

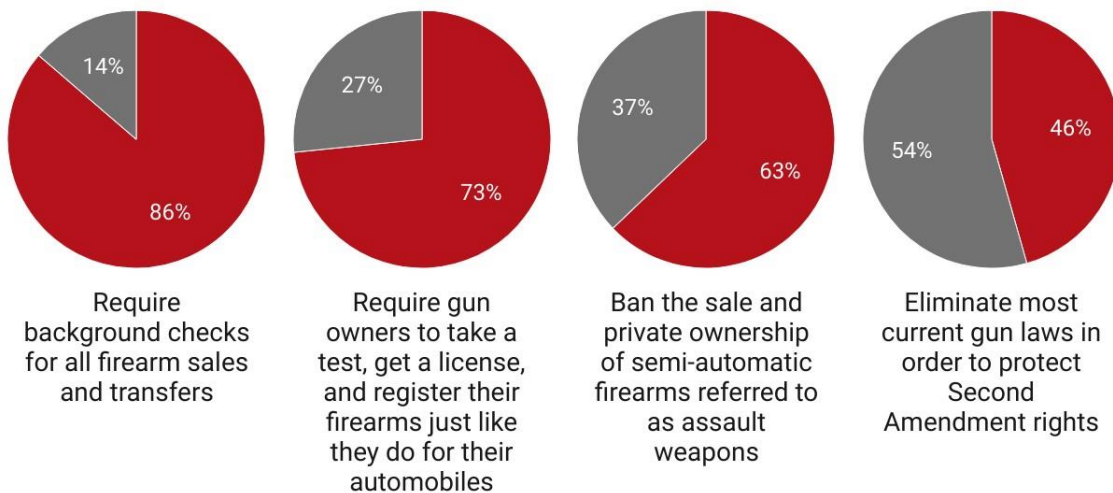
Mood of the Nation: What Americans think about firearm policies

*** EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:00AM Central Time, July 25, 2023 ***

A majority of Americans support background checks, gun licensing and an assault weapons ban; nearly half support elimination of most current gun laws

"Below are several actions that Congress might take related to guns."

■ % indicating support ■ % indicating opposition



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points.

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Summary and key findings

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy's latest Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted with 1,000 American adults May 12 through 18, 2023, included questions aimed at better understanding American adults' opinions on a variety of gun policies.

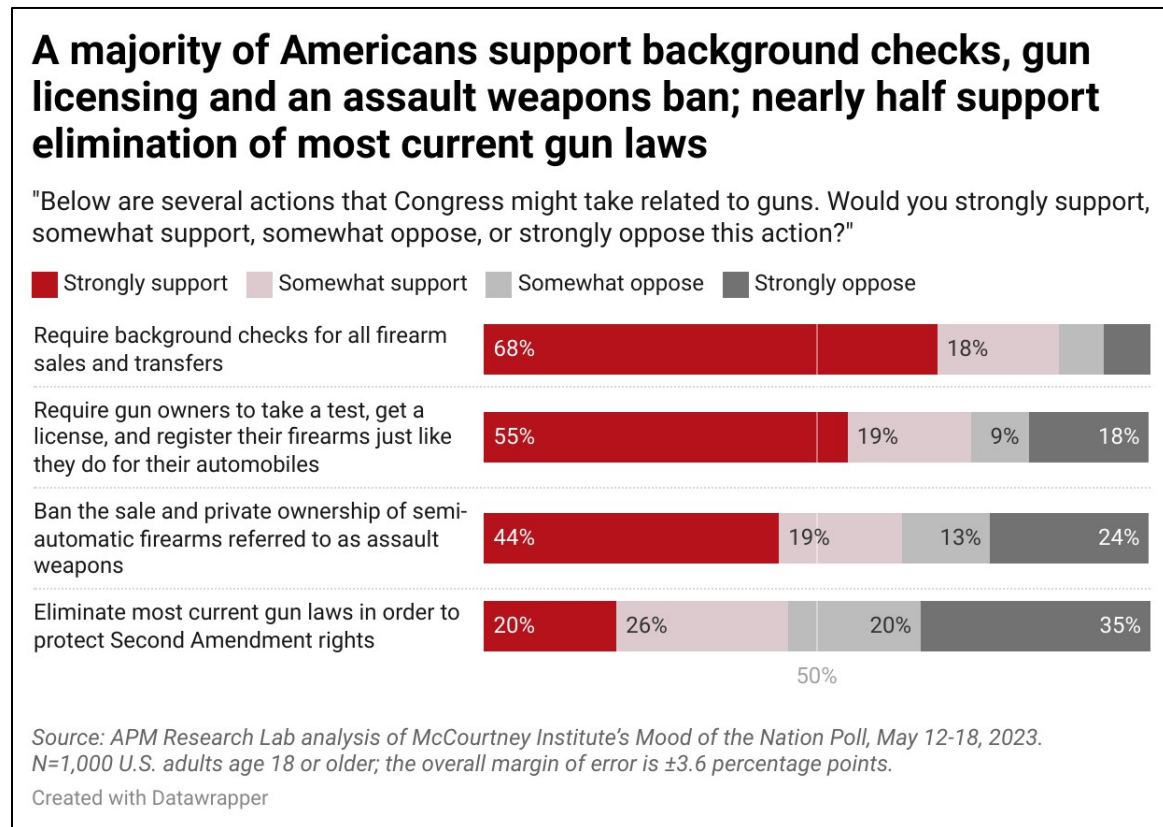
- A large majority of Americans, across the political spectrum, support background checks, while three in four Americans, including a majority of Republicans, favor the idea of introducing gun licenses modeled after the testing and licensing requirements currently used to operate a motor vehicle.
- Bipartisanship breaks down when it comes to banning assault weapons, with nine in ten Democrats in favor and six in ten Republicans opposed. Independents lean closer to Republicans on this policy proposal.
- Since the McCourtney Institute last polled on this topic in October of 2019, the annual number of firearm suicides, homicides and mass shootings have all increased. Nevertheless, support for three popular reforms is virtually unchanged.
- The largest shift in opinion since 2019 was a noticeable increase in support for the proposal to “eliminate most current gun laws in order to protect Second Amendment rights” from 36% to 46%.
- When asked to explain why they endorsed their most favored policy, Americans articulated a range of reasons, showing the complexity of gun policy in the United States.

A majority of Americans support universal background checks, gun licensing and assault weapons bans

A majority of Americans support three of the four gun policies included in this poll. Eighty-six percent of American adults support U.S. Congress mandating background check for all firearm sales and transfers, including the two-thirds that “strongly” support this policy. Nearly three-quarters supports Congress requiring “gun owners to take a test, get a license, and register their firearms just like they do for their automobiles.”

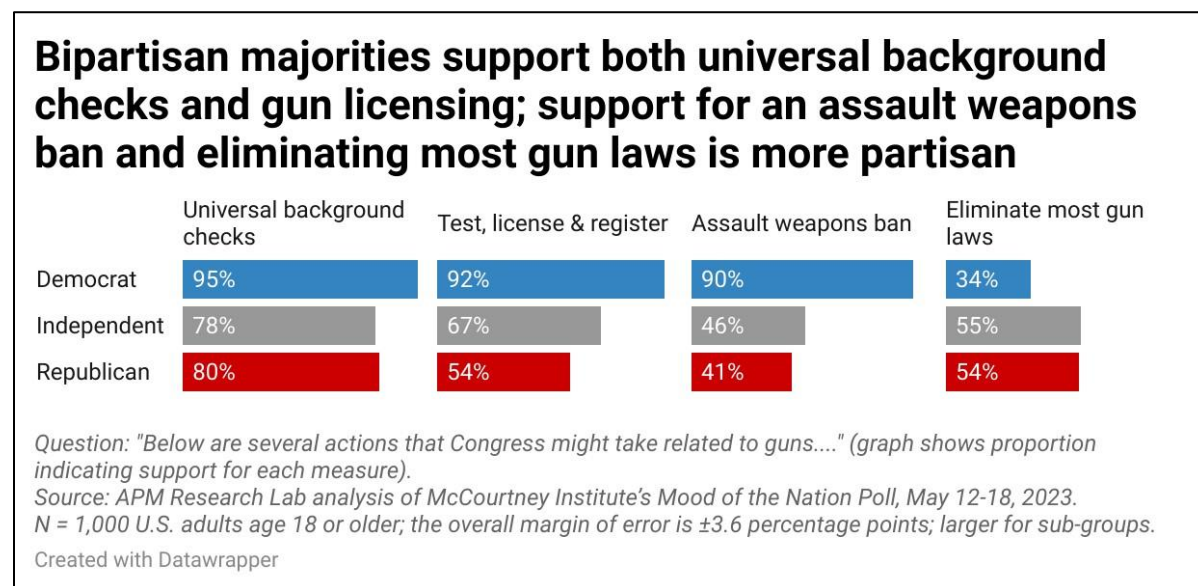
Sixty-three percent of Americans indicate that Congress should “ban the sale and private ownership of semi-automatic firearms referred to as assault weapons.” One-quarter strongly oppose this measure.

Just under half of Americans , 46%, support the elimination of “most current gun laws in order to protect Second Amendment rights.” Over one-third strongly oppose eliminating most current gun laws.



Support for universal background checks for gun ownership and gun licensing is bipartisan. Over 90% of Democrats support both provisions, as do most Republicans. Eighty percent of Republicans support universal background checks and 54% support gun licensing.

The other two provisions are split by party: An overwhelming majority of Democrats (90%) support a Congressional ban on assault weapons, while a majority of Republicans (59%) oppose it. On the other hand, a majority of Republicans (54%) support eliminating most current gun laws to protect Second Amendment rights, while two-thirds of Democrats are opposed.



Second Amendment supporters' views on gun policies

It is noteworthy that the three firearm-restricting provisions included in this poll are supported by a majority of those who support eliminating "most current gun laws in order to protect second amendment rights." Among these second amendment advocates, 77% support universal background checks, 60% support a testing, licensing and registering process for guns similar to that of automobiles, and 52% support an assault weapons ban.

A majority of Second Amendment advocates support background checks, gun licensing and banning assault weapons



Question: "Below are several actions that Congress might take related to guns..." (graph shows proportion indicating support for each measure).

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.

N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points; larger for sub-groups.

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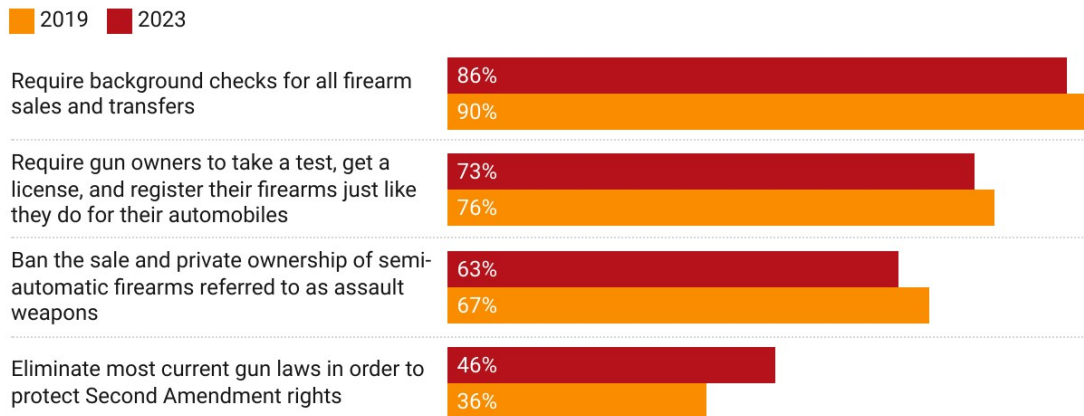
Public opinion has changed little since 2019, with one important exception

The firearm-related questions included in this poll were replicated from a 2019 Mood of the Nation Poll.¹ Factoring in the margin of error associated with each survey (± 4.3 percentage points in 2019 and ± 3.6 percentage points in 2023), the overall level of support for the three gun-restricting measures is unchanged.

There is, however, a statistically significant ten percentage point increase in overall support for "eliminating most current gun laws in order to protect Second Amendment rights."

¹ https://democracy.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/08/Gun-control-report_final.pdf.

Support for Second Amendment has grown somewhat since 2019, while support for gun-restricting policies is statistically unchanged



Question: "Below are several actions that Congress might take related to guns..." (graph shows proportion indicating support for each measure).

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Sept. 23-26, 2019 (N=1,000; overall margin of error = ± 4.3 percentage points) and May 12-18, 2023 (N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error = ± 3.6 percentage points).

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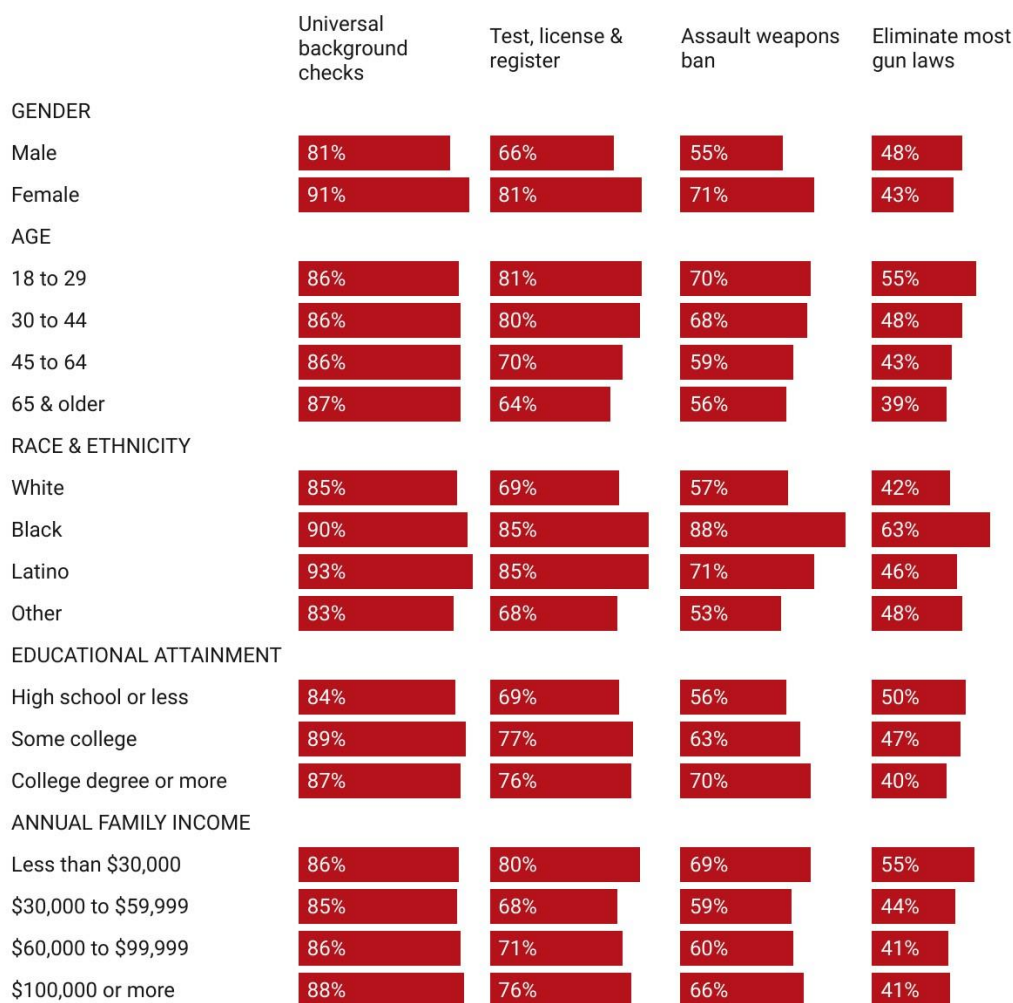
Other group-level differences are generally less dramatic than the differences that follow party lines or support for the Second Amendment. When looking at the results according to gender, age, race and ethnicity, and income, the single largest difference is the percentage of white versus Black Americans supporting a congressional ban on assault weapons: while a majority of white respondents indicated support for this measure (57%), the support among Black respondents is overwhelming (88%). Latinos fall between the two other major racial groups in support for an assault weapons ban.

It may be that Black respondents to this poll were simply more "supportive" than other racial or ethnic groups, since a higher proportion of Black respondents also supported eliminating most current gun laws (62%, compared to less than 50% among other racial or ethnic groups).

A somewhat larger proportion of women than men support the three gun-restrictive measures included in the survey, but the difference in proportion supporting "eliminating most current gun laws" is not statistically significant.

By age, more of those 45 and younger support gun licensing and an assault weapons ban than is the case among those over age 45. Unlike the 2019 Mood of the Nation Poll, however, support for eliminating most gun laws is highest among the youngest age bracket. This pattern is repeated by income, where support for the Second Amendment appears highest among the group with the lowest income.

A majority of several large groups of Americans support gun restrictions; nearly half of many groups support eliminating most gun laws



Question: "Below are several actions that Congress might take related to guns..." (graph shows proportion indicating support for each measure).

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.

N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for sub-groups.

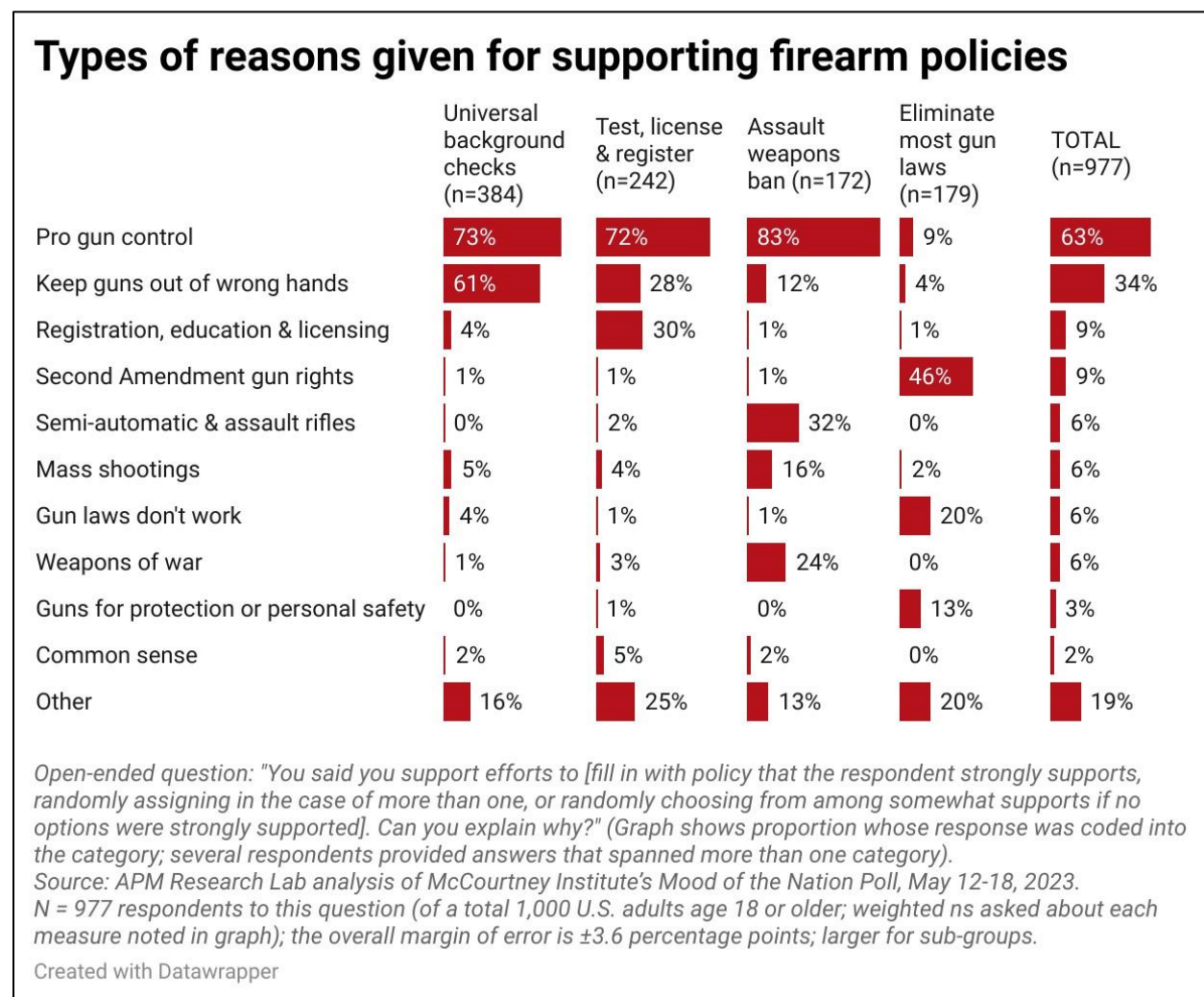
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In their own words

When asked to explain their support for gun policies, survey respondents answers were wide-ranging. Using a coding rubric developed by the McCourtney Institute following the 2019 poll that used the same questions, it was apparent that most respondents indicated general support for gun control measure, with some implying that support and others explicitly using those words. For example:

“Gun control is a must! We fear the future of our kids with all of these shootings!” – 37-year-old white woman from California.

It was not surprising that this was a common theme among those who had indicated support for the three gun control measures included in the poll. Somewhat surprising is that nine percent of those who were asked about their support for eliminating most current gun laws also indicated a “pro gun control” reason for their support of that provision.



The second most common reason given for supporting a specific gun policy was that it would help to keep guns out of the wrong hands. This reasoning was provided by a majority of those asked to explain their support for universal background checks. Some examples include:

“Currently too many guns in the hands of irresponsible and sometimes dangerous people” – 75-year-old white woman from Michigan.

“It would help somewhat in helping to identify those people that should never own a gun due to mental health issues, those with criminal histories, or are too young to legally own a gun.” – 72-year-old Hispanic woman from Texas.

Those who were asked why they supported the policy to “require gun owners to take a test, get a license, and register their firearms just like they do for their automobiles” commonly referred back to the premise of the policy in question, indicating that they supported one or more aspect of the measure. For example:

“In order to know if they are qualified to carry [a gun] or not” – 33-year-old Black man from Texas.

“Many things are and should be heavily regulated: healthcare, cars, occupations, travel- and all of those things are less dangerous than guns. License and registration isn’t an undue burden.” – 32-year-old white woman from Illinois.

About one-third of those who were asked to explain their support for an assault weapons ban provided a response that referred to semi-automatic or assault rifles, and about one-quarter specifically noted that these types of firearms are “weapons of war” meant only for combat:

“There is no real reason to own assault weapons unless you plan on killing people.” – 50-year-old Black man from Louisiana.

“No one needs an assault weapon. That’s for the armed service.” – 69-year-old Black man from Virginia.

Second Amendment supporters

Perhaps it is not surprising that the most common reasoning given by those who were asked to explain their support for “eliminate most current gun laws in order to protect Second Amendment rights” was support for the Second Amendment. Examples of those responses, given by half of those supporting this policy, include:

“There shouldn’t be any gun laws to begin with because it is a constitutional right to bear arms.” – 61-year-old Black woman from New York.

“All restrictions are a violation of the second amendment. As a rights maximalist I do not believe the government has the authority to regulate arms.” – 39-year-old white man from Colorado.

“The 2nd amendment is one of few protections against government tyranny. It is also a guarantee of the ability to defend yourself, one of the most basic freedoms there is. Limiting these rights can only be intended to make it impossible for people to resist their rights being violated.” 37-year-old white man from Iowa.

Additionally, 20% of those asked to explain their support for doing away with most current gun laws indicated that gun laws do not work. For example:

“The vast majority of guns laws are modern creations. Gun laws fail to deter or reduce crime while substantially burdening law-abiding citizens.” – 67-year-old white man from California.

Another set of explanations for supporting the elimination of most current gun laws had to do with the personal protection and safety that unfettered gun ownership affords:

“If the Second Amendment doesn't stand, then good honest people will have no way of protecting their homes and family and only criminals will have guns.” – 78-year-old white woman from Oklahoma.

While the answers given by Second Amendment supporters may seem contradictory, this is not necessarily the case. Arif Memovic, a doctoral student at Penn State University, noted that “most Second Amendment supporters support responsible gun ownership, and many believe that gun control advocates are ignorant about guns and gun culture.” That would be consistent with licensing that encourages education while also being wary about other gun control policies.

About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,000 individuals who completed the May 2023 Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

Survey questions used in this report

Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.²

To assess American adults’ opinions about various gun policies, survey respondents were asked to respond to the following questions in May 2023:

1. Below are several actions that Congress might take related to guns. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this action?
 - A. Require background checks for all firearm sales and transfers
 - B. Ban the sale and private ownership of semi-automatic firearms referred to as assault weapons
 - C. Require gun owners to take a test, get a license, and register their firearms just like they do for their automobiles
 - D. Eliminate most current gun laws in order to protect Second Amendment rights
2. You said you support efforts to [fill in with policy that the respondent strongly supports, randomly assigning in the case of more than one, or randomly choosing from among somewhat supports if no options were strongly supported]. Can you explain why?

Note that the order in which the answer options were presented was rotated to avoid possible order effects. Also note that the survey included other questions, some of which will be reported separately, but this is the order in which these questions were asked.

² For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/mood-of-the-nation-poll-motn>

To see whether Americans’ opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), age (four groups), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment (three categories), family income (four categories), and political affiliation (self-identified Republican, Independent, Democrat, as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” to “Strong Republican”).³

The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

³ As a nationally representative sample with no oversamples this survey is unable to adequately represent the experiences and opinions of smaller groups such as those identifying as LGBTQ, Indigenous Americans, or those affiliating with smaller political parties. The opinions of people from these and other small groups are represented in the findings, but we generally do not separate out the responses from groups with fewer than 100 respondents since the margin of error associated with small samples is so large as to render the associated findings (point estimates) potentially misleading.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within the American Public Media Group that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan. Our tagline is *bringing facts into focus*.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

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About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

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Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab, with contributions from the Lab's Ten Across Data Journalism Fellow, Rithwik Kalale, and Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer, who also designed survey's the questions.

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