to the aforesaid statements by Dana Loesch and Judge Roger Benitez, diverse examples demonstrate the conviction that armed citizens must stand ready to fight an oppressive government. In litigation before the Supreme Court, the NRA has argued: "This individual right to keep and bear arms is a fundamental right; the Second Amendment on its face describes it as essential to a 'free State'—a democratic state free from government tyranny" (NRA *amicus* brief, *Heller*, 2008). The libertarian lawyers who litigated the landmark *Heller* case distanced themselves from the NRA and made various concessions that infuriated some gun rights activists (Winkler, 2013). Even so, their legal

brief likewise underscored that “the right to arms protects two of the most fundamental rights—the defense of one’s life inside one’s home, and the defense of society against tyrannical usurpation of authority.” In other words, self-defense against criminals and protection against the government. The brief added that, “should our Nation someday suffer tyranny again, preservation of the right to keep and bear arms would enhance the people’s ability to act as militia in the manner practiced by the Framers” (Respondent’s Brief, *Heller*, 2008).

Dick Heller, the plaintiff in the *Heller* decision, was persuaded that guns are needed to revolt against the government. Granted, Heller was more radical than diverse other plaintiffs who initially joined the suit but whose claims were dismissed for lack of legal standing (Winkler, 2013). Heller’s views nonetheless reflect the anti-government ideology in parts of American society.

The declarations of other prominent gun rights advocates exemplify this trend. Larry Pratt, the head of Gun Owners of America, argued that gun control advocates “are coming for our freedom, for our money, for our kids, for our property. They are coming for everything because they are a bunch of socialists” (Hornick, 2010). His organization depicts the NRA as too compromising.

A man from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, explained the meaning of firearms in his community as follows when interviewed for a study: “Freedom. Liberty. Patriotism. That’s why we just voted Trump. No way we were going to let ‘Crooked Hillary’ take those things away from us” (Metzl, 2019). In the man’s eyes, the primary threat and reason to carry guns is not criminals. He pointed to Hillary Clinton but she comes across as the embodiment of a wider threat with diverse labels: “big government,” “socialists,” “liberals,” etc. This perceived enemy does not merely wish to take away the guns of the American people—it aims to deprive them of their “freedom” and “liberty,” as the interviewee described.

The views of influential media personalities are revealing as well. Glenn Beck declared that he was prepared to use a gun to stop federal workers purportedly keen on seizing his children and forcibly vaccinating them. Erick Erickson affirmed that the federal government had “enslaved” Americans and was collecting census data coercively. “[I’ll] pull out my wife’s shotgun and see how that little [census worker] twerp likes being scared at the door,” he warned (Meyerson, 2011). Allegations of coercion by vaccination and census officials show how “tyranny” is not necessarily an amorphous threat since certain government policies trigger calls for armed resistance. The rise of the Third Reich is another recurrent theme in America’s gun rights discourse (e.g., Hofstadter, 1970). Beside the declarations about Nazi Germany by Judges Benitez and Kozinski quoted in the article’s opening paragraph, Ben Carson notably vowed that Jews could have largely prevented the Holocaust if they had been armed: “I’m telling you that there is a reason that these dictatorial people take the guns first” (Philips, 2015).

It is difficult to assess the extent to which this discourse represents the views of the average gun owner or conservative. For instance, a 2019 poll found that 63 percent of gun owners said that they support the right for “Personal safety/Protection” (Gallup, “Guns”). The poll does not specify if it is for safety or protection against criminals or against the government or both. Another study is more indicative of growing hostility to gun control, as it measured partisan support for a simple policy requiring a permit to buy a gun. At first glance, a majority of both Democrats and Republicans consistently supported this policy from 1972 to 2016. However, only 50.5 percent of “strong Republicans” supported this elementary form of control in 2016, a sharp decrease from approximately 70 percent in 1972 (Miller, 2019). Additional data show that, in 2018, 76 percent of Republicans thought that protecting gun rights was more

important than gun control, a surge from 38 percent in 2000. Only 19 percent of Democrats held this view in 2018, the same share as in 2000 despite relative fluctuations in the interval (Pew Research Center, 2018). These findings suggest that a non-negligible proportion of Americans, predominantly conservatives, gravitate toward the gun rights movement’s headline perspective.

To be sure, some conservatives, including a segment of NRA members, express concern about the gun lobby’s scare tactics and uncompromising positions (e.g., Melzer, 2009). But, at the end of the day, conservative citizens are much closer to backing or enabling the radical gun rights agenda than to challenging or restraining it.

The gun rights movement has used a public relations strategy to normalize its views. For example, despite catering heavily to anti-feminist males (Melzer, 2009), the NRA has aimed to soften its image by highlighting female members. The gun-toting conservative women depicted in its messages signal support for traditional gender roles and opposition to liberal women’s rights organizations, some of which demand gun control (Browder, 2006). This illustrates how guns have become intertwined with mainstream conservative identity in modern America.

The sociopolitical context confirms that hostility to gun control is not limited to a tiny fringe of the U.S. population. Rather, this belief reflects the growing radicalization of American conservatism since the 1980s. Conspiracy-mongering about government tyranny, a longstanding theme in American history (Hofstadter, 1963) intensified in the Obama era and contributed to the election of Donald Trump (Jouet, 2017). In this mindset, every gun regulation could gradually lead America on a slippery slope toward not only full disarmament, but the federal government becoming an authoritarian regime. Overall, due to a phenomenon that political scientists have identified as “asymmetric polarization,” the views of American conservatives have generally become more radical than those of American liberals in recent decades (e.g., Hacker and Pierson, 2015).

While activists and elites have a disproportionate impact on America’s polarization (Fiorina et al., 2010), the social divide on many issues encompasses the wider public, too (Abramowitz, 2013; Jouet, 2017). In this social environment, the average proponent of the right to bear arms plausibly holds more moderate views than leaders of organizations like the National Rifle Association or Gun Owners of America. Still, the idea that gun control threatens “freedom” appears relatively common among rank-and-file conservatives.⁸ Having examined this evolving societal context, we will now turn to the symbolic meaning that guns have acquired in conservative America.

The symbolic dimensions of guns

The symbolic dimensions of the right to bear arms in America are glaring. After all, the odds that anyone will fire a gun against a criminal are slim. The odds that anyone will fire a gun in an insurrection against the government are slimmer. In all likelihood, the overwhelming majority of ardent proponents of the right to bear arms will only ever pull a trigger at a shooting range or when hunting animals. A fierce rhetorical defense of the right to bear arms or the choice to arm oneself to the teeth are largely symbolic acts. They reflect strong views about what guns mean based on an underlying set of beliefs.

In this section, I will offer diverse theoretical perspectives on the right to bear arms in modern America, especially among its conservative movement. Neglecting this issue, scholarship on the symbolic meaning of guns has commonly focused on guns possessed by offenders in inner-cities, such as juveniles or gang members (Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998; Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007; Wilkinson, 2003). Furthermore, scholars who have written

on the symbolic value of guns have mostly focused on the ideology of activists like NRA members (e.g., Melzer, 2009), rather than on how guns have become intertwined with a broader conservative identity in the United States. These studies have likewise generally neglected the interrelationship between the evolution of American conservatism, asymmetric polarization, and American exceptionalism that I depicted above, namely the societal context in which guns have gained a peculiar symbolic value.

The sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu provide a lens to analyze the symbolic meaning of guns in America. His multi-faceted concept of “*habitus*” is particularly relevant, as it sought to explain what shapes a lifestyle, including “a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, practices.” To Bourdieu, these elements may serve as “classificatory schemes” and principles of “vision and division,” namely the ways in which a social group defines itself or is defined by others. As part of this process, “goods” and “opinions” can express “symbolic differences” (Bourdieu, 1998).

In Bourdieu’s eyes, the concept of *habitus* does not signify that social actors are necessarily “conscious and knowing subjects acting with full knowledge of the facts” shaping their conduct. By the same token, Bourdieu rejected the image of purely passive social actors responding to “mechanical forces” totally beyond their control. Rather, Bourdieu argued that social actors are guided by a “practical sense” reflecting both their personal or group “preferences” and “a system of durable cognitive structures.”⁹ Put otherwise, Bourdieu suggested that *habitus* reflects an interplay between, on one hand, individual and group agency, and, on the other hand, societal context and systemic structures.¹⁰

Drawing upon Bourdieu’s framework in *Practical Reason*, possessing guns or adamantly defending the right to bear arms may be ways of defining a group identity. These are indeed “goods” and “opinions” that express “symbolic differences” between group members and outsiders. The in-group could generally be defined as people who consider themselves the true protectors of the Second Amendment and the Constitution created by the Founding Fathers; and who believe that the right to bear arms is critical to “freedom.” In-group members may perceive out-group members as people who wrongly or naïvely reject these ideas, such as by supporting significant gun control.

Bourdieu’s interplay between individual agency and wider social patterns is also relevant. Identification with the in-group of staunch gun rights supporters may be more or less conscious, as it may range from genuine activism against regulation to vaguer beliefs about the meaning of guns and “freedom.” This in-group identity is further tied to the aforesaid social and historical context that has seen anti-government attitudes intensify in conservative America in the last decades.

Figure 1 suggests that the belief in the right to bear arms in America may be divided in three general categories. First, the right to bear arms may be equated with a right to self-defense against criminals. This is probably the widest and least controversial understanding of the right. Second, support for the right to bear arms may reflect hostility to “big government” and its regulations. This understanding can lead to intransigent opposition to gun control as a matter of principle due to the belief that government is overreaching. Third, support for the right to bear arms may reflect the conviction that an armed citizenry is a bulwark against government “tyranny”—the kind of “doomsday provision” that Judges Benitez and Kozinski described above. This final category comprises the most controversial beliefs since it romanticizes the prospect of an armed rebellion. We saw that influential public figures in the conservative movement regularly invoke this image of the right to bear arms.

As the categories in Fig. 1 are on a continuum, it is possible for people to slide from one category to the next. People in the first

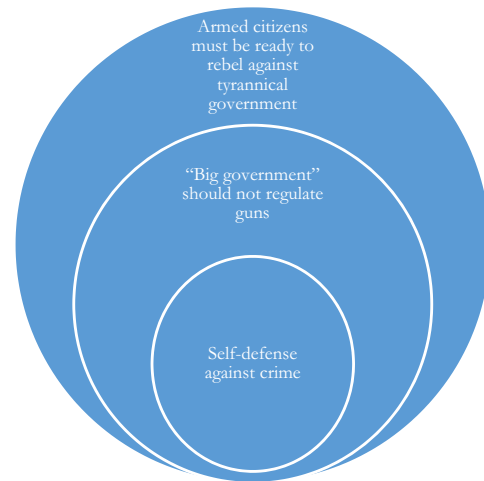


Fig. 1 Conceptions of the right to bear arms

category may initially see guns merely as a means of self-defense against criminals, namely other private citizens. But if they believe that government wants to disarm them with strict gun control, they may shift from the first category to the second category of hostility to gun control in the name of opposition to “big government” and its regulations. Moreover, if people in the second category have profound animus toward “big government,” it becomes easier for them to join people in the third category who believe that an armed citizenry must stand ready to rebel against government “tyranny.”

Given our focus on group identity and its ties to a feeling of existential threat, scholarship on the relationship between ethnicity and conflict can offer theoretical insights. Studies in this field highlight that perceiving an enemy or menace (rightly or wrongly) can lead to groupthink. The performative discourse of elites fomenting ethnic strife or war for political or personal gain can contribute to fostering this feeling of threat among the general public (Brubaker, 2002; Steflja, 2018). We consequently see a parallel with our analysis of the interrelationship between group identity, staunch support for the right to bear arms, and the conviction that patriots must defend America from “tyranny,” “big government,” “socialism,” and beyond. Even though a perceived threat is obviously not the only factor that can enhance groupthink, its influence is demonstrable in certain social contexts.

Another factor is that the sense of identification with a group can rest on sharing radical beliefs that enhance cohesion. Contrary to the assumption that the radicality of the modern gun rights movement necessarily “turns off” the rank-and-file, evidence suggests that the very radicality of a belief system can foster group cohesion. Laurence Iannaccone, an economist, demonstrated this phenomenon in a study examining why strict churches manage to draw and retain members. Dramatic or peculiar expressions of faith can intensify the feeling of religious gratification, “such as speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, prophetic utterances, and ecstatic trances—all of which are more sustainable and satisfying when experienced collectively.” Iannaccone’s statistical study confirms this theory, by showing how strictness “screens out members who lack commitment and stimulates participation among those who remain” in a congregation (Iannaccone, 1994).

Accordingly, staunch support for the right to bear arms may foster a sense of belonging in a nation where “big government” is perceived as the enemy of “freedom.” Although Iannaccone’s theory particularly applies to fringe religious groups, it is possible for peculiar beliefs to become relatively common and for them to

enhance social cohesion and group identification on a wider scale. We saw earlier that America's conservative movement has adopted increasingly radical positions since the 1980s. As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue, America's asymmetric polarization "is mainly driven by a sharp retreat from moderation on the right side of the spectrum" and this shift "has occurred across multiple dimensions, from voting patterns and intensity of preferences to concrete policy demands and willingness to use on-rare hardball tactics" (Hacker and Pierson, 2015). While allegiance to the NRA is sometimes described as a cultish "religion" (Melzer, 2009), this sense of cohesion extends beyond NRA members or people who possess an arsenal of guns. Rather, holding radical beliefs about the right to bear arms has become a component of mainstream conservative identity in the United States.

Under Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, guns are objects that may consciously or subconsciously play a symbolic role in defining in- and out-groups (Bourdieu, 1998). Once guns become associated with national or individual identity, restricting access to them may be perceived as an existential threat. This is among the reasons why the framing of the right to bear arms has profound implications. If it is framed as a protection against criminals, balancing this right against gun control would seem necessary to prevent criminals from being armed, too. But if the right is framed as a means of protection against government overreach, the need to balance the right to bear arms against gun control becomes less obvious. Given the tremendous stakes involved in preventing America from evolving into a dictatorship, the right to bear arms can seem practically absolute. Patriotism or nationalism can therefore entail firm opposition to gun control.

Displaying guns and employing pro-gun rhetoric may also be symbols of power. Diverse social theorists (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Foucault, 1993), have argued that competing power relations are omnipresent in social dynamics. From this point of view, one may conclude that the government is exerting symbolic power when it displays its armed forces (military, police, etc.) or uses authoritative rhetoric. Likewise, anti-government elements may convey symbolic power by arming themselves, emphasizing their right to bear arms, and suggesting that they stand ready to use force to resist government tyranny. Even though citizens hostile to government will most likely never fire a gun at a government official, their behavior may be intended to dissuade government overreaching or may have symbolic value in affirming these citizens' identity.

Religion is another factor influencing the symbolic value of guns. Staunch supporters of the right to bear arms commonly believe that this right is of divine origin (Melzer, 2009). Illustratively, the official platforms of the national Republican Party (2016) and of the Texas Republican Party (2016) refer to the right to bear arms as "God-given" Similarly, Larry Pratt, the director of Gun Owners of America, believes that the Bible calls for people to be armed (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019).

Distinctive dimensions of faith in America shed light on how guns can be religious symbols. The religious right movement insists that the Founding Fathers were Christian traditionalists and that the U.S. Constitution is based on the Bible, despite extensive historical evidence showing otherwise. While certain Founding Fathers were orthodox Christians, others held moderate Christian views, and some were skeptical of Christian dogma, including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine (Holmes, 2006; Jouet, 2017). The text of the Constitution is remarkably secular yet generations of Americans have debated the appropriate role of faith in public life. In particular, the United States is the only Western democracy where a sizeable proportion of the population gravitates toward Christian

fundamentalism, an ultra-traditionalist conception of faith rooted in Biblical literalism (Gallup, 2019; Jouet, 2017).

To the extent that Christian fundamentalism bolsters belief in the right to bear arms, it may help shape a gun rights fundamentalism. If one is convinced that possessing guns under the Second Amendment is a God-given right, gun restrictions can be perceived as anti-God and anathema. Further, Christian fundamentalism has become largely intertwined with market fundamentalism in modern America (Jouet, 2017). Alan Abramowitz describes how contemporary U.S. conservatives tend to perceive social welfare programs as "undermining personal virtue and promoting dependence on a secular state" (Abramowitz, 2013). Gun regulations can thus jointly symbolize an affront to God and to economic or individual liberty.

In sum, belief in the right to bear arms may carry a host of symbolic meanings. Safeguarding "freedom." Resisting "tyranny." Protecting the Constitution and the Founding Fathers' legacy. Doing God's will. These theoretical perspectives are not intended to be exhaustive, as guns plausibly have additional symbolic dimensions. Hunting is an important tradition in parts of America and guns can evoke a struggle of endurance or dominance against nature, for example. Guns may symbolize other values beyond the scope of this article, such as racial or ethnic identity (e.g., Metzler, 2019), virility or patriarchy (e.g., Browder, 2006; Melzer, 2009), vigilantism, or even a response to feelings of (actual or perceived) economic insecurity and social alienation (Carlson, 2015). Yet the theoretical frameworks described above provide ways to interpret the peculiarly staunch support for the right to bear arms in a conservative America that has increasingly become an outlier in the modern Western world.

Conclusion

If "[g]uns are permanent in America," as Adam Winkler argues (Winkler, 2013), it is partly because a thriving, loosely-regulated market has led to their proliferation. There is undoubtedly significant consumer demand for firearms. The powerful gun industry and lobby have encouraged people to arm themselves and have successfully resisted reforms to curb access to weapons. The types of bans or restrictions in other Western nations would therefore be highly challenging to enforce in the United States, assuming they were adopted, which is inconceivable in the foreseeable future. The upshot is that, in the words of Abigail Kohn, "gun culture" is now embedded in "American culture" in the eyes of countless citizens. Gun control proponents will not persuade these citizens to "relinquish their basic belief in gun rights or their belief that guns signify their Americanness" (Kohn, 2004).

Generations of Americans may thus continue to live in a society where guns remain a controversial matter and gun violence a reality. We saw throughout this article that social clashes on this issue reflect key dimensions of American exceptionalism and asymmetric polarization, including the relative normalization of a conservative identity in which firearms have acquired a peculiar symbolic value. In this mindset, defending a broad right to bear arms represents a stand against "big government," if not "socialism" and "liberalism." Restricting access to guns deprives Americans of their "freedom." Worse, it may be a prelude to America evolving into a dictatorship, lest true patriots stand ready to take arms. The image of the Founding Fathers as creators of a crucial right to bear arms allowing people to protect themselves from an oppressive government adds patriotic, nationalistic, and traditionalist dimensions to this mindset. Guns, identity, and nationhood are thus powerfully related in the psyche of a sizeable segment of Americans, although the intensity of these beliefs naturally varies depending on their level of activism.

These symbolic associations will plausibly remain ingrained unless a paradigm shift occurs. A visceral suspicion of “big government” and public regulations was not always as prevalent in the United States. Nor is it the norm in conceptions of conservatism elsewhere in the West.

Absent such a paradigm shift, certain reforms may still be able to transcend the partisan and symbolic divides. A policy requiring background checks for all gun sales, a measure supported by 92 percent of Americans (Gallup, “Guns”), appears in the realm of the possible, for instance. Other measures, such as mandatory waiting periods (Luca et al., 2017; Ludwig, 2017), restrictions on concealed weapons (Donohue et al., 2019) or reinstating the assault weapon ban (Donohue and Boulouta, 2019) may contribute to stemming gun violence to an extent.

No matter their level of public support, the modern gun lobby has adamantly opposed reforms to improve gun control. As its fundraising strategy relies on fearmongering about the end of “freedom” (Melzer, 2009; Winkler, 2013), it has a financial disincentive to moderate its stance on top of its ideological *raison d'être*. In late 2019, a call for better gun control by the CEOs of certain prominent U.S. companies was not joined by executives dreading a confrontation with the gun rights movement (Sorkin, 2019). This reminds us of the striking interrelationship between diverse facets of American exceptionalism. After all, in no other Western democracy is lobbying by moneyed interests as influential as in the United States.

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Notes

- 1 The Second Amendment reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”
- 2 The concept of “American exceptionalism” has historically been descriptive, not normative, particularly in its academic usage. Although it may also refer to a faith in American superiority, this meaning did not gain popular traction before the Obama presidency. The phrase was then turned into a political weapon, as Obama’s opponents accused him of being unpatriotic and not believing in “American exceptionalism” (Jouet, 2017).
- 3 While the boundaries of the Western world have historically been malleable, Russia and certain former Soviet bloc countries in its orbit, such as Belarus, are not generally considered part of the West.
- 4 Scholars sometimes list Switzerland as an exception to this norm (e.g., Winkler, 2013). While Swiss military reservists may keep semi-automatic rifles, the rate of firearm ownership in Switzerland is over four times lower than in America (Karp, 2018). Moreover, in 2007, Switzerland stopped providing ammunition for the reservists’ weapons and proceeded to collect previously issued ammunition (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2011).
- 5 See also *McDonald v. Chicago*, 561 U.S. 742 (2010) (plurality opinion) (applying the Second Amendment to state governments).
- 6 A key precedent was a dated opinion, *United States v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174 (1939), which had not resolved the question.
- 7 One major exception to this anti-government sentiment is conservative support for morals legislation restricting abortion, contraception, gay rights, and other practices offensive to ultra-traditionalist values (Jouet, 2017).
- 8 “Right now, gun policy gridlock says more about partisan polarization at the elite level than at the mass level, but the trends in the data suggest partisans at the mass level will become a bigger part of the gun control policy gridlock in the near future” (Miller, 2019).
- 9 To Bourdieu, a narrow focus on calculated behavior would “neglect the fact that, by virtue of the habitus, individuals are *already predisposed* to act in certain ways, avoid certain tastes, and so on” (Thompson, 1992).
- 10 Bourdieu aimed to transcend the dichotomy between social theories based on either “objective” or “subjective” structures. While “objective” theories can devote insufficient attention to the individual subject, “subjective” ones can fail to fully take into account the broader societal context (Wacquant, 1992; see also Heinich, 2007).

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