

American Public Opinion about Gun Control Remained Polarized and Politicized in the Wake of the Sandy Hook Mass Shooting

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Congress took little action to restrict gun ownership in the wake of the tragic school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012. Why was no real action taken, when the national mood seems so in favor of such measures? In new research which analyses public opinion polling on gun control, [Kevin H. Wozniak](#) finds that support and opposition for stricter gun control laws is split along partisan lines. He argues that this split helped lead to legislative gridlock in Congress on the issue, with legislators responding to views of their constituents, not to the overall will of the public.



Public opinion about guns and gun control in the United States is characterized by two primary facts. First, mass public opinion about this policy domain has been remarkably stable over time. Summarizing data from decades of polls conducted by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, [Tom Smith](#) notes that a majority of Americans typically support policies to restrict the manufacture and sale of guns, prevent dangerous people from acquiring guns, and increase gun safety. At the same time, polls also usually find that a majority of Americans oppose complete bans on citizens' ability to own guns. This overall trend of majority support for many forms of gun control paired with opposition to gun bans remained largely unchanged even in the wake of high-profile mass shootings, like those that occurred at Columbine High School in 1999 or a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado in 2012.

Second, public opinion about gun control is highly polarized. [Smith](#) states, "Women, residents of large cities and their suburbs, liberals, and Democrats are most likely to support general gun control measures, whereas, men, residents of rural areas, conservatives, and Republicans are least likely to support such measures". For many Americans, guns are a symbol of individualism and freedom from government tyranny; for these people, government regulation of guns is an existential threat to national values.

However, many people wondered if the December 2012 shooting of six teachers and twenty students aged seven and younger in Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut would alter the polarized stability of public opinion about gun control. Indeed, [President Obama](#) himself characterized the massacre as exceptionally tragic because the victims were young children, and he urged Congress to forgo partisanship and enact new gun control legislation to prevent additional mass shootings.

I analyzed data from a nationally-representative public opinion poll jointly conducted by *CBS News* and *The New York Times* four months after the Sandy Hook shooting in order to assess whether or not the tragedy altered the common patterns of public opinion about gun control. The survey included questions on whether or not people supported more strict controls on guns, bans on semiautomatic weapons and shotguns, a federal law requiring background checks on all potential gun buyers, and whether people would vote for a candidate who has different views on gun policy. I analyzed the distribution of respondents' answers to these questions broken down by their political party affiliation in order to identify issue polarization.

Figure 1 shows that only a majority of Democrats support making gun control laws stricter. In contrast, a majority of Republicans favor making no changes to the gun control laws that are already on the books. Independents who chose not to identify with either party resembled Republicans in their answers to this question, but a larger percentage of them supported making laws more strict. Thus, even though an overall majority of respondents (57 percent) supported making gun control laws more strict, we see that opinion about this issue is quite split across party lines.

Figure 1 – Percent support for making gun control laws more or less strict

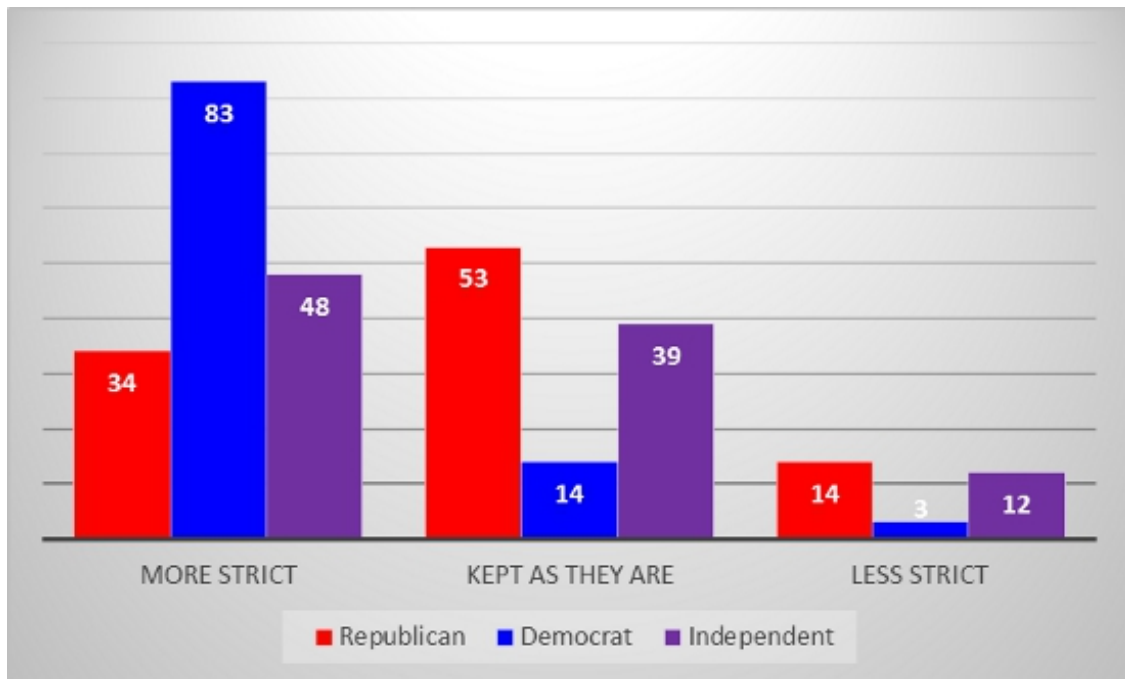


Figure 2 shows a similar pattern. Overall, a majority of respondents (55 percent) supported a nationwide ban on semiautomatic weapons, but again support is split across party lines. About 74 percent of Democrats but only 41 percent and 49 percent of Republicans and Independents supported such a ban, respectively.

Figure 2 – Percent support for a ban on semi-automatic weapons

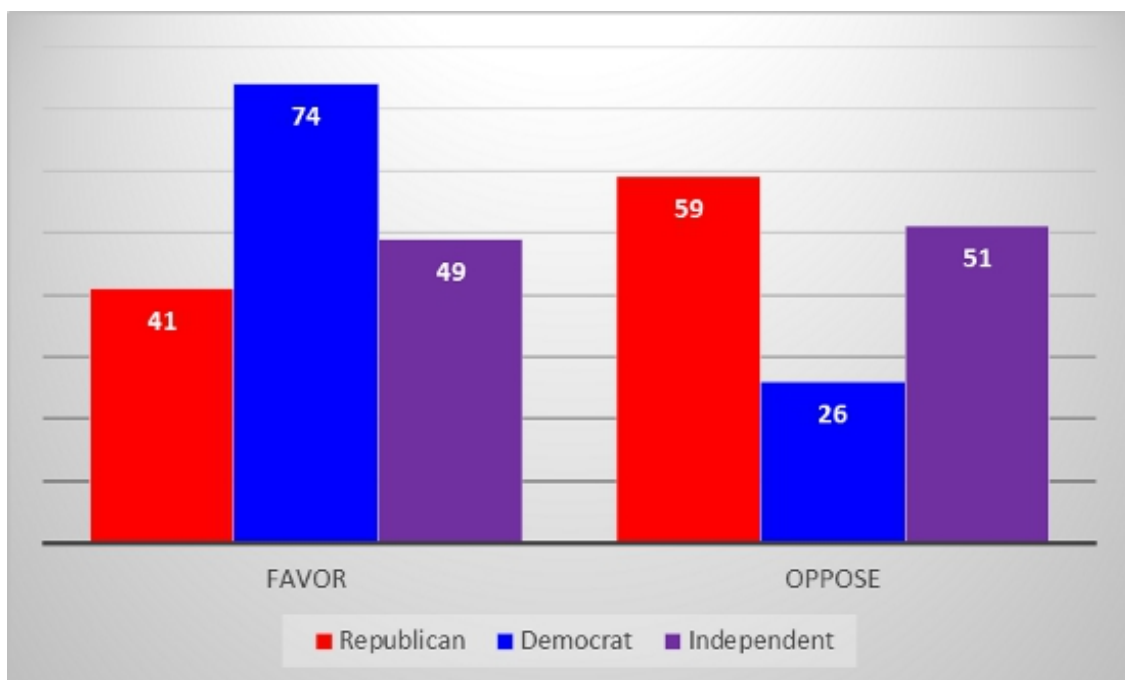
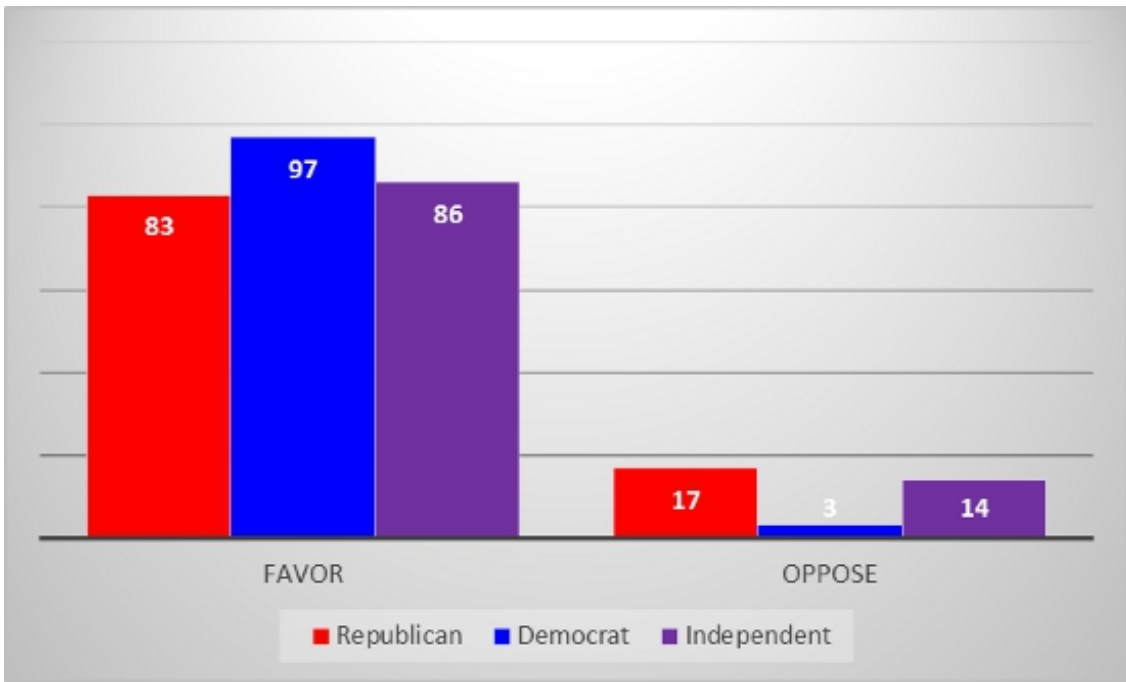


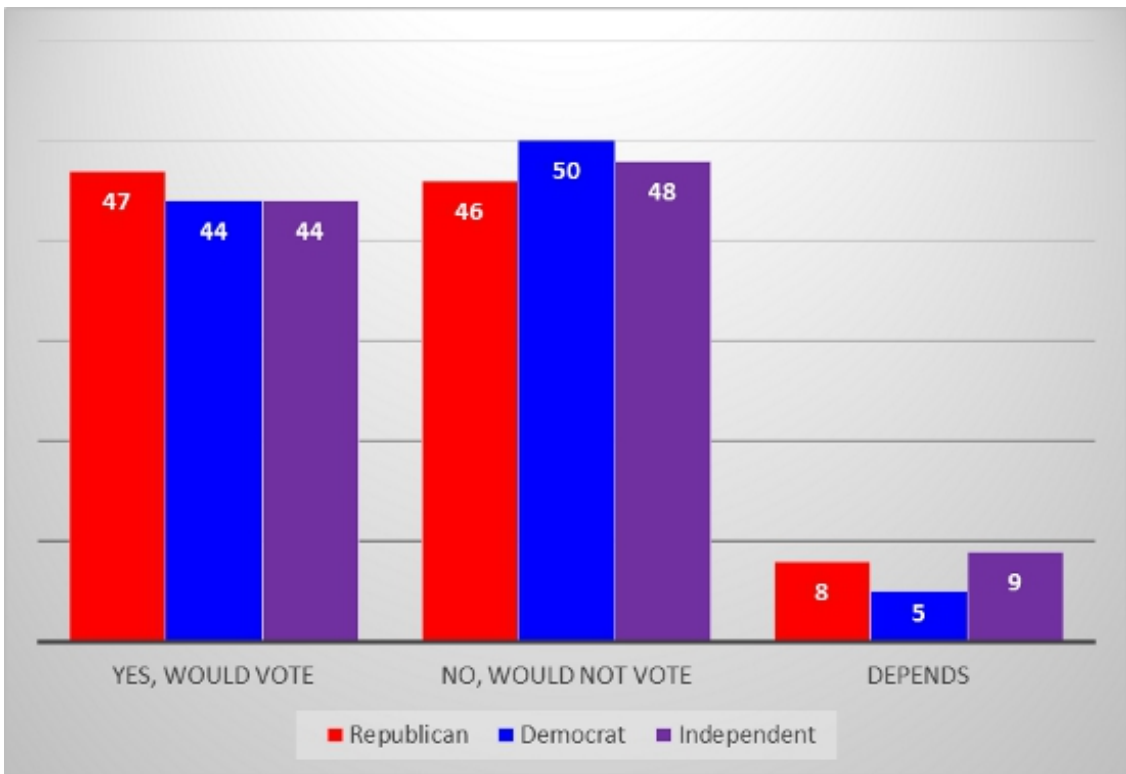
Figure 3 shows more concurrence. Overwhelming majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents favored a federal law that would put all potential gun buyers through a background check to screen out people who are banned by law from owning firearms.

Figure 3 – Percent support for a federal background check law



Finally, Figure 4 shows the greatest polarization of all, but this polarization cuts across party lines. Respondents were almost evenly-split when asked whether or not they would consider voting for a political candidate who does *not* share their opinions about gun policy.

Figure 4 – Percent willingness to vote for a candidate who does not share your views on gun policy



Despite the President's plea that Congress respond to the Sandy Hook tragedy, and the fact that Democratic legislators in both the House of Representatives and the Senate introduced numerous different gun control bills to strengthen the nation's background check system and ban civilian ownership of automatic and semi-automatic weapons (among other objectives), neither the 113th nor 114th Congresses passed a single new piece of legislation to alter gun policy in the United States.

These poll results may explain legislative gridlock on this issue. With the exception of background checks, American voters are split across party lines in their level of support or opposition to gun control proposals. This

divide is testament to the fact that overall poll numbers do not sway American politics; the federalized nature of the American political system means that legislators respond to their constituents, not the overall “public will.” These poll data show that Democratic legislators likely pleased their constituents by introducing new gun control bills, but Republican legislators knew that supporting any of those bills would likely anger their constituents. Especially in light of the fact that voters appear to be evenly split on the question of whether or not they would automatically vote against a candidate who disagrees with them on gun control, it seems that electoral politics explains the enduring partisan gridlock over guns and gun control in the United States. Even an event as tragic as the Sandy Hook shooting failed to alter the status quo of politics and public opinion about this issue.

*This article is based on the paper ‘[Public Opinion About Gun Control Post–Sandy Hook](#)’, in *Criminal Justice Policy Review*.*

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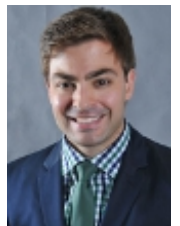
Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Kevin H. Wozniak is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He studies the politics of punishment and criminal justice. He received his Ph.D. in justice, law, & society and American politics from American University in Washington, D.C. He was also a 2012-2013 Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association. During his fellowship, he worked as a legislative aid for Representative Bobby Scott (VA-03), a member of the House Democratic Gun Violence Prevention Task Force.



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