Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research

Volume 4 Article 13

2015

Opinions on Gun Control: Evidence from an Experimental Web Survey

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Introduction

Recent mass shootings, such as at Sandy Hook Elementary School and in Aurora, Colorado, have brought attention to the issue of gun control reform. One side raises concerns regarding the 2nd Amendment. These individuals are worried that gun control will compromise their Constitutional rights. The individuals on the other side of the issue are concerned with public safety and feel that without gun control, lives of innocent people may be at risk. As politicians and the media debate stricter gun laws, what motivates public opinion and whether these opinions are as polarized as politicians suggest come into question. In this research, I address how partisanship frames attitudes toward gun control laws through an experimental design, to potentially identify the source and variation of perceptions.

I argue that framing plays a major role in perceptions of gun control proposals. Framing is how information is presented and how people receive and interpret that information as it is presented. How information is framed is vital in determining whether individuals are likely to agree with the information. Framing presents complex concepts in a deliberate fashion in order to elicit cognitive or emotional appeals that benefit the interests of the framer, engaging "different psychological processes" (Slothuus 2008) and altering emotions toward certain predispositions (Gross and Ambrosio 2004). For example, Brian Montopoli (2006) shows how influential framing is, in that the "Death Tax" elicits largely negative reactions while the "Estate Tax" does not. Montopoli also gives the example of framing in relation to abortion, referring to someone who is against abortion as "pro-life" as opposed to "anti-choice." If the goal is to get a group to agree with a concept, then the approach and the framing will differ greatly from the approach and framing used if the goal is to create opposition to a concept. The information that is presented is intentionally worded in order to achieve an overall goal of either generating support or opposition of certain issues. This trend is also seen when looking at hypothetical policies (Bishop, et al 1980). Bishop et al, show that when individuals are presented with hypothetical policies, they will provide opinions on them even though they are not real. This is extended in my paper as I use hypothetical policies to gauge opinion on gun control. Taking this concept further, Richard Morin (1995) replicated Bishop's experiment adding partisan tags. His results show that more individuals respond to this hypothetical legislation when the partisan tag is present by drawing on these party cues. My experiment draws on this concept as well, as I use partisan cues to frame the hypothetical legislation presented.

Previous research identifies how the media frames issues and its influence—in both how it influences public perceptions and how the public receives these messages (Scheufele 2000; Tuchman 1978). Druckman (2001) looks at the credibility of a source and its influences on framing and finds that the more credible a source is deemed to be, the greater the influence of the framing. This shows that framing can work with other factors in order to change public opinion. Frames must be politically salient; they tap into issues on which the target already has an opinion. Framing on its own, does not create as great of a reaction as does framing when matched with another concept. Brewer finds that "national interest frames in media coverage resonate with ordinary citizens" (2006). Framing is also evident in international news coverage: Nossek (2004) finds that the national identity of a news journalist and the journal's editors inversely influence professional news values.[1]

Appealing to partisanship, in itself, is a form of framing. Furthermore, partisanship as a framing device has already been shown to influence support for immigration in the United

[1] Also see Novias 2007

States. Rural voters agreed with Democrat immigration legislation when no party label was present, but when labeling was present, rural voters agreed with the Republicans (Bishop 2012). Looking at gun law reform from the approach of framing will give insight to why or why not individuals support gun law reform. While framing and party cues tend to be separated, my experiment is a combination of the two. The framing in my experiment is not attempting to tap into a particular value or emotional response; however, it is present to remind the respondent of the history of Democratic interests in gun control.

Simply put, when basic information is presented in marginally different ways, it can change the way individuals perceive it. The manipulation of framing on influencing public opinion has long been acknowledged but has not been adequately addressed in terms of gun control perceptions. Accordingly, I analyze how the framing of a question can influence whether or not people say they agree with gun control laws. If gun control is presented in a manner that is consistent with previous beliefs, such as a person's partisanship, individuals would be expected to respond more favorably than if it is framed in a manner inconsistent with one's previous beliefs. I captured framing through a web survey with a randomly selected group receiving a question asking whether they would support a particular hypothetical gun control law—a 24 hour waiting period for a firearm—recently proposed by Democrats, while others received the same question framed as proposed by Congress. The goal of this analysis is to test whether perceptions of gun control laws would change in accordance to being told that either Congress or Democrats proposed this legislation.

Since 1959, Gallup has conducted polls on opinions on gun control that ask if participants have a gun in their home; however, people may feel uncomfortable answering this potentially intrusive question, especially when asked in person. Gallup also does not address the respondent's direct ownership of the gun, whereas this anonymous experimental web survey does.[2] Experimental web surveys have generated insights in social science, but they have not been extended to gun control research where framing would be expected to be present. Rather than simply asking one question about gun control, an experimental web survey allows for control over potentially influencing factors that result either in support or opposition for gun control. Furthermore, the results suggest not only the extent of support for a type of gun control, but how parties can frame this in their favor. The contribution of this paper is that it extends our knowledge of what influences gun control by connecting this issue to the broader literature on framing.

Research Design and Hypotheses

For analysis, I implemented a survey using Survey Monkey's paid option to obtain an approximation of a random sample (517 respondents) of the American public in the summer of 2013. While this may not be as close of an approximation as phone surveys, it does provide an affordable way to address framing. Though internet access is widespread in the U.S., Pew Research Center finds indicate that 13% of individuals do not use the internet (2014). This may have some influence on the representativeness of the sample; however, a web-based survey proves to be a more affordable approach. The participants were presented with a series of questions regarding demographics and political identification. From there, the survey asked a series of gun related questions, including how closely the individual associates guns with certain words in order to identify why partisan framing is likely to be successful as it conjures up these

[2] The difference here is that there may be a gun present in the house as opposed to someone directly owning it.

latent differences on how Democrats and Republicans view guns. Next, to test framing, respondents were randomly selected to receive either a question framed as Congress proposing gun control laws or Democrats proposing such laws. Besides just measuring partisanship, this survey also asks an often overlooked question: whether or not the respondent personally owned a gun.

To address how framing and partisanship influence support or opposition of gun control laws, hypothetical gun control legislation is presented to respondents in a web survey. There are many advantages to using a web-based survey, especially in terms of time efficiency (e.g. Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski 2000). While access to the internet used to be a major concern in web survey samples (e.g. Fricker & Schonlau 2002; Wilson & Laskey 2003), this is much less a concern now as access expands (Scholl, Mulders, & Drent 2002). n this case, gun law reform is analyzed by asking about hypothetical legislation with 24-hour waiting period for a firearm. This wording was chosen because, on its surface, it seems less controversial and fairly straightforward. Previous research suggests broad support for a 24-hour waiting period, whereas longer waits and stricter restrictions on particular weapons have been much more controversial. This wording also avoids potentially loaded terms such as "assault weapons." It is hypothesized that when Democrats are presented with gun control framed as Democrat-led, they will be more likely to support the question (H1). Likewise, when Republicans are presented a Democrat frame, they will be less likely to support the question. This is expected because Republicans tend to be seen as against gun control, while Democrats are associated with being for stricter gun control laws. In contrast, less of a distinction should be evident when a Congress frame is presented as this is used as a baseline. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of the following questions on gun control:

1. Congress Frame: Congress has proposed a 24-hour waiting period for the purchase of a firearm. Ranging from strongly oppose to strongly approve, where would you place yourself on this scale?

2. Democrat Frame: Democrats in Congress have proposed a 24-hour waiting period for the purchase of a firearm. Ranging from strongly oppose to strongly approve, where would you place yourself on this scale?

While there is a strong emphasis on partisan framing in this study, gun ownership should also influence support. It is expected that gun owners will be less likely to support a waiting period on guns in general, regardless of whether it was framed as Congress or Democrats that proposed the waiting period (H2). This is expected because it makes the issue of gun control more personal. This thinking is that individuals who own guns may believe that gun control is not an issue because they feel that they are responsible with their guns. This personal identification may lead to a split in how individuals believe which particular gun control laws should or should not be implemented.

Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Of the total surveyed population, 40.8% identified as Democrat, and 28.7% identified as Republican. Only 33.9% of respondents stated they owned a gun, with little distinction between those who later received a Congress or Democrat frame (35.7% and 32.4% respectively). The Pew Research Center finds that "more than a third of Americans say they or someone in their household owns a gun. There are by various estimates anywhere from 270 million to 310 million guns in the United States—close to one firearm for every man, woman, and child" (2013). This shows the results yielded from my survey of the amount of Americans who say they own a gun, are representative of the United States. The similarities in gun ownership rates in both groups of the survey suggest that the later results are not driven simply by one group having a disproportional number of gun owners.

Before the experimental question, the web survey also asks "in general, how strongly do you associate the following terms with firearms?" Table 1 reports the percentage of respondents identifying the terms to be closely or very closely associated with firearms, divided by partisan identification and including a Pearson Chi-Square.[3] Only two of the terms, hunting and military service, show no statistically significant difference between Democrats and Republicans. In particular, Democrats associate firearms more with crime and danger than Republicans, while Republicans view firearms as closely associated with home security and self-defense.

Table 1: Association with Firearms by Partisan Identification

	Republicans	**Democrats**		
	Pct.	Pct.	Coeff.	Sig.
Hunting	86.2	86.4	2.692	0.062
Sport	62.3	38.4	27.626	0.000
Home Security	73.8	41.6	39.523	0.000
Self-Defense	80.6	48.8	45.954	0.000
Crime	71.5	79.6	11.183	0.000
Danger	47.1	72.4	30.627	0.000
Military Service	88.8	87.5	3.023	0.554
Patriotism	51.4	17.4	74.780	0.000

These distinctions may partially explain the effectiveness of partisan framing if Democrats and Republicans start with a different perception of the role of guns. They also show that certain framing of gun control may not be as effective as others. For example, framing in terms of military service or hunting may not gain as significant of a response as using the other terms listed because there is not much of a partisan divide between these two terms.

The mean response for people who received the question with the Congress frame was 4.14 on a five-point scale from strongly oppose (1) to strongly approve (5), while the mean response for people who received the question with the Democrat frame was 4.2. This implies

[3] A Wilcoxon rank-sum test provides consistent findings as the Chi-Square tests and in the hypothesized direction.

that on average respondents supported a waiting period proposed by either Congress or Democrats.

Table 2: Support for Gun Control by Partisan ID and By Framing (In Percentages)

Framing Frame	**Congress**			**Democrats**		
	Republicans	Democrats	N	Republicans	Democrats	N
Strongly Oppose	6.3	0.9	11	3.6	3	8
Oppose	7.5	2.8	15	8.7	0	12
Neither oppose or support	15.1	7.5	32	18.8	4	30
Support	32.1	23.4	76	30.4	20	62
Strongly support	39	65.4	132	38.4	73	126
Pearson Chi-Square	20.772			34.425		
Sig.	0.00			0.00		
N	266			238		

Moving to perceptions of a waiting period, we again see distinctions by partisanship. Table 2 shows a cross tabulation on whether or not an individual supports a waiting period, broken down by party identification, when presented with the Congress frame. Of those receiving the Congress frame, approximately 26.4% more Democrats than Republicans strongly supported a waiting period, with a Chi-Square test statistically significant at the .001 level. However, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats held favorable views of the waiting period overall. These results seem to suggest that there is less polarization on this minimalist gun control than one might have assumed. As expected, the evidence in Table 2 also shows that when the question had the Democrat frame, Democrats were much more likely to strongly support a waiting period. There is a 34.6% difference between Democrats and Republicans in terms of strongly agreeing with a waiting period. There is also a 7.6% increase in Democrats who strongly agree, and the percentage of Republicans remains about the same between both cases. This is, with a Chi-Square test, significant at the .001 level. This data implies that when Democrats see the Democrat frame, they respond more positively; however, there is little change in the response of individuals identifying themselves as Republicans in contrast to expectations. This supports the first hypothesis in that Democrats did respond more positively to the Democrat frame than to the baseline, Congress frame.

Table 3: Support for Gun Control by Gun Ownership and By Framing (In Percentages)

Framing Frame	**Congress**			**Democrats**		
	Non-Gun Owner	Gun Owner	N	Non-Gun Owner	Gun Owner	N
Strongly Oppose	2.3	7.4	11	2.5	5.2	8
Oppose	4.1	8.4	15	3.1	9.1	12
Neither oppose or support	13.5	9.5	32	8.7	20.8	30
Support	24.0	36.8	76	24.2	29.9	62
Strongly support	56.1	37.9	132	61.5	35.1	126
Pearson Chi-Square	14.201			18.381		
Sig.	0.007			0.001		
N	266			238		

Table 3 breaks down support by gun ownership. Among those receiving the Congress frame, non-gun owners were much more likely to strongly support a waiting period. There is an 18.2% difference in the gun owners and non-gun owners for strongly supporting a waiting period, statistically significant at the .01 level. Despite the divergence, both groups are generally receptive to the waiting period. Therefore, merely being a gun owner does not make an individual opposed to this form of regulation. However, it does imply that gun-owning individuals, perhaps, may be more cautious of the reform. This would be consistent with the fear of a slippery slope; gun owners are cautious of this reform because it could eventually lead to even stricter gun control laws. When presented with the Democrat frame, again a majority of both gun owners and non-gun owners approved of a 24-hour waiting period. Non-gun owners are 26.4% more likely to strongly agree with a waiting period when they received the question with the Democrat frame, statistically significant at the .001 level. There is a 5.6% increase in the amount of non-gun owners in agreement with a waiting period from the question with the Congress tag than to the question with the Democrat tag. While this is a significant difference, the Democrat tag had a slightly greater influence on individuals identifying as Democrats. The number of gun owners who strongly agree with a waiting period stays relatively the same between the two questions; however, 6.9% fewer gun owners supported the 24-hour waiting period with the Democrat frame. While majorities are generally supportive of the wait, divergent effects between gun and non-gun owners show when framed as Congress proposed vs. Democrats proposed, consistent with H2. Tables 2 and 3 suggest a potential connection between gun ownership and partisanship, in terms of the influence of framing, but on their own cannot identify which variable is more influential.

In sum, cross tabulations that use the independent variable of party identification give us useful information in regards to framing. It is supported that a partisan tag does influence whether or not individuals agree with gun law reform when looking at party identification. It is also implied that most individuals are generally supportive of a waiting period; Democrat support however, is stronger.

The cross tabulations regarding gun ownership yield interesting conclusions as well, inferring that having a partisan tag does influence gun owners' and non-gun owners' support of a

waiting period. This also suggests that there is a connection between whether or not an individual owns a gun and an individual's party identification. It is supported that individuals respond positively to their own party identification, consistent with the partisan hypothesis.

Regressions

Table 4: OLS Regression on Support for Gun Control

	Congress			**Democrat**		
	Coeff.	SE	sig.	Coeff.	SE	sig.
Democrat	0.533	0.138	0.000	0.577	0.135	0.000
Gun Owner	-0.221	0.141	0.118	-0.416	0.143	0.004
Constant	4.004	0.107	0.000	4.094	0.105	0.000
N	266			238		
Adjusted R2	0.073			0.127		

For a more rigorous analysis, Table 4 presents OLS regressions under each frame (Congress or Democrat) with a five-point dependent variable measuring whether or not an individual supports a waiting period. The independent variables include party identification (a dummy variable for Democrats) and whether or not an individual is a gun owner. The results show, when presented with the question with Congress framing, being a Democrat is associated with a 0.53 point increase in support for a 24-hour waiting period, statistically significant at the .001 level. Being a gun owner is associated with a 0.22 point decrease in support for the waiting period. This approaches but does not reach statistical significance (.118). Identifying as a Democrat has a greater relative influence on an individual's agreeing with a waiting period than being a gun owner does when an individual is presented with the Congress framed question. When presented with the Democrat framed question, Democrats are associated with a 0.57 point increase in support for the waiting period, statistically significant at the .001 level. Meanwhile, gun owners are associated with a 0.42 point decrease in support for the waiting period, statistically significant at the .01 level. The Democrat frame model has a much higher R2, suggesting again the importance of framing differences. Also, gun ownership only seems to matter when the partisan frame is present even after controlling for partisanship. This implies that when the waiting period is Democrat-sponsored, gun owners appear suspect regardless of partisanship. This finding shows that it is not just partisanship that matters regarding support of gun control laws, but it is partisanship as well as gun ownership working together that creates these perceptions.

Table 5 shows expanded OLS regressions with added controls of gender (female), age, education, and the South (determined by Census classification of regions). Even with these added variables, gun owners are still much less likely to support the waiting period when the Democrat frame is presented, and this is still statistically significant. When looking at the control variables, women and individuals with more education respond positively to the waiting period with both frames. Both of these groups respond more positively, however, when the Democrat

frame is present, and the findings are only significant with the Democrat frame. It is unclear why this is so, but it may be partially explained by partisanship, in that both women and individuals with more education tend to be Democrat. Between the expanded regressions, it is seen that the Democrat frame, while still positive, does not have as much influence compared to the earlier models on people who identify as Democrats.

In contrast, the difference in the two regressions is clear when looking at gun owners. Gun owners appear much more likely to respond negatively when presented with the Democrat framed question, supporting H2. These models control for Democrats, leaving other parties as a baseline. While most of the individuals are Republican, some were not; therefore, I ran the models with only Democrats and Republicans, and the results are consistent with my original models.[4]

The regressions show similar findings to the cross tabulations. When presented with the Democrat frame, Democrats responded more positively; however, there is a significant difference in the response of gun owners. When presented with the Democrat frame, gun owners respond much more negatively. This implies that gun owners are less likely to support gun law reform, even after controlling for partisanship, if framed as Democrat-initiated. However, party identification still has a greater relative influence in all but one model, and that is consistent with the findings presented in the cross tabulations.

In sum, the first hypothesis (Democrats will be more likely to support a waiting period when it is presented by Democrats) finds support. Both the cross tabulations and the regressions show that when the Democrat frame is included, individuals identifying as Democrats strongly support the waiting period at a higher rate. However, Republicans did not respond more negatively. In fact, the responses of Republicans stayed very similar in all of the tests. This could possibly be explained by the 24-hour waiting period not being a controversial reform. As far as partisanship goes, Republicans may have seen the waiting period as non-threatening even with the Democrat frame. The second hypothesis (gun owners will be less likely to support a waiting period regardless of the framing) is somewhat supported. The gun owners strongly supported a waiting period much less frequently than non-gun owners; however, they tended to be generally supportive. In contrast, gun owners responded more negatively with the Democrat frame, and non-gun owners responded more positively with the Democrat frame. Gun owners, even after controlling for partisanship, respond more negatively to the Democrat frame. This suggests something beyond just mobilizing partisan feelings. One potential explanation is that references to Congress are interpreted as more abstract than a party label, although this requires further testing. It could also be that while Democrats are supportive in general, the framing of the waiting period as a Democratic initiative concerns gun owners in a negative way and might lead them to feel that the Democratic Party may be "selling them out." The abstractness versus concreteness of a party label might be an explanation for this, just as Fenno's Paradox partially explains high evaluations of one's own legislator versus low evaluations of Congress in general (Fenno 1978).

Conclusion

The study addresses the influence of both partisanship and gun ownership on framing gun control support. First, there are clear, perceptual differences regarding guns. Democrats and Republicans have predisposed attitudes towards guns that influence their perceptions of guns.

[4] These models can be found in the appendix.

Second, the majority surveyed supports the 24-hour waiting period. Between all of the models, no one group was overwhelmingly opposed to this type of regulation. Third, there are clear differences in support based on framing. The Democrat tag yielded positive reactions from Democrats and negative reactions from gun owners regardless of partisanship.

One issue to consider is how much of the findings are actually based upon the 24-hour waiting period. I also collected data on the regulation of different types of weapons such as single shot, semiautomatic, shotguns, and pistols. These regulations yielded more opposition than the 24-hour waiting period with the same general patterns between Democrats versus Republicans and gun owners versus non-gun owners. This implies that the type of firearm might matter when it comes to perceptions on gun control laws.

Another point worth mentioning is the decision not to use the term "assault weapon." It was not used because it was thought to have been a potentially loaded word. When considering what terms would be less loaded, the argument of framing would seem to work in this case as well. My survey asked about a ban on "assault weapons" with an even more polarized response by partisanship and gun ownership. However, it may be that the two sides may be defining "assault weapon" very differently.

A clear implication of this research is how parties should frame gun control for their benefit. For example, for the Democratic Party leadership, the results here suggest that one should frame 24-hour waiting periods as bi-partisan and not try to take ownership of the measure as it appears to drive gun owners away at the same time as it encourages support among co-partisans. For the Republican Party leadership, one should frame it as something other than a 24-hour waiting period as this has broad support regardless of partisanship or gun ownership. Ultimately, this research identifies not only the influence of framing on gun control perceptions but the limits of the polarization on the issue as well.

There is more we do not understand about why individuals support or oppose gun law reform. Future research should address how party identification and gun ownership interact. One way to look into this would be to analyze the feelings of gun owners toward Democrats in order to identify why gun owners seem to respond more negatively to the Democrat frame. Also, it would be valuable to see if other forms of gun control yield a similar pattern. Clearly, other variables beyond region should be considered as well, although Carlson cautions that "relying too much on the rural/urban divide across states obscures how this plays out within states" (2013). I would have liked to have controlled for National Rifle Association membership and the amount of exposure to guns an individual has had. Nonetheless, this initial analysis suggests the extent in which framing influences public opinion on gun control.

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Appendix

Models with Only Democrats and Republicans

	Congress			Democrat		
	Coeff.	SE	Sig.	Coeff.	SE	Sig.
Democrat	0.509	0.149	0.001	0.497	0.150	0.001
Gun Owner	-0.267	0.156	0.088	-0.478	0.162	0.004
Constant	4.036	0.132	0	4.184	0.128	0
N	200			185		
Adjusted R2	0.091			0.127		
	Congress			Democrat		
	Coeff.	SE	Sig.	Coeff.	SE	Sig.
Democrat	0.452	0.153	0.004	0.313	0.154	0.044
Gun Owner	-0.254	0.165	0.124	-0.401	0.163	0.015
Female	0.305	0.153	0.047	0.448	0.145	0.002
Age	0.204	0.089	0.023	0.028	0.088	0.754
Education	0.051	0.076	0.5	0.173	0.073	0.019
South	0.030	0.166	0.858	-0.251	0.152	0.099
Constant	2.527	0.581	0	2.893	0.492	0
N	194			182		
Adjusted R2	0.112			0.185		