The Political Weaponization of Gun Owners:
The NRA's Cultivation, Dissemination, and Use of a Group Social Identity

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Abstract: There is substantial evidence indicating that the NRA’s political influence is closely tied to the deep political engagement of the minority of Americans who oppose strict gun control laws. This explanation of the NRA’s influence, however, raises its own questions; namely, why are gun owners so devoted to their cause and why is the NRA so effective at mobilizing them? I argue that an important cause of the political activity of gun owners is the NRA’s long-term cultivation, dissemination, and utilization of a distinct, politicized gun owner social identity. A wide-range of evidence covering nearly nine decades is marshaled to document (1) how the NRA has used its membership communications and programs to advance a collective identity, (2) that this identity has taken hold among gun owners, and (3) that NRA appeals to the identity have led to widespread mobilization that has had important policy consequences.

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Despite internationally exceptional rates of gun violence and strong public support for stricter rules, firearm regulations in the U.S. remain comparatively weak (Lupkin 2013; Parker et al. 2017). This puzzling outcome is commonly attributed to the political influence of the National Rifle Association (NRA). Yet the source of this prominent interest group’s political power remains something of a mystery. Theories of interest group power often emphasize the private channels through which groups exert influence – through, for example, behind-the-scenes lobbying and campaign support, regulatory sway, and so on. Influence in these models is often considered a product of the financial resources groups bring to bear on politics. To be sure, the NRA spends a substantial amount of money on (mostly GOP) electoral campaigns. But its spending, by itself, is an insufficient explanation of its clout. Upon close inspection, the NRA does not look like most interest groups that fit neatly into predominant theoretical frameworks. For example, its large mass-based membership is mostly middle-class, not wealthy; and despite its close relationship with gun manufacturers, the NRA is not dependent upon or beholden to them, or other economic elites. There is ample evidence, for example, that the NRA has more power over gun manufacturers than manufacturers have over it (Feldman 2008; Murphy 2012).

Other recent accounts, discussed below, suggest that its influence may be best understood as a function of the political involvement of its members and supporters. Indeed, these individuals – as discussed below – exhibit extremely high levels of political engagement, especially relative to gun control supporters, and their political behavior has been persuasively shown to have substantial impacts on policy outcomes (or lack thereof).

But even as these findings help explain the NRA’s influence, they raise still more questions. Why are gun owners so devoted to their cause? Why is the NRA so effective at mobilizing them? How has the NRA been able to “politically weaponize” gun owners?
In this article, I argue that the NRA has assiduously and strategically cultivated a distinct, politicized gun-owner *social identity* over the course of many years, which enables it to influence politics by mobilizing its members and other gun owners into frequent and intense political participation on its behalf. I develop this argument by analyzing two original text corpora using automated and manual methods: 79 years of (1) the NRA’s *American Rifleman* magazine and (2) letters to editors of four major U.S. newspapers about gun control. These data are complemented by original archival data and existing data on the political behavior of gun owners.

I do not claim that this is the sole explanation for the NRA’s formidable political clout, nor does the nature of this analysis enable me to make dispositive causal claims. But I do present systematic and comprehensive empirical evidence of the NRA’s long-running effort to use *ideational* resources to cultivate a *mass* channel of political influence (in contrast to more conventional *financial* resources and *private* channels), as well as evidence that it has taken hold among gun owners. These findings are difficult to square with any alternative explanation and suggest that greater attention ought to be paid to the ways in which interest groups might cultivate and exploit alternate pathways of influence that are, in a way, hidden in plain sight.

After situating this study within the existing literature and developing my theory, I document how the NRA has used both its membership communications and popular firearms programs to cultivate, spread, and politicize a distinct gun-owner social identity. A new database of gun-related letters to the editor is then used in conjunction with other data sources to demonstrate that this identity has taken hold among gun owners. Finally, I show that the NRA has successfully leveraged this identity to mobilize political action on behalf of its objectives.


Interest Group Power and the NRA

The task of identifying and explaining interest group power has presented generations of political scientists with analytical challenges, likely due to the fact that political power takes several distinct forms and is often very difficult to see (Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Moe 2005; Pierson 2016). In spite of these challenges, scholars have nonetheless produced substantial, wide-ranging insights that are far too numerous to list here. Despite the diversity of this scholarship, it has two common themes. First, it largely focuses on groups’ financial resources (e.g., Hall and Wayman 1990; Ansolabehere et al. 2003), and second, even when it does consider non-financial resources, it mostly examines what can be described as private channels of influence – influence achieved through behind-the-scenes techniques (e.g., Hansen 1991; Hall and Deardorff 2006). Research on interest groups generally finds that groups representing businesses and affluent citizens are most likely to form, maintain themselves, and exert influence (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Page and Gilens 2014).

Although financial resources and private channels are crucial – and although the NRA does, of course, make campaign contributions and engage in lobbying – these activities are not sufficient explanations of its success. First, several groups that make comparable campaign contributions (e.g., environmental groups and labor unions) do not appear to have influence comparable to the NRA’s, while groups that do seem to have comparable influence (e.g., business groups) spend much more money than the NRA on lobbying. Second, the NRA’s

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1 The NRA does spend substantial money on politics. It was a top-15 outside spending group in the 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections. From 1998-2016, its average annual lobbying expenditures were around $2.2M. However, comparable campaign contributing groups – including the League of Conservation voters and the Service Employees International Union – appear to have far less influence, and the NRA spends much less on lobbying than other influential groups, like the Chamber of Commerce, which have spent as much as $100M in a single year. Finally, the NRA spends relatively little (just over $1M in 2016) on direct contributions to candidates; it would be
influence – observed as far back as the debates over the National Firearms Act (1934) and the Federal Firearms Act (1938) – long predates its foray into political spending, which did not occur until the 1970s with the creation of its PAC and Institute for Legislative Action (Leff and Leff 1981; Spitzer 2016). And finally, gun regulation advocates have at times outspent the NRA – including following the Sandy Hook massacre, when Michael Bloomberg put his full financial weight behind gun control – but were nonetheless unable to match its influence (Draper 2013).

The case of the NRA thus suggests that alternative routes to interest group power must exist. But what might the NRA’s route to influence be? Existing accounts of key battles over gun policy indicate that a crucial factor is the political intensity of the minority of Americans who oppose gun control. This includes substantial evidence demonstrating that gun owners are much more politically engaged than gun control proponents (Grossmann 2012). They are more likely to write letters or donate money on behalf of this cause (Schuman and Presser 1981; Parker et al. 2017), more likely to join the NRA than their counterparts are to join gun control organizations (Goss 2006), and more likely to vote solely based on this issue (Aronow and Miller 2016).

And this engagement gap has had an effect on gun control policy. The impact can be seen as early as the 1930s when the NRA led a letter-writing campaign against the earliest attempt at federal gun control through impassioned appeals in the American Rifleman (NRA 1934; Kennett and Anderson 1975). This continued throughout the 20th century, including the critical 1965-1967 period, when gun owners, again encouraged by NRA clarion calls, flooded policymakers with letters opposing a strong gun control bill (S. 1592) that had been introduced. At the height of debate, the White House received 12,000 pro-gun letters in a single month. Members of Congress received thousands more; one member said he received 3,000 letters, only three of expected to spend much more on these sorts of contributions if it sought to “buy the votes” of legislators (Center for Responsive Politics n.d.).
which were supportive of the bill, and another admitted the opposition generated by the NRA caused the legislation to die before a vote (Harris 1968). Recent accounts depict the same dynamic, offering private insights from policymakers suggesting that pressure from pro-gun constituents has altered politicians’ behavior (Draper 2013). Moreover, quantitative analyses of recent periods demonstrate how an “intense minority” on gun control has caused Senators to vote against the will of an “apathetic majority” (Bouton et al. 2016).

If the NRA’s political influence is largely a product of the behavior of gun owners, the natural next question is whether and how the NRA has sought to cultivate, maintain, and harness this behavior on behalf of its policy agenda. But whereas predominant explanations of group influence fit well with what have been described as the first two faces of power – how groups prevail in open, visible political conflict and how they control the policy agenda (Dahl 1961; Bachrach and Baratz 1962) – they do not fit as well with what has been called the third face of power – the power to shape the political opinions, identities, and preferences of others (Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1982). This third dimension, which is particularly difficult to observe and measure, has understandably been given far less attention than others in the study of American politics (Pierson 2016). But despite the challenges associated with studying it, the third face may nonetheless warrant further investigation in order to understand how groups may also build influence by gradually altering mass behavior over time in less visible ways.

**Social Identities as Interest Group Resources**

To this end, I argue that the NRA uses ideational resources to build influence via mass channels. A major source of its political power is its alteration of the preferences and behavior of members of the mass public, whose political behavior, in ways just described, then affects policy outcomes. One such pathway involves the cultivation of a *group social identity* that is connected
to politics. A politicized group identity increases the political salience and intensity of opinions held among group members, making it easier to mobilize them to engage in various forms of political participation. When a particular group identity is politically salient for individuals, they view political participation as more than just expressive behavior that contributes to the advancement of particular policy preferences. Especially when they believe their group identity is threatened, they may become particularly motivated to defend their values and lifestyles; that is, to defend their very identities.

The political intensity of gun owners, I will argue, is a product of their adoption of a distinct, politicized gun-owner social identity. Moreover, I argue that the NRA – through its membership communications and firearms programs – has played a crucial role in creating this identity, disseminating it to gun owners, and connecting it to politics. Finally, I argue that NRA has utilized this identity to mobilize political action on its behalf by portraying it as under dire threat from gun control and its supporters.

*Social Identity Theory*

Previous scholarship on social identity has addressed numerous important questions across various substantive domains. It indicates that when a particular identity is politically salient for a particular group, it shapes group members’ political behavior in ways that can have profound impacts on political outcomes. Indeed, in their sweeping study of U.S. democracy, Achen and Bartels (2016) conclude that social identity is the primary driver of mass political behavior and a defining feature of American politics. Other seminal work has similarly found that social identity impacts politics by shaping issue preferences and political participation in myriad ways from voting to racial views to partisan frames to rural consciousness (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Dawson 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Cramer
2016). Despite the breadth of this scholarship, however, little is known about the connections between organized interest groups and the construction of group social identities.

Despite the lack of explicit attention to this topic, Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides insights into how groups might construct identities. It indicates that to create a group social identity an interest group would attempt to clearly distinguish group members from others based on a set of positive characteristics that apply to members and a set of negative characteristics that apply to opponents. According to SIT, individuals categorize people into groups and identify with some of those groups in order to make sense of complex social situations and reduce uncertainty (Bruner 1957; Oakes 1987; Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Further, individuals inherently desire a positive self-concept, which motivates them to psychologically emphasize positive qualities of their group’s identity (the in-group). Those positive qualities may be contrasted with negative qualities of out-groups – especially when a group feels threatened – but positive in-group feelings are generally a more prominent part of group identity than negative out-group feelings (Turner 1982; Hogg 2000b; Allport 1954; Brewer 1999; Balliet, Wu, and De Dreu 2014).

Second, after cultivating a collective identity, a group would need to politicize it – to connect it to politics and make it politically salient for members. Understanding identity salience – when and why a particular social identity is relevant – is crucial to understanding how identity shapes behavior because individuals have multiple, overlapping social identities, some of which are more important than others both generally and in a given context. Identity salience is a product of two factors: accessibility (i.e., which identities does one value and frequently employ?) and fit (which identities are relevant to the situation currently being confronted?) (Bruner 1957; Oakes 1987). After making its identity accessible by frequently emphasizing
positive in-group and negative out-group characteristics, it could make its identity fit in political contexts by framing government policies and other political contests (a) in terms of their impacts on the identity and values of the group (as opposed to their specific, technical effects) and (b) as battles between the “good” in-group and “bad” out-groups (Simon and Klandermans 2001).

Third, and finally, a group would attempt to maintain identity salience and to mobilize members into political action by portraying the identity as under constant threat from out-groups. If they believe their identity is threatened, group members will be highly motivated to take action (Ellemers 1993, Monroe et al. 2000; Nauroth et al. 2015).

**Expectations**

A number of narrower, case-specific expectations can be derived from this theoretical framework. **First**, to create a collective group identity and make that identity psychologically accessible, I expect the NRA’s communications to members to frequently emphasize a set of positive characteristics that apply to gun owners (the in-group) and a set of perceived negative qualities that apply to those who support gun control (the out-group). I expect the political discussions of gun rights supporters – as revealed in letters to newspaper editors – to use the same set of characteristics to describe the in-group and out-group. **Second**, to politicize the gun-owner identity – to make it psychologically fit in political contexts – I expect the NRA to portray the gun regulation debate as a battle between competing identities and the values associated with them. I expect gun rights supporters to use similar identity frames when discussing gun regulation, describing it in terms of its impacts on their lives and identities rather than in terms of its likelihood of achieving particular policy goals. **Third**, to more widely disseminate the identity, I expect the NRA to include politically-charged identity appeals in its firearms programs. **Fourth**, to mobilize political participation, I expect the NRA to portray the gun-owner
identity as under threat and to connect depictions of threat to explicit calls to action on its behalf. And I expect gun owners to be highly responsive to such calls.

**Data and Methods**

To assess whether the NRA has worked to cultivate and utilize a social identity along these lines, I focus, first, on what the NRA says to members. Do its appeals exhibit evidence of identity-building and identity-based political mobilization efforts? Although evidence of such appeals is necessary for my explanation to be correct, it is not sufficient. I also need evidence that gun owners have adopted this identity and that it is politically salient for them. I therefore also look at the political discussions and behaviors of people who oppose gun control, and, as a point of reference, compare them to people who support gun control.

Analysis of NRA communications focuses on editorials from the NRA’s paramount publication, the *American Rifleman*. The *Rifleman* is the NRA’s original official journal and has been published under its current name since 1923. A *Rifleman* subscription is included with membership and it has long been the primary means through which the organization communicates with members. The magazine is thus a rich data source through which to examine the NRA’s political approach over time. I created an original digital corpus of the *Rifleman*, including all issues of the monthly magazine from 1930 and 2008 – over 900 total. The magazine’s editorials appear in the first few pages of an issue, are generally authored by the NRA’s top official, and are typically the only section of the magazine in which the organization directly addresses members. Their content is thus a strong indicator of the NRA’s priorities.

Newspaper letters to the editor are used to test whether the ideas and arguments advanced by the editorials “take hold” and are subsequently deployed by the NRA’s target population of gun owners. Letters to the editor are especially useful here because they are written by the
population in which I am interested: Ordinary citizens who are politically engaged, but who are
not elites or NRA officials (who were explicitly excluded from the sample) whose public
comments might not be genuine. Their words and actions about gun control therefore likely
represent those of gun owners who participate in politics on behalf of the gun rights cause. The
following analyses include all letters pertaining to gun control from four major U.S. newspapers
covering the same period as the Rifleman corpus (1930 to 2008) – over 3,200 in total.²

These sources are complemented by original data collected from several presidential
archives, including mail statistics tallying the number of letters pertaining to gun control during
particular periods as well as which stances they took. For select periods, the archives contain
actual letters sent to presidents, a sample of which supplements analyses of letters to the editor.
Finally, existing data on the political participation of gun owners is utilized throughout.

Rifleman editorials are analyzed using automated topic modeling, more specifically the
Structural Topic Model (STM). I estimated a model³ that fits the Rifleman editorials into 6
topics.⁴ Table 1 lists each topic’s “Highest Probability” words – the words most likely to appear
within a topic – and “FREX” words, which are words that are both common and exclusive to

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² Using ProQuest databases and the newspapers’ own online archives, I searched for “(gun OR firearm) AND (law OR legislation).” In ProQuest, I limited my searches to letters to the editor. In newspapers’ archives – which lacked functionality to limit searches to particular sections of
³ I included “Year” as a “prevalence” covariate – to account for topical prevalence changing over
time – and “Author” as a “content” covariate – to account for different authors discussing the
same topics using slightly different words.
⁴ There is not a single set of criteria to use to determine a “correct” number of topics. Following
other applications, I tried specifications with more and less topics and “evaluated their semantic
coherence and exclusiveness independently from each other” (Bauer et al. 2016, 9). I also used
the STM R package’s selectModel function to confirm that the topics identified here as a whole
are not artifacts of modeling choices. Finally, I used the topicQuality function to examine the
semantic coherence of each topic; all topics scored well.
each topic. They are useful in identifying the substantive, semantic meanings of topics because they not only frequently appear in a topic but also are relatively distinct to that topic.

I also calculated the proportion of each document comprised of each topic, which enabled me to read prototypical documents for each. In table 1, the topics are labeled based on close readings of example documents and their Highest Probability and FREX words. Four of the topics, outlined in red, pertain to gun control.

The output of the topic model (discussed in greater depth in the appendix) enabled the systematic selection of a subset of documents related to gun control for closer analysis. This subset was created by adding up the proportion of each editorial comprised of the four gun control-related topics. Editorials are included in the subset if the four gun control-related topics combined comprise two thirds or more of their content; 422 (of 872) such editorials were
identified. I then manually coded these editorials, along with all of the letters to the editor, along number of dimensions, described below.  

**Identity Cultivation**

I first use the *Rifleman* editorials to assess my *first* expectation that the NRA uses its membership communications to *cultivate* a group identity. Each gun control related editorial was coded based on whether it utilizes *identity-forming language*, operationalized as the use of (1) positive characteristics to describe gun owners and/or (2) negative characteristics to describe an out-group who is perceived as a threat to gun rights.

Table 2 shows that 80% of editorials use identity-forming language of some sort, indicating that NRA editorials very frequently use language that would be expected from a group engaging in identity building.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Identity-Forming Language</th>
<th>In-Group Positive</th>
<th>Out-Group Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NRA Editorials</strong></td>
<td>80% (338/422)</td>
<td>55% (232/422)</td>
<td>66% (280/422)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pro-Gun Letters</strong></td>
<td>64% (1366/2135)</td>
<td>43% (909/2135)</td>
<td>38% (813/2135)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anti-Gun Letters</strong></td>
<td>39% (401/1018)</td>
<td>7% (71/1018)</td>
<td>36% (362/1018)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The “Identity-Forming Language” column depicts the portion of editorials or letters that discuss either in-group positive or out-group negative characteristics, or both. The “In-Group Positive” and “Out-Group Negative” are more specific and depict the extent to which each type of identity-forming language is used.

The letters to the editor were coded the same way in order to assess the extent to which a collective identity seems to exist among gun owners. As table 2 shows, a substantial 64% of pro-

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5 The codebook used for this is contained in a supplementary appendix. A research assistant coded a random sample of ten percent of the editorials to check intercoder reliability. The agreement rate was 85 percent, an impressive rate for a complex content analysis.
gun letters use identity language, a finding consistent with the existence of a gun-owner social identity. This is less than the 80% rate in NRA editorials, but such a difference is to be expected; the average letter to the editor is only 168 words compared to an average of 754 words per editorial, meaning that editorials simply allow more space for writers to exhibit particular characteristics. Moreover, given my theoretical expectation that the NRA is the driver of this identity and its targets are members of the public, its writings – the “source” of the identity – are expected to exhibit a particular characteristic at a greater rate than the writings of its “targets.”

As a point of reference, I also compare the pro-gun letters to letters written by gun control supporters; I expect gun control supporters, who presumably do not share a collective identity, to use identity-based language much less frequently. As table 2 shows, pro-gun writers do indeed use identity-based language at a substantially greater rate than anti-gun writers – 64% vs. 39%. This difference is statistically significant.

Revealingly, the second and third columns of table 2 show that pro- and anti- gun letters use negative out-group language at similar rates, but that pro-gun letters use in-group positive language far more frequently than anti-gun letters. Closer inspection reveals that the primary driver of the relatively high rates of out-group negative language in the anti-gun letters is the shared perception of a pro-gun villain: the NRA. This pattern provides additional evidence of a gun-owner social identity. Whereas pro-gun writers perceive both an “us” – an in-group – and a “them” – one or more out-groups – anti-gun writers do not share a common identity – they lack an “us” and, therefore, a relevant group identity. This finding aligns with research indicating that

\[\text{Letters from gun control supporters would obviously refer to different in-groups and out-groups than the NRA editorials and pro-gun letters. The letters of gun control supporters were coded based on whether they describe gun control supporters collectively using positive characteristic and/or gun control opponents using negative characteristics.}\]
positive feelings towards an in-group are a more prominent aspect of group attachment than negative feelings toward out-groups (Allport 1954, Brewer 1999, Balliet, Wu, De Dreu. 2014).

Notably, this finding is supported by recent public opinion polls, in which half of gun owners, as of 2017, say that owning a gun is either very or somewhat important to their overall identity, with even higher numbers among NRA members (Parker et al. 2017). Other research identifies a very strong issue identity on gun control among pro-gun Republicans; this identity predicts individual’s preferences and behavior even when controlling for party and ideology (Mason 2017). This makes sense given additional evidence that gun ownership is strongly tied to one’s social network, with ownership rates statistically significantly higher among those who are part of a “social gun culture” (Kalesan et al. 2016).

The NRA’s use of identity-forming language, however, combined with the apparent existence of a group identity among gun owners, do not by themselves demonstrate that the NRA has actually played a role in cultivating a collective identity. If the NRA is responsible for cultivating the identity that exists among gun owners, then the identity language used by pro-gun letter writers should closely align with the language used in NRA editorials. I therefore also examined the content of the editorials and letters that contain identity-based language.

In the Rifleman, in-group positive editorials describe gun owners as average citizens who obey the law and love America. The 10 most frequently used descriptors of gun owners in Rifleman editorials are: law-abiding, peaceable, patriotic, courageous, honest, average citizen(s), ordinary citizen(s), brave, freedom-loving, and reputable. At least one of these words or phrases appears in 80% of editorials that use in-group positive language.

As expected, the pro-gun letters to the editor use very similar characteristics to describe gun owners. One or more of the words in the set described above appears in 79% of pro-gun
letters that use in-group positive language, nearly identical to the 80% in the *Rifleman*. As a point of reference, only 13% of anti-gun letters with identity-forming language use at least one of these words, and often do so only when referencing the ways that gun owners describe themselves. Given that most of the in-group words defined above are not inherently related to gun ownership, the close alignment between use in NRA editorials and pro-gun – but not anti-gun – letters is strong evidence of a connection between NRA appeals and the appeals of gun rights supporters.

Out-group negative NRA editorials vary more than those describing the in-group. The perceived opponents of gun rights consist of several distinct groups, the three most prominent of which are politicians, the media, and lawyers. Politicians are frequently described as: bureaucrat(ic), reformer(s), big city, urban, elitist, special interests, tyrannical, and “F” troop (which refers to politicians who have received “F” ratings from the NRA). At least one of those words, plus politician(s), appears in 38% of editorials that use out-group negative language. The media is frequently described as: lying, cowardly, elitist, phony, cynical, devious, shameless, and propagandists. At least one of those words, plus media, appears in 54% of editorials that use out-group negative language. Lawyers as: greedy, fat-cat, opportunist(s), big city, urban, elitist, phony, cynical, and lying. At least one of those words, plus lawyer(s), appears in 45% of editorials that use out-group negative language. A set of more general characteristics is used to portray gun regulation proponents as un-American, including: fanatic(s), extremists, radical(s), hysterical, anti-liberty, Communist(s), tyrannical, globalist, and internationalist. Finally, gun control supporters are described as “anti-gunners” and “the gun ban crowd.” At least one of the characteristics described here appears in 84% of editorials that use out-group negative language.

There is again a clear – although smaller – relationship between the *Rifleman’s* description of out-groups and pro-gun writers’ description of them. At least one of the words
described above appears in 35% of pro-gun letters that use out-group negative language (versus 23% in anti-gun letters with identity-based language). The politician subset appears in 12%, the media subset in 19%, and the lawyer subset in 6%. This outcome is not surprising given the previously mentioned findings that in-group favoritism is more crucial to identity attachment than out-group derogation (Allport 1954; Brewer 1999; Balliet, Wu, and De Dreu 2014).

**Identity Politicization**

To assess my **second** expectation – that the NRA has *politicized* the social identity described above – I first examine the extent to which it has made identity frames a centerpiece of its discussion of gun regulations. To do so, it would be expected to discuss such regulations in terms of their impact on the identities and values of gun owners, rather than in terms of their likelihood of achieving particular policy goals or of improving society in abstract terms.

The first column of table 3 lists the proportion of editorials, pro-, and anti-gun letters that directly discuss policy. The second column depicts the extent to which those documents frame policy in social identity terms; that is, the extent to which gun regulation is discussed in terms of its impact on the lifestyles and/or values of gun owners or, in the case of anti-gun letters, on the lifestyles and/or values of the letter writers.

The overwhelming majority of NRA editorials (90%) discuss policy. As expected, of those documents, a large proportion (74%) frame policy in identity terms.
I expect pro-gun letter writers to similarly frame policy discussion in identity terms. As table 3 shows, 54% of pro-gun letters that discuss policy do indeed frame it in identity terms. This proportion is, as before, smaller than the corresponding proportion in the Rifleman (74%), which makes sense for the same reasons stated earlier (i.e., the long length of the editorials relative to the letters, as well as the fact that the “source” of the identity would be expected to exhibit a particular characteristic more frequently than the “target”).

Pro- and anti-gun letters are again compared as a point of reference, with the expectation that anti-gun letter writers use identity frames less frequently. Table 3 shows that anti-gun letter writers are indeed substantially (and statistically significantly) less likely to frame policy discussion in identity terms. Whereas pro-gun letters tend to focus on the impacts that gun regulations have on the lives of gun owners, anti-gun letters more frequently focus on potential crime reduction and typically do so in abstract (as opposed to personal) terms.

Again, however, the use of identity frames in both NRA editorials and pro-gun letters does not by itself demonstrate that the NRA is responsible for politicizing the identity. Both could be using the same frames generated through an altogether different process. If the NRA is

| Table 3. Identity and Policy Appeals in Gun Control Editorials and Letters to the Editor |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|                                           | Policy Discussion | Identity Frame |
| NRA Editorials                            | 90% (380/422)     | 74% (283/380)  |
| Pro-Gun Letters                           | 96% (2054/2135)   | 54% (1110/2054) |
| Anti-Gun Letters                          | 95% (967/1018)    | 23% (224/967)  |

Note: The denominators in the “Policy Discussion” column are all documents within each category. The denominators in the “Identity Frame” column – which captures the proportion of policy-discussing documents that use identity frames – are all documents that discuss policy within each category.
responsible for connecting the identity to politics, gun rights supporters should use identity frames very similar to those used by the NRA. Moreover, particular frames should originate in NRA editorials and then appear in pro-gun letters later on.

Careful qualitative analyses reveal that the NRA’s identity framing in early decades often tied gun regulation and its proponents to Communism. Proposed laws were framed as existential threats both to gun owners – since gun confiscation and the imprisonment of gun owners, it was said, is the ultimate goal Communist-based gun control schemes – and to America itself. The April 1948 editorial, written by C.B. Lister, for example, argues:

The pattern of Communist action is now well established…In Hungary…all shooting clubs were closed by legal decree. All privately-owned small arms were taken into “safekeeping” by the police. In Czechoslovakia all patriotic citizens had been disarmed when the arms registration lists were seized by Hitler's Fifth Column. In both countries Communists infiltrated the army and the police departments… How can anyone, squarely facing the contemporary record, seek or support laws which would require American citizens to register their privately owned firearms with any municipal, state, or federal agency?…Who will guarantee that the registration lists of arms owned by reputable, loyal Americans will not, now or in the future, fall into the hands of disreputable, disloyal persons?…General firearms registration fits perfectly into the established pattern of Communist action and is…the typical example of police state psychology.

As expected, letters to the editor during this period echoed – in delayed fashion – these concerns. A February 1955 letter printed in the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, specifically cites the NRA while opposing gun legislation that the Chicago city council was considering:

…This law, of course, would hurt no one except the honest citizen, sportsman, and target shooter. It would have no effect upon the criminal…The National Rifle association has traced these laws back to their source on a great many occasions and found a very large percentage of them inspired by the Communist party. All are vigorously supported by the Communists, as such disarming of private, honest citizens is a major aim of any organization which advocates the overthrow of a government by force… I am a former peace officer of another city and a veteran of World War II and, as such, I will always vigorously oppose any proposal which penalizes the right of an honest man to keep arms free of police dictatorship…
Use of these themes lingered throughout the Cold War era, with numerous letters to President Johnson invoking comparisons to Communism to oppose gun control. The following June 1968 letter to the White House,\(^7\) for example, says:

I am completely opposed to your stand favoring anti-gun legislation, or, denying, the right of ordinary, law-abiding Americans to possess, buy, sell, or transfer firearms… Existing gun laws throughout the USA, if properly enforced, will deny firearms to criminals… Therefore, I am inclined to believe reports being circulated in various quarters that those who now clamor for anti-gun laws applicable to everyone in the USA are wittingly, or unwittingly, seeking to disarm the American people, which is one of Communism’s major objectives. Otherwise, Americans could resist being hauled before firing squads or being dragged from their homes at nite [sic] as is done in Russia, by Communist agents, & as they want to do here. Therefore, veto anti-gun legislation… Keep America free.

The NRA’s identity frames have become increasingly tied to the Second Amendment as its focus on “2A” – as it often calls it – has intensified.\(^8\) A close reading of editorials that are highly representative of the topic model’s Second Amendment topic indicates that the NRA associates an individual rights view of the Second Amendment with a number of positive values and characteristics, including patriotism, self-sufficiency, and the American tradition. Second Amendment defenders are law-abiding, average citizens who love freedom and are skeptical of the urban elite. Conversely, Second Amendment opponents are portrayed as radicals who rely on others (including government) to provide for themselves and their families, and who disrespect the long-standing traditions that make America exceptional. They are elitists who want bureaucrats to implement collectivist policies associated with other political systems.

As expected, more recent letters to the editor – written following the NRA’s emphasis on the Second Amendment – utilize similar themes. The following letter, for example, from February 2000, printed in the Arizona Republic and written by a self-identified NRA member, invokes the Second Amendment as the basis for the letter writer’s opposition to gun control:

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\(^7\) LBJ Library, WHCF LE-JL 3, Box 94.

\(^8\) See the discussion of the Second Amendment topic in the appendix for evidence of this.
I was very disappointed in your editorial Wednesday opposing House Bill 2095...I am a member of the National Rifle Association, not because I am a “gun lover” any more than I support the First Amendment because I am a “newspaper and magazine lover.” I am an NRA member because I believe strongly in the rights of law-abiding citizens to arm and defend themselves against dangerous criminals and governments, just as I believe in a free press. Would The Arizona Republic like to exercise its right to publish a newspaper in an environment where every city in the state had varying laws on what you could or could not print? This is the current state of affairs in Arizona regarding gun laws...Why don't you quit trying to vilify the NRA and its members? The NRA is a grass-roots, 3 million member organization that is overwhelmingly funded by individual contributions. Please accept the fact that we cherish Second Amendment freedoms for the same good reasons that we cherish First Amendment freedoms.

Examples can also be found in more recent letters sent to the president. The following letter, for example, was sent to President George H.W. Bush just prior to his inauguration. It encourages the president to make sure that any potential Supreme Court appointees support an individual rights view of the Second Amendment:

I voted for you because your campaign promises were true American. The one that influenced me the most was your stand on the Second Amendment rights. Now I...asking that you stick by those promises and if you appoint any judges to the Supreme Court, please make sure he is in total support of our individual Second Amendment rights! We pro gun people came through for you in November, so please come thru for us by keeping your promises.

In summary, citizens’ letters not only mimicked the frames circulated by the NRA, but did so after the NRA had first articulated those frames in its magazine, thus lending support to the notion that the NRA was instrumental in both the creation and subsequent use of those frames by activist gun owners.

Identity Dissemination

To assess my third expectation – that the NRA has used its firearms programs to disseminate the gun-owner identity discussed above – I closely examine the nature and content of these programs. Are they mostly apolitical and focused solely on providing participants with

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9 George H.W. Bush Library, WHORM FG051.
firearms-related skills and knowledge? Or do they simultaneously push politically charged, NRA-crafted ideas of what it means to be a gun owner?

First, it should be noted that NRA programs are very popular: Although political observers correctly think of the NRA as the preeminent pro-gun political group in the U.S., it is also the preeminent firearms-oriented organization more generally. NRA programs currently draw over 1 million annual participants, and it has long been the main provider of firearms programming in the U.S. Its successful shooting sports and military surplus weapons programs (first popular in the early 1900s) were expanded to include, in the 1950s, wildly popular hunting services aimed at World War II veterans (NRA 1963, NRA 1972). More recently, it has positioned itself as the primary – and in many cases only – source for (often legally-required) concealed carry training (Carlson, 2015. 64). Importantly, as the NRA’s offerings have expanded, membership in the organization – which in many cases is required for participation and, when not required, is strongly encouraged – has ballooned.

Although NRA programs are nominally devoted to helping individuals develop firearms-related skills, analysis of them reveals that, throughout its history, the NRA has simultaneously – and intentionally (NRA 1931b; Johnson 1953; Edson 1954; LaPierre 2005) – used them to spread the politically charged identity revealed in the Rifleman. Notably, since joining the NRA

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10 See https://firearmtraining.nra.org/

11 More than 50% of states that allow concealed carry, for example, requiring training that, in practice, only the NRA can provide.

12 From 3,500 in 1921 to (following the expansion of the surplus firearms program) 10,700 in 1925 and 54,000 in 1940, to (following its post-WWII growth) 267,000 in 1955 and 325,000 in 1960, to (following continued growth) 1 million in the mid-1970s, to (following further expansion of its offerings) 3.5 million in 1995 to its current reported membership of approximately 5 million (Scofield 1951; NRA 1960a; Spitzer 2016, 94-95. See https://membership.nra.org/).
as a result of its programming has always meant also receiving a subscription to the *Rifleman*, all of these new members have been, to some extent, exposed to the NRA’s identity appeals.

But aside from exposure to the NRA’s written communications, the NRA injects politically charged identity appeals into the programs themselves. Its oldest programs – those focused on marksmanship – were used to associate gun ownership with patriotism, citizenship, courage, and responsibility. Junior marksmanship programs, in particular, were used to both incorporate new members into its social group and advertised based on the positive personal qualities with which they endow children (NRA 1932; NRA 1933; NRA 1965). The NRA closely associated participation in its shooting matches with several key identity characteristics. Take, for example, the August 1932 editorial’s description of match participation:

Riflemen of America, you are pointing the way for cowards and for weaklings as you have always done. By your attendance at those regional shoots which you can afford to reach; by your fighting support of your National Association, finding, as you are, men who can afford to support it even though your own purse is empty; by your very mental attitude, you are showing the nation as you have shown it often in the past that you are its most courageous sons. That from your ranks spring leaders, not followers!

Shortly after, in 1934, the NRA converted rifle clubs that participated in its matches into organized units to oppose restrictive legislation; these politicized clubs took their guidance in the form of information and strategy from NRA headquarters (Goddard 1934; Cupps 1970). The *Rifleman* also explicitly connected these programs to opposition to gun regulation (NRA 1931a).

By 1960, following its post WWII growth and facing changing social conditions, the NRA anticipated a renewed push for gun legislation following a couple quiet decades. It recognized that continued growth could help cultivate favorable attitudes towards guns, which would help preempt restrictive legislation. The May 1960 *Rifleman* editorial, entitled “The Future of Firearms in America,” summarizes these themes well, making clear that the NRA saw its programs as means to grow its membership and, in turn, spread both its identity and its
political positions. It describes its “Centennial Plan” (which outlined its goals for the last decade of its first century), focusing in large part on addressing “more and more efforts...to deny reputable citizens the right to keep and bear arms” by spreading it programming. The editorial ultimately argues that “The future of firearms in America depends to a large degree upon the willingness of gun owners to establish and promote educational programs for the use of firearms in the home, on the range, and in the field” (NRA 1960b).

More recently, the NRA has spread its identity through its concealed carry training courses. These courses begin with a focus on gun culture itself – often utilizing scare tactics – rather than simply focusing on technical firearms skills (Baum 2013, 36, 42). Jennifer Carlson, who studied NRA concealed carry courses by embedding herself in them, argues that that “NRA gun training reshapes gun culture from the ground up...” (2015, 28).13 Carlson notes, “Rather than prioritize hands-on defensive training, these courses teach gun carriers that they are a particular kind of person – a law-abiding person willing to use lethal force to protect innocent life if faced with a violent threat” (2015, 28). These courses – which are in many cases legally required to obtain a concealed carry license – promote the same politically-charged identity revealed in the Rifleman, tying gun ownership to personal responsibility, good citizenship, and civic virtue. Crucially, Carlson’s study reveals how concealed carry can increase the psychological accessibility of the gun-owner identity – when individuals carry firearms, they are constantly reminded of the identity that goes along with those firearms (Carlson 2015, chapter 3).

Similarly, Melzer (2009) finds evidence through interviews with NRA members that at least some members join exclusively to participate in NRA programming and then later become politically awakened. One member, for example, said that he joined the NRA to compete in

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13 Carlson uses “gun culture,” but what she describes can clearly be considered a group identity.
shooting competitions, but now understands that gun rights are threatened and feels like he is part of the NRA’s power base. He told Melzer, “So, that’s [competitive shooting] really what motivated me to join, because [back then] I wasn’t as politically active or as politically knowledgeable that there was even a threat to the Second Amendment. I was just oblivious to it. I never thought that the Constitution was in jeopardy in any way” (Melzer 2009, 181, 185).

Identity, Threat, and Political Mobilization

To assess my fourth expectation – that the NRA uses the gun-owner identity to mobilize political action on its behalf – I first examine the extent to which it (a) depicts the identity (not just particular aspects of gun ownership) as threatened and (b) connects depictions of the threat to explicit calls to action.

The NRA could both motivate members to take action and keep the group’s identity salient by portraying the gun-owner identity as under constant threat. The first column of Table 4 indicates, as expected, that about two thirds (66%) of NRA editorials portray gun rights as threatened (and, not depicted here, often do so while framing policy in identity terms).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4. Threat and Calls to Action in Gun Control Editorial Subset</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRA Editorials</td>
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</table>

To mobilize action, the NRA would be expected to link threat with calls to action. The second column of table 4 shows that, in many instances (36% overall), threat is indeed connected to an explicit call to action asking members to participate in politics on the NRA’s behalf. To further quantify this relationship, I estimated a logistic regression in which “Call to Action” is the dependent variable and “Threat” is an independent variable (along with “Policy Discussion”
and “Identity-Building Language”). As table 5 indicates, threat is a highly statistically significant predictor of calls to action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5. Logistic Regression Predicting Calls to Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>B (SE)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity-Building Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null deviance: 551.58 on 421 degrees of freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual deviance: 478.60 on 418 degrees of freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC: 486.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These threat-based calls to action appear to be successful: All available data indicates that gun rights supporters participate frequently and intensely, particularly relative to gun control supporters. Moreover, their participation appears to often be in response to NRA appeals.

Intense participation on behalf of gun rights first occurred in 1934. As hearings began on what would eventually become (in substantially weakened form) the National Firearms Act, NRA members – following instructions from the NRA – inundated members of Congress with letters and telegrams opposing the legislation. The February 1934 *Rifleman* editorial contained an explicit, identity-laden call to action. The next month, in the March editorial, entitled, “Keep Those Letters and Telegrams Coming,” the NRA wrote yet another editorial imploring members to take action. The National Firearms Act of 1934 still passed, but only after it was substantially weakened – or, as then-Assistant Attorney General Joseph Keenan described it, “emasculated” by the NRA (Kennett and Anderson 1975, 211). These appeals, which clearly worked, drew the attention of members of Congress, who were furious with the NRA for mobilizing its members (Kennett and Anderson 1975, 208-209; DeConde 1998, 143; NRA 1934a; NRA 1934b).
A similar pattern of events occurred in the 1960s, which witnessed a number of proposed
gun regulations following the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The NRA again mobilized its
members, using identity-based appeals on numerous occasions to implore them to contact their
representatives in Congress. It sent a special legislative bulletin to the entire membership in April
1965 encouraging them to tell their friends and family to join them in writing, along with
instructions on how to write effective letters. It warned members that, “If the battle is lost, it will
be your loss and that of all who follow you.” The membership responded dramatically. In the
month prior to this bulletin – and the NRA’s general campaign against the bill, which extended
into the Rifleman – President Johnson received only 50 letters, many of which were in support.
The following month, he received around 12,000 letters, nearly all of which were in opposition.
Similarly, a member of Congress received 3,000 letters, only three of which were supportive of
the legislation (Harris 1968, 127-128).14

A similar dynamic occurred following President Bush’s decision, in March 1989, to halt
the import of assault weapons in response to the schoolyard shooting in Stockton, California. The
April 1989 issue of the Rifleman included – along with an editorial focused on the topic – a
special cover insert imploring readers to write their representatives. The insert reads:

Last year anti-gunners said criminals use handguns. So they conspired to ban handguns. This
year they say criminals use semi-autos. So they’re conspiring to ban semi-autos. What they really
want is a ban on all guns. Long guns. Handguns. Your guns. And if we don’t act now, they’ll
have their way…70 million law-abiding gun owners should say, “Enough is enough! Leave our
rights alone!”

That month, following the NRA’s appeal, the Bush Administration was contacted 143 times in
support of the ban – and 4,000 times in opposition. Two years later, in 1991, a similar cover
insert was placed in the May issue of the Rifleman pertaining to the version of the Brady Bill that

14 LBJ Library, Mail Summaries, Box 1.
was being discussed at the time. During the last two weeks of April of that year – presumably right after members had received the May issue – the Bush Administration was contacted 5,242 times in opposition to the bill and only 92 times in favor it.\textsuperscript{15}

More recent participation rates are captured in public polling. Evidence from as long ago as 1978 and as recently as 2017 indicates that gun rights supporters are much more likely to engage in non-voting political participation – including letter writing, phone calls, and donations – than gun control supporters. Notably, NRA members are even more likely than other gun owners to contact public officials, suggesting that the NRA mobilization efforts are an important driver of gun owner participation (Schuman and Presser 1981, 44; Parker et al. 2017). Further, a remarkable 71% of individuals who favor less strict gun laws are unwilling to ever vote for political candidates who support gun control; among those who favor stricter laws, only 34% refuse to vote for candidates who do not share their gun preferences (Aronow and Miller 2016).

Moreover, recent scholarship demonstrates that participation among gun owners seems to be driven by feelings of both threat and identity. In Melzer’s previously mentioned interviews with NRA members, many told him that they believe gun rights are deeply threatened and indicated that the information with which the NRA provides them affects their political behavior (Melzer 2009, chapters 4, 8). And another recent study found that those who score higher on identity measures pertaining to gun ownership demonstrate a much greater intention to engage in non-voting political participation than others (Mason 2017).

Notably, NRA leaders openly acknowledge that the organization’s power is intimately tied to its members’ actions, and, further, they recognize that the NRA’s ability to mobilize those members into action is tied to the deep personal meaning associated with gun ownership. David

\textsuperscript{15} George H.W. Bush Library, WHORM WH004-01, Boxes 5-6.
Keene, a former NRA president, said in an interview with legal author David Cole that the NRA’s power is not a product of its money but instead of the votes it delivers. Keene – who describes the NRA as a “family” – then said, “The difference between the NRA and other groups is that we’ve developed a community [and] when they see Second Amendment rights threatened they vote. They do whatever they need to do. They get out.” Kayne Robinson, a former president and executive director of the NRA, emphasizes the importance of threat, saying, “The most important thing motivating the members is the threat. Understanding the gravity of the threat is what produces action” (Cole 2016, 142, 143, 145). These claims are reiterated by the candid account of former NRA lobbyist Richard Feldman. Feldman – whose departure from the NRA was acrimonious, indicating that he has no incentive to sugarcoat the NRA’s tactics – makes clear that grassroots action, and the single-minded devotion to gun rights driving it, is key to the NRA’s influence (Feldman 2008, 75, 233). Feldman notes that, “To millions of Americans, a gun is a symbol of all sorts of positive, traditional values of independence and freedom. When the government which can't protect its citizens wants to restrict the rights of citizens who have never misused their guns, those citizens get fearful” (BBC 2016).

Conclusion

This study marshals diverse evidence to demonstrate that the NRA has used both its membership communications and training programs to strategically cultivate a distinct gun-owner identity. Further, the NRA has politicized this identity by framing gun control policies as not merely ill-conceived, but as existential threats to gun owners as a distinct social group and to the things they collectively value. I have demonstrated that the NRA’s social identity frame has taken hold among gun owners and that it directly informs how they view, and mobilize against, gun control legislation. Gun owners’ letters contain self-descriptions that deploy the very same
terms used and disseminated by the NRA. Moreover, in voicing their concerns about gun regulation in terms of its impact on their *identities*, they have followed the NRA’s lead in stepwise fashion. Finally, I have demonstrated that widespread political mobilization of gun owners has frequently occurred immediately after the NRA has sent its members threat-based, identity-laden calls to action.

How far can we go in asserting that the NRA’s efforts to cultivate a politicized social identity *caused* the political mobilization of gun owners? Can we say that the NRA’s efforts constituted the only driving force in the cultivation, politicization, and activation of a gun-owner social identity, above and beyond proximate factors, background conditions, and endogenous relationships between the organization and its members? We cannot. The data leveraged in this study do not enable us to rule out all other contributing causes; nor do they provide anything like a natural experiment or any other routes to dispositive causal inference. But the evidence presented here, detailing both sides of the equation – the NRA’s communications and programs, and the responses of gun owners to those activities – is difficult to square with any plausible alternative explanations. Indeed, in light of the evidence presented here, it is difficult to imagine any plausible account that does *not* place the NRA at the center of the action, as a driving force behind the formation, politicization, and mobilization of a gun-owner social identity.

The striking similarities between the identity characteristics used to describe gun owners in NRA editorials and pro-gun letters demonstrate a clear congruence between the *meaning* the NRA associates with gun ownership and the *meaning* gun owners themselves associate with it. Moreover, the NRA’s centrality within the firearms community render it better positioned than any other group to disseminate the identity revealed in both its appeals and the appeals of gun rights supporters. And it has in fact done so intentionally and strategically by injecting
politically-charged identity appeals into its communications and programs. Finally, the timing of gun owners’ responses to the NRA’s calls to action – as well as the heightened responsiveness of NRA members to those calls relative to all gun owners – all provide compelling evidence that its mobilization efforts have had tangible impacts on mass-level political participation.

Over the years, the NRA surely co-opted and expanded some identity themes that already existed among other groups. Elements of the gun-owner identity associating gun ownership with life in rural America and service in the military, for example, connect it to other identities that would obviously exist in the absence of the NRA. But the NRA’s singular role in articulating, disseminating, expanding, and interrelating otherwise distinct themes and then using them to cultivate a devoted, politically active membership offers a compelling case of how a single-issue interest group, working assiduously to cultivate a distinct social identity over many years, can turn that identity to its political advantage. Identifying and specifying the NRA’s primary, instrumental role in these processes is thus the main contribution of this study.

These findings also suggest the importance of studying how interest groups can build influence using the third face of power. They suggest that groups can develop ideational resources – such as group identities – to influence politics by altering the preferences and behavior of members of the mass public. This theoretical elaboration and empirical investigation thus complements existing research and represents a promising step forward in the larger theory-building enterprise in this area.
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NRA. 1932. “FIGHT!” American Rifleman, August.


Appendix: Topic Model

In order to select a subset of NRA editorials for closer analysis, I analyzed the *Rifleman* corpus utilizing automated topic modeling, which uses algorithms to infer the topics of documents within corpora based on word frequency and word co-occurrence. Analysts specify a number of topics and then the model estimates both what those topics are and the proportion of each document that belongs to each topic. This study uses the Structural Topic Model (STM), a mixed-membership, probabilistic topic modeling approach similar to Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). STM improves upon LDA by allowing for the flexible incorporation of document-level covariates (Roberts et al. 2014). More specifically, STM uses regression to incorporate covariates that are believed to influence (1) “the frequency with which a topic is discussed” (topical prevalence covariates) and/or (2) “the words used to discuss a topic” (topical content covariates) (Roberts et al. 2014, 4). For example, analysts can account for the possibility that different authors discuss the same topics using somewhat different words. The inclusion of covariates during the topic estimation process allows analysts to subsequently examine the effects of those covariates on topical prevalence.

I estimated a model that fits the editorials into 6 topics, and includes “Year” as a “prevalence” covariate – to account for topical prevalence changing over time – and “Author” as a “content” covariate – to account for different authors discussing the same topics using slightly different words. Table 1 lists each topic’s “Highest Probability” words – the words most likely to appear within a topic – and “FREX” words, which are words that are both common and exclusive.

16 There is not a single set of criteria to use to determine a “correct” number of topics. Following other applications, I tried specifications with more and less topics and “evaluated their semantic coherence and exclusiveness independently from each other” (Bauer et al. 2016, 9). I also used the STM R package’s selectModel function to confirm that the topics identified here as a whole are not artifacts of modeling choices. Finally, I used the topicQuality function to examine the semantic coherence of each topic; all topics scored well.
to each topic. They are very useful in identifying the substantive, semantic meanings of topics because they not only frequently appear in a topic but also are relatively distinct to that topic. I also calculated the proportion of each document comprised of each topic, which enabled me to read prototypical documents for each topic. In table 1 (reproduced from the main text), I have named the topics based on close readings of example documents and their Highest Probability and FREX words.\footnote{The FREX and Highest Probability words are generally intuitive descriptors of the semantic meaning of each topic. \textit{Americanism and Guns} is the only exception; however, after reading numerous example documents, I am confident I have appropriately labeled its semantic meaning. The difficulty of interpreting its FREX and High Probability words may be a result of it having more content variation over time than other topics.}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Label</th>
<th>Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shooting Sports and Military Preparedness</td>
<td>FREX: rifl, train, marksmanship, war, program, shooter, match, game, civilian, fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{High Prob}: nation, rifl, associ, shoot, program, train, will, war, time, servic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership Programs and Benefits</td>
<td>FREX: nra, member, membership, futur, generat, perri, editori, hold, help, nras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{High Prob}: nra, member, year, can, one, take, now, will, million, come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Regulation</td>
<td>FREX: citizen, registr, propos, possess, weapon, regist, purchas, honest, author, govern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{High Prob}: firearm, citizen, state, arm, gun, use, govern, person, nation, weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns</td>
<td>FREX: law, feder, control, crime, handgun, criminn, bill, owner, legisl, court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{High Prob}: gun, law, feder, legisl, control, polic, crimin, crime, bill, firearm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Amendment</td>
<td>FREX: citi, amend, vote, liberti, hous, presid, second, ban, magazin, declar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{High Prob}: right, american, will, power, amend, peopl, citi, polit, constitut, bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americanism and Guns</td>
<td>FREX: hunt, men, safeti, board, respons, hunter, educ, cours, recreat, accid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{High Prob}: america, will, men, hunt, american, safeti, peopl, hunter, respons, one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Note:} Words are stemmed.

I also estimated the relationship between topical prevalence (the outcome variable in this case) and “Year” (the input variable) to model how each topic varies over time. All 6 topics are
plotted together in appendix figure 1 (excluding confidence intervals for simplicity). The topics vary over time in sensible ways. *Shooting Sports and Military Preparedness* is relatively high around World War II, reflecting both the environment of the time and the NRA’s original mission of developing the marksmanship of American men. It declines following the post-war period and does not pick back up during later wars, likely because by those wars the organization had expanded its mission beyond marksmanship and its formal government ties had weakened. *Membership Programs and Benefits* has upticks during the post-war period – when the NRA rapidly expanded membership by recruiting WWII veterans – and in the mid-1980s and early-1990s when it sought to generate revenue via membership growth amidst financial struggles. The remaining four topics – which are politically relevant – are discussed below.

**Appendix Figure 1: Frequency of American Rifleman Editorial Topics over Time**

![Graph showing frequency of American Rifleman editorial topics over time]

**Overview of Gun Control Topics**

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18 Topic-specific plots below include 95% confidence intervals.
Here, I briefly discuss the four gun control related topics (outlined in red in table 1). Appendix figure 2 is a graph of only these topics (again, excluding confidence intervals). The constancy of the NRA’s attention to politics is notable; although the relative prominence of each topic changes over time, politics nonetheless receives substantial attention throughout the entire period of study. And, with almost no exceptions, editorials discussing gun regulation oppose it.\textsuperscript{19}

Appendix Figure 2: Frequency of Political\textit{ American Rifleman} Editorial Topics over Time

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2}
\caption{Graph showing the frequency of political topics in the American Rifleman over time.}
\end{figure}

\textit{Gun Regulation} (appendix figure 3) addresses gun legislation in more general terms than other topics. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its generality, it is positively correlated with the \textit{Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns} topic (correlation coefficient = 0.49). It is more stable over time than other topics – perhaps also due to its generality – and peaks during the 1960s, when gun regulation was debated and eventually enacted following several high profile assassinations.

\textsuperscript{19} This finding contradicts popular claims that the NRA used to be apolitical and/or supportive of gun control. A thorough analysis of the \textit{Rifleman} makes clear that the NRA consistently voiced its strong opposition to gun legislation beginning in the 1930s.
The January 1966 editorial, entitled “A Suggestion to Congress,” is measured as a highly representative example:

When Congress reconvenes…one of the questions to be answered…is what legislation, if any, is needed to further control firearms in interstate commerce…Major attention has been given to "mail-order guns" and "destructive devices". Unfortunately, most of the proposed legislation has the wrong emphasis. It tends to harass the law-abiding citizen, while it would fail in its avowed purpose of denying firearms to those who violate the law. Unfortunately, also, much of the debate has been based upon emotion rather than reason, and upon impression rather than fact. This has led to gun control confusion and misunderstanding. Our Federal Government is one of limited or delegated powers… The right to keep and bear arms is a fundamental personal freedom of the people of the United States of America. It should not be denied to citizens of good repute so long as they use them for lawful purpose.

Appendix Figure 3: Frequency of Gun Regulation over Time

Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns, (appendix figure 4), argues that guns are a solution to rather than a cause of crime and that gun regulation makes crime easier and self-defense more difficult. It advocates for harsh sentencing in lieu of restricting access to guns. It peaks at three points: During (1) debates over gun regulation aimed at gangsters in the 1930s, (2) the rise of
“law and order” politics in response to high crime rates in the 1960s and early 1970s, and (3) during the Clinton years, when both crime control and gun regulation were salient issues.

The June 1997 editorial, in which Wayne LaPierre argues that new regulations would be unnecessary if existing regulations were better enforced, is a measured as a highly representative example:

“Gunrunning.” It's Chuck Schumer's latest national media ploy and his biggest fraud yet. … Schumer's office released what the media called a "Congressional study" which he claimed showed a flow of guns from states with "weak" laws to states with "strong laws." The assertion that some states have weak gun laws and others have strong laws is patently false…With his meaningless calls for new gun control, Charles Schumer would make it more difficult for peaceable people - you and me - to own and use firearms: Making the innocent pay the price for the guilty, when he won't make the guilty pay anything…So, why is it that [Schumer] has never demanded that tough existing laws be enforced? Because - like his anti-gun soulmate, Bill Clinton - he knows the truth. Because if current Federal laws were enforced, and if the public knew that there were such laws, the call for gun control would be pointless… Chuck Schumer, Janet Reno, Bill Clinton and their allies at the Washington Post and the New York Times and the national networks have to keep the lie alive. And every day they refuse to enforce the law - every day they keep the lie alive - innocent people suffer under the anvil of violent crime.

Appendix Figure 4: Frequency of Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns over Time

![Graph of Crime, Self-Defense, and Guns over Time]
Second Amendment (appendix figure 5) advocates for an individual rights interpretation of the Second Amendment. The Second Amendment, it argues, is critical to freedom because it enables the people to defend themselves against an abusive state: Gun rights are the freedom that makes all other freedoms possible. The topic has gradually – and very notably – increased in prominence since around 1960.

The editorial from August 1989 is a representative example:

The right to own and use firearms is the preeminent individual right. Without the ability to physically defend the other provisions of our Constitution from encroachment, the remainder of the Bill of Rights become privileges granted by the government and subject to restrictions at the whim of government… Whereas the Framers dreamed of a strong citizenry who could remove any threatening government, modern collectivists attempt to reduce the Second Amendment to a measure of the “sporting use” of firearms…Self-defense, defense of country, and resistance to tyranny (the Second Amendment's triune) are not abstract principles. The right of the people to keep and bear arms guarantees the rest of our freedoms.

Appendix Figure 5: Frequency of the Second Amendment over Time

Americanism and Guns (appendix figure 6) peaks earliest and describes the centrality of guns throughout U.S. history and their importance to the American tradition. It was frequently
used as a frame through which to oppose gun regulation attempts – including the Federal Firearms Act of 1934 and the National Firearms Act of 1938 – and to rally support for war preparation measures involving civilian firearms training. It advocates limited government and hawkish foreign policy positions, and has been used to oppose gun regulations aimed at hunters and to more generally highlight the connection between gun owners and outdoor recreation.

*Americanism and Guns*

The July 1947 editorial is a representative example. Written in celebration of Independence Day, it connects the American Revolution to contemporary (in 1947) battles against Communism and Fascism, and argues that perceived overreach by government officials is anti-American:

The American Declaration of Independence was, in fact, a declaration of the principles of a form of government in which the majesty of the individual was recognized as the only foundation on which the majesty of the State properly could rest… Americans, that is your heritage!… Today all over the world, Communism, Fascism, Nazism, Socialism feed upon and fertilize one another. All over the world the dignity of Man is being subordinated to the majesty of the State…America is not untouched by the disease. American statesmen lack a clear chart to guide them on a consistent course toward the establishment of truly representative forms of government…Money alone will not do it. Armed might alone will not do it… [The] principles set forth in the American Declaration of Independence…lighted the path to real freedom for the common man in 1776. They will do the same in 1947 if America itself leads the way in putting the State back into its proper relationship with the Citizen of the State - the State the servant of man, not man the servant of the State.

**Figure 6: Frequency of *Americanism and Guns* over Time**


Appendix: Coding Rules

Rifleman Editorials

1. Policy Discussion

   1.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial discusses government gun policy/regulation of some kind, whether in broad/general or narrow/specific terms. This could include discussion of specific pieces of legislation, but might also consist of more general discussion of gun policy/regulation that does not mention a specific piece of legislation. Gun legislation/regulation does not need to be the topic of the editorial, but rather just needs to be mentioned. This includes discussion of the purpose of the Second Amendment and lawsuits aimed at gun manufacturers.

2. Identity-Frame for Legislation

   2.1. Within editorials that discuss policy, coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial frames legislation in social identity terms. Legislation is framed in social identity terms if it is discussed in terms of its impact on the lifestyles and/or values of gun owners (as opposed to being discussed only in terms of its estimated technical, policy impacts). For example, an editorial focused on crime that is framed in identity terms might argue that gun control reduces the ability of Americans to protect themselves and their families from criminals, whereas a similar editorial that is not framed in identity terms might argue that a proposed law is unlikely to successfully reduce the use of guns by criminals. Editorials that use both types of arguments should be coded 1. Not included as identity-frames are discussions of inconveniences a law might cause for gun owners without accompanying discussion of: (1) how those inconveniences might threaten the values of gun owners or their ability to protect things they value, or (2) discussion of how the laws might lead to outright personal disarmament/confiscation of firearms (which goes beyond inconvenience).

3. Use of Identity Forming Language (In-group Positive or Out-group Negative)

   3.1. In-group positive is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial uses positive attributes/adjectives to describe gun owners.

   3.2. Out-group negative is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial uses negative attributes/adjectives (or comparisons to negative groups) to describe members of an out-group who are portrayed as a threat to gun rights due to its support for gun regulation. Criminals who misuse guns are not considered an out-group.

4. Threat

   4.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial portrays gun rights and/or gun owners’ identities as under threat.

5. Calls to Action

   5.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the editorial contains a call to action on behalf of the protection of gun rights/against gun regulation. These consist of actions such as (but not limited to) contacting policymakers or speaking with others about gun rights. They can also include calls to act (or not act) in certain non-political ways because of the potential political impacts of those actions (e.g., practice gun safety while hunting this fall because if there are hunting accidents people will call for new gun control laws). Non-political calls to action that aren’t in some way connected to politics
Letters to the Editor

1. Policy Discussion
   1.1. Coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter discusses government gun policy/regulation of some kind, whether in broad/general or narrow/specific terms. This could include discussion of specific pieces of legislation, but might also consist of more general discussion of gun policy/regulation that does not mention a specific piece of legislation. This includes discussion of the purpose of the Second Amendment and lawsuits aimed at gun manufacturers.

2. Identity-Frame for Legislation
   2.1. Within letters that discuss policy, coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter frames legislation in social identity terms. For letters written in opposition to gun control, legislation is framed in social identity terms if it is discussed in terms of its impact on the lifestyles and/or values of gun owners (as opposed to being discussed only in terms of its estimated technical, policy impacts). For example, a letter focused on crime that is framed in identity terms might argue that gun control reduces the ability of Americans to protect themselves and their families from criminals, whereas a similar letter that is not framed in identity terms might argue that a proposed law is unlikely to successfully reduce the use of guns by criminals. Letters that use both types of arguments should be coded 1. For letters written in support of gun control, legislation is framed in identity terms if it is discussed in terms of impact on the lifestyles and/or values of the letter writers themselves (rather than, for example, exclusively in terms of their potential impact on crime rates without including mention of personal connections to crime). For example, a letter focused on crime that is framed in identity terms might talk about how the letter writer’s life has been negatively impacted by gun violence, whereas a similar letter that is not framed in identity terms might only mention that studies have shown that gun control laws reduce overall levels of gun violence.

3. Use of Identity Forming Language (In-group Positive or Out-group Negative)
   3.1. In-group positive is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter uses positive attributes/adjectives to describe either gun owners (in the case of pro-gun letters) or gun control advocates (in the case of anti-gun letters).
   3.2. Out-group negative is coded 1 (if yes) or 0 (if no) based on whether the letter uses negative attributes/adjectives (or comparisons to negative groups) to describe members of an out-group who either support gun regulation (in the case of pro-gun letters) or oppose gun regulation (in the case of anti-gun letters). Criminals who misuse guns are not considered an out-group.