

*“From my Cold Dead Hands:” the role of the NRA in the lack of gun reform in the United States from 1996-2014*

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**Abstract:**

This thesis is an in-depth look at the role of the pro gun lobby, specifically the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the lack of gun reform in the United States from 1996-2014. I have concluded that the political, economic, and cultural influences of the NRA have transformed it from a small marksman group into the most powerful social movement organization in the gun rights vs. gun control social movement sector. The NRA has gained traction over the years because of the group's appeal to the symbolic attachment that Americans have for guns, which emerged from a frontier past. This romanticized US gun culture created the NRA and the NRA has perpetuated and further exaggerated what the American gun culture is and the value of guns to maintaining freedom. The organization uses their cultural influence as a foundation for its political and economic influences to stop any and all gun reform from happening. While it is easy for Americans to demonize the NRA as an all-powerful organization of "gun nuts," in reality around half of the American population shares their ideals and beliefs. This common culture that the NRA appeals to has made it one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the US and has cemented its strong political and economic influences. The power of the NRA was demonstrated by its most recent lobbying efforts in 2012 and 2013. Even when modest gun reform was attempted after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012 it was not passed because of the ability of the NRA in achieving its single goal to prevent any restrictions on firearms ownership.

## **Introduction: From Tragedy to Reform**

On March 13, 1996 hundreds of elementary students woke up and arrived at school as they did each day in Dunblane, Scotland. Little did they know, this was no ordinary day. Shortly after nine am, Thomas Hamilton entered the school and killed fifteen five and six year olds and their teacher in the gymnasium. Hamilton then made his way to the playground and began firing at a mobile classroom. In total, he killed eighteen students and teachers and injured fifteen before committing suicide.<sup>1</sup> Within a year and a half of the Dunblane massacre, the United Kingdom enforced some of the strictest firearms legislation in the world by effectively banning the private ownership of all handguns. What started as a ban on the private ownership on all large caliber handguns turned into a ban on virtually all privately owned handguns of any caliber months later.<sup>2</sup>

Years later, after witnessing multiple tragedies such as Columbine High School, Fort Hood, Tucson, Virginia Tech, and Aurora it seemed as though the United States would never follow suit of other industrialized countries like the United Kingdom and implement their own gun reform. With George W. Bush, Republican President in office from 2002-2012, and the war on terror emerging as the most prevalent issue at the time, gun policy was pushed to the back burner. The last pro gun control bill or gun reform was passed under the Lautenberg Amendment in 1996 with the support of Democratic President, Bill Clinton. Since 1996, thousands of bills that would be considered pro gun control have been introduced, but none have come close to being passed. This changed in

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, Peter. "Dunblane: How UK school massacre led to tighter gun control."

<sup>2</sup> Squires, Peter. *Gun culture or gun control? Firearms, violence and society*. Taylor & Francis edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pg. 5.

2013 after Newtown in 2012, but to the surprise of most American citizens, gun reform was not passed even then.

December 14, 2012 began like any other day at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. At 9:30 am the doors locked as usual and 700 students attended class. A mere number of minutes later, the seemingly normal morning turned into an unimaginable tragedy. As the morning announcements were being read, twenty-year-old Adam Lanza used a semi-automatic rifle to shoot his way into the building. After entering a kindergarten classroom, Lanza shot fourteen students and then made his way into another classroom and proceeded to kill Victoria Soto, a first grade teacher who tried to save her students by moving them away from the door. Lanza killed six more students in that classroom and would end up killing twenty students and six adults in all before taking his own life in the twenty minutes that it took the police to arrive at the school.<sup>3</sup>

About one month later, President Obama and other gun control advocates used the Sandy Hook shooting as evidence that gun reform-meaning more restrictions on gun ownership, was a necessity in the US. After heated debate between Republicans and Democrats, reform under the Manchin-Toomey Amendment, which would simply expand background checks, was voted down in the Senate by six votes. How could this have happened? In January 2013, 51% of the American public believed that it was more

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<sup>3</sup> “Sandy Hook Elementary shooting: What happened?” *CNN.com*. Accessed 1 December 2013. <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/12/us/sandy-hook-timeline/>

important to control gun ownership than to protect the right of Americans to own guns,<sup>4</sup> but the US government voted no on a seemingly moderate gun law. This amendment would have simply expanded background checks to gun shows, which 81% of the American public supported.<sup>5</sup>

The gun debate has been prevalent in US politics since the 1960s. However, today this issue has become even more important as gun deaths in the US continue to be the highest in the industrialized world. Since Newtown on December 14, 2012, roughly 41,366 people have died from guns.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the media has only reported 12,042 of these gun deaths shows that many gun deaths often go unnoticed in American society and therefore not everyone realizes the severity of this issue. According to the *Huffington Post*, since Obama's presidency, there have been twenty mass shootings that have "made waves on a national scale".<sup>7</sup> Even though these mass shootings are just a small part of the gun violence story, since gun deaths occur in urban areas like Chicago and Detroit every day, mass shootings are what often catalyze gun reform. This is what happened in the United Kingdom in 1996, but has not happened in the United States in almost twenty years. The driving question behind my research is: why hasn't the United States imposed

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<sup>4</sup> PEW Research Center. "Gun Control: Key Data Points from Pew Research." *Pew Research Center RSS*. Accessed 1 Dec. 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/guncontrol-key-data-points-from-pew-research/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Kirk, Chris and Dan Kois. "How Many People Have Been Killed by Guns Since Newtown?" *Slate Magazine*. Accessed 1 Nov. 2013. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2012/12/gun\\_death\\_tally\\_every\\_american\\_gun\\_deaths](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2012/12/gun_death_tally_every_american_gun_deaths)

<sup>7</sup> Wing, Nick. "We've Had so many Mass Shootings in the U.S., We've had to Redefine the Term." *The Huffington Post*. *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. 17 Sept. 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/17/mass-shootings-us\\_n\\_3935978.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/17/mass-shootings-us_n_3935978.html)

more restrictions on gun ownership since 1996 when mass shootings continue to occur, as opposed to the United Kingdom, where gun reform took place almost immediately after one tragic mass shooting?

Through a sociological lens this paper will analyze the political, economic, and cultural influences of the NRA as a social movement organization (SMO) within the gun rights social movement industry (SMI) in opposition to the pro gun control SMI. This will begin with an overview of social movement and culture theory, a brief background on gun culture and gun laws in the United States and United Kingdom and the power of the NRA, and will finish with my findings on the cultural, political, and economic influence of the NRA and what that has meant for gun reform in the US from 1996-2014.

### **Methodology**

In order to uncover an answer to the puzzle of why the United States has not implemented gun reform since 1996, I began my research studying the gun culture in the United States. My original hypothesis was that it is the unique gun culture in the United States that has prevented large-scale gun reform from taking place since the 1990s. However, after completing initial research I found that there is not one monolithic gun culture in the United States since what is considered normal surrounding gun ownership and use varies between race, gender, and region within the country. This hypothesis is also flawed because if it were truly the American gun culture preventing gun reform from happening, reform would not have occurred in the 1990s. One theme that emerged in almost all preliminary research was the influence that the pro gun lobby, specifically the National Rifle Association (NRA), has over the passage of gun laws in the US. This finding led to a new hypothesis that the NRA plays a large role in the lack of gun reform

in the US. I separated my research into the economic, political, and cultural influence of the NRA because this is what Laura Desfor Edles classifies as the three analytically but not empirically distinct parts of society.<sup>8</sup> In order to research each of these realms of NRA influence I studied legislation involving guns since 1996, read secondary sources analyzing the influence of the NRA and its power, read dozens of news articles relating to the NRA and gun control, and used sites like *Open Secrets* to learn more about the NRA's funding and economic power. The findings from this research will be discussed in Chapter Three.

While this paper is primarily an examination of gun laws and gun culture in the United States, I chose to include a brief comparison of the United States to the United Kingdom. This is because publicized mass shootings occurred in both countries in the 1990s, but reform of gun laws only occurred in the United Kingdom. Since the United States was originally a British colony, the origins of the Second Amendment originated from British common law. However, since the 1700s the United States has not imposed many restrictions on guns at the federal level while the United Kingdom has completely banned the private ownership of handguns and rifles to all citizens but those who obtain a permit. This paper will examine the attempts at reform that occurred after two specific mass shootings: Dunblane in 1996 and Newtown in 2012. The following chapters will attempt to solve the puzzle as to why the UK was able to reform its gun laws after seventeen lives were taken at Dunblane when the US was not after twenty-six lives were taken at Newtown.

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<sup>8</sup> Edles, Laura Desfor. *Cultural sociology in practice*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 6.



My argument is that the political, economic, and cultural influences of the National Rifle Association have all contributed to the lack of gun reform (or tighter restrictions on gun ownership) in the United States from 1996 to the present day. Looking solely at the United States, the cultural influence of the NRA is the most important in stopping reform since the NRA has emerged from and perpetuated an even stronger common culture and collective identity to attract and mobilize its members (five million today). This cultural influence is the foundation for their political and economic influences, which are also fundamental to the power of the NRA, especially in comparison to the United Kingdom. Because of the role of money and single interest groups in US politics that does not exist as prevalently in the UK, it is harder to implement any type of reform in the US. It is even harder to implement gun reform because the gun has such a strong symbolic value in the United States that does not exist in the United Kingdom. Through framing techniques, the NRA is able to feed off of the symbolic attachment to guns and use strong rhetoric and emotional appeal to mobilize voters to stop any reform from happening. As a multi-billion dollar organization, the NRA's economic influence supplements both its political and cultural power through lobbying, grassroots and campaign spending. All three of these components allow the NRA to mobilize resources as the most powerful social movement organization in the gun rights vs. gun control social movement sector. Thus, the economic, political, and cultural power of the National Rifle Association has prevented even modest federal restrictions on gun ownership since 1996.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Theory and Literature Review**

### **Social Movement and Culture Theory**

In order to support this research, social movement theory will be applied in congruence with cultural theory to the recent gun control social movement and gun rights counter movement. Both theoretical foundations are necessary to understand why gun reform has not occurred in the US and the role that the NRA has played in this phenomenon. Social movements emerge from culture, but these movements also begin to also create their own unique culture; thus both theoretical frameworks are mutually reinforcing and necessary to understand American culture, gun culture, and gun politics.

Cultural theory and social movement theory go hand in hand because social movements are rooted in conflicting idealized views of what culture is and should be in a society. In order to understand social movement theory, I will first introduce classic and modern cultural theory and its implications for the emergence of the social movements for and against gun control. Philosophers first began to study culture theory after the Enlightenment, which exposed that “human behavior is a result of culture”.<sup>9</sup> In 1750 the French philosopher Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot defined culture as “the emphasis on use of symbols to communicate and pass on knowledge and emphasis on shared heritage of learning”.<sup>10</sup> Turgot understood the significance of symbols when studying culture, as opposed to understand culture as an “entire way of life.” The latter, ethnographic definition of culture, was largely relied up on the 1950s and 60s but was challenged in the

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<sup>9</sup> Moberg, Mark. *Engaging Anthropological Theory A Social and Political History*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

1970s by Clifford Geertz. This research will rely on Geertz's symbolic definition of culture defined in 1973 as "systems or patterns of shared symbols and/or meaning".<sup>11</sup> Geertz believed that every society has cultural or symbolic systems through which people "make sense" of the world, which he identifies as "webs of signification".<sup>12</sup> These webs of signification are socially constructed and therefore culture is constantly changing within society. Broadly, culture can be attributed to an entire population, but there are also several distinct sub-cultures within a larger society. In the words of TS Eliot, "culture cannot altogether be brought to consciousness; and the culture of which we are wholly conscious is never the whole culture".<sup>13</sup> In this way, there may be one overarching culture of a nation or group of people, but there are always exceptions to the rule. This is especially significant when studying gun politics, because what some groups deem to be the American culture and gun culture does not coincide with what others believe it to be. Durkheim described the phenomenon of a fracturing of a common culture as a decline of "conscience collective," which is the identity, purpose, and meaning that underwrites the integration of overall society.<sup>14</sup> He believed that Protestant beliefs promote egoism and because of this, different groups in Protestant countries, such as the United States, are more likely to form their own collective group identities, thereby breaking down the conscience collective. The emergence of unique collective behaviors within the culture of

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<sup>11</sup> Edles, *Cultural sociology in practice*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>14</sup> Buechler, Steven M. *Understanding social movements: theories from the Classical Era to the present*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011.

one country is what Durkheim defines as a symptom of tensions and problems of social integration.<sup>15</sup> Collective identity is then formed as a memory process shared and constructed by a group.<sup>16</sup>

Collective identity is a core concept to a constructivist understanding of culture. In a constructivist view, reality is always changing and is collectively developed.<sup>17</sup> Through this lens, culture is continuously being constructed and is therefore always changing. A group's collective memory of the past is crucial to understanding their current reality and shapes their culture and collective identity. Public memory is a particular type of collective memory that focuses on dominant culture and enables people to make sense of a past, present, and future.<sup>18</sup> This memory often tends to overshadow marginalized groups, who in the US would be anyone besides white men. The intersection between differing cultures and different collective identities that are built upon differing collective memories within a society is crucial to understanding the gun control social movement. In later sections the implications of collective identity and collective memory for the NRA and the gun rights counter movement will be further discussed.

Constructivist schools of thought also apply to sociology and social movement theory. According to Max Weber, one of the forefathers of sociology, sociology can be defined as the interpretation, understanding, and casual explanation of social action.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Palczewski, Catherine Helen. Ice, Richard. Fritch, John. *Rhetoric in Civic Life*. State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

Weber believed that values and ideas together provide group cohesion and motivate collective action. This collective action then becomes social once there is meaning attached to it.<sup>19</sup> Once meaning is attached to social action, it has the potential to turn into a social movement. A social movement can be described as “collective attempts to promote or resist change in a society or group”.<sup>20</sup> Liberal social movements emerge from an attempt to promote change, in turn causing the materialization of conservative counter movements seeking to resist this change. According to leading social movements scholars, Zald and Useem (1987), “movements and counter movements are nested in long waves of ideology and counter ideology”.<sup>21</sup> A social movement organization (SMO) is a named collective organized formally or informally to work for social change goals of a particular social movement”.<sup>22</sup> Various SMOs operate within social movements and counter movements. A population of SMOs operating in a single nation state to bring about the same goals of a social movement is called a social movement industry (SMI).<sup>23</sup> The combination of SMOs comprising both a liberal movement and conservative countermovement make up a social movement sector (SMS). By this logic, the NRA is one of the many social movement organizations making up the conservative countermovement against SMOs like the Brady Center and Million Moms March

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<sup>19</sup> Buechler, *Understanding social movements*.

<sup>20</sup> Borgatta, Edgar F. and Montgomery, Rhonda J. *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Social Movements.” New York: MacMillan Reference USA, 2000, 2717.

<sup>21</sup> Buechler, *Understanding social movements*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Edwards, Bob. “Organizational Style in Middle Class and Poor People’s Social Movement Organizations: An Empirical Assessment of New Social Movements Theory.” PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

supporting the gun control movement. Since resources are scarce, within each SMI each SMO is fighting for resources of money, leadership skills, and polity relations to better influence public opinion and authority figures.

Resource mobilization (RM) theory and New Social Movement (NSM) theory both emerged after vast social change was experienced in the US in the 1960s. While resource mobilization theory was formed in the US, NSM was formed in Western Europe. Although there are several differences between the two theories, both “accord social movements legitimacy and consider them important factors in shaping broad patterns of social change”.<sup>24</sup> One of the similar focuses of both old resource mobilization theory and new social movement theory is the emphasis on collective identity. Melucci (1988) concluded that collective identity is key to the formation of SMOs, movements, and counter movements- and it is a group’s collective identity that can be used to mobilize support. Friedman and McAdam (1992 ) supported this claim in their belief that “collective identity is internal to mobilizing structures and individuals that partake of one reconstitute their individual identities, to some degree, around this new and valued collective identity”.<sup>25</sup> The collective identity of an SMO, like the NRA, is socially constructed by the culture, ideology, and values of its members and has the potential to transform the identity of new members. Klandermans (1992) and Melucci (1988) also see collective identity as a product as well as precursor of social movements.<sup>26</sup> Melucci

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, “Organizational Style in Middle Class and Poor People’s Social Movement Organizations: An Empirical Assessment of New Social Movements Theory.”

highlights the construction of collective identity “through an ongoing process of interaction, negotiation, and conflict”.<sup>27</sup> Doug McAdam’s theory of social movements (1994) also examines the cultural aspect of social movements. McAdams wrote that all movements have cultural roots and that movements themselves develop internal cultures that become “worlds unto themselves that are characterize by distinctive ideologies, collective identities, behavioral routes, and material cultures.”<sup>28</sup> The NRA’s cultural roots were based on a shared attachment to guns and shooting sports and have in turn developed an even stronger attachment to guns and an internal culture that does not tolerate even the most modest restrictions on firearm ownership. When collective identities conflict, a “culture war” can transpire and social movements are more likely to be sustained (Taylor and Whittier, 1992).<sup>29</sup> This is what has occurred within the pro gun control vs. gun rights SMS, because the collective identities of SMOs on each side are directly conflicting. Pro gun rights groups believe that it is an American right to own a firearm and this right must be protected at all costs while pro gun control groups believe that firearms have a negative impact on society and therefore should be more heavily restricted.

In the classical understanding of resource mobilization, groups are mobilized according to similar grievances, whether that is economic, political, or social. However, McCarthy and Zald (1977,1987) challenged the role of grievances with the introduction of what they call “professional social movements.” Professional social movements reflect

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Buechler, *Understanding social movements*, 182.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

a shift from intensive exclusive membership to a more partial inclusive membership with fewer obligations.<sup>30</sup> Members are one of the key resources that a SMO needs and by loosening membership guidelines, many SMOs hope to attract more members. The NRA did so by offering discounts on membership in late 2012 and early 2013 to attract more members after Newtown. Single interest groups often support professional social movements. The NRA is perhaps the most powerful single interest group in the United States today and their mission is solely focused on protecting Americans' right to bear arms.<sup>31</sup> As a single interest group, the NRA urges voters to vote in elections with only the right to bear arms in mind and supports candidates solely on their voting history surrounding firearms.

Gaps in the resource mobilization theory can be addressed by looking at the New Social Movements theory. Key themes in this theory that would apply to the pro-gun lobby include a distinct social formation as the context for emergence of collective action, movements that are rooted in the new middle class or in ideology, the importance of social construction of collective identity, the politicization of everyday life, symbolic forms of resistance, and a preference for organizations that are egalitarian, decentralized, and participatory. According to Melucci (1989) members of the "new middle class" are the core of new social movements. No longer are movements simply restricted to the poor and the marginalized, instead the middle class is fighting for their rights as well. The politicization of everyday life is also very relevant when looking at guns in the US because this issue has become polarized amongst party lines. The NRA's members have

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<sup>30</sup> Buechler, *Understanding social movements*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> Melzer, Scott. *Gun Crusaders: the NRA's culture war*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.



become aligned with the Republican Party while gun control supporters are often Democrats.

One of the ways that SMOs mobilize support is by framing an issue in order to appeal to potential members. Gamson and Modigliani's theory (1989) that discusses the framing techniques of social movement organizations is crucial to understanding how the NRA has framed the issue of gun reform in order to gain membership and support to mobilize. Four frame alignment techniques they introduce are bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation.<sup>32</sup> Bridging is a technique used to form a connection between an SMO and a potential member by making them feel as if "our concerns are your concerns".<sup>33</sup> Amplification means playing up certain values and beliefs in order to attract members with certain values, ideology, and beliefs. Through extension techniques SMOs try to connect with otherwise detached individuals to gain their support in a movement. Transformation is the most radical framing technique and involves convincing individuals to change their interpretive filter on an issue and rethink their stance.<sup>34</sup> All four of these frame alignment techniques are used by the NRA, which will be discussed later. Sasson (1995) wrote that frames make facts intelligible and political conflicts arise as contests between framers with opposing messages.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the framing of an issue, which is done by an SMO, creates meaning that a member then attaches to an issue. Social movements are sustained when the socially constructed values

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<sup>32</sup> Buechler, Steven M. *Understanding social movements*.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Edles, *Cultural sociology in practice*, 221.

and meanings of organizations are conflicting. Therefore culture matters because it is what creates a social movement but more importantly what sustains it. Because there is a clash of cultures between pro gun rights SMOs and gun control SMOs, the debate over gun control has been present in the US since the 1960s. Even modest efforts at reform are made difficult because of the difference in collective identities of the pro gun SMI, led by the NRA, and gun control SMI.

In his work *Gun Crusaders: The NRA's Culture War*, Scott Melzer- a sociology Professor at Albion College, studies the connection between guns and masculinity and how the NRA has been shaped by the relationship between the two. Melzer joined the NRA in 2001 and attended the annual convention in Reno in 2002 in order to learn more about the influence of the NRA and its members. As a sociology professor, Melzer's work studies the NRA as a social movement organization. Throughout the book, his main argument is that the NRA is not only fighting for gun rights, but is waging "an all out culture war" against the Left. According to Melzer, "It became clear to me that the NRA is not just fighting for guns. Committed NRA members' support for gun rights is about freedom, independence, self-reliance, and their American way of life. Though they rally behind and respond to these ideas, beneath all that is fear."<sup>36</sup> Although he did encounter some female members, Melzer sees the group as male run and shaped by the frontier masculine identity of white men. The intersection of guns, masculinity, and freedom is what Melzer believes defines the NRA. NRA members "cast themselves as heroic frontiersmen celebrating a version of American manhood from decades past, defending

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<sup>36</sup> Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 11.

‘frontier masculinity’.<sup>37</sup> Edward Leddy, author of *Magnum Force Lobby: National Rifle Association Fights Gun Control*, describes the NRA as a symbolic person:

If the NRA were to portray itself as a symbolic person, he would be a pioneer heading west with a rifle. He is self-reliant, morally strong, and competent. He is also peaceful by preference, but ready to defend himself from attack. He believes in personal rather than collective responsibility. He is not against government but sees its role as subordinate and supplementary to individual personal efforts. He opposes the arbitrary abuse of government power but is openly patriotic.<sup>38</sup>

This description solidifies the connection between the NRA and the frontier mentality of its members. Interestingly enough, this description would also be fitting of many politically conservative Americans; further signaling the overlap between conservative beliefs and the mission of the NRA. The individualistic nature of NRA members is contradictory to the beliefs of many liberals and gun control supporters, that the safety of the majority is more important than the rights of the individual. The clash of individualism vs. collectivism is an important piece to understanding the culture clash between gun rights and gun control advocates. Gun rights supporters tend to cite the frontier past as proof that Americans are inherently individualistic and deserve the right to protect themselves, while gun control advocates point out that even in the wild west, crime was relatively low in most areas and guns were not allowed in major towns because of the threat to the collective of gun violence.<sup>39</sup> Gun rights supporters tend to live in rural areas where guns are embraced while gun control supporters tend to live in urban areas where guns are seen as dangerous. William Tonso explores the urban/rural divide in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Kopel, David B.. *The samurai, the mountie, and the cowboy: should America adopt the gun controls of other democracies?*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992.

relation to the clash between collectivism and individualism in his article “How Sociology Texts Address Gun Control.” Tonso believes that an important perspective in the gun debate that is missing in many academic and popular texts is the symbolic interactionist perspective, which examines the “diametrically-opposed socially-constructed meanings attached by those on opposite sides of the gun issue”.<sup>40</sup> Essentially, because gun rights advocates associate guns with pleasure and freedom, while gun control advocates associate guns with crime and fear, the socially constructed associations around guns are opposite. Not only are symbolic meanings attached to guns opposite, but also the foundational views of each of these groups on government, rights, and public life. For example, citizens in urban areas who support gun control are more likely to favor a state that is more concerned about protecting the safety of citizens and less concerned about individual freedoms, while the opposite is true in rural areas. These groups have fundamentally different ideas of what America is, should be, and how the government plays a role in the lives of its citizens, and for this reason the culture conflict goes much deeper than just issue of firearms. Gun rights SMOs are more likely to attract citizens who align with an individualistic interpretation of what America is, while gun control SMOs are more likely to attract citizens who see America as supporting the collective over the individual.

The clash between individualism and collectivism is also important when comparing the United States to the United Kingdom. The culture of the United States is more individualistic than that of the United Kingdom, which is demonstrated by Hofstede Center index. Because of this Peter Squires believes that a “disciplined

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<sup>40</sup> Tonso, William. “How Sociology Texts Address Gun Control.” *Academic Questions*, Spring 2004, 76.

collectivism” existed after the Dunblane tragedy in the UK, which allowed the government to pass gun reform. Citizens did not rally against a private ban on gun ownership because it was believed that more gun restrictions would be better for the country as a whole. While it is not certain that less guns means less violence, citizens believed this to be true and set aside their own individual right to bear arms in order to protect society. Squires argues that this “disciplined collectivism” does not exist in the United States and it is much harder for Americans to give up individual rights in any case, even if it was believed to better serve the country. However, according to the Geert-Hofstede country comparison, the United States score of 91 on individualism is only two points above the United Kingdom’s score of 89.<sup>41</sup> Since both countries are more individualistic than collectivist, this aspect of culture alone cannot explain the lack of gun reform in the US and not in the UK.

### **The American Gun Culture: What does the gun represent in the US?**

In the 1970s, Richard Hofstadter was the first scholar to study the “American gun culture”. According to Hofstadter in one of his most influential articles, the US was the only modern industrial nation to maintain a gun culture.<sup>42</sup> In this way, Hofstadter felt that a gun culture was synonymous with a strong attachment to guns, since the strong significance many Americans place on firearms is not found in any other industrial nation, perhaps besides Switzerland and Israel. On the contrary, scholars like Michael

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<sup>41</sup> "THE HOFSTEDE CENTRE." *United States*. <http://geert-hofstede.com/united-states.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Squires, *Gun culture or gun control?*, 56.

Lenz do not believe that gun culture necessarily means a nation attaches value to guns, but instead to be the shared norms of a nation in regards to firearms. In *Arms are Necessary: Gun culture in eighteenth-century American politics and society* Lenz studies the prevalence and significance of guns in eighteenth century America and connects this feelings towards guns today in the US. While he does agree that Americans place more significance on guns than most other industrialized countries, he does not associate negative connotations around the term “gun culture” that Hofstadter does in *America as a Gun Culture* (1970). Instead, he believes the term gun culture represents a country’s beliefs and behaviors towards gun ownership and use. Hence, this section will explore the norms and beliefs surrounding gun use and ownership in the United States from the 1800s to the present day.

The creation of the United States’ gun culture can be traced back to the Second Amendment in 1791, which states that “A well-regulated militia, being necessary to a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed”.<sup>43</sup> Although the original intent of the militia was to defend the colonies, Lenz discusses its evolution into a social organization that was largely ideological. Compared to the standing armies of the UK, the militiamen were overall very poorly trained and unskilled with guns. However, militia trainings became regular social events for entire communities, and a time for neighbors to interact with each other.<sup>44</sup> The ideology behind the creation of the militia was that local control of the military was essential, since a

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<sup>43</sup> Burbick, Joan. *Gun show Nation: Gun culture and American democracy*. New York, N.Y.: New Press, 2006, 60.

<sup>44</sup> Lenz, Michael. *"Arms are necessary" :Gun culture in eighteenth-century American politics and society*. Köln: Böhlau, 2010.

military that was led by the state gave the government too much power. Therefore, the militia represented a gathering of the people, for the people, and it was essential for all of its members to be armed. Thus began the tradition of American citizens valuing the ownership and carrying of guns as a necessity, since there was no police force to defend the citizens. Of course at the time, the only recognized citizens were white males, therefore African Americans were prohibited from owning guns and there are no records of any women owning guns.<sup>45</sup>

Gun use also had other social connotations beside the militia use in the 1800s, especially in the South. Lenz specifically explores the gun culture of Massachusetts and South Carolina and concludes that in South Carolina guns became a status symbol of the upper class. Hunting was largely a recreational sport done for pleasure in the South, so if one owned a gun to hunt with, it meant that they had a lot of money. Duels were also more common in South Carolina and were a symbol of one's high status in society. While guns were not as representative of status in Massachusetts, they were still a part of everyday lives. According to Lenz, guns affected every citizen's life whether they were associated with citizenship and honor, social standing and political rights, or domination.<sup>46</sup>

Scholars like Richard Slotkin and RM Brown believe that because of America's frontier past, violence and violent conflict is inherent in the American psyche. Slotkin considers the use of guns throughout American history in the Civil War, wars against American, Indians, and the experimentation with Prohibition in the 1920s and rise of

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<sup>45</sup> Lenz, "*Arms are Necessary.*"

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 149.

gangsters as laying the foundation for the gun culture in America today<sup>47</sup>. RM Brown's work echoes this idea in his belief that Americans are predisposed to violence because of what he deems the "Code of the West" and the idea of vigilantism that is thought to have existed in the 1800s and is glamorized in American culture today<sup>48</sup>. Contrary to this belief, Gerry Souter- long time NRA member and self proclaimed "American shooter" believes that America is not a gunfighter nation and in his book, he seeks to debunk the myth of Americans as gunfighters. Instead, he believes guns were used more for hunting in the West than for gunfights. In fact, he points out that many towns had laws prohibiting guns in city limits in the 1800s and at that time the gun was an expensive commodity costing almost a month's pay<sup>49</sup>. Souter argues that although the tradition of America's gun culture is centered on the myth of the sharpshooter or rugged cowboy, more than anything guns were more valuable symbolically than for their actual use. In the words of Souter, in American history the "handgun became a trademark of individualism, self-reliance, dim-witted bravado, a crutch for low self esteem and a status symbol"<sup>50</sup>. Essentially, even though the average American was not highly skilled in gun use, the idealism of sharpshooting cowboys is a myth that is rooted in American culture, because the gun represents the individualism and self-reliance that Americans have always strived for. The NRA further perpetuates this image of ideal American patriots as self-reliant individuals who can defend and provide for themselves by owning a gun.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Souter, Gerry. *American Shooter :A personal history of gun culture in the United States* (1st ed.). Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 35.



The romanticism of the gun as a symbol of individualism and self-reliance has also been perpetuated by constant imagery in Hollywood and the media of the “Wild West” frontier culture. Richard Slotkin explores this imagery in a trilogy of works and concludes that in the past, America’s hunting history and frontier culture instilled masculine ideals in the average American. Hunting was something that father and son could do together and the gun represented manhood and masculine identity. Hollywood has idealized this masculine identity embedded in gun use and gun ownership and further glamorized it by “sustaining the imagery, values, and characters associated with America’s western frontier<sup>51</sup>” in the countless westerns and gangster movies that have been produced to date. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century guns became comparable to toys for adults and 22 pages in the Sears and Roebuck catalog were specifically devoted to guns and ammunition.<sup>52</sup>

Through her exploration of American gun shows in 2006, Joan Burbick, an expert on culture and politics in the US, concluded that the millions of gun shows that happen in the US today exploit the idea of the Wild West in order to increase gun sales. “Gun in fiction and in reality,” says Burbick, “convinced and reassured men that personal power was only a trigger-pull away”.<sup>53</sup> This symbolic representation of the gun as power that may have began in a romanticized version of the past on the frontier continues to be preserved by the NRA and at gun shows. Essentially “gun shows create imagined

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<sup>51</sup> Squires, *Gun culture or gun control?*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Souter, *American Shooter*.

<sup>53</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*, 13.

communities, shaping what it means to be an American citizen”.<sup>54</sup> The NRA is able to gain power by appealing to citizens at gun shows who believe that owning a gun is synonymous with being a true American patriot. However, in reality this connection has simply been fabricated and exaggerated by Hollywood and now by the NRA and other gun rights SMOs.<sup>55</sup>

There is a darker side to the American gun culture that is often forgotten or pushed aside by pro gun advocates- the use of guns for oppression and destruction of other races. For example, in the 1800s the sole purpose of the militia in the South was to prevent a slave rebellion.<sup>56</sup> The militiamen owned guns in order to prevent an uprising and since African Americans were not considered citizens at the time, they were prohibited from owning firearms. Native Americans were also banned from owning guns, and since women did not have equal rights at this time the only American gun owners were white males. More recently, from 2007-2012 it was found that white males were 1.5 times as likely to own a gun than the rest of the population<sup>57</sup>. Although the pro gun lobby has tried to appeal to minorities and women, these groups are often less likely to be gun owners in the US.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, xx.

<sup>55</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*.

<sup>56</sup> Lenz, Michael. *"Arms are necessary."*

<sup>57</sup> Jones, Jeffrey M. "Men, Married, Southerners Most Likely to be Gun Owners." GALLUP Politics. February 1, 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/160223/men-married-southerners-likely-gun-owners.aspx>

Another story involving guns in America that often goes untold is that the majority of gun homicides occur in African American communities. Although mass shootings (which usually affect white communities) are made into national phenomenon

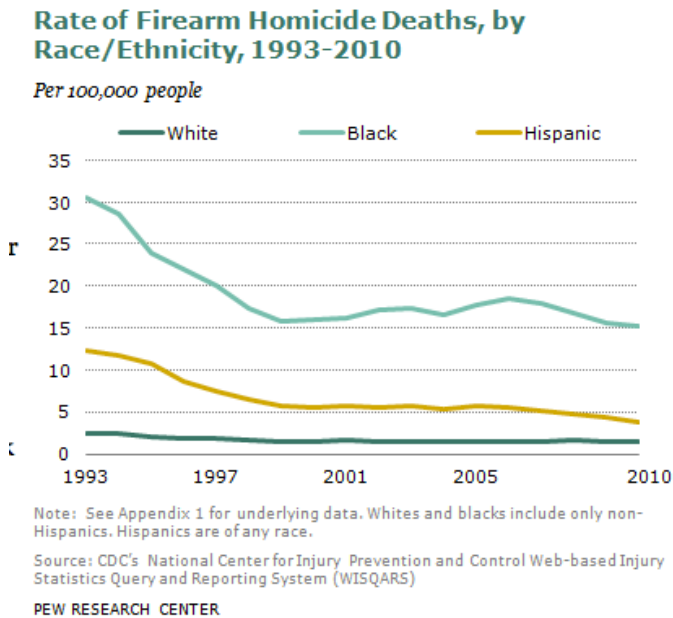


Figure 1: Rate of Homicide Deaths, by Race/Ethnicity 1993-2010

by the media, dozens of African American and Hispanic teenagers and adults are killed in urban areas like Detroit and Chicago every day, without any national coverage. In 2010, although African Americans made up only 13% of the American population, they accounted for 55% of shooting

homicide victims (see Figure 1 above).<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, White Americans comprised only 25% of shooting homicide victims while making up 65% of the total American population. According to Niaz Kasravi, the NAACP National Criminal Justice Director, gun violence and its leading causes of poverty, the war on drugs, and easy access to guns are more prevalent in “colored communities”: areas where more African Americans live. In her article, Kasravi illustrates a recent shooting in January of 2013 in Chicago of a

<sup>58</sup> “Blacks Suffer Disproportionate Share of Firearm Homicide Deaths.” Pew Research Center RSS. N. p., 21 May 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/blacks-suffer-disproportionate-share-of-firearm-homicide-deaths/>

teenage girl named Hadiya Pendleton in Chicago's deadliest January since 2002<sup>59</sup>.

Kasravi uses this example to illustrate the high threat of violence in colored communities that often goes un-noticed, but is a serious issue.

Gun use and ownership does not only differ by race in the US, but also by gender. In the past, gun use was restricted to males but after the women's rights movements in the early 1900s gun ownership expanded to women. Although some women have begun to embrace the American gun culture, Claire Cooke found in one study that the majority of women tested in 2004 associated guns with crime rather than with self-protection. After surveying hundreds of college age students in the US, Cooke concludes that females were more likely to see guns as a cause of crime rather than a defense against it while almost all males believed guns could protect against crime and that it is every person's right to own a gun. Cooke attributes this difference to a difference in norms surrounding male and female gun use since in the US males are encouraged to hunt while females are not. Males may see a gun as a symbol of pleasure, while females are more likely to see a gun as a symbol of crime and violence<sup>60</sup>. Since the creation of the US, males have always represented the majority of gun owners and Gallup found that between 2007-2012, men were five times as likely than women to own a gun.<sup>61</sup>

So what does the gun represent? Michael Lenz and Joan Burbick believe that the gun is a symbol of white male domination in America since the 1800s. Historically, white

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<sup>59</sup> Kasravi, Niaz. "Caught in the Crossfire." *The Crisis Magazine*. Spring 2013, 12-19.

<sup>60</sup> Cooke, Claire Ann. Young people's attitudes towards guns in America, Great Britain, and western Australia. *Aggressive Behavior*, 30, no. 2 (2004): 93-104.  
doi:10.1002/ab.20009

<sup>61</sup> Jones, Jeffrey M. "Men, Married, Southerners Most Likely to be Gun Owners."

males have used the gun to oppress African Americans, Native Americans, and indirectly also women. It is no wonder that the majority of NRA members are males<sup>62</sup> since the right they are so desperately protecting has served to give them an elevated status throughout American history. This is not to say that all white males who have ever owned a gun in the US have had bad intentions, but instead that at a fundamental level the gun has largely been a tool of white male power. Many current NRA members even feel that their voices are being lost to that of minorities and that before long, minorities and women will be given “special rights”.<sup>63</sup> Because of this fear they have clung to their right to bear arms even more tightly.

The mythical American gun culture of the rugged, individualist, sharpshooter using a gun for self-defense and self-reliance is simply an idealized version of gun use in American history. The reality is that this is just one romanticized vision of gun use and ownership in the US, when in fact guns are a symbol of the white male’s dominance and status in society. Although many African Americans do carry guns today, it is largely for protection against crime and gang activity- not because they wish to mirror cowboys, hunters or sharp shooters of the past like many of their White counterparts.<sup>64</sup> Since there is a vast difference in the norms and behaviors associated with gun use amongst different sectors of the US population, there is not one monolithic American gun culture. The monolithic US gun culture that does exist has been socially constructed- starting with the emergence of militias as social structures and furthered by the integration of guns into the

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<sup>62</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*.  
Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*.

<sup>63</sup> Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

US social context because of Wild West stereotypes. I am not arguing that using guns for hunting and self-defense did not occur in the frontier, but rather that the extent to which this occurred has been exaggerated in the US today. Chapter Three will demonstrate how the exaggeration and perpetuation of the socially constructed American gun culture has allowed the NRA to become the most powerful lobbying group in the US today.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Background and History**

### **A Brief Summary of Gun Laws in the United Kingdom**

The American right to bear arms was derived from a similar British right, which began in 1181 under King Henry II. All free men at this time had the right to bear arms for national defense, however some groups like Jews were excluded.<sup>65</sup> The Statute of Winchester in 1285 then required all free man to own arms, knives, and bows. This was the origin of the creation of militias in 1590 and although Henry VIII temporarily took away the right to own a handgun from those who made less than 300 pounds a year, after 1557 all free men had the right to own handguns and men between 16-60 were required to do so. David Kopel argues that the United Kingdom was a “limited monarchy” because of the power of militias.<sup>66</sup> This power was demonstrated in 1688 during the “Glorious Revolution” when armed militia members drove King James II out of the country.

The first attempt at gun control in the United Kingdom was the 1820 Seizure of Arms Act in which magistrates could confiscate arms that they suspected would be used

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<sup>65</sup> Kopel, *The samurai, the mountie, and the cowboy*.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

by revolutionaries. Then in 1883 after armed robberies in London increased the modern push for gun control began. In response to this push several rifle clubs were formed for workingmen around 1900. The first modern gun control legislation was introduced in 1903 under the Pistols Act, which prohibited minors and felons from buying pistols. This act also made it mandatory for buyers to obtain a gun license before purchasing a pistol. Later, under the Firearms Act of 1920 the sale of pistols and rifles was restricted to only those who showed “good reason” to the police.<sup>67</sup> Restrictions were extended to shotguns, rather than just pistols in 1967 with the passing of the Criminal Justice Act. Although this act required a license for the purchase of a shotgun, police had to grant applicants a license unless they had a history of mental illness or criminal record. However, it is important to note that self-defense was not considered a valid reason for obtaining a license at this time. After the 1987 Hungerford Massacre where Michael Ryan shot and killed seventeen people and himself more restrictions were placed on gun ownership. All semi-automatic rifles were banned and in order to purchase any firearm a consumer had to abide by strict storage requirements. It is important to note that the pro gun lobby in the United Kingdom was fully supportive of this measure since they felt semi-automatic rifles were not appropriate for target shooting, and therefore were not necessary to own at all. In 1992 legislation was passed requiring the registration of all shotguns as well as making it necessary for buyers to obtain a firearms license to own any type of gun.<sup>68</sup>

After the Dunblane Massacre occurred in March of 1996 the United Kingdom government wasted no time in passing even stricter gun laws. Not only did all gun

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

owners have to obtain a license to purchase a firearm, but the application process was made even stricter. In order to obtain a license applicants have to submit four photos of themselves, must be verified by a person of “good standing” that they’ve known for at least two years, have no criminal record, history of mental instability or alcohol/drug abuse, have a good reason to possess (again self defense is not a good reason), have a secure place for storage by the “British Standard” and have a safe place for all shooting (gun clubs).<sup>69</sup> With so many restrictions in place, gun ownership decreased dramatically from 425 in 1996 to less than 300 in 1997 per 10,000 people.<sup>70</sup>

Both Peter Squires, author of *Gun culture or gun control? Firearms, violence and society* and David Kopel, author of *The samurai, the mountie, and the cowboy* agree that the United Kingdom is a perfect example of a case where moderate restrictions on firearms turned into a virtual seizure of almost all guns. Technically, there still is a right to bear arms in the United Kingdom, but because of all the restrictions on gun ownership essentially no British citizens do, other than the few who are members of shooting clubs. Although the right to bear arms originated in the United Kingdom it has practically vanished. Yet, the right to bear arms that was adapted by Americans from the British remains alive and well today in the United States.

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<sup>69</sup> Carter, Gregg Lee. *The gun control movement*. New York: Twayne Publishers;, 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Criminal Statistics, England and Wales 2000” British Home Office, [www.gunfacts.info](http://www.gunfacts.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Guns-in-other-countries-U.K-Violent-Crime-and-Firearm-Ownership-Trendline.jpg)  
<http://www.gunfacts.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Guns-in-other-countries-U.K-Violent-Crime-and-Firearm-Ownership-Trendline.jpg>



## **An Overview of Gun Laws to Date in the US**

Any discussion on US gun laws must start with the creation of the Second Amendment, which states that “A well-regulated militia, being necessary to a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”<sup>71</sup> The ideology behind the creation of the militia was that local control of the military was essential, since a military that was led by the state gave the government too much power<sup>72</sup>. Therefore, the militia represented a gathering of the people, for the people, and it was essential for all of its members to be armed. This began the tradition of American citizens valuing the ownership and carrying of guns as a necessity, since there was no police force to defend the citizens.

In the past several decades, the meaning and interpretation of the Second Amendment has been debated amongst scholars. Entire books have been written on this subject, so I will briefly touch on the two main schools of thought on its meaning. The individualistic interpretation of the Second Amendment views the right to bear arms as a guaranteed right of the individual, for their own self-protection. According to scholar Joyce Malcolm, the Second Amendment protects the individual’s right for self-defense and is not about collective defense.<sup>73</sup> On the opposite spectrum, those who view the Second Amendment from a collectivist perspective argue that the purpose of this amendment was for the militia, which no longer exists. Therefore: they argue that the

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<sup>71</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Lenz, “*Arms are necessary.*”

<sup>73</sup> Squires, *Gun culture or gun control?*, 71.

Second Amendment is now obsolete. In 1989, Denis Henigan- Vice President for Law and Policy at the Brady Center argued that without a citizen militia, this Amendment is no longer relevant to the modern US society.<sup>74</sup> In the landmark case *District of Columbia vs. Heller* in 2008, the Supreme Court's unanimous decision was that the Washington D.C. laws, which regulated handguns and other firearms was unconstitutional since they believed the Second Amendment guarantees an individuals' right to own ownership.<sup>75</sup> This ruling solidifies the importance of the Second Amendment and its interpretation, because one of the major reasons gun reform has not been able to take place is that any type of gun control is seen in direct violation to this Amendment. Again, the clash of cultures between individualism and collectivism is significant because whether an individual interprets the Second Amendment to be individualistic or collective is a good indicator of which side of the gun debate that they fall.

Since the ratification of the Second Amendment in 1791 there have been relatively few federal gun laws passed. Instead of discussing all federal gun laws that have been passed since some were not very controversial or impactful, only a handful of laws that have the most significance to the issue of gun control and gun reform will be introduced in this section. The first influential gun control law passed was not until 1934 under the name: The National Firearms Act. This amendment was passed after the rise of crime under the Prohibition and gangster era and made it more difficult for citizens to purchase lethal guns like sawed-off long rifles or shotguns and machine guns. In order to

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>75</sup> Weaver, G.S. "District of Columbia Et. Al. V. Heller: Another Round in The Debate Over Gun Control." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 25, no 1. (2009): 119-222 (accessed November 15, 2013).

decrease what the government saw as a misuse of these firearms, these few specific firearms required registration and a transfer tax had to be paid when bought.<sup>76</sup>

Jon S. Vernick and Lisa M. Hepburn, two experts on American gun issues, consider the Gun Control Act of 1968 to be the foundation of gun control legislation in the US. In this act, firearm dealers and manufacturers were required to be licensed, convicted felons and fugitives could no longer purchase or possess guns, handguns could only be sold by licensed dealers to citizens over 21 years old, and a limit was placed on firearm imports that were not seen fit to be used for sporting.<sup>77</sup> This act placed the most limits on gun ownership and is the best example of “gun control” in the US.

In 1986, another federal gun law was passed, but instead of supporting gun control, the Firearm Owners Protection Act or FOPA was introduced to ease restrictions in firearm owners and dealers. One of the main things that this law did was ban a national firearm registration system and forbid the ATF to inspect the premises and records of licensed dealers, which they had done in the past.<sup>78</sup> In reaction to this law, which essentially stripped away some of the gun control put in place in the 1968 Act, three important laws were passed between 1991 and 1994. The first was the Gun Free School Zones act, which forbid the possession of a gun within 1,000 feet of a school. Pro gun advocates have often blamed this law for school shootings, because they feel that if teachers and administrators had guns they could better protect students from attacks.

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<sup>76</sup> Vernick, Jon and Lisa Hepburn. “State and Federal Gun Laws: Trends for 1970-99.” In *Evaluating gun policy effects on crime and violence*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003. 345-365.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

Then, in February of 1994 the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, perhaps one of the most controversial gun reform policies was passed. This law required licensed gun dealers to process background checks on any prospective gun buyer. A five-day waiting period was also enforced for the background check to be completed. Even though the Supreme Court ruled in 1997 that requiring background checks were illegal, most states continue to enforce them. Later that year, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was passed, which established a minimum age of 18 for the purchase and possession of handguns and ammunition. Certain semiautomatic assault weapons that contained large-capacity feeding devices and held more than ten rounds were also banned.<sup>79</sup>

In 1996 another reversal on “gun control” was made when Congress and the NRA passed a law banning the Centers on Disease Control funding for any research “to advocate or promote gun control<sup>80</sup>.” This has been critical to the lack of complete knowledge surrounding the “gun issue,” because neither side has a complete set of data to draw from. Under this law the CDC was not allowed to investigate how many guns were in the US, why gun accidents occur, what percentage of gun owners commit crime, and other important questions to understanding the correlation between gun ownership and crime, homicide, and suicide. The year 1996 also saw a win for pro gun control advocates when the Lautenberg Amendment was passed, which outlawed anyone who had a

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Jamieson, Christine. “Gun violence research: History of the federal funding freeze.” <http://www.apa.org>. *American Psychological Association*. Feb. 2013. <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2013/02/gun-violence.aspx>

misdemeanor crime of domestic violence from buying a gun. Between 1996 and 2007, the gun issue seemed to fade into the background because of other foreign threats and concerns, but when President Obama was elected in 2008, the issue re-emerged again. After the Newtown shooting in December 2012, President Obama finally thought he had the momentum he needed to pass another amendment relating to gun reform, but much to his dismay he came up short with the failure of the Manchin-Toomey Amendment in 2013.

### **The Original NRA**

Since the NRA is most well known as a lobbying organization in the United States, it may come as a shock to most that the National Rifle Association was originally founded in the United Kingdom. In 1859 the organization was founded as an annual gathering of marksmen- who were usually members of the elite. According to the NRA-UK website the annual meeting, named the Imperial Meeting, was created “for promotion of marksmanship in the interests of Defence of the Realm”.<sup>81</sup> The first marksmen competitions of the NRA were held in July 1860 on Wimbledon Common and Queen Victoria fired the first shot. Members competed by shooting at targets and a 250-pound prize was given to the best marksmen, thus beginning to the tradition of an annual meeting of NRA members. Since its humble beginnings, the UK NRA has entered the political and lobbying realm of the United Kingdom, but only to protect the rights of marksmen and hunters, not to protect the right to bear arms in general.<sup>82</sup> Today, “Membership of the National governing body directly supports the future of shooting in

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<sup>81</sup> NRA.org/UK. *National Rifle Association of the United Kingdom*. <http://nra.org/uk>.

<sup>82</sup> Kopel, *The samurai, the mountie, and the cowboy*.

the UK. The NRA has a commitment to promote shooting and especially to encourage younger shooters to participate in the sport.”<sup>83</sup> Since gun owners are required to have a proper place for target shooting, the NRA is a common club for gun owners to join.

Current benefits of UK NRA membership include receiving the NRA journal, using the National Shooting Centre facilities, and enjoying insurance benefits.

### **From Marksmen to Lobbyists: The Creation and Evolution of the National Rifle Association in the United States**

In recent years, the National Rifle Association has been equated to a religion in the United States. What started as an organization for marksmen and sharp shooters has transformed over the past century and a half into the most powerful lobbying group in the United States. Contrary to the belief of most Americans, the NRA has not always had a strong presence in Washington and shaping policy has not always been their priority. In order to understand the role that the pro gun lobby plays in shaping gun policy in the United States it is necessary to first grasp the complex history of the pro gun lobby’s most prominent leader: the NRA.

Joan Burbick traces the roots of the National Rifle Association back to the 1870-1871 Orange City Riots in New York City. Since the militia was unable to stop the riots because of a lack of marksmanship on the part of its members, the NRA was formed in order to prevent a similar situation from happening again by training better shooting militia members.<sup>84</sup> Post Civil War, riots and social upheaval were commonplace so William Church, George Wingate, former Civil War General Ambrose Burnside and

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<sup>83</sup> NRA.org. *National Rifle Association*. <http://nra.org>.

<sup>84</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*.

twelve other men met and decided to form the National Rifle Association to “turn the Guard into sharpshooters<sup>85</sup>.” Although the group was not formed as part of the military, the majority of its founders were former soldiers.<sup>86</sup> Members of the original NRA were often respected members of the community and men of means who “could lead the nation to future glory<sup>87</sup>.” The purpose of the organization was to promote marksmanship and sporting uses of guns and the NRA’s main claim to fame in the late 1800s was beating the world champion Irish in consecutive marksman competitions.<sup>88</sup> Before long, the group had a reputation as the best shooters in the world and its members were focused on upholding a strong tradition of marksmanship. In the late 1800s the organization also began to emphasize hunting for sport as one of its values and traditions. The NRA continued to train militia members until informal militias were replaced with a formal military structure under the National Defense Act in 1916. With no militia members to train since militias were no longer relevant, the 1920s and 30s were a time of change for the NRA’s mission.<sup>89</sup> In the 1920s organized crime spiked due to Prohibition, the emergence of gangsters, and race riots. The NRA saw this increase in crime as an opportunity to once again use their marksmanship abilities to protect their country by training police officers. As an organization superior in arms use, the NRA acted as the

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<sup>85</sup> Davidson, Osha Gray. *Under fire the NRA and the battle for gun control*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998, 22.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*, 38.

<sup>88</sup> Davidson, *Under fire the NRA and the battle for gun control*, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*, 40.

nation's safeguard and stoppers of organized crime<sup>90</sup>. By the 1940s, the NRA was so established as a sharp shooting organization that advertisements considered the best defense against the Germans in World War II to be a well-trained NRA marksman.<sup>91</sup> Between World Wars I and II the NRA received over 200,000 rifles at cost and only NRA members were allowed to purchase the weapons at a much cheaper price.<sup>92</sup> This as well as the return of ex soldiers after both wars boosted membership. Many members had a newfound interest in hunting and post World War II marked a transformation of the NRA from a quasi-military organization to an organization supporting the average American hunter.

A new transformation and shift in values, ideas, and the mission of the NRA occurred in the 1960s and 70s. During this time of social and political turmoil, the NRA emerged as a powerful lobbyist group fighting for the rights of everyday citizens to maintain their Second Amendment rights. Joan Burbick claims that guns were introduced into national politics in the 1960s because conservatives needed footing when they believed they were losing to Democrats in the national political battle. While Democrats, such as JFK, were fighting for equality for all Americans through the Civil Rights movement, Republicans were fighting their own battle- for gun rights. The creation of the lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action, or ILA for short, of the NRA in 1975 cemented the NRA's emergence into the national political scene. Along with Republicans, they stood on the platform that the government was becoming too willing to

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>91</sup> Souter, *American Shooter*.

<sup>92</sup> Davidson, *Under fire the NRA and the battle for gun control*.



listen to minorities and this would eventually lead to a seizure of all handguns. After the National Gun Control Act was passed in 1968, conservatives began to fear that more gun control was to follow. This view was shared by NRA party hardliners who transformed the group's focus from shooting sports to lobbying.

During the 1970s a split among NRA party leadership occurred. Old party leaders like General Franklin Orth, who supported the Gun Control Act of 1968, were quickly being questioned by younger hardliners like Harlon Carter. The focus of the older generation simply on hunting and sportsmanship, which was reflected in their choice to move headquarters away from Washington D.C. to Colorado Springs, did not sit well with the younger members. Although Carter and many of his followers were fired in what is known as the "Weekend Massacre" in November of 1976 they were able to re-assert their power at a meeting in May of 1977 in Cincinnati, which would later be called the "Cincinnati Revolt." Orth and the older generation of marksmen and hunting advocates were replaced by a new generation who had one single goal: protecting Americans' gun rights. By the time Reagan was voted into office in the 1980s, the NRA was an integral lobbying institution in US politics. In fact, Reagan- a lifetime member, even spoke at the 1983 NRA convention and declared that, "We will never disarm any American who seeks to protect his or her family from fear or harm".<sup>93</sup> Through this speech, Reagan reinforced the idea that owning a gun is an individual right, not a right of the collective to be taken away. The days of a passive NRA whose existence was dictated by the government, military, and police were over. Instead, the most powerful lobbying group in the United States was born under a much stronger leadership- with Carter as the face of the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 39.

organization. The sign above the NRA headquarters that once symbolized the organization's commitment to hunting and shooting sports now read "the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed," signaling a complete transformation in the organization's mission.

Since 1983, the NRA's activities and goals have largely remained the same. Positioned primarily as Second Amendment advocates, the organization also provides firearms and gun safety education. By 1983 membership reached 2.6 million, over double the number in 1977<sup>94</sup> and membership only continues to grow. Today, membership is reported to be five million by the NRA although some claim that this number is inflated.<sup>95</sup> Protecting the Second Amendment rights through its lobbying arm (NRA-ILA) continues to be the NRA's main goal and since 1996 they have been very successful in doing so. Wayne LaPierre has held the position of Vice President and chief operating officer since 1991 and has been known to be very outspoken on gun rights, even in times of crisis. Jim Porter is the current NRA president and Chris Cox is the current executive director of the ILA. Other notable NRA members include rock star Ted Nugent, Chuck Norris, and former Governor Sarah Palin. Josh Sugarmann, a leading expert on firearms and the NRA, deems the group as "the most powerful and feared lobby in America."<sup>96</sup> However, they do not like to represent themselves as such and instead the NRA describes

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Kessler, Glenn. "Does the NRA really have more than 4.5 million members?" *Washington Post*. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/does-the-nra-really-have-more-than-45-million-members/2013/02/07/06047c10-7164-11e2-ac36-3d8d9dcaa2e2\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/does-the-nra-really-have-more-than-45-million-members/2013/02/07/06047c10-7164-11e2-ac36-3d8d9dcaa2e2_blog.html)

<sup>96</sup> Sugarmann, Josh. *National Rifle Association: Money, Firepower, and Fear*. Washington, DC: National Press, 1992.

itself as the oldest Civil Rights organization in America. Though, the NAACP, which was founded in 1909, also claims to hold this title. The power of the NRA has become a polarizing topic in US society, especially surrounding gun policy, but what many people tend to ignore are the roots of the organization and its continued efforts at gun safety and education. Since its creation, the NRA has evolved from an organization centered on marksmanship and shooting sports to a multi-million dollar lobby organization that uses its money and political clout to promote gun rights and gun ownership in the US.

### **The Power of the NRA**

Academic literature written about the NRA tends to take a disapproving and condemning tone towards the organization and its aims. While all scholars recognize that the roots of the NRA were innocent enough, many scholars such as Michael Lenz, Joan Burbick, Josh Sugarmann, and Scott Melzer demonize the NRA in its fight for gun rights today. According to Burbick, the NRA today is bound together by middle-aged, mainly white men, clinging to the Second Amendment to the Constitution, “hurrying to grassroots organizational sessions, committee meetings, and seminars”.<sup>97</sup> She believes that today the gun functions to further racial repression, economic disparity and war, and by supporting all gun ownership, the NRA does as well. Melzer even wrote that the typical NRA member- a gun owning, rural, conservative, straight white man believes that they are now the new minority. They perceive that liberals are plotting to not only take away their gun rights, but plan to give people of color “special” rights<sup>98</sup> and they are

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<sup>97</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*, 57.

<sup>98</sup> Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 11.

doing everything they can to prevent this from happening. Melzer concludes that behind the fight for gun rights lies fear and the fear tactics used by the NRA have allowed it to become a powerful SMO. The NRA constantly exploits the fear of Americans that “gun grabbers” will seize all of their arms, thus stripping them of their freedom. Joan Burbick, Gerry Souter, Scott Melzer, and Josh Sugarmann all used this term to describe the somewhat irrational fear of NRA members than any attempt at gun reform used this term or any attempt to restrict gun ownership is the first step towards the seizure of all guns. Melzer believes that the clash between gun rights advocates and gun control advocates is often simplified into “gun grabbers” vs. “gun crusaders”. Even though not all people fall in these two categories, to the NRA there is no middle ground. Anyone who is in favor of any restrictions on gun ownership becomes a “gun grabber,” regardless of whether they actually want to ban all guns or not and anyone who is willing to fight for gun rights is deemed a “gun crusader”. Burbick describes this phenomenon as the “moral crusade” of the NRA, which enforces a mentality that you are either with them or against them.

On the other hand, Osha Gray Davidson takes a softer approach in his analysis of the NRA. He claims that it is dangerous to label all NRA members as “kooks or witless bumpkins”<sup>99</sup> because it prolongs deadlock in the gun debate and prevents any and all gun reform from happening in the US. Davidson writes that although many believe that gun owners are violent and potentially dangerous, the typical gun owner is usually well-educated and a member of the middle class who do not commit crimes with guns.<sup>100</sup> He does agree though, that the NRA is extreme in its beliefs. According to Warren Cassidy,

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<sup>99</sup> Davidson, *Under fire the NRA and the battle for gun control*.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

former NRA CEO, “you would get a far better understanding if you approached us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world”.<sup>101</sup> Davidson claims that this explains why the fight for any gun control measure, no matter how moderate, turns into “a holy war” for firearms owners.<sup>102</sup> The NRA strongly holds onto the belief that even the smallest restriction on firearms ownership will ultimately turn into the confiscation of all guns, from all citizens. This belief is crucial to understanding the NRA’s position on any gun reform bill, because even if the right to bear arms would still be protected, the NRA is not willing to give an inch in the gun rights/gun control battle.

Although some are very opposed to the NRA, a recent study by *PolicyMic* found that 54% of Americans have a favorable view of the NRA.<sup>103</sup> A recent *TIME* article published in February 2013 found that most Americans’ beliefs on gun control issues matched that of the Obama administration more closely than that of the NRA. However, 62% of those polled reported to identify more closely with the views of the NRA than that of President Obama.<sup>104</sup> There is no doubt that there is a disconnect between public opinion on gun control and popular views of the NRA and this can be explained by the power of the NRA. The next chapter will dissect this power by examining the NRA’s cultural, political and economic influence separately.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> Lee, Jack. “10 Surprising Facts About the NRA You Never Hear.” *PolicyMic*. January 23, 2013. <http://www.policymic.com/articles/23929/10-surprising-facts-about-the-nra-that-you-never-hear>

<sup>104</sup> Rogers, Alex. “Gun Owners Trust the NRA but Agree with Obama.” *TIME*. Feb. 8, 2013. <http://swampland.time.com/2013/02/08/gun-owners-trust-the-nra-but-agree-with-obama/>

## **CHAPTER THREE: Findings**

### **Culture Matters: The Cultural Influence of the NRA**

Since the 1960s two separate sub cultures surrounding guns, or views on the place of guns in US society, have emerged. On one hand there is the pro-gun rights group, largely made up of rural white males, who view guns as a significant part of American life and support the right to possess a firearm. On the other hand there is the pro-gun control group, largely made up of urban citizens, who believe that the government should be able to restrict firearm use and ownership.<sup>105</sup> Glenn Utter and James True, authors of “the Evolving Gun Culture in America,” recognize that while this is not a dichotomy and there are some segments on the population who fall in between these two positions, these are the two fundamental views in the gun debate in the US today. These views have helped shaped the collective identities of SMOs on both sides of the gun debate. However, neither side is willing to admit that there is more than one view of gun use in the US and instead claims that their values are American and “right”. According to Utter and True “Each of these groups considers itself part of the mainstream of the broader American culture while at the same time portraying the other as participating in a separate and irrational subculture.”<sup>106</sup> On its website the NRA claims “NRA Represents America: That polls indicate that 63% of Americans feel that NRA represents their views. (Zogby International, January 2001)”,<sup>107</sup> which demonstrates that they believe their views are shared by the majority of Americans. One of the most powerful cultural tools of the

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<sup>105</sup> Utter, Glenn and True, James. “The Evolving Gun Culture in America.” *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, March 2004.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid

<sup>107</sup> “Did you know.” NRA-ILA.org. <http://www.nraila.org/gun-laws/did-you-know.aspx>

NRA is its appeal to those who they deem to be “true Americans” - the patriots who believe all Americans should be able to own a firearm to protect themselves and their families. The most effective way the NRA does this is through rhetoric. Rhetoric is essential to how they frame the issue of gun control and gun rights and their framing techniques have been crucial to increasing membership in the past thirty years.

One of the most famous NRA speeches of all time was Charlton Heston’s “From My Cold Dead Hands” speech given at the 2000 annual NRA meeting in North Carolina. Just one year after the Columbine High School massacre where twelve students and one teacher were killed, Heston stood in front of a crowd and exclaimed that the only way to take his “freedom” away would be to take the guns from his “cold, dead hands.”<sup>108</sup> Heston purposely points out “Mister Gore” who was running for president as the Democratic candidate at the time. Throughout the speech Heston continuously uses the word “our” and “we” as all-inclusive nouns. He is trying to appeal to all Americans whose freedom it is to have guns. He does not single out those who are against guns until the very end of his speech when he says “especially for you Mister Gore” which is not only a stab at Al Gore, but at the entire Democratic party, who in his mind are synonymous with gun control advocates. He vows to “defeat the divisive forces that would take freedom away” obviously implying any gun control advocates. Heston uses pathos instead of ethos and logos to appeal to the emotions of those listening. He draws

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<sup>108</sup> Heston, Charlton. “From my cold dead hands.” Speech, Charlotte, North Carolina, May 20, 2000. *American Thinker*.  
[http://www.americanthinker.com/video/2012/11/flashback\\_charlton\\_heston\\_from\\_my\\_cold\\_dead\\_hands\\_-\\_speech\\_on\\_patriotism\\_freedom\\_and\\_liberty.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/video/2012/11/flashback_charlton_heston_from_my_cold_dead_hands_-_speech_on_patriotism_freedom_and_liberty.html)

them in by referencing the loss of liberty and freedom in the US and congratulates NRA members for being the “patriots who hear the first call”. To him the gun “gives the most common man the most uncommon of freedoms” and the gun is not just a gun but instead “an extraordinary instrument that symbolizes the full measure of human dignity and liberty”.<sup>109</sup> The rhetoric used in this speech aligns with both the bridging the amplification framing techniques discussed by Gamson and Modigliani. Through amplification, SMOs play up certain beliefs, ideology, and values in order to attract members. Heston does so in this speech by playing up the core beliefs and values of many conservative Americans that owning a gun is a right. Furthermore, by appealing to the “common man” the NRA is bridging the gap between the NRA as an organization and individuals who have common concerns surrounding gun control.

Scott Melzer believes that the NRA is so powerful because they use fear tactics to generate more member support. Any time there is even discussion of moderate gun reform the NRA does not waste any time sending out mailings or writing editorials in their publications about the threat of “gun grabbers” moving to take away all guns. Fear tactics are often successful means of mobilization and through extension framing techniques, the NRA tries to connect with individuals who would otherwise be detached by making them believe that all of their core freedoms are at stake. Gerry Souter, long time NRA member and self-proclaimed “American shooter” points out that because the handgun itself is a symbol of fear all gun politics are full of fear. This fear can be seen in the numerous editorials in *Guns and Ammo* and *The American Rifleman* on latest outrages of “gun grabbing.” The cultural influence of the NRA has grown increasingly

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid



over the past thirty years because they have been able to tap into people's fears of losing their right to bear arms and have promised to safeguard this right. In the words of Melzer "the gun crusaders mission is clear: Defend gun rights. Win the culture war. Save America".<sup>110</sup> By equating guns to freedom, the NRA has a significant cultural appeal to many Americans, who feel that freedom is essential to what it means to be American.

Not only does the NRA try to win the "culture war" they have waged on pro gun control advocates, liberals, and the media by appealing to the "common" American man, but also by through efforts to demoralize and discredit the Left and the media, which they believe is controlled by liberals. For example, weeks after the Columbine High School tragedy in May 1999 Charlton Heston blamed the media for politicizing the trauma. "The dirty secret of this day," said Charlton, "is that political gain and media ratings all too often bloom on fresh graves."<sup>111</sup> Although he was not directly appealing for gun rights, by casting the media as heartless and lacking integrity he is positioning the NRA as an organization standing on the moral high ground in that situation. Heston even went as far as saying that "news anchors seek to drench their microphones with the tears of victims."<sup>112</sup> In this same speech he spoke of how opportunists wishing to "cleave the Bill of Rights" use each tragedy as an opportunity to do so. In almost every mass shooting since Columbine, the NRA's response has largely been the same- that it is a tragedy, but that gun control advocates are wrong in using tragedy for their own political agenda.

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<sup>110</sup> Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*, 59.

<sup>111</sup> Heston, Charlton. "From my cold dead hands."

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

In comparing Charlton Heston's speech after Columbine in 1999 and Wayne LaPierre's speech after the Sandy Hook shooting in December 2012, it is clear that the NRA's beliefs have become more radical since the 1990s. In 1999 the NRA supported gun free, zero tolerance gun safe schools, but in 2012 claimed "the only thing to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun".<sup>113</sup> LaPierre even went as far as calling President Obama hypocritical for protecting his children with armed secret service but not allowing children in all schools to have the same right. In 2013 LaPierre told viewers of CPAC "they call us crazy for holding fast to our belief... In their distorted view of the world they're smarter than we are... they know better than we do".<sup>114</sup> LaPierre is clearly pointing out the divide between pro gun control advocates and gun rights supporters in a classical, us vs. them dichotomy. He realizes that liberals and media may see the NRA as an organization full of radical, backwards thinking members and tries to point out the flaws in this argument. LaPierre criticizes the opposition's demonization of the NRA and is saying that they will not be silenced, no matter what. Charlton Heston reacted similarly whenever he or NRA members were criticized of being extremists. After the *LA Times* published an article calling NRA members "zealots," Heston responded, "because I support the NRA I am a zealot? Like hell. We didn't need the NRA but now we do... the

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<sup>113</sup> LaPierre, Wayne, "NRA Press Conference Speech after Newtown." December 21, 2012. *Washington Post Politics*.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/remarks-from-the-nra-press-conference-on-sandy-hook-school-shooting-delivered-on-dec-21-2012-transcript/2012/12/21/bd1841fe-4b88-11e2-a6a6-aabac85e8036\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/remarks-from-the-nra-press-conference-on-sandy-hook-school-shooting-delivered-on-dec-21-2012-transcript/2012/12/21/bd1841fe-4b88-11e2-a6a6-aabac85e8036_story.html)

<sup>114</sup> LaPierre, Wayne, "Wayne LaPierre Cpac Speech 2013," March 15, 2013. *The Huffington Post*. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/15/wayne-lapierre-cpac\\_n\\_2865004.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/15/wayne-lapierre-cpac_n_2865004.html)

right to own firearms is under attack”.<sup>115</sup> In this speech, Heston not only defended the organization and its morals, but also initiated fear tactics through strong, emotional rhetoric once again.

Glenn Utter and James True wrote that the NRA is losing its cultural influence in the US today since more of the population is concentrated in urban areas and have never seen the American frontier or experienced the “American gun culture.” However, my findings show the opposite to be true. While it is true that gun control advocates are gaining ground in the “culture war” the NRA has waged, the NRA’s foundation as a gun rights advocate has been built up for over thirty years and is showing no signs of weakness. Membership continues to rise, especially under the leadership of President Obama because people are afraid of losing their right to bear arms. Through framing techniques and powerful rhetoric the NRA feeds off of and perpetuates these fears to gain the support of millions of Americans. By comparing gun rights to freedom and positioning themselves as an organization defending individual freedom, the NRA continues to showcase their cultural influence through grassroots movements. Anytime gun control legislation is introduced, the NRA sends out legislative mailings to its members urging them to contact their Congressmen or Senator and without fail, they do. Even a former staff member of President Clinton’s administration, one of the most pro gun control administrations of all time, conceded, “ Let me make one small vote for the NRA. They’re good citizens. They call their congressmen. They write. They vote. They

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<sup>115</sup> “A Patriot at the Podium.” *NRA.org* video. <http://home.nra.org/history/video/a-patriot-at-the-podium/list/history-feature>

contribute. And they get what they want over time.”<sup>116</sup> If there is a culture war in the US today, the NRA is winning. Even though public opinion polls have showed that 92% of Americans supported background checks<sup>117</sup>, which would have been expanded under the Manchin-Toomey Amendment in April of 2013, more recent polls show that in September of 2013 only half of Americans thought gun laws should be stricter, down from 58% after Newtown.<sup>118</sup> These findings lead one to believe that although emotions are high after mass shootings, after the dust settles the majority of Americans continue to hold fast to their belief that the right to bear arms is inherent and should not be tampered with. Gun ownership may be declining in the US, but the attachment to guns that current gun owners have is not. If anything, gun owners continue to become more passionate about gun politics and will by no means give up their right to bear arms. This passion and willingness to get involved in politics at the grassroots level is the defining characteristic of NRA members and the key to their strong cultural influence in blocking gun reform. The NRA’s cultural influence translates directly into political influence at the grassroots level, which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> “A Brief History of the NRA.” *The National Rifle Association Headquarters*. Accessed March 1, 2013. <http://www.nrahq.org/history.asp>

<sup>117</sup> Edwards-Levy, Ariel, “Gun Poll: Background Checks Supported by 92% of Americans.” *The Huffington Post*. 17 January 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/17/gun-poll\\_n\\_2494513.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/17/gun-poll_n_2494513.html)

<sup>118</sup> Saad, Lydia. “Americans fault mental health system most for gun violence.” *Gallup Politics*. 20 Sept 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/164507/americans-fault-mental-health-system-gun-violence.aspx>

The NRA was created in the fabricated image of the sharpshooting, self-reliant American and has since furthered and perpetuated this fictitious American gun culture to a new extreme. By comparing guns to freedom, the organization has created an entirely new cultural paradigm that gun rights are no longer just about guns, but instead represent freedom as a whole. Americans who support gun rights must do so whole-heartedly. There is no middle ground and supporters are either all in, or they are not patriotic. Through rhetoric that feeds on emotions and manipulates fear of the average Americans, the organization continues to grow and attract millions of members. Essentially, the NRA emerged from an exaggerated US gun culture and in turn has perpetuated an even stronger and more complex gun sub culture in the US. This cultural influence does not exist independently of their political and economic influences, which allow the organization to mobilize more members more efficiently in their “fight for freedom,” but it is the foundation of their power within the United States.

### **From Humble Beginnings to a Multi-billion dollar organization: The Economic Influence of the NRA**

When the NRA was first created in 1871 its efforts were funded by the government at both the federal and state level. In 1872 the organization was only able to build a rifle range with funds from the state of New York and until World War II the organization was provided rifles at reduced or no cost from the US government.<sup>119</sup> Today, the situation is almost completely reversed since the NRA has become a self-sufficient organization that indirectly provides the government funds by giving money to various PACs and political candidates. In order to understand the economic influence of

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<sup>119</sup> Burbick, *Gun show Nation*.

the NRA it must be noted that the NRA is actually made up of four separate entities. The primary organization, the National Rifle Association of America, is a 501 (c) 4 organization, which means that they are a nonprofit organization to promote a social welfare cause.<sup>120</sup> The main 501 (c) 4 organization raises money through membership dues and donors, recruits volunteers, and raises awareness on proper gun use. Next, is the NRA-ILA or Institute for Legislative Action, which is the lobbying entity of the NRA that was founded in 1975. Full time staffs of lobbyists work for the NRA-ILA in order to support pro gun legislation and support pro gun candidates. The NRA-ILA also manages the NRA Political Action Committee, which is the main source of funding for individual candidates during elections. Finally, the two lesser known entities of the NRA are the NRA Civil Rights Defense Fund, which helps fund court cases related to the Second Amendment for those who cannot pay their bills themselves and the NRA Foundation, which supports outdoor and sportsmen's organizations and charities. While these four groups are technically separate organizations, they are all interconnected and operate under the same leadership.<sup>121</sup> The NRA-ILA and NRA PAC do the bulk of the spending and have the most economic influence in the political realm.

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<sup>120</sup> Sullivan, Sean. "What is a 501 (c)(4) anyway?" *The Washington Post*. 13 May 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/05/13/what-is-a-501c4-anyway/>

<sup>121</sup> Hickey, Walter. "How the NRA became the most powerful special interest in Washington." *Business Insider*. 12 Dec. 2012. <http://www.businessinsider.com/nra-lobbying-money-national-rifle-association-washington-2012-12#ixzz2vuH9hw7e>

In 1988 the income of the NRA was \$88 million and by 2001 this number had more than doubled to \$200 million.<sup>122</sup> Half of the NRA's income comes from membership dues and the rest from individual donors and rounding up on gun sales.<sup>123</sup> It costs \$35 a year to be a member of the NRA and lifetime memberships costs \$1,000.<sup>124</sup> Compared to the UK NRA, which charges 72 pounds per year for membership, the US NRA membership rate is much more affordable. In 2010 the IRS filings show that the total revenue of the NRA was \$227.8 million and assets worth \$163 million. The NRA Foundation had assets of \$80.4 million and the NRA-ILA spent \$9.9 million.<sup>125</sup> The NRA and NRA-ILA do the majority of their spending during election years, when they are fighting for pro gun candidates to be elected and in times when there is controversial pro or anti gun legislation developed in Congress. For this reason, this next section will examine the spending of the NRA, NRA-ILA and NRA-PAC in 2012 and 2013 since 2012 was an election year and 2013 was the year that gun reform under the S.649 Safe Communities, Safe Schools Act titled Public Safety And Second Amendment Rights Protection Act (also known as the Manchin-Toomey Amendment) was introduced.

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<sup>122</sup> Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*.

<sup>123</sup> Lee, Jack. "10 Surprising Facts About the NRA You Never Hear."

<sup>124</sup> NRA.org. *National Rifle Association*. <http://nra.org>.

<sup>125</sup> Hickey, Walter. "How the NRA became the most powerful special interest in Washington."

*The Washington Post* looked at the influence of the NRA in a recent publication “How the NRA exerts influence over Congress.”<sup>126</sup> Six graphics are used to illustrate NRA contributions to candidates (both winners and losers) of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2012.

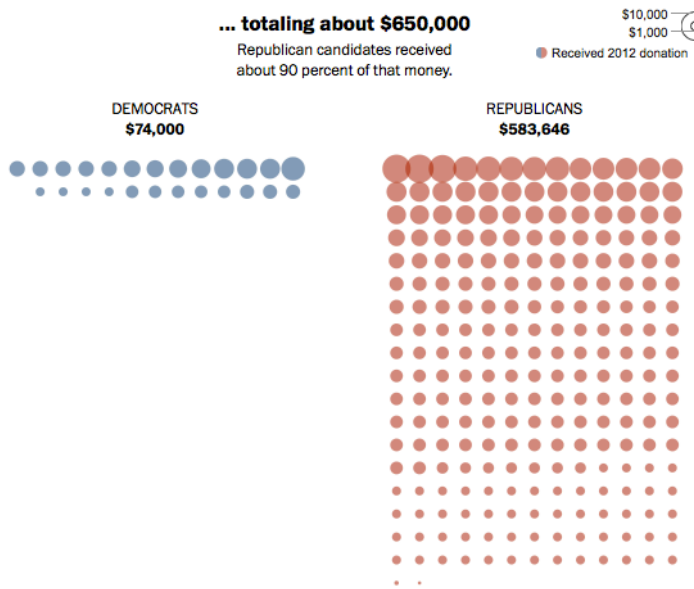


Figure 1: NRA Contributions to Candidates in 2012

According to the graphic, 261 candidates received donations in 2012, 236 of them Republicans and only 25 being Democrats. In total the NRA contributed \$650,000 to Congressional candidates and Republicans earned \$583,646 or about 90% of the money (Figure 2). Of the candidates funded by the organization, about 80% won

including 16 Democrats and 197 Republicans. This means that 213 members of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress received NRA money in 2012, which is almost 40% of the members in Congress. The organization also gave \$250,000 to the Republican Governors Association, \$41,977 to the Republican State Leadership Committee, and \$40,000 to the

<sup>126</sup> “How the NRA exerts influence over Congress.” *The Washington Post*.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/nra-congress/>



Democratic Governors Association between 2011-2012.<sup>127</sup> The top candidates receiving money from the NRA in 2012 were Jim Renacci, Stephen Fincher, Josh Mandel, Rick Berg, and Eric Cantor- all Republicans. However, Rick Berg and Josh Mandel both lost their election even with NRA support. The basis of NRA's funding is a grading or scoring system in which they give candidates a grade from an A (meaning the candidate supports gun rights) to an F (meaning the candidate is pro gun control).

According to *The Washington Post's* study, the top recipients have the highest ratings by the NRA and the highest tenure in Congress. This should come as no surprise, since it is in the organization's best interest as a single interest group to support candidates who share their same values and beliefs on gun rights. The most telling information from this data is that with NRA support, candidates were likely to be elected about 80% of the time. While this may not be true in every election cycle or every case, this is a high success rate for the organization. The success cannot be completely attributed to NRA support because variables such as incumbency, the party affiliation of the state, and who the opponent was also come in to play. However, what is clear is that the NRA spends money in order to put candidates that will support their stance on gun rights in power. Although these candidates tend to be Republicans, the NRA also supports pro gun rights Democrats like Joe Manchin, Jim Matheson, and John Dingell.

While this article shows compelling evidence that the NRA's economic influence played a role in electing members of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, this data did not include the spending and lobbying efforts of the NRA-ILA and NRA PAC during the election cycle.

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<sup>127</sup> "National Rifle Assn." *OpenSecrets.org*  
<http://www.opensecrets.org/usearch/?q=national+rifle+association&cx=010677907462955562473%3Anlldkv0jvam&cof=FORID%3A11>

According to Opensecrets.org the NRA PAC was only 63% successful in general election spending for the 2012 election. \$43,973 was spent supporting 28 candidates who won, \$40,973 was spent opposing 6 candidates who lost and in total \$11.1 million was spent by the PAC for the 2012 federal elections.<sup>128</sup> This may seem like drastically different information than given by *The Washington Post* article, but much of the gap comes from only looking at spending for Congressional candidates and not the presidential election. The NRA PAC spent \$7 million opposing Barack Obama and \$1.8 million supporting Mitt Romney. The NRA PAC also spent a little under \$7 million against Barack Obama in 2008. Since Barack Obama won both elections, in this respect the NRA was not successful in garnering enough support for the Republican presidential candidates in 2008 and 2012. However, they were still very successful by helping to elect over half of the Congressional candidates they supported in 2012.

While the NRA spent \$1.5 million on contributions to candidates and leadership PACs in 2012 (not the NRA-ILA or NRA-PAC)<sup>129</sup> this spending is only a fraction of their average annual spending on lobbying efforts. In 2013 alone the NRA spent \$3,410,000 on lobbying efforts.<sup>130</sup> This was nearly half a million more than lobbying spending in 2012, most likely because of increased lobbying efforts surrounding the amendment of bill S.649 Safe Communities, Safe Schools Act titled Public Safety And Second Amendment Rights Protection Act (also known as the Manchin-Toomey Amendment) that was introduced in the Senate in April of 2013. As seen in Figure 3,

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<sup>128</sup> “National Rifle Assn.” *OpenSecrets.org*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*

since 2008- the year that President Barack Obama was elected, the NRA has increasingly spent more and more on lobbying.

**Client Profile: Summary, 2013**

**Major Political Contributor**

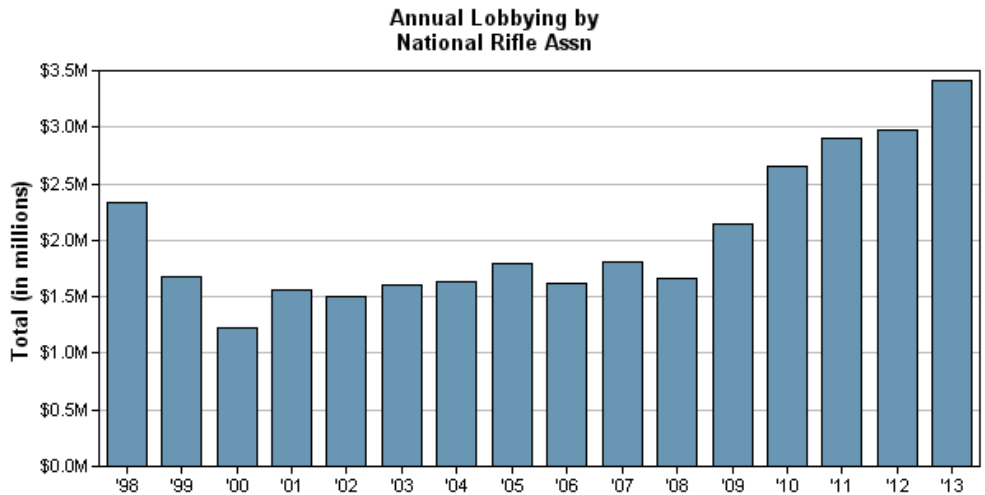


Figure 3: Annual Lobbying Spending by the NRA, *Open Secrets*

In contrast to the relatively flat spending from 2000-2008 when Republican president George W. Bush was in power, this consistent increase since 2008 is in direct correlation with the increasing threat the organization has felt.<sup>131</sup> President Obama has not been quiet about his intentions to introduce gun control, most notably after Newtown in 2012 when he gave a speech that brought him to tears pledging to follow through on his intentions to enforce more regulations on firearm ownership. However, before 2012 President Obama did not persistently try to enforce gun control legislation and much of the increase in lobbying was more out of fear that the NRA created since a Democratic president was in power and was sure to be a “gun grabber.”

<sup>131</sup> Melzer, *Gun Crusaders*.

Certainly \$3.4 million spent on lobbying in 2013 and \$11 million spent on the 2012 federal election are large sums, but in contrast to other lobbying groups, the NRA is not the biggest spender. For example, lobbying groups within industries like technology, mining, and defense consistently spend more than the NRA on lobbying and in contributions to candidates. In 2013 alone Microsoft Corporation spent just almost \$10.5 million in lobbying, almost triple that spent by the NRA. In 2012 Boeing spent \$15.6 million in lobbying, which is five times the amount spent by the NRA the same year.<sup>132</sup> However, the Boeing PAC spent a little over \$2 million in the 2012 general election, which is five times smaller than the \$11 spent by the NRA PAC. This data demonstrates that the economic influence of the NRA and NRA-ILA is limited compared to other lobbying organizations in Washington, but the economic influence of the NRA-PAC is large in comparison to other lobbying organizations. Essentially, the NRA spends a lot more on federal elections than on lobbying, especially during presidential elections.

In 2012, Paul Waldman- author for the *American Prospect*, argued that the NRA's dominance is a myth, especially in terms of election spending. After assembling a database that covered the federal elections in 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010 Waldman argues "the NRA has virtually no impact on congressional elections".<sup>133</sup> Since the NRA spreads its money out across so many races for so many candidates, he argues that their

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<sup>132</sup> "Boeing Co." OpenSecrets.org.

<http://www.opensecrets.org/usearch/?q=boeing&cx=010677907462955562473%3Anlldkv0jvam&cof=FORID%3A11>

<sup>133</sup> Waldman, Paul. "The Myth of NRA Dominance Part 1: The NRA's Ineffective Spending." *Think Progress*. 9 February 2012.  
<http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2012/02/09/421893/the-myth-of-nra-dominance-part-i-the-nras-ineffective-spending/#>

endorsements and impact on elections is almost zero. The median NRA contribution for a House candidate is \$2,500, which represents only .2-.3% of the candidates' total spending. Waldman also examined races where the NRA spent over \$100,000 and found that their favored candidate won 10 times and lost 12 times. Even in races where the NRA's candidate won, like the 2010 Pennsylvania Senate race between Pat Toomey and Joe Sestak, where Republican Pat Toomey emerged victorious, the NRA's money only accounted for less than 3% of the total spent during the race.<sup>134</sup> Although the NRA backed candidate won, the organization cannot be completely credited for that win. Waldman also points out that the majority of NRA contributions go to Republican incumbents in states where they are likely to win anyways with or without the NRA's support. According to Waldman, "Despite what the NRA has long claimed, it neither delivered Congress to the Republican party in 1994 nor delivered the White House to George W. Bush in 2000".<sup>135</sup> The NRA may have supported these candidates, but their contributions alone did not elect them, nor did they play the biggest role in their elections, which is what the organization wants people to believe.

It is clear that although the NRA may not be the wealthiest lobbying organization or biggest spender on Washington, they do wield a substantial economic influence. Whether or not their spending actually impacts the outcome of elections is up for debate, but regardless they are a "heavy hitter" in Washington. This economic influence seems even larger in comparison to the economic position of pro gun control SMOs. Even the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, which is by far the largest and most

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid

<sup>135</sup> Ibid

influential gun control organization, spent only \$250,000 in lobbying in 2013, which is a mere 7% of the \$3.4 million spent by the NRA-ILA. In 2012 the Brady PAC only spent \$4,018 in contributions to federal candidates, which is almost nothing compared to the \$11 million spent by the NRA PAC. In terms of resource mobilization, it is obvious that the NRA is leading gun control SMOs like the Brady Campaign by a substantial amount in economic resources, which in turn has helped cement their cultural and political influence as well. However, in recent years the economic influence of gun control SMOs had been increasing. Mayors Against Illegal Guns, an SMO controlled by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg spent \$1.7 million on lobbying in 2013. Although this is still half the amount spent by the NRA in the same year, it is a sharp increase from the \$200,000 spent in 2012. Economically speaking, gun control SMOs are catching up and closing the resource gap between the gun rights SMI and gun control SMI.

Compared to the United Kingdom, money plays a much larger role in United States' politics, especially during elections. In the United Kingdom, election spending is capped at 10,000 pounds (the equivalent of about \$16,600) while candidates typically spend millions of dollars on campaigns in the US. Because of the larger role that money plays in elections, it is easier for lobbyist groups, like the NRA, to have an influence in who gets elected through TV advertisements and political attack ads. By only supporting candidates who are pro gun and have a high ranking according to their A-F system, the US NRA plays an exponentially larger role in United States politics than the UK NRA and any other pro gun SMO plays in the United Kingdom. This difference is one variable that prevented gun reform in the US in 2013 but not in the UK in 1996, but alone does

not explain everything. The next section will explore the political influence of the NRA, which as was demonstrated in this section is inter-connected with its economic influence.

### **Special Interest Politics and the Political Influence of the NRA**

When examining the political influence of the NRA in the United States, there are two separate factors to take into account. The first is the political system of the United States government, which the NRA has no control over. Because of the unique political system in the United States, all SMOs and special interest groups, not just the NRA, have more ability to sway policy than in other countries like the United Kingdom because they have more access to politicians at various levels of government. Next, there is the political influence that is unique to the NRA within the United States. This political influence is largely gained at the grassroots level through outside lobbying. Although the NRA has a reputation for being the most powerful lobbying organization in the US, the majority of their power comes from members and constituents at the grassroots level. This is not to say that they have no inside lobbying power, because there is no question that NRA members yield a certain amount of influence in not only passing or blocking gun policy, but also in developing it. This section is intended to demonstrate that in comparison to the United Kingdom, the political power of the NRA is much greater than that of its UK equivalent. However, within the United States, the political power of the NRA is almost entirely dependent on its strong cultural influence and also relies heavily on its economic influence.

Although the United States has some of the strictest lobbying rules in the world, lobbying organizations in the United States are more powerful than in many other countries, including the United Kingdom. One reason for this is that the federalist

government structure in the United States, which shares power between the federal government and states allows for more access points for lobbyists than the parliamentary system that exists in the United Kingdom. Since legislation can be implemented at either level, lobbyists have the ability to influence not only the federal government, but state governments as well. The United States' political system also favors the development and persistence of private groups and SMOs because of fragmented governmental structures, robust societal structures, and numerous policy networks.<sup>136</sup> For example, because power is separated between the legislative and executive branches at both the federal and state level this allows lobbying groups like the NRA-ILA to lobby at multiple levels and increases their likelihood of affecting policy. The societal structure of the US allows NGOs and SMOs to prosper and affect policy because of the emphasis on individual freedoms over state power. This principle is illustrated by the NRA, which started as an NGO, and now includes a lobbying branch that can directly affect gun policy. A policy network has been created of similar minded gun rights SMOs and special interest groups and other groups like Gun Owners of America have often influenced the NRA.

By definition, the United States is a constitutional republic, which means that the people hold the power and officials are elected to represent the people. Under this logic, if individuals are able to organize and voice their opinions to their representatives, their representatives are obligated to listen and vote accordingly. Whether or not they will vote according to what constituents want is a different matter, which political science

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<sup>136</sup> Hook, Steven. *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Washington DC: CQ Press, 2011.

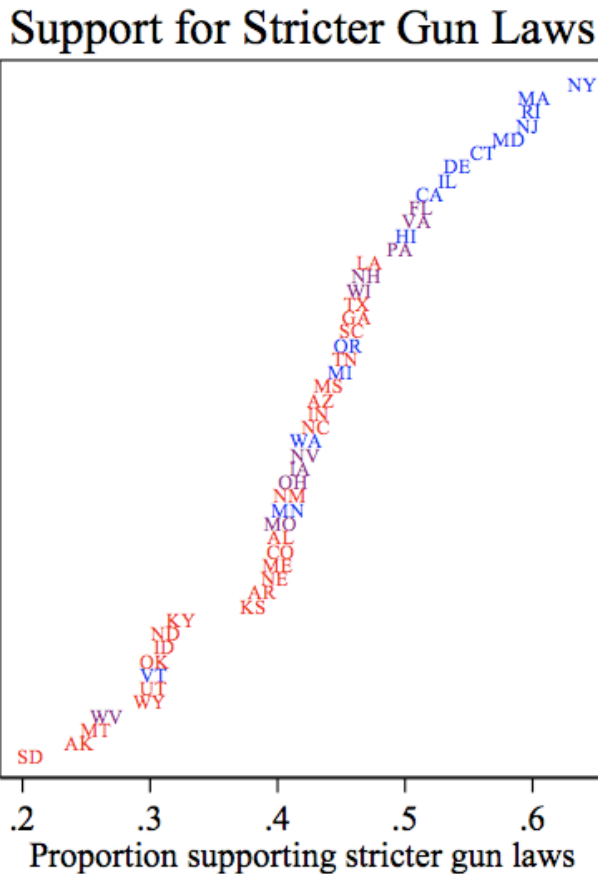


professor Michele Swers calls the trustee vs. delegate problem.<sup>137</sup> Under a delegate system, representatives must vote for what the majority of constituents want, whether or not they agree (James Mill). In contrast under a trustee system, the representative may take the constituent's' opinions into account but will ultimately use their own judgment

when voting (Edmund Burke).

Like most models, neither model represents the entire picture of voting in the United States. Both the trustee and delegate model are followed depending on the representative, the issue, and the state.

This problem can be addressed by looking at public opinion polls and comparing them to how representatives voted, which is exactly what John Sides did in the article,



Source: Based on 54,451 interviews from 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

Red: No senators supported weapons ban. Blue: Both senators supported ban. Purple: Split.

Figure 4: Support for Stricter Gun Laws and Votes for and Against the Assault Weapons Ban in 2013

“Public Opinion and the Senate Votes on Gun Control” in *Legislative Politics* that

<sup>137</sup> Baum, Caroline. “If We Elect Them, Do they have to listen to us?” *Bloomberg.com*. 7 Nov 2012. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-11-07/if-we-elect-them-do-they-have-to-listen-to-us-.html>

studied the Senate votes on the assault weapons ban introduced by Dianne Feinstein voted on in April 2013.<sup>138</sup> The research found that representatives did in fact listen to what constituents wanted, which demonstrates that any inside lobbying efforts the NRA may have done in the Senate had no influence. Figure 4 shows how the proportion of each state's population who supported stricter gun laws in a nation-wide survey on the bottom axis correlates with how the state senators voted. If the state initials are red, that means both senators voted no, if it is purple that means the vote was split, and if the initials are blue that means both senators voted yes. There is a clear correlation between states with a low proportion of support for the law voting no and states with a high proportion of support voting yes. Most purple states lie where the proportion of the population supporting stricter gun laws was around 40% or 50%, which can be expected. In each state where a majority favored stricter gun laws at least one senator voted for the ban. These findings lead one to believe that even though Senator Feinstein blamed the NRA for the assault ban failing, Senators voted according to what their constituents wanted. This data is somewhat problematic because the survey results were taken before Newtown in 2012 but Senators voted on the assault weapon ban in 2013. However, in a Gallup poll taken in 2013 after Newtown, it was found that 51% of Americans were still against an assault weapons ban.<sup>139</sup> Lydia Saad, Gallup reporter found that although more

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<sup>138</sup> Sides, John. "Public Opinion and the Senate Votes on Gun Control."

*TheMonkeyCage.org*. 18 April 2013.

<http://themonkeycage.org/2013/04/18/public-opinion-and-the-senate-votes-on-gun-control/>

<sup>139</sup> Saad, Lydia. "Americans fault mental health system most for gun violence."

Americans supported gun sale laws after Newtown, the majority of citizens still oppose bans, which explains the votes against an assault weapons ban.

When conducting a search for “gun and control” on Congress.gov from 1997-2014, 698 bills show up. Of these 698 that were introduced, 438 were moved into Committee consideration, 177 were put into floor consideration, 3 failed on chamber, 145 passed one chamber, 75 passed both chambers, 66 were resolving differences, 63 were sent to the president, and 6 were vetoed- leading to only 58 becoming law. Of these laws, four were actually pro gun and loosened current gun laws and only fourteen actually tightened restrictions on firearms ownership.<sup>140</sup> These bills and amendments were all very moderate like the Court Security Improvement Act in 2007, which offered stricter security in US courts. One of the trends in gun legislation is that over time multiple efforts at Child Safety and Anti Gun Trafficking laws as well as closing the “gun show loophole” by requiring background checks at gun shows have been introduced but never passed. When searching “firearms and restrictions” 877 introduced bills show up, 593 which were put into Committee consideration, 313 into floor consideration, one failed one chamber, 264 passed one chamber, 153 passed both chambers, 130 resolving differences, 136 to president, ten vetoed, and 129 that became law. However, when looking at these laws, many do not actually pertain to firearms restrictions and of those that do, the restrictions are very moderate. No real change has happened in gun laws since 1997 and although 129 laws relating to firearms restrictions may have been passed, the majority of these have only put into place very minor changes.

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<sup>140</sup> Congress.gov. *Library of Congress*. <http://beta.congress.gov/>

David Kopel points out that the NRA is able to have the largest amount of political influence when the Republican Party is the majority in Congress.<sup>141</sup> This is because they are then able to appoint the Committee heads that can either help move a bill forward or let it die. 95% of all proposed legislation begins and dies in committees<sup>142</sup> and as the evidence shows, this is also true for most gun reform legislation. This is made possible when Republicans who are against any gun control are in charge of these committees and have the ability to block legislation from passing to the next stage. Since Republicans have controlled the House the past seven of nine Congresses since 1997 and the Senate half the time, this could indeed have had a big impact on gun reform. The biggest thing that has been done at the federal level in relation to gun control since 1996 was President Obama's lifting of the ban on funding gun violence research in January of 2013. Although the NRA fought the lift, the CDC conducted a study on gun violence in the US, which was released in August of 2013. Nevertheless, this alone though cannot be considered gun reform, because no restrictions were tightened on the ownership of firearms.

The United States Congress is divided into two separate bodies: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Although the number representatives in the House are elected according to their state's population, each state has two senators. This is problematic when trying to implement gun legislation in the Senate, because less populated conservative states like Montana and Wyoming have the same amount of power as heavily populated liberal states like California and New York. Therefore, their

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<sup>141</sup> Kopel, *The samurai, the mountie, and the cowboy*, 86.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

votes count just as much as votes in higher populated states, even when the majority of the US population is concentrated in urban areas, not rural towns. This imbalance of power is especially important when examining legislation introduced in the Senate, like the Manchin-Toomey Amendment in 2013.

The most recent well-known attempt at gun reform was introduced in the Senate in April 2013 under Amendment S.649, which would amend the Safe Communities, Safe Schools Act, titled Public Safety And Second Amendment Rights Protection Act (also known as the Manchin-Toomey Amendment). The shortened description of the bill given on Congress.gov reads “To protect Second Amendment rights, ensure that all individuals who should be prohibited from buying a firearm are listed in the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, and provide a responsible and consistent background check process”.<sup>143</sup> The bill was sponsored by Democratic Senator Joe Manchin and Republican Senator Pat Toomey and was supposed to be a bi-partisan compromise at reforming gun laws without infringing on the Second Amendment. So why didn't it pass?

After the Sandy Hook shooting in December 2012 even NRA endorsed Senator Joe Manchin decided that more federal gun restrictions needed to be put in place. With the help of the NRA-ILA and Senator Pat Toomey, the Public Safety and Second Amendment Rights Protection Act was drafted. However, after being accused by other gun rights groups as being “too soft” on gun legislation and caving in to the liberal point of view, the NRA decided that they no longer supported the Manchin Toomey

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<sup>143</sup> Congress.gov. *Library of Congress*.

Amendment. In fact, the NRA was initially involved in the drafting of the Manchin-Toomey Amendment in 2013 and would have been behind it, if it hadn't been for the criticism of even more conservative gun rights groups. Joe Manchin, an NRA "A" rated Democrat, involved the group in developing the legislation and even re-defined the legal definition of a gun show, in order to please the NRA. However, in late March the vice president of the National Association for Gun Rights sent a mass email declaring that Joe Manchin and NRA officials were bargaining to "sell our gun rights."<sup>144</sup> Fearful of having their name thrown in on any legislation restricting firearms ownership, the NRA flipped their position to one of support, to one of staunch disapproval. After this decision a mass mailing was sent out declaring that

"We need a serious and meaningful solution that addresses crime in cities like Chicago, addresses mental health deficiencies, while at the same time protecting the rights of those of us who are not a danger to anyone. President Obama should be as committed to dealing with the gang problem that is tormenting honest people in his hometown as he is to blaming law-abiding gun owners for the acts of psychopathic murderers."<sup>145</sup>

The mailings also included strongly worded language implying that the Manchin Toomey Amendment would prohibit transfers of firearms between family members, which was false. Because of this, thousands of NRA members called and wrote to their representatives telling them to vote no. Senators in purple states who were on the fence then had no choice but to vote down the bill, even though they may have supported the

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<sup>144</sup> Draper, Robert. "Inside the Power of the NRA." *The New York Times*. 12 December 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/magazine/inside-the-power-of-the-nra.html?pagewanted=3&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/magazine/inside-the-power-of-the-nra.html?pagewanted=3&_r=0)

<sup>145</sup> "NRA to Oppose the Manchin/Toomey bill on background checks." Hot Air. 10 April 2013. <http://hotair.com/archives/2013/04/10/nra-to-oppose-manchintoomey-bill-on-background-checks/>

measure. Under Manchin Toomey background checks would have been expanded to gun shows and the Internet, but not to transfers between friends and family. Overall, the bill was very watered down than what many gun control supporters would have wanted, but the NRA was able to persuade voters that even it was too far and would take rights away from “law abiding gun owners” because of “psychopathic murders”.

The bill needed 60 votes to pass the Senate, but fell six votes short. Democrats who voted no include Max Baucus from Montana, Mark Begich from Alaska, Heidi Heitkamp from North Dakota, Mark Pryor from Arizona, and Harry Reid from Nevada. As the Majority party leader, Senator Reid only voted no in order to bring the bill back into reconsideration in the future. The other Democratic senators who voted no live in states where the majority of constituents are very pro gun (Figure 4). The failure of Manchin-Toomey is a perfect representation of how the cultural influence of the NRA drives their political influence. Because the NRA was called soft on gun rights by another gun rights SMO, which would damage their reputation and cause them to lose support from its members who have formed a collective identity surrounded by protecting the Second Amendment at all costs, they switched their stance on the amendment. Not only did they no longer support the Amendment, but actively persuaded voters to urge their representatives to vote against it. Through strongly worded mailings appealing to the emotions of its members, the NRA once again created an “us” vs. “them” dichotomy between Democrats and “gun grabbers” and conservatives fighting as “gun crusaders.” Through carefully crafted rhetoric, the NRA convinced voters that Manchin Toomey was the first step towards a seizure of all handguns from law abiding citizens even though this was far from the truth. Once the bill was associated with President Obama and liberals

instead of as a compromise between gun rights and gun control advocates, it lost all chances of being passed. Conservatives and liberals who were on the fence had no choice but to listen to their constituents, who overwhelmingly said no in all red states except for John McCain of Arizona.

*Open Secrets* shows that money went to several representatives who voted no on the Manchin-Toomey Amendment, which led some to directly associate the NRA's economic influence to the failure of the amendment. Most notably Democrat Max Baucus received \$7,950 from the NRA PAC in 2012 and voted no on the Amendment. However, because Baucus lives in a very pro-gun state (Montana) one cannot say that it was the NRA's money that swayed his vote. Furthermore, many representatives who were given money by the NRA in the 2012 election cycle like Joe Donnelly, Mark Udall, John McCain, Kay Hagan, and others voted yes on the Amendment. In this case, it cannot be concluded without doubt that the NRA's inside political influence led to the failure of the Manchin-Toomey Amendment. Instead, it is clear that by mobilizing support from thousands of voters, their outside lobbying efforts were much stronger and it was these efforts which led the bill to be voted down by only six votes. Also, there is a strong likelihood that Senators on the fence did not want to vote no and risk being graded badly by the NRA when they were facing an upcoming election in 2014. These senators include Mark Begich, Mark Pryor, and Max Baucus, all Democrat Senators in typically red states who voted no. Although it cannot be proved directly that these candidates voted no in order to avoid NRA attacks in the next election, this is a likely conclusion. More recently, the NRA is showing its inside political influence by attempting to block President Obama's nominee for US surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, who has expressed public



support for gun safety measures from a public health perspective. This does not sit well with the NRA so they have threatened to score Congress' confirmation votes, like they do with all gun legislation. In other words, any member of Congress who votes for Murthy will be given an F by the organization on the vote. This threat may be enough to sway Congress members who are facing an upcoming election in November like Democrats Mark Begich, Kay Hagen, Mark Udall, Mark Pryor, and several others.<sup>146</sup>

From this data it is clear that most of the NRA's political influence lies in fear tactics and the constant threat of Congress members losing their seats. Whether or not this fear is real or perceived is another matter. Again going back to the study done by Paul Waldman showing that NRA money alone does not in fact influence the outcome of an election one would conclude that most of the NRA's inside political influence is imagined and exaggerated. However, when one thinks back to cases like Pat Toomey's defeat of Jim Sestak in 2011, it is easy to see why members of Congress feel the pressure to not go against the organization. Even if the NRA was not the biggest influence in that election, it was perceived that their power elected Toomey and defeated Sestak. Especially in states that have recently become blue or purple like Montana, Alaska, North Carolina, and Arkansas it is not a mystery why Senators like Max Baucus, Mark Begich, and Mark Pryor would be afraid to vote against the NRA. Without a foundation of liberal values, there is simply not enough support in these states for gun control measures and

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<sup>146</sup> Castillo, Dava. "NRA blocking Obama's nominee for US surgeon general." *All Voices*. 27 March 2014. <http://www.allvoices.com/contributed-news/16785105-the-national-rifle-association-is-blocking-obamas-nominee-for-us-surgeon-general>

even if the Senators themselves are liberal, they do not have the means to go against the NRA. Going against the NRA on any vote would mean thousands would be spent against them in political attack ads and that is a risk that these Senators are not willing to take.

Although the NRA does have inside political influence through threats and fear tactics, the majority of their real political influence is held almost entirely in outside lobbying and at the state level. Most recently, the NRA has been credited for recalling two Democratic Colorado State Senators in September of 2013 after the Senators supported state level gun restrictions. The restrictions required background checks for all private gun sales and limited ammunition magazines to 15 rounds.<sup>147</sup> Angela Giron of Pueblo and John Morse of Colorado Springs were recalled and Democrat Evie Hedak resigned before she was also voted out of office. Both Pueblo and Colorado Springs are more conservative areas in Colorado and the NRA was able to organize its members at the grassroots levels to recall the state senators. This recall election is a prime example of the conflict between the NRA as the primary gun rights SMO and Mayors Against Illegal Guns as the primary gun control SMO. \$3 million was raised to defend Morse and Giron and Mayor Bloomberg personally gave \$350,000, but in the end it was not enough. The NRA contributed \$362,000 to recall efforts and helped organize citizens at the grassroots level through mailings and donations. Thousands of citizens worked together to sign petitions needed to recall Giron and Morse and also organized several protests. In the end although the SMOs supporting Giron and Morse spent almost six times as much, it was not enough to sway the conservative leaning constituents in Pueblo and Colorado

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<sup>147</sup> Healy, Jack. "Colorado Lawmakers ousted in recall vote over gun law." *The New York Times*. 11 September 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/us/colorado-lawmaker-concedes-defeat-in-recall-over-gun-law.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/us/colorado-lawmaker-concedes-defeat-in-recall-over-gun-law.html?_r=0)

Springs.<sup>148</sup> In this case, it was clearly not the economic influence of the NRA that triumphed, but instead their appeal to the cultural and political beliefs of the Coloradan constituents. The NRA is often able to attract single issue voters while gun control SMOs are not as successful in doing so. Other notable political successes by the NRA have mostly been at the state level: for example, passing concealed carry laws in all fifty states<sup>149</sup> or enacting gun laws expanding gun rights in twenty-one states in the past year.<sup>150</sup>

The NRA does have access to Congressmen in Washington through the ILA, but this is not where most of their political influence comes from. Instead, the organization has perfected its strategy to influence voters through mass mailings, advertisements, and grassroots gatherings. It helps that they have the ability to campaign for pro gun candidates in elections, but even when NRA endorsed candidates have not had the majority in Congress, gun control legislation has not passed. Because the NRA can appeal to single-issue voters better than gun control SMOs through the mobilization of political, economic, and cultural resources, they have exercised their power and blocked gun reform from occurring from 1996-2014.

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<sup>148</sup> Weber, Joseph. "Colorado state senators recalled over gun control support." *FoxNews.com*. 11 September 2013.  
<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/09/11/colorado-dems-face-historic-recall-over-gun-votes/>

<sup>149</sup> McCarthy, Ciara. "Concealed carry is no legal in all 50 states, and the NRA doesn't want us to know what that really means." *Slate.com/blogs*. 11 July 2013.  
[http://www.slate.com/blogs/crime/2013/07/11/illinois\\_concealed\\_carry\\_carrying\\_guns\\_in\\_public\\_is\\_legal\\_in\\_all\\_50\\_states.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/crime/2013/07/11/illinois_concealed_carry_carrying_guns_in_public_is_legal_in_all_50_states.html)

<sup>150</sup> Friedersdorf, Conor. "The NRA wins again." *The Atlantic*. 28 March 2014.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/the-nra-wins-again/359760/>

## Conclusion

It is not just the American gun culture preventing gun reform from taking place in the United States. Although the gun culture has a strong impact on the lives of Americans and firearms legislation, most of the population is now concentrated in urban areas and see guns as more of a threat than a freedom. So what else is at work? The unique gun culture in the United States may have created the NRA, but through perpetuating this mythical and romanticized gun culture even in an age where most citizens live in urban areas, they have attracted millions of followers that are even more attached to these beliefs. The cultural influence of the NRA lays the foundation for both its political and economic influences, because without a distinct collective identity centered around conservative beliefs and an attachment to guns, the organization would not be able to attract the five million members it has today. These members provide the NRA with the majority of its funds, which it then uses to lobby, and influence elections through campaign spending. Though, the extent to which the NRA actually influences elections is debatable and often over-stated. What is not debatable is the immense power of the group at the grassroots level. Even when the organization is outnumbered, the passion and fervor of its members make almost anything possible- including voting down even moderate attempts at gun reform. Essentially, gun reform has not occurred in the US from 1996-2014 because the NRA's strong cultural influence has allowed them to mobilize millions of Americans to act both economically and politically against any and all gun reform. Many believe that the power of the NRA comes from the NRA-ILA within Congress, but this is only one small piece of the puzzle that is inflated. Without support at the state level from millions of voters through the creation of a collective identity

centered solely around the fight for the Second Amendment, the NRA would not be the political and economic giant that it is today in the United States. Gun control SMOs like Mayors Against Illegal Guns and the Brady Campaign may be catching up politically and economically, but there is nothing that they can do to shake the immeasurable cultural influence of the NRA and its members. There is a culture war in the United States today and guns have taken center stage in this fight.

According to the NRA's website, the "NRA was founded in 1871 with the intention of teaching marksmanship and gun handling to the American people. The necessity to get involved in politics was a relatively recent one, and came from the unreasonable pushes of gun control activists".<sup>151</sup> However, the threat of losing gun rights in the United States is very unlikely since the majority of Americans do not support any type of weapons bans and less than half support stricter gun laws. On the other hand, the NRA in the United Kingdom never changed its focus from an organization supporting marksmanship and shooting sports, even when the possibility of losing gun rights became very real. Why is that? Simply put, the strong attachment that Americans have to guns, which does not exist in the United Kingdom or other industrialized countries, makes any type of gun reform almost impossible. Even when the majority of the public has supported expanding background checks and other moderate attempts at reform, gun rights SMOs like the NRA have used their cultural influence and exaggerated rhetoric to make citizens believe that any gun restrictions will turn into a complete seizure of all guns. Because of this cultural influence, the NRA has had the ability to be one of the most successful lobbying organizations at the grassroots level through outside lobbying. The NRA also has strong

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<sup>151</sup> NRA.org. *National Rifle Association*. <http://nra.org>.

economic and political influences, which are inter-connected, but without the “gun culture” that has developed in the American psyche and has been perpetuated by the group, their impact would not be anything close to the magnitude it is today. The recent recall in Colorado demonstrates that even when they are outspent, the NRA still has the potential to win the culture conflict between gun rights and gun control advocates.

This research is far from all encompassing of the gun debate and entire books can be written on any one of the sections in this paper. Further research needs to be done on the power of the NRA in order to solidify the connection between the NRA and the lack of gun reform in the US. Access to voting records on all firearms legislation by every senator and representative as well as complete access to all NRA mailings and legislative alerts would help solidify the connection between the cultural, political, and economic influence of the NRA, but unfortunately I was not able to obtain access to NRA mailings. It would be interesting to see public opinion polls taken before and after NRA mailings were sent out to see how these legislative alerts affected public opinion on firearms legislation. Also, as Paul Waldman did in his study, it would be helpful to gather a database of all NRA campaign contributions and whether their candidate won or lost from every year since 1996 to further analyze whether or not the NRA’s economic influence does translate into political influence or not. Despite these limitations, my findings have shown a clear connection between NRA power and a lack of gun reform since 1996. This power lies in a strong cultural foundation that is proved through the organization’s rhetoric and this foundation directly impacts its political and economic influences. It is dangerous to demonize the NRA for being a powerful political and economic giant monopolizing gun politics, when in reality it has a large support base in

the US, which stems from the mythical American gun culture. NRA members are not “gun nuts,” they are ordinary citizens who believe that owning a gun is a basic right, and to take it away would be to infringe on their freedom.

David Kopel, author of *The Samurai, the Mountie, and the Cowboy* argues that gun laws alone are not enough to stop gun violence. He believes that the industrialized countries with the least amounts of violence like the United Kingdom and Switzerland also have social control that is lacking in the United States. In the United Kingdom even when gun laws were almost non-existent, the incidence of gun violence was still very low compared to that of the United States. That is because individuals are raised with a greater sense of social responsibility and would never dream of taking matters into their own hands to protect themselves. Even police there are not armed, because there is little need. So what can we learn from all of this? Kopel argues that before the US should restrict or ban handgun ownership they should first fix the issues that lead to violence in the first place such as racism and urbanization. Although I do agree, I think it is necessary for the United States to place some moderate restrictions on gun ownership, starting with expanding background checks to gun shows. Osha Gray Davidson agrees that harsher gun laws will not stop violence and deaths from occurring at the level that they do today in the US, but he does not think that gun control is merely a “Band-Aid for deeper social ills”<sup>152</sup> like the NRA and other gun rights SMOs claim. The Manchin-Toomey Amendment, which was intended to be a compromise between gun rights and gun control advocates should have passed and the fact that it didn’t has global implications. What does it say to the rest of the world that the United States government and firearms SMOs

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<sup>152</sup> Davidson, *Under fire the NRA and the battle for gun control*, 316.

cannot compromise at all? This paints a poor picture of the country to the rest of the world, especially in countries like the United Kingdom that implemented federal gun reform quickly and painlessly. This is not to say that all handguns should be banned- like they virtually are in the UK, because that will never be a possibility or never should be in the US where guns are a symbol of freedom to many. The biggest problem confronting both sides of the gun debate today is that the gun rights and gun control social movement industries are so polarized and have created collective identities that are so starkly contrasting, that any attempt at legislation is met with attacks. Compromise of any sort has not worked, as demonstrated by the failure of the Manchin Toomey amendment in early 2013 even after emotions were high after Sandy Hook in 2012.

There is a culture war in the United States today and the National Rifle Association is at its forefront, as the face of the gun rights social movement industry. Through rhetoric, which appeals to the individualism that is inherent to American culture, a large amount of money at their disposal, and political access not only to representatives, but also more importantly to concerned voters, the NRA is winning this war. Gun reform has not been passed from 1996-2014 in the United States because the NRA has successfully mobilized its cultural, political, and economic resources more effectively than its gun control opponents. If anything is going to change, gun control SMOs must gain a larger base at the grassroots level that can match the passion of gun rights advocates. Gun reform is not the end all answer to all violent crime in the United States, but it is a start to addressing the hundreds of lives that are taken each day in the United States by firearms.



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