

# The Path to Gun Control in America Goes through Political Philosophy



Volume 2, Number 1  
Spring 2019  
DOI: [10.25335/PPJ.2.1-4](https://doi.org/10.25335/PPJ.2.1-4)

Thomas R. Wells

## Abstract

This essay argues that gun control in America is a philosophical as well as a policy debate. This explains the depth of acrimony it causes. It also explains why the technocratic public health argument favored by the gun control movement has been so unsuccessful in persuading opponents and motivating supporters. My analysis also yields some positive advice for advocates of gun control: take the political philosophy of the gun rights movement seriously and take up the challenge of showing that a society without guns is a better society, not merely a safer one.

## 1. Introduction

Every time there is a mass killing in America—at a school, a place of worship, an open air-concert—a familiar ritual plays out. Gun control and gun rights advocates spring to the airwaves to present their cases, fail miserably to persuade anyone who didn't already agree with them, and leave everybody on both sides fuming with even more indignation than before. It is a sad picture of democratic failure, especially when set beside successful national conversations—such as over civil rights or gay marriage—in which large majorities changed their minds because of the arguments they heard.

It is easy enough to connect this failure to America's general turn to a partisan politics more concerned with which political tribe you identify with than the exchange of ideas and arguments about the public good, or to cite the pernicious influence of the National Rifle Association's (NRA's) election spending on Republican primaries. However, such explanations are both too easy and rather unhelpful. I think I have something better to offer—better both because it embodies a more idealistic view of democracy and because it is more likely to be politically successful.

Of course it is up to Americans to decide what kind of society they should have—not philosophers, and certainly not foreign ones like me. Indeed, part of my argument is that the

place of guns in America has to be decided *politically*—by the people—and not by appeal to the special authority of sacred constitutional principles, or social science, or even philosophy. Philosophers' pronouncements of truth and rightness have no special authority over politics, nor should they. What philosophical analysis can offer are new perspectives and argumentative resources by which a political debate such as this one might be freed from its toxic stalemate.

So what does my philosophical perspective come down to?

First, a diagnosis: America's decades long national argument about guns is so pernicious and acrimonious because it is not just a *policy* debate about what the government should do to best fix some problem (like an opioid epidemic or car accident fatalities). It is also about what kind of politics to have: how citizens should relate to each other and the state. Politics with a capital *P*. This ideological dimension is explicit in the arguments of the gun rights movement but has been largely neglected by the other side.

Second, some positive advice for the advocates of gun control: Talk about civic values is not a squishy second best to the objective statistical facts of gun violence. It is an essential ingredient for building a committed political majority. Winning this debate requires showing that a society without guns is a *better* society, not merely a safer one.

## 2. Why the Public Health Argument Is Not Enough

America's gun control movement relies extensively on a public health argument for saving lives that has so far failed to achieve political results. First, because it doesn't connect to the values arguments of the gun rights movement, it doesn't persuade opponents to change their minds. In fact, it appears to increase the ardency of their opposition by adding the insult of being ignored to the original disagreement. Second, its technocratic character doesn't much engage the values of even those voters who are persuaded by it. Thus, the public health argument has so far failed to make gun control a political priority for its supporters; for example, by motivating them to turn out in primaries to vote candidates up or down on that single issue.<sup>1</sup> The combined result is to allow a political minority of ardent, values-motivated gun rights supporters to keep winning legislative victories.

What makes guns special is that they are an excellent killing technology. They are extremely good at transforming an intention to kill into its achievement. This is what makes them dangerous according to the public health argument. But it is also exactly what makes them empowering according to the gun rights movement. Thus, right from the start the public health case seems unlikely to win over principled opponents of gun control: those who see other—civic—values at stake besides lives. However, even for those who see negligible virtue in gun ownership, the fact that guns kill lots of people does not seem very politically compelling. It turns out that this is a general problem with public health arguments, which face the challenge of translating statistical facts about society into reasons for action by individuals who have many other calls on our attention.

1. As in the case of state senators who lost their Democratic majority seats for supporting gun control after the Aurora movie theatre shooting, see Firmin DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free?: Democracy and the Armed Society* (New Haven, CT: London: Yale University Press, 2015), xii; Sean Trende, "What Colorado's Recall Results Mean for Dems," *RealClearPolitics*, September 11, 2013, [http://www.realclear-politics.com/articles/2013/09/11/what\\_colorados\\_recall\\_results\\_mean\\_for\\_dems\\_119913.html](http://www.realclear-politics.com/articles/2013/09/11/what_colorados_recall_results_mean_for_dems_119913.html).

In 2015, around 36,000 people were killed by guns in America (of which 13,000 were homicides, 1,000 were accidental deaths and the rest were suicides).<sup>2</sup> That looks like a big number, but then America is a big country in which 2.7 million people die every year. The 36,000 gun deaths represent a little over 1 percent of deaths (0.5 percent if we limit the statistics to gun homicides). To most Americans that level of risk just isn't that big a deal. If this attitude seems blasé, it is at least consistent. More than twice as many Americans die from diabetes as from guns, yet that fact has failed to *prove* the political case for regulating major contributors to that illness like sugary soft drinks. Even successful public health arguments can take decades to gain political traction (as in the case of seat-belts and other automobile safety features), and some remain decades from full implementation (as in the case of tobacco). The basic problem is that these risks are only some of the many things that people have to worry about as we go about our lives. Therefore, they do not stand out as a political priority and government action to reduce them can be successfully opposed by more motivated political minorities or vested interests.

The political significance problem is compounded by the role of other factors in causing gun violence. Social scientists have shown pretty convincingly that a higher prevalence of guns correlates with higher homicide rates, other things being equal. Yet this fact is underwhelming in the larger context of a historic decline in violence. The rollback of gun control laws by judges and Republican legislators began in the 1980s, but the murder rate in America has actually fallen by half since then, back to what it was in 1950.<sup>3</sup> The reason is not that the statisticians are wrong but that access to guns is only one piece of the problem of gun violence. *Rates* of violence have a lot more to do with social conditions and political institutions than with particular technologies.<sup>4</sup> Ready

2. CDC, "Deaths: Final Data for 2015," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 66, no. 6 (2017): 75. In addition, many survivors of gun violence suffer lifelong debilitating injuries.

3. CDC, "Table 32: Death Rates for Homicide, by Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: United States, Selected Years 1950–2013," Health, United States, 2014 – Individual Charts and Tables, 32, accessed August 3, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus/contents2014.htm>.

4. Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (Allen Lane, 2009); Rachel Kleinfeld, *A Savage Order: How the*

access to illegal handguns makes this violence more lethal, but its main drivers are failures of social justice that America, among rich democracies, seems particularly bad at addressing.

This is reflected in the geographic and demographic concentration of America's gun violence. Most of middle-class (white) America is nearly as safe as Western Europe, but some areas of concentrated poverty and hopelessness within particular cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Baltimore, have the murder rates of Central America.<sup>5</sup> This poses a challenge to the public health argument insofar as it is structured as an appeal to people's self-concern to protect their own lives (and those of their loved ones), since it is really only a minority of voters whose life-expectancy would be much improved by expanded gun control. To ask voters to care about reducing the suffering that gun violence brings to far away fellow citizens requires appealing to broader civic values. It means engaging the ideological debate about what a just society should look like.

A similar point can be made about suicides, which make up the great majority of deaths by gun. The public health argument is that impulsivity is a major factor in suicide, and that guns, like the Golden Gate Bridge, greatly facilitate the transformation of suicidal impulses into death. If fewer people kept guns at home, fewer suicide attempts would succeed and this would mean many lives saved because many suicide survivors do not repeat the attempt.

Again, though statistically sound, it is not surprising that such arguments fail to generate political traction. First, suicide is not a source of fear in the way that murder is, because it seems like something in our control rather than a risk to which we are involuntarily subjected. Second, the issue of gun suicides seems irrelevant to the central political debate about gun control. Preventing suicide by gun would seem to require either more or less invasive—but anyway quite different—government interventions than those designed to prevent mass killings or to reduce the gun murder rate.

---

*World's Deadliest Countries Can Forge a Path to Security* (New York: Pantheon, 2018).

5. FBI, "Table 6: Crime in the United States by Metropolitan Statistical Area, 2017," *Crime in the United States 2017* (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/tables/table-6>.

Either Americans shouldn't be allowed to keep guns in their own houses (which goes much further than any constitutionally plausible gun control measure), or they should be encouraged to reduce this risk for themselves via a public information campaign (which is not most people's understanding of gun control).

The political failure of the public health argument can also be shown the other way around. The main driver of America's stop-start national debate about guns are the mass killings that dominate the news cycle every few weeks. These events do have political significance (as I will explain below), but *not* because they support the public health case for gun control. The media attention makes it seem like there are a lot of them, but actually there have only been 105 mass killings since 1982.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps they are becoming more frequent (it is hard to extrapolate trends from such small numbers) and perhaps they are more deadly thanks to the availability of militaristic weapons like the AR-15. But, even so, a few dozen deaths per year spread among a population of 330 million are statistically irrelevant to public health.

In conclusion, it is true that guns kill (and maim) lots of people in America, and that many of those people would not have died if access to guns were more controlled (with practical measures like a universal registry to track guns used in crimes back to those who bought them). But truth is not the same thing as political significance. Gun control advocates have put their faith in the special power of facts to *convince* (from the Latin to overcome/conquer) at the expense of making a broader values case for gun control. This has left their supporters undermotivated and their opponents free to frame the debate around their own ideological vision of what kind of society America should be.

### 3. The Gun Debate Is About What Kind of Politics to Have

My criticism of the public health argument may have some readers worrying that I am just another NRA stooge claiming that facts don't

6. Deanna Pan, "US Mass Shootings, 1982-2018: Data from Mother Jones' Investigation," *Mother Jones* (blog), accessed November 7, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data/>.

matter. But I intend it in another way. By showing the political limitations of the public health case, I hope to persuade the proponents of gun control to give more attention to the *values* case for gun control. That means getting clearer about your own vision of citizenship and government—a political philosophy of peace, not mere safety—and recognizing and responding to the philosophical arguments made by gun rights advocates.

Specifically, I believe that an underlying motivation on both sides of this debate is a subjective feeling of *vulnerability* as citizens, which is something quite different from objective actuarial risk to life and cannot be adequately expressed in its technocratic language. Americans worry about what their armed fellow citizens might do: about arguments over parking spaces turning into gunfights; about their son getting shot by a racist fool for wearing a “threatening” hoodie; about maniacs with military grade weapons appearing on their subway car, or in shopping malls, or at their workplaces. This subjective feeling deserves to be taken seriously.

In this light, mass killings matter not because they present a significant public health risk to our lifespans to be analyzed like car accidents or cigarettes but because they are deliberate attacks on our society to be analyzed like terrorism. Mass killers are nearly always loners lacking the political organization and agenda of regular terrorists. But they nevertheless engage in symbolic violence against civic institutions, such as schools, that is particularly terrifying exactly because it is so impersonal—the victims of their violence are merely interchangeable extras in the screenplay they are trying to produce.<sup>7</sup> Mass killings are not interpersonal squabbles but deliberate attacks on the peace itself, and this is something for which citizens have the right to hold their government responsible.

It is a truism of political philosophy that a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the legitimacy of any state is its ability to provide its citizens with freedom from fear. But there are different routes to this. Some believe that

they can only overcome this feeling of vulnerability with the right to carry a gun of their own (hence the spike in gun sales after every mass shooting). Others want the freedom to live as civilians rather than in a state of militaristic hypervigilance always ready and alert to respond to deadly attack. There are thus two views of government and citizenship in play. In one political philosophy, the job of government is to enable good citizens to solve their own security problems, to defend their rights and liberties for themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the other, government is expected to solve such problems for us, to guarantee security directly by preventing or containing threats.

There is a reason most gun control advocates are on what passes for the Left in American politics and are often mocked as “European.” This is fundamentally a dispute about how citizens should relate to the state, and especially a dispute between the state as a guarantor of security or as a guarantor of liberty.

#### 4. The Political Philosophy of the Gun Rights Movement

Banning guns would certainly save some American lives. But so would banning cars. Of course, no one proposes that because it is generally agreed that cars provide benefits that outweigh their dangerousness. (Even environmentalists who refuse to drive a car for moral reasons aren’t motivated by road deaths.) It is a symptom of their political blindness that gun control advocates refuse to admit the obvious political fact that guns have benefits as well as costs.

This brings me to what guns do for people. Of course they do various things. They are beautifully made objects that also, as the Democrat voting gun-lover Dan Baum puts it, like sky-diving give off “a little contact high from the Grim Reaper.”<sup>9</sup> But they also make people feel more powerful and thus, indirectly, more in possession of their political rights as citizens: less willing to put up with being over-managed

7. Randall Collins, “Micro-Sociology of Mass Rampage Killings,” *Revue de Synthèse* 135, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 405–20, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11873-014-0250-2>.

8. Jeffrey Snyder, “A Nation of Cowards,” *The Public Interest*, Fall 1993, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public-interest/detail/a-nation-of-cowards>.

9. Dan Baum, “Happiness Is a Worn Gun,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 2010, <https://harpers.org/archive/2010/08/happiness-is-a-worn-gun/?single=1>.

and under-respected by the state. Dan Baum again:

Going armed has connected me with an entire range of values I didn't use to think much about—self-reliance, vigilance, muscular citizenship—and some impulses I'd rather avoid, like social pessimism and irrational fear. It has militarized my life; all that locking and loading and watching over my shoulder makes me feel like a bit player in the perpetual global war in which we find ourselves. There's no denying that carrying a gun has made my days a lot more dramatic. Suddenly, I'm dangerous. I'm an action figure. I bear a lethal secret into every social encounter.<sup>10</sup>

The gun rights movement seems to me to reflect a heroic vision of citizenship, and hence of society, that taps into an enduring strain of rugged individualism in America's political psychology. Most Western polities are characterized by an overwhelming emotional and institutional dependence on a beneficent, all seeing, all powerful government. This plays a significant role in American politics too. (Just look at how Americans from all points on the political spectrum responded to 9/11 by demanding the Federal government do whatever it took to make them feel safe again). However, America also has a long tradition inspired by the rebellious individualism of a seventeenth-century English political philosopher named John Locke.<sup>11</sup> This emphasizes the enduring independence of the individuals who make up a political society, including their right to revolution if the state fails to respect their "self-evident" natural rights to life, liberty, and property.

John Locke may not be a household name, but his ideas are part of America's DNA. His natural rights arguments and assumptions permeate America's founding documents and the logic of the Second Amendment itself, and these values have been resurgent on the Right since the Reagan revolution. I want to emphasize

here that this is an interesting and even attractive political philosophy. It deserves to be considered seriously and respectfully.

In the Lockean vision of society as a social contract, government is seen as a convenience rather than a necessity; an institution created by and dependent upon the people's consent rather than the other way around. Government is worth having because it allows some collective action problems to be overcome, thereby enhancing the provision of law and order and other public goods that make everyone better off. But otherwise it should get out of the way so that people can get on with their own business. It is a device for securing and extending the liberties of citizens rather than advancing aggregate social welfare (or social justice). Even when limited to its proper domain, faith in government is distinctly limited. Government is analyzed as any other institution, a vested interest whose powers can be dangerous as well as useful to society. The wide distribution of political power throughout American society—including the power of violence conferred by civilian gun ownership—may be socially inefficient, but it is supposed to reduce the danger of tyranny. If guns are sometimes used against society, that may be a price worth paying to maintain a free society.

So, what is the role of guns in this political philosophy? Contra certain Second Amendment fantasists, armed citizens do not deter government tyranny by putting a real power behind the people's theoretical right to revolution. Nevertheless, gun rights do reflect and support a different vision of the relationship between citizens and the state. Having in one's pocket a device capable of a miniature whirlwind of mayhem makes people feel more like a force with which to be reckoned. Unlike the "sheeple" who have reduced themselves to pathetically pleading for the government to save them from bad guys, these citizen heroes willingly take up their share of responsibility to protect themselves and others in society. Such faith in their own powers and abilities spills over into political citizenship. By making citizens feel less dependent on the institutions of the state to guarantee their freedom and security, guns allow them to believe that they are in a position to bargain with the state rather than to submit,

10. Dan Baum, "Happiness Is a Worn Gun," *Harper's Magazine*, 2010, <https://harpers.org/archive/2010/08/happiness-is-a-worn-gun/?single=1>.

11. Alex Tuckness, "Locke's Political Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/locke-political/>.

like frightened sheep, to its authority to decide what is best for them.

The gun rights movement is entwined with a philosophical view of the soul of America. Defeating it will require more than the recitation of actuarial statistics. In the remainder of this essay I outline two complementary paths that may be more successful.

## 5. Engaging with the Philosophical Debate

Gun rights activists talk constantly about their political philosophy. I suggest doing the same. I do not suppose that all gun rights supporters are open to such philosophical debate, or even that they recognize John Locke as the original source of many of their views. But assuming the least and the worst of gun owners has become troublingly common in this debate. However hard it is to persuade people with whom one fundamentally disagrees, it becomes even harder if they feel that what they say isn't being taken seriously.

Making the philosophical *values* case for gun control has three potential pay offs. First, some opponents may be persuaded by superior arguments, or at least recognize weaknesses and limits to their own previously unchallenged beliefs. Second, it is the respectful, democratic thing to do and that in itself may draw some of the poison from the debate and lower the vehemence of opposition. (In the face of widespread denigration, a kind of solidarity is emerging among civilian gun owners united by a feeling of membership of a misrecognized and endangered tribe.<sup>12</sup>) Third, those who already accept that guns are more dangerous than they are worth, but who aren't much motivated by wonkish public health arguments, may be more motivated to vote for a vision of a better society.

Gun control advocates should articulate and defend their own vision of political society and citizenship. What do they believe in besides slightly increased life-expectancy? Until now their opponents have been free to portray both sides of the debate: a truly American (Lockean)

society of free people versus an un-American tyranny of frightened sheeple.<sup>13</sup>

They might—to take up one example—explain that progressivism is a respectable form of liberalism—a home-grown pragmatic form developed by the American philosopher John Dewey—and a more effective partner for advancing the freedoms of individuals than a seventeenth-century Englishman like Locke. The pragmatic view I have in mind embodies a healthy and heartily American skepticism of the state without lapsing into the paranoid cynicism of some contemporary followers of Locke. For example, while progressives see the state as a partner in society's projects of self-improvement, this is because of its special powers to make laws and raise money; not because it has some special faculty of judgement that supersedes that of the citizenry. Government is a partner not an overlord; valued for what it can help achieve in terms of problem-solving, not because it deserves awe and respect as the constitutional sovereign, representative of the true will of the people, Hobbesian savior, or what have you.

Pragmatism requires an experimentalist see-what-works attitude rather than merely applying one's preferred theory of society to every problem, giving the same answer to every question. The law and order approach that began in the 1980s and is now finally being rolled back was predicated on such a theory, a foolish one that divided the world into bad guys and good guys and assumed bad guys could only be controlled by deterrence. It abjectly failed to address the circumstances of violence and the right of citizens to be free of it. A pragmatic politics would have demanded more evidence that it was working before expanding such draconian powers of the state against its people, and it would have looked continuously at how individual policies, from the overarching war on drugs to minimum sentencing and racial profiling, might be reformed and improved.

Moreover, while a pragmatic politics respects what works, and thus the known quantity of inherited institutions, it has no particular respect for tradition in itself. Even institutions and laws that successfully solved or prevented problems

12. Dan Baum, *Gun Guys: A Road Trip* (New York: Vintage, 2013).

13. As in this classic example of gun rights literature: Snyder, "A Nation of Cowards."

in the past—such as the Second Amendment defense against tyranny and the return of the English—may end up causing new problems if they do not evolve to fit changing conditions and needs.

Properly explained, progressivism seems to satisfy many of the concerns that draw Americans to Locke's philosophy of defending individual rights against the state. The unpopularity of such pragmatism on the Right seems to relate mainly to disagreement about what counts as a problem in the first place (for example, is the gender pay gap really something that society needs to solve?). But that is a normal political disagreement between those more or less satisfied with the status quo, not a disagreement about how politics itself should go.

However, this is not the end of the argument. For it seems to me that despite Locke's central place in the theory of America, his ideas have not actually done much service. Recall that Locke's account is most associated with individuals hanging on to their personal rights (to life, liberty, and property) even while agreeing to live under a government. Critics of progressive liberalism complain that a government dedicated to solving social problems will often trample over the rights of individuals that stand in the way of increasing aggregate welfare. We need individual rights to prevent such excesses, and therefore we need Lockean constraints and a muscular citizenry that will insist on them.

The first problem with this claim is that, however inspirational Locke may have been for its founding fathers, the actual history of American government doesn't hew very closely to Lockean values and constraints. The American social contract was apparently compatible with the genocides of Native Americans, economic dependence on racial slavery, the suppression of women, mass conscription in wars of choice, moralistic laws against contraception and homosexuality, and so on.

A more immediate problem is that a muscular citizenry has become a goal in its own right rather than merely a means to restrain government. And that is a mistake incompatible with a civilized society. Where every citizen must retain responsibility for upholding the law and judging the use of deadly force, every individual

must be a hero or else a victim (or else a villain) in a pre-political Homeric world in which society is no more than a band of heroes. Hence the strange belief—which appears central to the gun rights movement; see for example the popularity of stand your ground laws—that the world is divided into good guys and bad guys, and the government has no right to interfere in what the good guys get up to. This is neither attractive nor feasible nor Lockean. A society fit only for heroes is not a fit society to live in, but rather resembles a nostalgic fantasy of movies of the Wild West.<sup>14</sup>

Still, a society of sheeple uninterested in anything but getting on with their own small lives is an appalling prospect. There should be heroes, citizens willing to stand up for more than themselves. Fortunately, the choice is not binary. The second path to advancing gun control is to disentangle guns from the ideal of strong citizenship.

## 6. Strong and Healthy Citizenship

Let's start by uprooting the myth. Neither handguns nor even those military grade AR-15s are going to stop the US army from crushing you if that's what it has a mind to do. (Fatuous comparisons with terrorist insurgencies like ISIS or the Taliban will not do; unless your idea of strong citizenship is extorting concessions from the US government by threatening a terrorist campaign against fellow Americans.) Gun rights may induce a feeling of political significance and that feeling may be of significant power. Yet, the first thing to note is that this feeling is founded on a delusion as great as that of the sports enthusiast who looks up from his bowl of Buffalo wings to shout instructions at the football players on the TV screen. And, second, gun rights, like Buffalo wings, introduce new health problems of their own into society.

This is because, besides fostering political assertiveness in defense of classical liberal views of the state, extensive gun ownership also undermines the very society it is supposed to defend against tyrannical government. Gun rights introduce a new fear and distance

14. For an extended analysis of the failure of the "Lockean" justification of gun rights on its own terms, see DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free?*

between fellow citizens, whether they choose to arm themselves or not. As the philosopher Firmin DeBrabander argues, an armed society is a polite society not because everyone in it recognizes that others deserve respect, but only because everyone is afraid to say or do anything that might be considered threatening:

Our gun culture promotes a fatal slide into extreme individualism. It fosters a society of atomistic individuals, isolated before power—and one another—and in the aftermath of shootings such as at Newtown, paralyzed with fear. That is not freedom, but quite its opposite.<sup>15</sup>

Here the feeling of vulnerability to guns comes back into political significance. Guns were supposed to protect society from threats, including from its own government. But instead they undermine its health from within, weakening civil society and leaving us unable to relate to each other except via the legalistic forms controlled by the state or else down the barrel of mutual suspicion, as in a spaghetti Western. The great irony of gun rights is that they actually make citizens more dependent on the state and less able to resist it because we lose the sense of solidarity that a civilian society so readily supports. This is a different conception of public health than the aggregation of statistics about individuals' risk of death. It directly concerns the political power of citizens that gun rights activists claim to be defending, the very benefit they claim makes guns worth having.

But there is one more line of positive argument to make. For, fortunately, gun rights are not the only path to strong citizenship. If heroic citizenship is about taking up one's share of responsibility to protect self and others from tyrannical lawlessness or legalized tyranny, then America's own history shows that gun rights are not necessary for it. The civil rights movement is probably the most impressive demonstration of the power that citizens can mobilize against tyrannical government, but there are plenty of other more recent models of strong citizenship, from the progressive

liberalism of #blacklivesmatter to the classical liberalism of Edward Snowden.

These movements succeed, when they do, by relying on the social relations that gun rights undermine. They do not shout up at the government demanding to get their way or else. Instead they bypass the government and address the people themselves. "Here's a problem," they say, "and this what we think should be done. If you agree let's go tell the government what to do together."

## 7. Conclusion

I share the intuition of many Americans that there is something very wrong with a society in which peace is supposed to be achieved by each individual's fear of their fellow citizens' capability for deadly force. I understand their appall at the gun rights pundits lining up on mainstream media after every atrocity to somberly declare that the only solution to bad guys with guns is more good guys with concealed carry permits. This is not the kind of society I would want to live in either.

But I do not think that what is wrong about an armed society is really captured by the actuarial risks it imposes on individuals. And I worry that the narrowness of the public health framing crowds out powerful *values* arguments; for example, about the damage that widespread civilian gun ownership inflicts on the civic virtues of a free society. This is a harm that at least a large proportion of believers in gun rights might be persuaded to take seriously, since it undermines the very integrity and resilience of society—and thus its independence of government—that is central to their political philosophy.

Some gun control advocates may still be skeptical. Science already tells us the objective truth about the dangers of guns. Why give up that advantage to talk about differences of philosophical opinion on an equal footing with gun rights enthusiasts? I have argued that having science on our side may not be such a great political advantage if it narrows the kind of arguments we make and their appeal. It would do no harm and probably much good if at least some proponents of gun control added to the public health case by explaining why an

15. Firmin DeBrabander, "The Freedom of an Armed Society," *New York Times*, December 16, 2012, sec. Opinion: The Stone, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/the-freedom-of-an-armed-society/>.



unarmed America would be a better as well as a safer society.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my two *PPJ* reviewers, Firmin DeBrabander and Ted Alcorn, and to my colleague Nathan Wildman, for their criticism and helpful suggestions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baum, Dan. *Gun Guys: A Road Trip*. New York: Vintage, 2013.
- . “Happiness Is a Worn Gun.” *Harpers’s Magazine*, 2010. <https://harpers.org/archive/2010/08/happiness-is-a-worn-gun/?single=1>.
- CDC. “Table 32. Death Rates for Homicide, by Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: United States, Selected Years 1950-2013.” Health, United States, 2014 – Individual Charts and Tables. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Center for Health Statistics, 2014. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/2014/032.pdf>.
- CDC. “Deaths: Final Data for 2015.” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 66, no. 6, (2017): 75.
- Collins, Randall. “Micro-Sociology of Mass Rampage Killings.” *Revue de Synthèse* 135, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 405–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11873-014-0250-2>.
- DeBrabander, Firmin. *Do Guns Make Us Free?: Democracy and the Armed Society*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2015.
- . “The Freedom of an Armed Society.” *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2012, sec. Opinion: The Stone. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/the-freedom-of-an-armed-society/>.
- FBI. “Table 6: Crime in the United States by Metropolitan Statistical Area, 2017.” Crime in the United States 2017, 2017. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/tables/table-6/table-6>.
- Kleinfeld, Rachel. *A Savage Order: How the World’s Deadliest Countries Can Forge a Path to Security*. New York: Pantheon, 2018.
- Pan, Deanna. “US Mass Shootings, 1982-2018: Data from Mother Jones’ Investigation.” *Mother Jones* (blog), Feb. 15, 2019. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data/>.
- Snyder, Jeffrey. “A Nation of Cowards.” *The Public Interest*, Fall 1993. [https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public\\_interest/detail/a-nation-of-cowards](https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/a-nation-of-cowards).
- Trende, Sean. “What Colorado’s Recall Results Mean for Dems.” *RealClearPolitics*, Sept. 11, 2013. [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/09/11/what\\_colorados\\_recall\\_results\\_mean\\_for\\_dems\\_119913.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/09/11/what_colorados_recall_results_mean_for_dems_119913.html).
- Tuckness, Alex. “Locke’s Political Philosophy.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford University, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/locke-political/>.
- Wilkinson, Richard G., and Kate Pickett. *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. Bristol: Allen Lane, 2009.

## CONTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

**Thomas R. Wells** teaches philosophy at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. His research focuses on practical ethics, on using the resources of academic philosophy to solve real world problems.

# The Path to Gun Control in America Goes through Political Philosophy



Volume 2, Number 1  
Spring 2019  
DOI: [10.253335/M5/PPJ1.1](https://doi.org/10.253335/M5/PPJ1.1)

A Public Holistic Response

Ted Alcorn

America's great gun debate is about more than guns, and Thomas Wells sets out to examine its philosophical dimensions. As someone who worked at the debate's white-hot core for years, I greatly appreciate his contribution.

His focus on the ideas underpinning the debate, necessarily a critique of the messaging and positions adopted by the gun violence prevention movement, is refreshing, though at times I think slightly misplaced. For example, in drawing a contrast between what he sees as the dominant "public health argument" for gun violence prevention and a "values" argument that makes the case in philosophical terms, he goes too far in minimizing how consequential gun violence is for the American public and the power inherent in acknowledging it. "Truth is not the same thing as political significance," he writes—but preserving and protecting life is moral high-ground, and many committed advocates draw their sense of righteousness from the knowledge they are standing on it.

Likewise, I think many observers fail to appreciate the advances being made by today's gun violence prevention advocates. In my observation, the relative power of the gun violence prevention movement has grown according to the resources available and the institutions for effectively employing them (which does not corroborate—though need not contradict—Wells's thesis about the centrality of values). There has been a sea-change in these two factors over the last decade, as private and public funders have poured resources into a once-starved movement, fueling durable organizations that are fostering activity in university laboratories, legislative chambers, and

communities. And [sweeping changes in state law](#) and [a new tenor in the halls of Congress](#) are the undeniable results. That the process is slow—perhaps too slow, disastrously slow—is not enough to declare this a "democratic failure," or today's activists "undermotivated."

Nevertheless, I do not dispute Wells's main assertion that the gun violence prevention movement could—and should—do a better job explaining how its recommendations will yield "a better society, not merely ... a safer one." Marc Solomon, who helped lead the marriage equality movement, wrote that they won by convincing people that, "in order for them to live up to their own value system," they needed to adopt a new position on marriage.<sup>1</sup> Gun violence prevention advocates would be wise to engage in similar thinking. Wells's proposals of how to do so are a good place to start.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Becker, Amanda. "U.S. House Approves Expanded Background Checks for Gun Sales." *Reuters*, 27 Feb. 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-guns-congress/u-s-house-approves-expanded-background-checks-for-gun-sales-idUSKCN1QG2VD>.

Moms Demand Action. "Gun Politics in 2018 and What's Ahead in 2019." *Everytown.org*, 12 Dec. 2018. <https://everytown.org/documents/2018/12/gun-politics-in-2018.pdf/>.

<sup>1</sup>Marc Solomon, *Winning Marriage: The Inside Story of How Same-Sex Couples Took On the Politicians and the Pundits and Won* (Lebanon, NH: UP of New England, 2014), 232.

Solomon, Marc. *Winning Marriage: The Inside Story of How Same-Sex Couples Took on the Politicians and the Pundits and Won*. Lebanon, NH: UP of New England, 2014.

**Ted Alcorn** is a researcher, journalist, and educator with expertise in gun violence prevention policies and programs.