

**Rifles and Reinforcement: The National Rifle Association's Partisan
Approach to Gun Ownership**

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Abstract

The NRA has long been the dominant player in the battle over gun control. Scholars have attributed this dominance in large part to the NRA's ability to mobilize its membership when necessary. Lacombe (2018) has written of the NRA's cultivation of a politicized social identity around gun ownership that assists it in doing so. In this thesis, I show that the NRA has tied this gun owner identity to conservatism and to the Republican party. I find that the NRA's homogenous membership composition advantages it in its strategy of developing a partisan politicized gun-owner identity among its members. The NRA deliberately taps into members' existing identities in the process of cultivating such an identity. Using Liliana Mason's (2018) work on identity reinforcement as a framework, I demonstrate that the NRA has much to gain from facilitating the alignment of a gun owner identity with a Republican partisan identity. The alignment of identities tends to strengthen all identities involved, making individuals who hold them more susceptible to action-driving emotions, like enthusiasm and anger. These individuals thus become more likely to engage in politics and are easier to mobilize. With this in mind, I argue that identity reinforcement has been a driving factor in the NRA's success in overcoming the problem of collective action.

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I. Introduction

Heaven help the God-fearing, law-abiding, Caucasian, middle class, Protestant (or even worse *evangelical*) Christian, the midwestern or southern (or even worse *rural*) hunter, apparently straight or admitted heterosexual gun-owning (or even worse *NRA-card-carrying*) average working stiff, or even worst of all, *male* working stiff, because not only do you not count, you're a downright obstacle to social progress.

- Charlton Heston, former NRA President, *The Courage to be Free*

The satirical newspaper The Onion republishes the same article every time a mass shooting shakes the nation to its core. The article's headline reads: *'No Way To Prevent This,' Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens*. Gun policy debates take center stage when these tragedies occur, yet – as encapsulated by The Onion – it seems like nothing ever changes. Gun laws in the United States are ultimately the result of the democratic process. Despite broad public support for various gun control policies, existing gun control measures are largely tame and new ones almost never receive traction in Congress. Gun control advocates simply have had little success translating majority support among the public into meaningful legislation. One group has stood in the way of any perceived challenge to gun rights and has been at the forefront of attempts to expand gun rights: The National Rifle Association (NRA).

The NRA's many victories in advancing its agenda through Congress, the Courts, and state legislatures has led it to acquire a reputation as a near-invincible political juggernaut.¹ While such a reputation is somewhat overstated, the organization has undoubtedly been able to exert an outsized influence on the politics of gun control. On its website, the NRA boasts about its more than five million dues-paying members. There is good reason to believe this number is inflated.² Still, even if one assumes it is correct, the idea that five million NRA members are able to dominate

¹ "Is the Gun Lobby Invincible?", The New York Times, 2012

² "Nobody Knows How Many Members the NRA Has, but Its Tax Returns Offer Some Clues." The Washington Post, 2018

the gun debate despite opposition from the majority of the public begs a fundamental question: how is the NRA so effective? The Sierra Club, which has a similar number of members (over 3.5 million)³, has been unable to prevent sweeping rollbacks of environmental protections by the Trump Administration. The NRA, on the other hand, was a constant thorn in the side of Barack Obama, who described his failure to enact gun control laws as the “greatest frustration” of his presidency.⁴ He accused the NRA of “distorting the national debate about gun violence.”⁵ His administration's communications line on gun control involved portraying the NRA as having a disproportionate hold over lawmakers.⁶ According to the Obama administration, the NRA made it near-impossible for the President to gain the legislative support necessary for implementing gun control measures.

While the NRA has a stellar lobbying arm (NRA Institute for Legislative Action) and an active Political Action Committee (NRA Political Victory Fund), the true source of its power is the sizeable share of its membership that is politically engaged. Purely following the money therefore only paints a partial picture of the NRA's triumphs. The organization does not even rank among the most spend thrifty interest groups. Not to mention, gun control advocates have spent plenty of their own money, sometimes even more than the NRA, but to little avail (Spitzer 2018). When the organization needs to flex its political muscle, it taps into its rank-its-file: the gun owners that make up its membership. Any threat to gun rights, no matter how trivial or unlikely to materialize, spurs the NRA to communicate to its members that their action is required. The NRA floods them with emails, voter guides, magazines, and letters in an effort to let them know who is on their side and who is not. Cleta Mitchell, a former NRA board member, noted that the NRA's

³ Sierra Club Homepage

⁴ Obama: US gun control laws 'greatest frustration of my presidency', BBC, 2015

⁵ “Obama Tears into the NRA at Town Hall on Gun Violence,” PBS, 2016

⁶ Ibid.

relationship to its members is at the root of its political effectiveness: “It’s really not the contributions, it’s the ability of the NRA to tell its members: Here’s who’s good on the Second Amendment.”⁷

NRA members have been able to deliver the goods. Pro-gun activists and gun owners have consistently been found to be more politically engaged on behalf of their beliefs than their counterparts, a fact often attributed to the efficacy of the NRA (e.g. Schuman and Presser 1981, Parker et al. 2017). Given the problem of free-riding, in which large groups attempting collective are in theory supposed to be hindered by members’ lack of incentives to contribute (Olson 1965), it is surprising that gun owners have been so reliably engaged. Despite knowing that gun rights are a public good shared by all members – a fact which should suppress individuals’ motivation to contribute to that good’s attainment – a substantial number of NRA members are immensely active on behalf of gun rights. NRA members are not just getting and staying involved with the NRA to obtain discounts that they value more than their dues. This is because the NRA has had tremendous success employing the “third face” of power: the ability to shape preferences, opinions, and identities (Lukes 1974; Lacombe 2018). It has cultivated a politicized social identity around gun ownership (Lacombe 2018). The NRA has done this knowingly and strategically, because it is well-aware that members who hold this identity are more mobilizable and intense in their political activities.

Political psychologists and researchers of social identity theory have long recognized the salience of identity in the sphere of political behavior. The ability of narrowly focused interest groups like the NRA to strategically influence the behavior of their mass memberships by cultivating an identity around their issue of focus represents an incredibly powerful political tool.

⁷ “The True Source of the N.R.A.’s Clout: Mobilization, Not Donations.” The New York Times, 2018

Recent research by Liliana Mason (2015, 2018) has shown that identities can reinforce one another. For example, the identities of white conservative Christians are overwhelmingly reinforced by a Republican partisan identity, leading to an increase in the salience of partisanship for individuals who are a part of these groups. (Mason 2018). The Republican party label – in the eyes of citizens – now also often encompasses and represents those identities. More generally, an increase in social sorting has led to increased homogeneity in the parties. This, in turn, means that other qualities tend to divide on partisan lines. Multiple identities start playing for the same team. Mason writes: “if a person is a member of one party and also a member of another social group that is mostly made up of fellow partisans, the biasing and polarizing effect of partisanship can grow stronger” (Mason 2018, 7).

In this project, I examine how Mason’s framework can apply to single-issue interest groups, using the NRA as a case study. More specifically, I assess the role played by existing politicized identities among members. I find that the increasingly conservative NRA has both benefited from partisan reinforcement and strategically tapped into the existing identities of its members to reinforce them under a partisan mega-identity. The NRA has linked gun ownership and pro-gun attitudes with conservatism and the Republican party. In doing so, it has been advantaged by the fact that its membership is relatively homogenous. The NRA does not risk the gun-owner identity it cultivates among its members coming into conflict with identities those members already hold. When the gun owner identity it fosters is aligned with a Republican partisan identity and a conservative ideological identity, all three identities are strengthened. This makes members who hold those identities more likely to respond to threats and calls to action on their behalf, facilitating the mobilization process for the NRA.

In taking these factors into consideration, it is crucial to consider why left-leaning gun control groups have lacked success over the years. There exists a clear asymmetry. The NRA has benefited from and played into partisan reinforcement. So why have left-leaning gun control groups not also become more powerful with greater overall partisanship? Many political observers have astutely wondered why these groups have not attempted to replicate the NRA's methods (see Han 2017). They have, in fact, attempted to do so. The Brady Campaign To Prevent Gun Violence, a longtime NRA opponent, has explicitly worked to build a grassroots membership base by mirroring NRA tactics. To the chagrin of gun regulation activists, the Brady Campaign has been unable to compete with the NRA, both in terms of the magnitude of membership mobilization and the intensity of membership activity (Spitzer 2018). Some may argue that the NRA's accomplishments can be attributed to the passions ignited by an issue like gun control. By such logic, however, gun control groups should be just as effective as the NRA. This puzzle demonstrates the ultimate goal of this undertaking: to gain a better idea of why some interest groups – like the NRA – are able to build a politicized identity around a specific issue, while others are not.

My thesis is composed of two parts. Part I provides the requisite context and information related to the analysis that I present in Part II. Part I begins with a presentation of the relevant literature concerning the theories that underlie my own. Next, I explain my theory (section III), how it contributes to the existing literature (section IV), and what hypotheses it produces for my analysis of the NRA (section V). I then discuss my data sources (section VI) and methodology (section VII). I conclude Part I by outlining key portions of the NRA's history, from its founding until the present day (section VIII). In Part II, I start by detailing the results of my analysis of survey research on NRA members (section XIV) and the advertisements found in NRA magazines

(section X), and what kind of story they tell about NRA members. After that, I present the results of my content analyses of the features (section XI) and editorials (section XII) found in the magazines. Lastly, in section XIII, I summarize my findings, note limitations I faced, and discuss further implications of my work.

Part I

II. Literature Review

The concepts I review in this section set the stage for my analysis of an increasingly partisan, ideological, and identity-focused National Rifle Association. I begin by examining how activists come to take part in action on behalf of interest groups. I explain the collective action problem that groups like the NRA face when trying to motivate individuals to participate and I discuss the typical methods used to overcome the problem. Given that my thesis explores how the NRA is relying on social identity in a strategic manner for collective action purposes, I follow by providing a brief summary of the core facets of social identity theory, before delving into recent research on the formation of politicized identities. In this thesis, I treat partisanship as a salient social identity. I thus proceed to provide an overview of the scholarly debate surrounding the nature of partisanship. No examination of partisanship could be complete without an exploration of the role of ideology in explaining political attitudes and behavior. Most NRA members likely are not just Republicans, they are *conservative* Republicans. I therefore follow my discussion of partisanship by differentiating ideological self-placement from ideology and presenting new research on ideological social identity.

Having provided the necessary background on partisanship and ideology, I subsequently discuss scholarly discourse on elite-level polarization, mass-level polarization, and affective polarization. I next give a short history of trends in social sorting and its effect on the modern-day

compositions of the Democratic and Republican parties. After surveying these long-term trends, I engage with research on gun owners and gun politics. I show that political attitudes on guns can be explained by broader patterns observed in the sections on partisanship, polarization, and social sorting. I also survey new research that demonstrates that gun ownership may itself be emerging as a social identity. The actions of the NRA have also undoubtedly been influenced by macro-level political trends. Accordingly, I conclude the literature review by examining how interest groups have adapted to these changes in the political environment.

Getting Involved: How Organizations Engage Activists

In *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) Mancur Olson lays out a fundamental problem for any group attempting collective action: the group will produce public goods shared by all members, even though not all members have to contribute to the attainment of these goods. This means groups – in the pursuit of group-concentrated benefits – have to find a way to engage members to incur private costs like paying dues or writing letters. So, the question becomes: how do organizations go about attracting and cultivating members? In his seminal work on political organizations, James Q. Wilson (1973) argues that an individual’s tendency to participate in voluntary associations depends on a variety of social factors as well as personal attributes. Those with more resources are more able to dedicate time to join an organization (1973). Additionally, certain personality traits facilitate participation or indicate potential competence upon joining (Wilson 1973). Most interestingly as it pertains to my project, however, is that members of a “distinctive subconscious culture” – like gun owners – are more likely to join an association.

Hahrie Han (2014) distinguishes between two types of strategies used by associations in cultivating their membership: mobilizing and organizing. Mobilizers view activism in transactional terms, finding potential members among large swaths of the public and attracting

them with a well-developed pitch. They “allow people to self-select the activity they desire” (Han 2014, 15). Organizers, on the other hand, focus on the ways in which members undergo personal transformations upon engaging in activism (Han 2014). They may, for example, highlight opportunities for personal growth, leadership positions, or community involvement. Wilson (1973) argues that such membership incentives are necessary for organizational maintenance. Without them, it would be difficult to produce and sustain members’ cooperative effort. There are three general kinds of membership incentives: material, solidarity, and purposive incentives (Clark and Wilson 1961). Material incentives refer to tangible rewards, like discounts on airline tickets (Clark and Wilson 1961). Solidarity incentives are intangible rewards that derive from the act of associating. *Specific* solidarity incentives refer to awards provided to or withheld from individuals, like a particular office or honor, whereas *collective* solidarity incentives are provided to or withheld from the group as a whole, such as the development of friendship networks (Wilson 1973). Lastly, purposive incentives – also intangible – involve the sense of satisfaction members gain from contributing to a cause they find worthy (Clark and Wilson 1961). They differ from solidarity incentives in that they derive “in the main from the stated ends of the association” as opposed to the association itself (Clark and Wilson 1961, 135).

Mobilizers and organizers utilize membership incentives in different ways. Organizers make appeals to each type of incentive, though with an emphasis on solidarity incentives. Mobilizers, meanwhile, mainly focus on purposive incentives (Han 2014). The types of incentive offered may depend on the size of the group. Olson (1965) theorized that a large group oriented towards lobbying would have to sell “private or noncollective products” or provide “social or recreational benefits to individuals members” to have a source of positive inducements it could offer potential members (133). This is perhaps why many organizations use non-political means

to get members hooked before attempting to engage them in explicitly political ways (Han 2014). The Sierra Club, for instance, sponsors hiking expeditions, and the NRA offers gun safety courses. In his study of the pro-life movement, Munson (2008) finds that many pro-life activists start off without strong beliefs about abortion that they cannot articulate well and that a little under a quarter of them even start off as pro-choice. He writes: “individuals get involved in the pro-life movement by participating in pro-life events, not necessarily because they are thinking pro-life thoughts” (Munson 2008, 63). The hook is a crucial component of any interest group’s ability to attract and retain members.

An Overview of Social Identity Theory

Group membership plays a key role in social science research. It is a strong motivator of behavior and can therefore go a long way in explaining social psychology and social conflict (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In their seminal work on the matter, Tajfel and Turner (1979) conceptualize a group as any collection of individuals that: perceive themselves as being a part of the same social category; are emotionally involved in their shared definition of this social category; manage to reach at least some agreement in their assessments of the group and their own membership. Importantly, group identity is linked to self-esteem – group members internalize their group membership and develop a connection between their self-concept and their group (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Behavior towards others is often based on self-identification as part of a social category. Research has shown that this usually manifests itself in bias towards the in-group and prejudice towards the out-group (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Individuals can develop a sense of group membership even on the basis of highly trivial shared qualities, like the ability to better estimate the number of dots projected on a screen, and even then, they tend to

discriminate against the out-group and favor the in-group (Tajfel et al. 1971; Billig and Tajfel 1973).

Of course, individuals do not limit themselves to one group membership. For example, I categorize myself as German, American, male, a Penn student, and so forth. Many social identity theorists (e.g. Hogg and Turner 1987) have proposed that the biggest predictor of bias levels is the salience of the identity that is held. As such, if my group affiliation with Penn is more salient than my group affiliation with Germany, my positive feelings towards Penn students and negative feelings towards Princeton students will be stronger than my positive feelings towards Germans and negative feelings towards other Europeans. Salience is itself a product of other factors, like the feelings of loyalty one has for the group or the amount of times one is reminded of one's membership in the group (see Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

How Politicized Identities Are Formed

Individuals who hold politicized identities are more likely to take action on behalf of those identities (e.g. Klandermans 2014). Politicization often occurs at the collective level, however, and collective identity only becomes “politically relevant when people who share a specific identity take part in political action on behalf of that collective” (Klandermans 2014, 2). This being the case, it is first worth distinguishing social identity from collective identity. Social identity is an *individual* characteristic whereas collective identity is a *group* characteristic (Stekelenburg 2013). The two are tied together by group identification – when group identity is stronger, the beliefs and feeling encompassed within that group's collective identity are embodied more in an individual's social identity (Stekelenburg 2013). An individual might identify with a group but may identify differently with it than another group member, leading to differences in political behavior taken on behalf of that group. For instance, a member of the LGBT community who

identifies more strongly with others involved in the community will be more likely to “incorporate shared destiny, shared emotions, and enhanced efficaciousness” (Stekelenburg 2013, 1).

How are identities politicized? The first step of politicization entails that members holding the identity must be made aware of grievances they share (Simon and Klandermans 2001). These grievances manifest in different ways, such as in perceptions of illegitimate inequalities, suddenly imposed injustices, or violated principles (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Collective identity can itself intensify the salience of collective grievances because it “fosters homogenization and self-stereotyping processes that in turn transform ‘your’ and ‘my’ experiences into ‘our’ experiences” (Simon and Klandermans 2001, 325). The second step of politicization involves placing blame on some external identity – often a specific “out group” – for the group’s plights (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Again, the causal arrow can go both ways. Collective identity often serves to facilitate blame attribution by fostering self-stereotyping, which often leads to the utilization of simple explanations for complex events, where the in-group emerges as the victim and the out-group emerges as the villain (see Hewstone 1990). For politicization to occur, a third and final step needs to be taken: the in-group must level claims for compensation against the out-group which it has designated as its enemy (Simon and Klandermans 2001; Stekelenburg 2013). If the opponent group responds and meets the demand for compensation, no politicization will have occurred; if it does not respond, however, politicization process will continue, and the group will call on society at large to take a side in the conflict (Simon and Klandermans 2001; Stekelenburg 2013).

To put it simply: identities are politicized when they are *accessible* and made to *fit* into political contexts (Lacombe 2018). When this happens, political contests and debates over policies are framed “in terms of their impacts on the identity and values of the group (as opposed to their specific, technical effects)” (Lacombe 2018, 9) and as the type of group conflict described above.

Because politicized identities motivate individuals to take action on behalf of the issues they associate with their groups, they are a key component of political dynamics. Mason (2018), makes a very important contribution to this subject area in that she presents a revised approach to identity politics that considers how the effects of politicization are altered when identities are aligned. This means that identities should not just be examined in isolation, rather, they must also be considered in concert. For instance, how do the identities of a white, conservative, gun-owning male work *together*? The alignment of identities tends to strengthen all the identities involved, meaning a threat to one identity could heighten negative bias towards additional out-groups (Mason 2018). As these identities are politicized, political involvement becomes more about emerging victorious and defending the identity at stake than about advancing preferred policies (e.g. Huddy et al. 2015).

The Nature of Partisanship

Partisanship has long stood out as being a uniquely powerful predictor of American's political behavior and attitudes. In their seminal work on voting behavior, Campbell et al. (1960) treat partisanship as a psychological attachment of sorts – a “perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (133). According to Campbell et al., an individual’s partisan identification colors the way in which they experience and evaluate the political world. The exact nature of partisanship has been contested topic among American political scholars, however. Some take an *instrumental* view of partisanship, in which party preferences are rooted in rational choice theory (e.g. Downs 1957). This view holds that individuals’ political behavior is driven by the desire to maximize utility. Fiorina (1981) has argued that citizens keep a “running tally” of evaluations of party performances. Here, citizens base their vote choice on their perceptions of the effect of each party’s policy outcomes on their interests (Fiorina 1981) – party attractiveness is determined by the degree of policy agreement. Other

scholars have also found such a pattern at the macro-level, where “citizens in the aggregate reflect their experiences of politics onto the parties” (MacKuen et al. 1989, 1125).

Still, the instrumental view of partisanship has – especially in recent years – been heavily contested. Green et al. (2002) treat partisanship as a stable social identity and liken it to religious identity. Young adults might in part be attracted by a religion because of its doctrine, though when they start to feel a sense of belonging to that religious group, they also “absorb the doctrinal positions the group advocates” (Green et al. 2002, 4) and begin viewing opposing religions in a more adversarial manner. Much in the same way, partisans begin to self-identify as members of a partisan social group, absorb its doctrines, and feel prejudiced against opposing partisans. This view of partisanship holds that it is largely *expressive*. Citizens base their partisan affiliation on their stereotypes of Democrats and Republicans and whether the other groups they identify with fit into these stereotypes (Green et al. 2002, Achen and Bartels 2016). By affiliating other attachments with a certain partisan identity, partisanship becomes quite emotionally significant and changes less in response to political events or ideological considerations. It thus endures over time (Green et al. 2002, Achen and Bartels 2016).

The expressive view of partisanship has gained much traction in recent years because it is far easier to square with the fact that partisanship is indeed a very stable identity (Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Additionally, because the expressive model’s explanatory power is grounded within social identity theory, if research shows that partisan identification necessarily brings with it the psychological effects associated with group attachment, then the case for expressive partisanship is strengthened further. The research heavily points towards the social nature of partisanship. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) show that even the most salient culturally divisive issue, race, elicits less hostile and discriminatory responses than partisanship. When

coupled with the fact that partisans identify with their parties implicitly, at a visceral level (Theodoridis 2017), such findings – despite being quite shocking – do make a certain amount of sense. Mason (2015) has similarly shown that the strengthening of partisan identity increases levels of bias, activism, and anger. Others have found that partisans tend to perceive candidates from the opposite party as personally flawed and extreme, while ignoring increasing extremities in their preferred party’s candidates (Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016).

At some level, voters may simply support a party because they see that party as the team they root for. Using an experiment, Munro et al. (2013) show that participants who are presented two candidates with identical issue positions are more likely to vote for a candidate labeled with their own partisan preference. Recent research by Pope and Barber (2019) also supports the notion that partisan competition can be likened to a team sport. They capitalize on the uniqueness of Donald Trump, who frequently took multiple – often incongruent – issue positions to show that Republicans are more likely to support a policy when told that it is supported by Donald Trump, than when they are asked about the same policy without any reference to Trump’s position (Pope and Barber 2019). This holds true for both liberal and conservative policy positions. These findings fit in nicely with research that has identified partisans as being more likely to use motivated reasoning to confirm their pre-existing partisan beliefs (Taber and Lodge 2006; Bisgaard 2015, Erisen et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, proponents of the instrumental model can also point to different types of empirical support. Consequently, some scholars have offered compromise positions. Huddy et al. (2015), for example, find that while the expressive model of partisanship explains campaign involvement more than the instrumental model, instrumental partisanship could still drive political involvement, especially between elections, when focus could be more drawn to specific issues.

This indicates that the predictive power of both models may vary depending on other things, like political conditions. As noted by Mason (2018), however, the “current climate in political science is one that generally accepts the social nature of partisan identity,” despite “allowing for the ability of individuals to understand some issues and apply this to their political choices” (47).

What About Ideology?

If the expressive model of partisanship is mostly accurate, what does that say about citizens’ ideological preferences? First, it is worth distinguishing policy preferences from ideological self-placement. A citizen may, for example, have very conservative policy preferences but not necessarily self-identify as very conservative. Ellis and Stimson (2012) differentiate between *operational* and *symbolic* ideology. Operational ideology refers to actual policy preferences and values, while symbolic ideology simply refers to the “liberal” or “conservative” label that is adopted by the individual (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Phillip Converse (1964) famously concluded that the American mass public is “innocent of ideology” because most of its members cannot structure their beliefs in such a way that they form consistent ideologies. Ellis and Stimson (2012) provide support for this notion by finding that Americans like to call themselves conservative but generally prefer liberal policies. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) show that actual ideological constraint is only found significantly within segments of the population that are deeply immersed in and engaged with politics. Because being truly ideological requires individuals to be both informed and involved, a high threshold is set for real ideological outlooks. (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Many more Americans identify as liberal or conservative than hold consistently liberal or conservative policy preferences. This entails that the distinction between self-placement and preferences mentioned above is crucial.

Recent research indicates that ideology may be a social identity. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) note that ideological identification, to an extent, resembles a social identity, given that “liberal” vs “conservative” can easily function as an “us” vs “them” dichotomy. Malka and Lelkes (2010) conducted an experiment which suggests that subjects likely use their ideological identity (separate from their ideological preferences and partisanship) to inform themselves of what position to adopt for a newly politicized issue. Social identity theory demonstrates that all that is needed for an identity to form is a sense of belonging to a group and a sense of others not belonging to the group, a criterion which ideology can clearly meet. A conservative may identify with other conservatives socially despite not holding particularly conservative values and positions. Mason (2018) finds “that it is the ‘otherness’ of ideological opponents, more than issue-based disagreement, that drives liberal-versus-conservative rancor” (867).

The Nature of Polarization

Scholars tend to agree that elites have polarized significantly since the 1970s (e.g. Han and Brady 2007; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015). There are a multitude of non-mutually exclusive explanations for why this is the case, including: retirement and electoral losses by a unique group of post-war moderate legislators who had to balance the differing ideologies of their national party and their constituencies (Han and Brady 2007); the nationalization of elections resulting from closer competition for the House, in which any one district could drastically sway the nature of the legislative agenda and a situation in which voters are more inclined to vote for parties and not for candidates (Bonica and Cox 2018); tight restrictions on the parties’ campaign finance capabilities, which prevent the purely winning-oriented parties provide more financial support to pragmatic, moderate candidates (La Raga and Schaffner 2015). Others have explored the role of gerrymandering in causing polarization (Mann 2006), the influence of specific figures like Newt

Gingrich (Theriault and Rohde 2011), as well as the influence of party activists and interest groups (e.g. McGirr 2001; Charnock 2018).

There is far more debate around the degree of polarization among the mass-public. Fiorina et al. (2004) in *Culture War* contest the narrative put forth by the mainstream media – which is incentivized to play up tensions – that the public has grown increasingly polarized. The authors claim that the data paint a vastly different picture and that *close* division must not be conflated with *sharp* division (Fiorina et al. 2004). According to the authors, Americans tend to seek common ground on issues. Most Americans believe abortion, for instance, should be legal, but they also think context-dependent regulation is sensible (Fiorina et al. 2004). The other side of the debate, best encapsulated by Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), contends that ideological polarization has increased significantly and that there exist clear cleavages between Democrats and Republicans, red states and blue states, and the religious and secular. A particularly important part of the debate concerns the fact that people who are more engaged politically tend to be more ideologically polarized, while only the least interested in politics tend to exhibit the center-seeking behavior described by Fiorina (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). If these politically engaged people are overrepresented in politics, then more ideologically extreme candidates will be elected. For Fiorina et al., such an argument is misguided. They argue that voters, at the end of the day, have a choice between two candidates and will have to pick the one they prefer, even if that candidate's issue positions are not congruent with the voters' issue positions. Voters' behavior changes because elites present them with a different set of conditions. By this logic, because candidates are not fixed over time, election to election changes in returns cannot be used to infer anything about how voters are changing (Fiorina et al. 2008).

Nonetheless, Fiorina et al. (2004) concede the existence of partisan sorting. Partisan sorting refers to the finding that over recent decades, liberals have become far more likely to identify as Democrats and conservatives have become far more likely to identify as Republicans – people have moved into the ‘correct’ camp (e.g. Levendusky 2009). This phenomenon is largely elite-driven. As elites polarized and sorted into the right camps, the public followed suit. This is because voters frequently take cues from elites, meaning they are likely to adopt the ideologies of their preferred party’s elites. A sorted elite ensures that voters are less likely to receive mixed signals – party’s issue positions become more obvious to voters and voters can more easily link their desired outcomes to a party (Levendusky 2009). As was mentioned earlier, it is crucial to consider how identities work in tandem. Partisan sorting, because it is rooted in social identities, has itself strengthened political identities and contributed to mass polarization (Mason 2015). The partisan and ideological identities start to reinforce one another, creating or strengthening a sense of in-group identity (Mason 2015). For example, a democratic identity may be reinforced by liberalism, strengthening that identity as well as the levels of bias, activism, and anger associated with it (Mason 2015). Accordingly, identity alignment also drives what has been termed “social” or “affective” polarization.

Scholars who study social polarization would argue that polarization is rooted less in issue attitudes and may instead be rooted in affect. This conception of polarization is based on social identity theory and ties into much what was written about partisan and ideological identities earlier. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) find that partisans on both sides increasingly dislike and distrust one another, to the point where they do not like the idea of their children marrying someone from the “wrong” party. The affect that plagues both sides has significant normative consequences. It sustains elite polarization and stifles compromise. Partisan voters are more likely to reward

partisan behavior (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011). Partisan affect can also seep into everyday life and impact interpersonal relationships (e.g. Huber and Malhotra 2017). Mason (2018) highlights the three key components social polarization: partisan prejudice; political action in response to threat of loss of status; emotional reactivity on behalf of the partisan group.

In a world where the news media frequently highlights the partisan rancor of elites (e.g. Levendusky and Malhotra 2016) and such vitriolic media coverage is easier than ever to access (e.g. Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017), it is perhaps understandable that the public has developed the tendency to dislike those of the other side. If people are only exposed to the most extreme members of a group, the qualities of those extreme members is what they will associate with the group. Ahler and Sood (2018) find that while everyone – regardless of party – overestimates the share of stereotypical party members in each party (for example labor union members in the Democratic Party and evangelicals in the Republican party), out-party perceptions tend to be much more biased. Republicans, for instance, assume that 38% of Democrats are LGBT (the actual figure is around 6%) and Democrats assume that 44% of Republicans earn more than \$250,000 (the actual figure is around 2%) (Ahler and Sood 2018). Most strikingly, the authors document that “those most interested in politics hold the most skewed perceptions of party composition” (Ahler and Sood 2018, 979).

Social Sorting

Explanations of social sorting often begin by detailing the partisan realignment that took place most drastically in 1964. Very few issues are able to fundamentally disrupt party coalitions. Even highly salient events and issues like the Iraq War and the financial crisis ultimately did not significantly impact party compositions. Race, however, was able to do so. In the 1950’s, Republicans were generally more racially liberal than Democrats (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

However, Democrats' progression on racial issues had already begun by that time. Some historians have argued that Democrats set their shift towards racial liberalism in motion beginning with Truman's advancement of his civil rights recommendations in 1948 (Sitkoff 1971; Sundquist 1983). Sitkoff (1971) writes that Truman's actions "increased the pressure on future Presidents, especially Democrats, to support civil rights" (615). Everything changed in the 1960's. After the death of President Kennedy – who had been relatively centrist on civil rights issues in an effort to placate the Southern Democrats (Mason 2018) – Lyndon Johnson (a Southerner who had been vocally against Civil Rights in 1949) chose to embrace racial liberalism and push forward the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Act divided both parties, but arguably more so the Democrats. President Johnson is famously reported to have said that the Democrats had "lost the South for a generation."⁸ His opponent in the 1964 presidential election, Barry Goldwater, was one of six Republican Senators to have voted against the Civil Rights Act. It followed that five (previously heavily Democratic for a century) states in the South overwhelmingly voted for Goldwater. These events "reshaped the party system, replaced one dominant alignment with another and transformed the character of the parties themselves" (Carmines and Stimson 1989, 11).

Southern whites were not the only ones to become more Republican. By 1988, the aggregate partisanship of northern whites had shifted such that the GOP "enjoyed a plurality of support among the northern white electorate" (Carmines and Stanley 1992, 219). Black voters, on the other hand, recognized after the civil rights debates of the 1960's that there were clear policy-based reasons to support the Democratic Party. As noted by Mason (2018), however, "this policy-based affiliation has since grown into a distinctly social partisan divide." She cites Mangum

⁸ "The Long Goodbye," *The Economist*, 2010

(2013), who finds that racial identity is a stronger predictor of partisanship than racial policy preferences.

As this racial sorting was taking place, another form of sorting began to widen the partisan cracks: religious sorting. The religious right emerged as a key player within the Republican Party, making “born-again” Christians (otherwise known as evangelicals) a powerful Republican constituency. Beginning with Reverend Jerry Falwell’s registration of millions of new voters, the Christian Right had “infiltrated” the Republican party such that there already existed a sizable network of conservative evangelical activists when televangelist Pat Robertson launched his presidential bid in 1988 (Moen 1992). National leaders like Robertson and Falwell certainly had significant political influence and agenda-shaping power. But just as crucial were what Lydia Bean deems “local captains,” who “served as flesh and blood prototypes of what it mean to be a good Christian” – which usually meant exhibiting socially conservative values – and who thus played an “important role in fostering political homogeneity among white evangelical Protestants” (Bean 2014, 165). As the Christian Right’s priorities became more and more embedded within the Republican party’s agenda and evangelical activists became a more visible portion of the Republican electorate, the public became increasingly aware of the religious differences among the parties (Mason 2018). Nowadays, the composition of supporters of both parties reflects this divide: Democrats have a more secular electorate and Republicans have a more religious, Christian electorate (Mason 2018). Partisan and religious identities have also thus begun to reinforce one another.

In addition to race and religion, income brackets have increasingly divided on partisan lines. The differences in income between Republicans and Democrats doubled from 1952 to 1992 (Mason 2018). McCarty et al. (2003) put it quite bluntly: “high income Americans have

consistently, over the second half of the twentieth century, been more prone to identify with and vote for the Republican party than have low income Americans, who have sided with the Democrats” (29). Two decades later, in 2012, this gap widened even further (Mason 2018). The parties are now more divided than ever on income, race, and religion/religiosity. As a result, the social distance between parties has grown wider and wider. Partisans now often live in more homogenous communities (e.g. Nall 2015), find ways to align their religious identity with their partisan identity and find churches that match their politics (Margolis 2018), and use ideologically congruent news sources (Iyengar and Hahn 2009).

How Do Guns Play Into All This?

Recent evidence shows that gun ownership is emerging as a salient political identity (Joslyn et al. 2017). This of course implies that the Republican Party’s ownership of gun rights issues most likely advantages it among the share of the electorate possessing the gun owner identity. Have gun owners sorted into the Republican Party? It is the case that gun ownership overwhelmingly predicted vote choice in the 2016 presidential election⁹ and has increasingly predicted Republican presidential support across elections since 1972 (Joslyn et al. 2017). In light of partisan sorting, it becomes even more understandable that gun owners overwhelmingly vote Republican. After all, groups like the NRA have put in exhaustive effort to shape gun rights into a culture war issue, placing it within existing conservative cultural frameworks (Melzer 2009).

The evidence suggests that gun control has indeed become a more partisan and more ideological issue. Gun control attitudes have polarized significantly, both among Members of Congress and in the general electorate (Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). Partisanship and

⁹ “Nothing Divides Voters Like Owning a Gun,” The New York Times, 2017

attitudes towards guns and gun policy have essentially become intertwined, with a wide gap between Democrats and Republicans on their concern with gun control or protection of gun rights, respectively.¹⁰ If gun control is being framed as a conservative issue and conservatives are increasingly identifying as Republicans, then this intertwining makes perfect sense. In fact, ideologically sorted Republicans are the most likely to believe that the “right to own guns is essential to their own sense of freedom,” with the opposite being true for their Democratic counterparts (Parker et al. 2017). Interestingly, this trend holds true for non-gun owners as well (Parker et al. 2017), which provides strong support for the notion that the protection of gun rights has increasingly become a conservative and Republican position, not just an issue for gun owners more broadly.

Polarization and Interest Groups

Interest groups have played both a contributory and reactive role when it comes to polarization. They have numerous tools at their disposal to shape and reinforce polarization. Interest groups have significant power to serve as gatekeepers in the candidate selection process as well as in their ability to lobby. They often tie themselves to the parties when doing so and work through them to accomplish their policy objectives (Karol 2015). Charnock (2018) describes the tendency of interest groups in the 1950’s and 1960’s to attempt to change the parties by offering ideological scorecards, where legislators are “scored” based on their roll call votes. Scorecards like this were meant to serve as a form of ideological “quality control.” Incumbents felt the need to improve their scores, while outliers were pressured to switch to the “correct” party or to retire (Charnock 2018). This practice continues today. The NRA, for example, publishes letter grades both for

¹⁰ “The U.S. Has Never Been So Polarized On Guns,” FiveThirtyEight, 2017

officeholders (based on their voting records) and for candidates (based on how they fill out an NRA questionnaire that is sent to them).

Bonica (2013) develops method a for ascertaining the ideal points of Political Action Committees (PACs) in an effort to better understand their contribution behavior. He finds that the “vast majority of PACs incorporate ideological proximity into their contribution decisions” (Bonica 2013, 302). He also notes that some groups will be more service-oriented and will condition their support strategically based on things like what committees a Member of Congress sits on. Groups like the NRA, on the other hand, “condition primarily on ideology” when considering who to donate to (Bonica 2013, 307). This finding is line with Wand (2007) who shows that after 1994, most special interest groups began to focus their campaign contributions on electing candidates from the party that most represented their interests. Before 1994, interest groups tend to exhibit “investor behavior,” in that they chose to allocate contributions to members of both parties, with the deciding factor being whether the candidate was likely to win (Wand 2007). Their strategy was more access-oriented (in an attempt to gain influence) than partisan. Levendusky (2009) also documents the alignment of interest groups with parties, locating it within the process of elite polarization. According to Levendusky (2009), this alignment further polarized the parties on issues. The logic behind this is simple: if the NRA, for example, aligned itself with the Republicans, then presumably the Republicans would move further right on gun rights. This has the effect of providing voters with a clearer picture of where the parties stand on any given issue (Levendusky 2009). The NRA *did* align itself with Republicans. It follows that this alignment has made it quite obvious to voters what the GOP’s gun policy preferences are and has established quite plainly that Republicans are the party of gun rights.

III. Theory

In Olson's (1965) depiction of the free-rider problem, benefits are considered in economic terms. That is, members join a group because they have something to *gain*. In the case of labor unions, for example, members receive insurance, certain welfare benefits, seniority rights, and protection from employer malpractice (Olson 1965). Members receive these benefits regardless of whether they worked actively towards the union's goals. It is thus rational for them to count on everyone else to do their part but not actually contribute themselves. Mason's work highlights the need to further explore the role played by purposive incentives (incentives that arise when members feel a sense of satisfaction by contributing to a cause they deem worthy) in counteracting the collective action problem. An entirely new dimension is added to the collective action problem when interest groups begin to cultivate an identity among their members, especially when that identity is reinforced with a salient identity like partisanship. As has been mentioned previously, Mason (2015, 2018) has demonstrated that identities that reinforce each other can create and strengthen the sense of an in-group identity. This dimension demands questioning of whether the cost-benefit calculation involved with choosing to join an interest group and participate on its behalf is purely economic in nature. When interest group membership is tied to a sense of self-concept and self-worth, simply acting on behalf of the group may be a benefit. The chance to surround oneself in a likeminded partisan community – a non-economic benefit – might be a crucial factor in deciding to join and contribute to an interest group.

Mason's framework becomes especially intriguing as it pertains to the ways in which interest groups may knowingly take advantage of reinforcement. Individuals who hold aligned identities are more susceptible to action-driving emotions, like enthusiasm and anger and are thus more likely to engage in politics (Mason 2015, 2018). She writes: "the biggest motivator for

political engagement is not the issue itself, but the community around the issue” (Mason 2018, 121). Certain interest groups may thus have reason to tap into members’ existing identities, affiliate them with their specific cause, and attempt to align those identities with a particular party. From this proposition follows a core idea of this project: that the composition of an interest group affects the extent to which it can do so. I posit that more homogenous groups are able to better cultivate identities around the specific issue they advocate for among members. This is done for the purpose of cultivating a politicized social identity that can be easily spurred to action.

Application to the NRA

The NRA has tied gun rights to the Republican Party and to the conservative movement. It has spent decades doing so and it has generally understood how to get its members on board. The organization’s communications tap into a nostalgic sense frontier masculinity, which is depicted as being constantly under threat by freedom-hating liberals or Democrats (Melzer 2009). For example, in the October 2018 issue of the NRA’s political advocacy magazine, *America’s First Freedom*, NRA President Oliver North warns of “the Democrat Party’s progressive socialists seizing control of the House and Senate and derailing every pro-Second Amendment measure and conservative judicial nomination” (NRA 2018). The organization generally frames defenders of the Second Amendment as freedom-loving, rule-of-law-respecting ‘average Joes’, while opponents are depicted as government-dependent radicals with no regard for American traditions (Lacombe 2018). Clearly, these descriptions are reminiscent of conservative culture war talking points – conservatives love freedom and do not rely on government, while liberals are either urban elites or nanny state beneficiaries who need to be coddled by the government. In the NRA’s 2017 video, “We Don’t Apologize for the Truth,” spokesman Grant Stinchfield divides America into two factions: the “violent left” who want to burn down the country, and “those of us who believe

in freedom.”¹¹ This dichotomy makes it very clear that the “us” Stinchfield is referring to also necessarily refers to the political right, given that it is placed in opposition to the “left.”

Since the 1970s, the NRA has spent more on internal communications than almost every other interest group and has often used these communications to nurture a perpetual “crisis atmosphere” (Spitzer 2018). Its usage of framed threats illustrates this point quite well. The NRA frequently includes threats in its messaging to induce anxiety and spur action. The usage of such threats also ultimately benefits the Republican Party, both because of the NRA’s pro-Republican framing and because of the Republican Parties issue-ownership of gun rights (see Albertson and Gadarian 2015). In essence, members will respond to the threats by mobilizing for the Republicans and against the Democrats. These facts go hand in hand with the NRA’s strategy of relying more on membership mobilization than political contributions for its success. Perhaps it is also of no surprise that the most partisan NRA members are also the most likely to be heavily involved with the NRA and are the easiest for it to mobilize (Melzer 2009). In many ways, this underscores the importance of studying my theory concerning the crucial strategic role of identity reinforcement. When the NRA activates its members, it is not just activating gun-owners, it is activating extremely conservative Republicans *who are also* gun-owners. It is ensuring that partisan and ideological identities do not come into conflict with the gun-owning identity it cultivates among its members. By contributing to the alignment of the gun owner identity with a partisan identity, the NRA is also increasing the strength of gun owners’ partisanship in the process and thus making them more mobilizable.

Given that interest groups generally benefit from increased membership, some may argue that the NRA should be incentivized to cater to new groups in an effort to increase membership,

¹¹ “We Don’t Apologize for Telling For Telling the Truth,” NRA on YouTube, July 2017

reducing homogeneity in the process. Under my theory, however, these increases in heterogeneity should come at a cost to political efficacy. In their study of environmental activists, Fowler and Shaiko (1987) find that grassroots mobilization is modestly successful as a lobbying tool for environmentalists. Why is it only “modestly” successful? They indicate that factors like group member characteristics serve as significant constraints for the overall capability of grassroots mobilization (Fowler and Shaiko 1987). They write: “although group members held a common goal and shared many basic attributes, they differed in their ideological and partisan beliefs about how to pursue their objectives” (Fowler and Shaiko 1987, 490). The lack of unification in members’ political outlooks made it more difficult to mobilize effectively. By this logic – at least in terms of grassroots mobilization – it is in the NRA’s best interest to reinforce and unify the political identities of its members.

The ideas underlying this strategy are congruent with social identity theory. Brewer (1991) has noted that “groups that become overly inclusive or ill-defined lose the loyalty of their membership or break up into factions of splinter groups” (Brewer in Hogg and Abrams 2001, 249). In effect, too much heterogeneity can threaten a social group’s survival. In the NRA’s case, too much heterogeneity could threaten its ability to cultivate politicized gun-owner identities among its members. Even if the NRA is reaching out minority groups and women, this does not necessarily mean it is abandoning strategic identity reinforcement. It may just be less concerned with associating gun ownership with immutable characteristics like race and sex and more concerned with associating gun ownership with partisanship. Homogeneity, specifically *partisan* homogeneity, serves as a useful device for mitigating the collective action problem.

IV. Contribution to the Literature

There is an ever-growing amount of research on the role of social identity in political behavior. As has been indicated by Kalin and Sambanis (2018, 240), “the concept of identity has offered something of an organizing principle to unify a vast amount of research in the social sciences.” Within political science, partisanship is an identity that has received a lot of attention in recent years. Recent work, including the work of Liliana Mason (2018) which I discussed in my review of the literature, focuses on the alignment between political identities, such as partisanship and ideology. Mason’s work mainly focuses on voter behavior, as well as the indirect effects identity alignment and reinforcement have on the country’s political well-being. To the best of my knowledge, not many scholars have examined how political actors might strategically take such reinforcement into consideration. I intend to add to the literature by seeing how one of the most important players in our political system – interest groups – might do just that.

In addition, my work contributes to the relatively small body of research that has focused on the NRA. The history of the NRA has been well-documented, as has its influence on the public policy process (e.g. Sugarmann 1991). Likewise, scholars have noted how effectively the NRA activates its base (e.g. Schuman and Presser 1981, Spitzer 2018). Lacombe’s (2018) thorough and important work has shown that the NRA has deliberately cultivated a politicized identity among its members which it can activate when necessary. He does not, however, really address whether the salience of members’ existing identities is a key component of the NRA’s success in cultivating such an identity. In his conclusion, Lacombe mentions in passing that the NRA has “surely co-opted and expanded some identity themes that already existed among other groups,” citing the organization’s attempt to associate gun ownership with rural and military lifestyles (Lacombe 2018, 31). He does not once mention conservatism, nor does he focus at all on partisan identity or

whether the homogeneity of the NRA's base matters. This being the case, I hope to build on Lacombe's research by taking these features into consideration and investigating how they factor into the NRA's successes in building a politicized identity among its members. While there has been scholarly acknowledgement of increases in the NRA's partisanship, these changes have been conceptualized in more traditional ways by looking at things like the NRA's endorsements. I am broadening the scope of what it means for the NRA to become partisan by seeing how it tries to incorporate *other* identities (like gun ownership) under the larger identity of partisanship through reinforcement. Lastly, most of the scholarly works on the NRA and its membership are more than a decade old and Lacombe's (2018) recent analysis only goes through 2008. Given the current climate, in which gun control is an increasingly salient issue and in which the NRA has faced much media scrutiny, it is well-worth looking into the NRA's evolution until the present day.

V. Hypotheses

Before proposing hypotheses specific to the NRA, I will present hypotheses generalizable across interest groups. These serve as useful initial roadmaps for thinking about how my theory would apply to a particular group, like the NRA. First, just because interest groups *can* cultivate politicized social identities among their members does not necessarily mean that they *will* do so. For example, it could be that a strategic use of identity reinforcement would aid an interest group in cultivating an identity around its main issue, but that it has not actually put into place such a strategy. Basically, it is possible that a potential issue-identity lies latent unless an interest group chooses to make appeals to existing politicized identities and activate the issue-identity. A narrow interest group formed around chicken farming may consist mainly of Southern, white, Republican males, but a partisan-associated chicken farming identity may never emerge if the group's communications are nonpartisan and are not coded with any other appeals. An additional key factor in determining

whether homogeneity will matter is the political environment at a given time. In the 1970's, for instance, pro-life and pro-choice identities did not yet map well onto partisanship (Stimson 2004). This meant interest groups would have a more difficult time trying to link salient issue identities to a particular partisan identity. All this being the case, two related hypotheses (and one sub-hypothesis) must be considered:

H1: Groups with more homogenous compositions are better able to build a partisan politicized identity around their respective issues.

H2: The extent to which a group deliberately takes into account members' existing identities and attempts to reinforce them determines how successfully it can cultivate such an identity.

H2.1: Groups are constrained by the contemporary political environment.

Not all individuals hold highly aligned identities. Those with cross-cutting identities identify with a broader range of groups, making them more tolerant towards those less similar to themselves (e.g. Roccas and Brewer 2002). Interest groups composed of people with cross-cutting identities are disincentivized to cultivate a politicized identity in the manner described above. Groups that function as 'larger tents' (in that they house more types of people) risk angering their members if they decide to tap into other elements or correlated elements of identity if these elements are not highly correlated enough. Imagine an environmental group that consists of people from all around the country who care about preserving nature and wildlife, as well as fighting climate change. If this group sent out a mailer blaming the lack of legislation for combatting climate change on rural Americans, that group risks aggravating and alienating its rural constituency. With this in mind, one more hypothesis can be developed:

H3: Groups with more homogenous memberships have greater latitude for making identity-based political appeals to their members.

Due to partisan sorting, it has become exceedingly rare to find conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans. It is not just partisan sorting which has occurred, however. Mason's (2018) conception of "social sorting," as has been discussed previously, concerns the alignment of numerous identities that end up under one partisan umbrella. Over the last few decades, the amount of such sorting has been increasing. This leads to a final hypothesis, related to the idea encapsulated within **H2.2**:

H4: The processes described in *H1-H3*, to the extent that they are occurring, will be occurring more over time, as sorting has increased.

An in-depth, generalizable study of interest groups and identity reinforcement would require much more time and resources than I have at my disposal. While the general hypotheses presented above are useful for understanding how my theory would apply to interest groups more broadly, I am unable to test them. Below, I have reconfigured them so that they pertain specifically to the NRA:

H1: The NRA's relatively homogeneous composition is a significant factor in its ability to develop a partisan politicized gun-owner identity among its members.

H2: The NRA knowingly takes into account members' existing identities and attempts to reinforce them in its effort to cultivate such an identity.

H2.2 The NRA's approach to identity cultivation is constrained by exogenous factors related to the contemporary political environment (see **H4**)

H3: The NRA is able to make identity-based political appeals to its members because it will face little-to-no backlash from its homogenous membership.

H4: The processes described in *H1-H3*, to the extent that they are occurring, will be occurring more over time, as sorting has increased.

VI. Data

I utilized both survey research and NRA communications to conduct my analyses. I used polls from Gallup and Pew across a 28-year time that include data for four key variables I was concerned

with: gun-ownership, NRA membership, partisanship, and ideology. They also all ask respondents to provide important demographic information. Unfortunately, there are no polls with representative samples that ask questions on gun ownership or NRA membership between 2000 and 2013. This was not a significant problem as it pertained to the information I hoped to draw from the data, which I elaborate on more in the methodology section. Still, it meant that I could only make inferences about trends in the attitudes and characteristics of NRA members between 1999 and 2013. It should also be noted that for the 1993, 1995, 1999, and 2013 polls I relied on relatively small samples sizes – NRA members simply do not make up a large enough portion of the national adult population for there to be high quality data captured about them in thousand-person samples. The sample sizes of respondents who personally identified as NRA members that I could work with for these years ranges between 38 and 70. Luckily for me, however, the March and April waves of the 2017 Pew American Trends panel sampled 1,269 gun owners. This allowed me to conduct a robust analysis of recent patterns of political characteristics among NRA members and gun owners.

NRA communications to its members are the main source of data I used to evaluate my hypotheses. Specifically, I turned to *American Rifleman* (also referred to simply as *Rifleman*), as well as *America's First Freedom* (*AFF*). *Rifleman* is the NRA's primary magazine, which it has distributed to all of its dues-paying members since 1923. While imbued with political content and rhetoric, especially in its editorials, most of the magazine's articles are interest-based and deal with shooting and firearms more so than politics. *AFF*, on the other hand, was launched in 2000 and serves as the NRA's political advocacy magazine. The NRA describes it as a "news magazine designed for the membership of the NRA with the goal of delivering professional, moving, and accurate journalism that promotes knowledge about the threats to our Second Amendment Rights"

(America's First Freedom). Both magazines are rich with potential data and their time spans allowed me to conduct a thorough examination of the ways in which the NRA's approach to gun owner identity cultivation has changed over time.

It would have been futile – both theoretically and practically – to attempt to gather and survey every *American Rifleman* issue published since 1923. Instead, I started my analysis from 1976, one year after the founding of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action (NRA-ILA) and one year before the famed “Revolt at Cincinnati,” an event that marked a significant change in the NRA's vision (see section VIII). While issues from 2010 onward are published online, older issues are surprisingly hard to find. After trying without success to obtain the issues through other researchers, library resources, and the NRA itself (I was told the NRA library was closed to outside researchers “due to previous issues”), I decided the best course of action I could take would be to randomly select a smaller number of issues to study and purchase them online. Starting with 1976 for *American Rifleman* and 2002 (I could not locate earlier issues) for *America's First Freedom*, for every other year I drew a random number between one (January) and twelve (December) to compile a list of magazines I would order. In cases where the particular monthly issue I wanted was not available, I simply drew another random number and tried again. Including issues available online, I ended up with a corpus of thirty-one magazines.¹²

VII. Methodology

Looking at NRA Members

Before digging deeper into my hypotheses, I aimed to examine to what extent gun-owning NRA members differ from gun owners not a part of the NRA. The utility of doing so was twofold: I

¹² I should have had thirty-two magazines to work with but the 1988 issue of *American Rifleman* I ordered never arrived. Despite numerous attempts to obtain it, it has remained “stuck in transit” with USPS for nearly two months (at the time of writing).

would be able to determine what identities are more common among NRA members (with a particular interest in partisanship and ideology) and how these have changed over time *and* I would be able to see how these two groups differ in their political behavior and attitudes. I did not expect to be able to make causal determinations. Rather, I hoped that by discovering whether NRA members truly are more homogenous (and thus more Republican/conservative) than other gun owners and whether they are more politically engaged, I would have preliminary support for my theory. At the very least, such findings would suggest that my hypotheses were worth pursuing.

A Brief Discussion of Content Analysis

Given my aim of discerning trends in the NRA's communications over time, it was vital that I could systematically track the messaging characteristics I was interested in. The best option I had for doing so was through a content analysis. Content analysis is an analytical technique that serves to translate impressions of content into quantifiable data (e.g. Berelson 1952; Neuendorf 2002). It allows for the quantification of characterizations of textual data. Typically, strictly quantitative content analyses "seek to answer questions about *what* and *how many*," whereas qualitative content analyses go further, in that they emphasize the recontextualization of the patterns that are found – *why* and *how* did they "come to be?" (Morgan 1993, 116). Researchers conducting purely quantitative content analyses begin by developing a "consistent set of codes" that are used to "designate data segments that contain similar material" (Morgan 1993, 115). The frequencies of these codes are then counted. Qualitative content analyses, on the other hand, leave more room for subjectivity. A researcher conducting a qualitative content analysis would also develop a systematic classification schema, though would use this to "identify themes and patterns" in the service of subjective interpretation of the content (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278).

My research goals were such that merely searching for the appearance of certain words and then providing numerical summaries would have been of little use. Because I was dealing with abstract concepts like identity framing, I was inherently restricted to hand-coding subjective interpretations. I operated under the assumption that the quantitative descriptions I derived from the NRA's magazines were meaningful and that my interpretations of the content conveyed the NRA's intentions. This means that my content analysis was necessarily qualitative in nature. It also means that I faced certain difficulties. Most significantly, my interpretations of the NRA's messaging may not match the interpretations made by other researchers, the NRA's audience, or the writers themselves. Moreover, being that this is a senior thesis and my resources were limited, I was unable to have a fellow researcher follow my coding instructions to see the extent to which the instructions are replicable. While this would always be an issue, I aimed to mitigate it as much as I could by making my coding instructions exhaustive whenever possible. For instance, in evaluating whether an editorial was political in nature, I listed all of the possible conditions that had to be met for the article to be coded as political (see Appendix A for full coding instructions). I also included example cases for each coding possibility for each dimension. So, if the dimension concerned whether the editorial includes any explicit designation of gun owners as Republicans, I provided an example of what such a designation may look like:

“The Supreme Court was one of the reasons many NRA members and other gun owners strongly supported Donald Trump in November's election, fearing what kind of justice Hillary Clinton might put on the high court”

Lastly, when appropriate, I grounded my categories in existing political science literature. For example, when gauging whether the in-group is depicted as patriotically American and/or that they

hold American values, I specified that the article in question must include appeals to one of the five foundational elements of American political culture defined by Wilson and Dilulio (2008).

Content Analysis of Editorials

H1 and **H2** are closely related. **H1** holds that a homogenous membership facilitates the NRA's building of a politicized identity around gun ownership and **H2** holds that the NRA is deliberately taking into account members' existing identities and reinforcing them. I initially assessed these two hypotheses together. I aimed to do a deep dive into the NRA's identity-building and politicizing language and evaluate how much it relies on identity reinforcement in crafting identity-building language. Lacombe's (2018) work provided me with criteria for identifying identity-building language. Such language entails attributing and emphasizing positive characteristics to the in-group (members/ gun owners) while attributing and emphasizing negative characteristics to the out-groups (gun control advocates). It also involves framing the gun debate "as a battle between competing identities and the values associated with them" (Lacombe 2018, 9).

For this part of my research, I relied on the sections of the NRA magazines that directly address the reader (the same approach taken by Lacombe): the editorials usually found at the beginning of each magazine, often in the form of columns by top-ranking officials at the organization. I hoped to ascertain just how much the NRA, when addressing the reader, defines gun owners and NRA members in ways that seem to reinforce a particular set of political identities while excluding certain other types of identities and associating those identities with gun control advocates. Frequent employment of that kind of classification would be evidence in favor of **H2**. Furthermore, while difficult to prove definitively, it would point towards it being the case that the NRA's method of identity-building would be difficult to replicate *without* reinforcement, providing at least some support for **H1**.

I first established whether the editorial was political. Then, I coded whether the editorial employed an identity frame, as was defined earlier. Next, I coded for the following identity-based categories: in-group ideology, in-group partisanship, ingroup American, outgroup ideology, outgroup partisanship, outgroup anti-American. For ideology and partisanship, I differentiated between whether the editorial explicitly or implicitly expressed that the ingroup or outgroup held those identities. I included the category about American-ness as an indicator for the salience of partisan out-group animosity. As noted by Hunter (1991) in his seminal work on the culture war, both sides in the culture war tend to monopolize the symbols of legitimacy. They depict themselves as defending traditional American institutions and the American way of life while depicting the opposition as threatening these traditions. Painting the out-group as anti-American or American-values and the in-group as the defender of those values thus functions as a form of identity-building language. It is an outgrowth of the rancor and division that has accompanied social and partisan sorting which has resulted in an electorate that views victories by the other side as disastrous (e.g. Mason 2018). Consequently, it reinforces the idea that out-group partisans cannot be trusted with country's future.

Accurately gauging the NRA's deliberate acknowledgement and tactical use of its homogenous membership (*H2*), however, requires more supporting evidence than just counts of depictions of the in-group and out-group as holding certain identities. My coding schema includes a "call to action" category, which was coded "1" when the editorial studied included an explicit call for members to engage politically in the service of gun rights. Lacombe (2018) has the same category in his analysis and finds that the inclusion of threats in editorials strongly predicts calls to action. I hoped to gauge whether calls to action are more likely when paired with identity framing and ascriptions of certain political labels to the ingroup and outgroup. Should it be more

likely that the NRA calls on its members to act in editorials where it also uses identity-reinforcing language, then this would provide much stronger support for **H2**.

Finally, **H4** holds that over time, editorials will be more likely to apply identity frames to their discussions of political identities and will be more likely to link gun-owners with a Republican partisan identity and anti-gunners with a Democratic partisan identity. The 42-year timespan of my corpus of NRA magazines allowed me to track these trends over time. Of course, I am unable definitively attribute such changes over time to an increase in social sorting. I cannot separate them from other exogenous circumstances (**H2.1**, which I am not directly testing¹³) or even endogenous strategic decisions by the NRA. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the NRA would make explicit partisan appeals in its editorials if it did not believe that gun owners had become more homogenous in their partisanship.

Content Analysis of Magazine Features

If the NRA sees its own membership as largely holding aligned identities, its content should reflect the concerns of those other identities. Theoretically, its target audience is gun owners and the magazines are meant to be gun-related. Practically, however, what topics fall under the jurisdiction of gun owners might be more expansive. The scope of what the NRA is writing about could extend well past just gun-related issues. If this is the case, the NRA is implicitly acknowledging that its membership likely cares about these other issues. And if those issues are politically charged, it speaks to the responses the NRA expects these topics to evoke its members and tells us indirectly *who* the NRA thinks makes up its membership. For example, should the NRA choose to write about flag burning, it likely assumes that its readers are generally conservative and have a

¹³ The overarching theory behind **H2.1** underlies the logic behind the more specific **H4** so I used **H4** as a proxy for testing **H2.1**.

nationalist streak to them. Here is where **H3** comes into play. Other groups, such as the AARP, might be inclined to stay away from the culture war and from highly partisan debates because they could quickly start offending people in a way that the NRA might not. If this were to be the case, it would most likely be a result of the differences between the two organizations in the composition and identity-alignment among group members.

To test to what extent the NRA’s scope extends past its designated issues, I looked at every other feature in the magazine’s feature-specific table of contents and first coded the category under which the feature’s headline and sub-headline (as they appear in the table of contents) indicated it would best fall. Table 1 below shows the corresponding codes. I then located the item in the magazine and simply listed the first topic being talked about that did not directly pertain to the magazine’s stated focus. The key word here is “directly”. In the NRA magazines, entities like the

Table 1. Headline Categories

0	Default / item falls under magazine’s designated topic (guns) but is <u>not political</u> in nature <i>Note: this can be fairly broad - a gun-related article could be hunting, new gun technology, etc.</i>
1	Item falls under the magazine’s designated topic (guns) but it is political in nature. In this case, the item is <u>political in nature</u> if it relates to <u>gun policy</u> .
2	Item is political in nature but has little or nothing to do with the magazine’s designated topic (e.g. “How Does Venezuela Like Socialism Now? Having seen her own country mired in socialism, pro shooter Gabby Franco doesn’t want the United States to follow the same path”)
3	Item is a lifestyle piece. This includes subjects like health and fitness, tourism, leisure, fashion, decorating, and culture.
4	Other

Democrats and Michael Bloomberg will tend to be discussed in relation to guns or gun policy, so they would not be included in the category. Something like “Black Lives Matter” or “flag burning” may be tenuously linked to gun control activism by a writer but would not count as directly relating to the magazine’s focus and would thus fall under the category. I next coded the first political topic related to guns that was written about, if there was one. Compiling this list was meant to give me interesting data for qualitatively assessing what kinds of topics the NRA thinks its readers want to read about or will relate to. It also shows whether or not the NRA is not worried about deviating from its headlines. It could be the case that articles with non-political contain political content. If the NRA is frequently alluding to political subjects outside of its domain or injecting politics into seemingly non-political articles, the implication is that the NRA does not think it risks angering its members by doing so. The NRA then probably believes its membership most likely feels the same way about these topics as it does.

Content Analysis of Advertisements

I wanted to know which types of advertisers see themselves as being of interest to NRA members. This was not to provide direct support for any of my four main hypotheses in particular, but to supplement my analyses of NRA-produced content. Trends in NRA advertising could provide significant insights into about the ways in which businesses think about the general direction of the NRA’s communications. Businesses expect to reach a certain type of person when advertising in the NRA’s magazines and it is worth knowing who they believe such a person is and what they believe will appeal to such a person, as well as how this has changed over the years. As the NRA has become more political and more partisan, I thought it would be compelling to see whether the types of groups willing to advertise in NRA materials have become narrower. It could be the case that mass-marketed products have reduced their marketing in NRA magazines because such

products have to be less politically-charged by design. It might also be true that no one outside of NRA members pays attention to what is going on in NRA magazines, so perhaps advertisers do not really expect any backlash for advertising there.

I hand-coded every single advertisement found in an issue, which was very time-consuming, so I used a four-year interval between issues as opposed to the two-year interval I used for my other analyses. I first coded what type of product was being advertised in the advertisement in question. The list of product types and their corresponding codes is shown show in Table 2. Next, I included a category that serves as an indicator for whether the product is mass-market or not. My criteria for whether the product is mass-market is whether the coder – in this case, me – has “heard of the product or service.” This is undoubtedly a flawed measure, especially when one considers that this undergraduate student may not be familiar with big brands from 1976. Still, for the purposes of this project, the measure suffices, and is much more logistically feasible than attempting to cross reference every advertiser with some sort of external list (that may or may not exist) operationalized to define mass market businesses.

Table 2. Advertisement Categories Included in Coding Instructions

0	Guns/bullets/gun accessories (e.g. silencer, grip)
1	Sport/recreation/hunting/outdoor
2	Events (non-NRA, e.g. YAF conference)
3	Collectibles (e.g. coins)
4	Security service/hardware (e.g. Lifelock)
5	Insurance/legal services
6	Health-related products (e.g. vitamin supplement, life alert)

7	The product could be included in two or more of the above categories
8	Consumer products & services that do not fit into the above categories (e.g. personal accessories, beer, car rentals)
9	Other, non-consumer products (e.g. business-to-business)

For my next step, I coded for various other characteristics. I assessed whether the advertisement’s language made any sex-specific appeals or references and if so, what sex it was appealing to. Similarly, I coded for appeals to American values. I also included a category where I coded whether the advertisement was at all political in nature. Finally, I examined the image or images chosen for the advertisement: what was the sex of the person(s) featured in the advertisement?; what was the race of the person(s) featured in the advertisement?; did the advertisement depict American imagery?

VIII. A Brief History of the NRA

In August of 2017, NRA spokesperson Dana Loesch appeared in an NRA-produced video in which she threatens to “fisk” the “untrustworthy” and “dishonest” New York Times.¹⁴ 146 years prior in 1871, William Conant Church, a former Washington correspondent for the Times, co-founded the National Rifle Association with George Wood Wingate. The ironic fact that a New York Times reporter co-founded the NRA – an organization that has accused the mass media of loving mass shootings¹⁵ and has ominously warned journalists that their “time is running out”¹⁶ – highlights an important point: today’s NRA is vastly different than the NRA of yesteryear. The strategic

¹⁴ “NRA threatens to ‘fisk’ The New York Times, but that’s not what people thought it said,” Kansas City Star, 2017

¹⁵ “NRA spokesperson: ‘Many in legacy media love mass shootings,’” CNN, 2018

¹⁶ “NRA issues threatening video warning journalists ‘your time is running out,’” The Independent, 2018

calculation by the NRA's leadership to root the organization deeply in conservative and Republican politics has been a crucial factor in the shaping of conversations over gun politics today. For this reason, it is well-worth asking how the NRA got to this stage. Has it always been a partisan – never mind a *political* – organization? The NRA's rise to an ultra-political, hyper-partisan behemoth can be traced to the mission outlined in the days of its founding, the personalities of principal characters in positions of authority, as well as to external historical developments.

In the section that follows, I survey the NRA's history, starting with its early days as a pseudo-military marksmanship improvement operation. I explain how exogenous circumstances have influenced the NRA's membership levels, its relationship to guns, and – most importantly – its forays into politics. I document how its timid initial involvements in the politics of gun control changed as in-fighting within the organization grew stronger and as a string of assassinations in the 1960's brought gun control to the forefront of American politics. I explain how these tensions culminated in the 1971 "Revolt at Cincinnati," an event which immeasurably changed the trajectory and the public perception of the NRA. Following my discussion of this defining moment, I put into context the NRA's embrace of conservatism in the Reagan era and its subsequent ascent to a position of vast influence in Washington. I proceed to show how there is recent historical precedent that demonstrates the NRA's lack of invincibility. I show how the NRA plunged into instability when the terms of key figures in its leaderships ended and a new less capable leadership team took over. Lastly, I discuss the organization's reconfiguration and path to relative stability when the duo of Wayne LaPierre and Charlton Heston assumed key leadership positions within the organization.

Beginnings

George Wingate and William Church were both Civil War veterans, each having served as senior officers for the Union. They were appalled by the lack of marksmanship skills displayed by their troops during the war and were concerned that the United States would trail behind the rest of the world in terms of its shooting ability (e.g. Sierpien 2006; NRA 2013). The NRA's main purpose, as defined by Church, was to "promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis" (NRA 2013). Church wanted to model his approach towards the NRA after the National Rifle Association of the United Kingdom, which had been founded by volunteer militia members to "improve marksmanship and encourage participation by 'citizen-soldiers'" (Sugarman 1992, 26). The NRA's early admiration for the "citizen-soldier" and its role as a quasi-military organization is evident in its 1871 New York City charter, which includes a provision for providing firearms training to the New York National Guard, as well as to "the militia of other states" (Sugarman 1992, 26). Funding from the New York State Assembly allowed the NRA to set up a practice ground in Long Island that also served as the location for the first NRA shooting matches (NRA 2013). New York politicians helped the NRA get on its feet, though they also knocked it right back down. The state government, after the election of a new governor, was opposed to the promotion of marksmanship in the state and even more so to the NRA's veneration for the citizen-soldier. It forced the NRA to suspend its operations and deed its shooting range back to the state (Sugarman 1992, NRA 2013).

The NRA's experience with the New York state government only increased its drive to become a national organization. It swore never again to depend on the "whims of a single state government" (Sugarman 1992, 27). The early 20th century saw a growth in interest across the country for shooting competitions, leading to a reactivated and revitalized NRA. Competitive shooting would be the NRA's main focus throughout the first half of the 20th century and local

charters and NRA-affiliated shooting clubs sprung up around the US (Melzer 2009, Sierpien 2006). The association benefited heavily from a 1905 bill signed into law by President Teddy Roosevelt that allowed it to buy leftover military rifles at cost and sell them to its members and other civilians (Trefethen 1967, Melzer 2009). Roosevelt and numerous other administrations that followed his also provided financial support to the NRA for annual national shooting matches (Melzer 2009). Membership levels surged in the late 1940's after soldiers returned from World War II. During the war, many soldiers had developed a keen interest for guns. Most of these ex-soldiers were interested in hunting and not competitive shooting, so the NRA recruited these members with a firearms safety program, leading to approximately half of its membership consisting of hunters by 1950 (Davidson 1993). This spurred the NRA to move further away from competitive shooting and military-related training and instead become a “more generic sportsman league” (Melzer 2009, 36).

The NRA's Pre-Revolt Gun Control Politics

In its early days, the NRA was far less radically pro-gun than one might expect. The NRA always opposed gun control – it first criticized gun control in 1911. Even so, the NRA used to be much more open to gun regulations, sometimes even assisting the government in crafting gun control legislation (Winkler 2011). The early 1930's, a period of prohibition-induced chaos and violence, saw NRA leadership signaling to Congress that it would support even “drastic” gun control bills that included regulations on “machine guns, submachine guns, sawed-off shotguns,” and other “dangerous and deadly weapons” (Sugarman 1992, 30). NRA president Karl Frederick did not even have a position on whether or not the Second Amendment imposed limitations on gun control. When brought on to testify about the National Firearms Act (1934) and asked about that facet of the Second Amendment, he claimed to have “not given it any study from that point of view”

(Winkler 2011). Such a statement represents a far cry from the NRA's more recent rhetoric and strategy, in which it portrays the Second Amendment as being the foundation for freedom. Its current position is that once the right to bear arms is infringed upon, all other freedoms are lost soon after. It should be noted that the NRA leadership's moderate public tone differed vastly from that of the NRA's communications to its members. Its flagship magazine, *American Rifleman*, referred to the National Firearms Act as "vicious" and called on members to engage in a letter-writing campaign (Sugarmann 1992, 31; Lacombe 2018).

Pre-revolt NRA leadership often relied on such a strategy of cunningly trying to feign care in an effort to withstand pressure, all while simultaneously mobilizing members. Nothing illustrates this better than the NRA's actions during the 1960s. The 1940's and 1950's were a relatively quiet time as they pertained to federal gun control legislation. The turbulent 1960's, meanwhile, ushered in a new era of pro-gun control sentiment and action galvanized by numerous high-profile assassinations. The lack of a major gun debate during the previous 30 years came to an abrupt halt when Lee Harvey Oswald, who had purchased his rifle through a mail-in advertisement in the NRA's *American Rifleman*, assassinated President John F. Kennedy in November of 1963 (Sugarmann 1992). NRA leadership begrudgingly claimed to support some gun control actions proposed in the assassination's aftermath, such as the banning of mail-order rifle sales (Winkler 2011). In its messaging to members, however, the NRA stuck a different note. It consistently urged members to organize and defeat the threats against gun rights (Sugarmann 1992). One *American Rifleman* editorial, for instance, argued that a disarmed America would benefit the communists, who would still have access to guns and be the first to take advantage of an America weakened by gun control legislation.

The pressure on the NRA increased drastically in 1968 and basically became insurmountable when Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were both shot and killed by assassins. The NRA's old guard then wanted to get out of the gun debate entirely and focus the NRA's attention on shooting for sport (Melzer 2009). Franklin Orth, the NRA's executive vice president at the time, endorsed the Gun Control Act of 1968, saying that "the measure as a whole appears to be one that the sportsmen of America can live with" (Winkler 2011). Eventually, following the 1972 assassination attempt on Alabama Governor George Wallace, NRA leadership even endorsed the idea of banning so-called 'Saturday Night Specials,' cheap, low quality guns that were easy to obtain. This was the final straw for a more radical faction within the NRA's ranks. This faction was growing tired of what it perceived to be the old guard's wishy-washy stance on gun rights and wanted instead to plunge the NRA deep into the politics of gun control.

The Coup

On March 3, 1931, 17-year-old Harlon Carter shot a Hispanic teenager. In 1975, the same Harlon Carter took over as the first director of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action (ILA), the self-described "lobbying arm" of the organization. Prior to assuming this position, Carter had served as NRA vice-president, president, and on its executive council. Carter made it his mission to contrast his vision for the NRA with the vision of the sports-touting old guard. In a 1972 speech at the NRA headquarters, Carter passively aggressively referred to the incumbent leadership's endorsement of the Saturday Night Special ban as "unfortunate," before castigating it out-right: "the latest news from NRA embraces a disastrous concept... that evil is imputed to the sale and delivery, the possession of a certain kind of firearm, entirely apart from the good or evil intent of the man who uses it and/or (2) the legitimate use of a handgun is limited to sporting use" (Carter 2006, 137). This speech represented a watershed moment in the NRA's history. It signaled to all

involved that a minority of radicals in the NRA was ready to take over and redefine the purposes and meaning of the organization.

In the years following Carter's speech, the Second Amendment fundamentalists in the new guard began to take more and more issue with the actions of the recreation-focused old guard. They saw the incumbent leadership as restraining the ILA, both politically and financially. They were disgusted by a sentence in the NRA's *Fact Book on Firearms Control* which "characterized the Second Amendment as being of limited practical utility as an argument against gun controls" (Sugarmann 1992, 48). Additionally, they could not believe that the NRA would not join in on the 1970 Citizens Against Tydings Campaign meant to unseat the progressive, vehemently pro-gun Senator Joseph Tydings. These events lead the new guard to feel betrayed and frustrated. By 1976, they began to view the old guard as "actively destroying" the organization from within (Sugarmann 1992). The incumbent leadership planned to relocate the NRA's headquarters from Washington to Colorado Springs and hoped to build a "National Outdoor Center" there.¹⁷ The new guard viewed this as a retreat from politics and as an abandonment of the cause (Sugarmann 1992). Their worst fears were confirmed when a report commissioned by the NRA's leadership was leaked. This report stated that in order to raise the \$30 million dollars necessary to build the Outdoor Center, the "NRA must attract to its cause powerful leadership that is today either repelled or put off by the NRA's image as the leader in the fight against gun control" (Sugarmann 1992, 40).

Carter wanted to *home in on* this controversial image, not retreat from it. He previously told NRA members in a letter just how he planned to tackle the fight over gun control: "we can win it on a simple concept —no compromise, no gun legislation."¹⁸ The old guard grew

¹⁷ "How NRA's true believers converted a marksmanship group into a mighty gun lobby," The Washington Post, 2013

¹⁸ Ibid.

increasingly weary of his extremism, as well as that of his fellow members in the new guard. They proceeded to fire 74 of employees to clear out the dissenters, an event which the dissenters coined the “Weekend Massacre.” Harlan himself was not fired because he was deemed too popular among regular members, though he resigned in protest.¹⁹ Following these events, the newly founded and independent Federation for the NRA planned an outright coup to “oust the Old Guard leadership and place control of the organization in the hands of the members” (Sugarmann 1992, 50). The Federation’s leadership proceeded to attack the NRA in other gun-focused outlets. The NRA’s old guard tried to restore calm and called for unity, but the damage had already been done

On May 21, 1977, two thousand NRA members met in Cincinnati. The Federation, “armed with walkie-talkies and bull horns” were ready to take over (Sugarmann 1992, 50). New bylaws were enacted to make the executive vice president position a member-elected office, as well as to make the protection of gun rights the NRA’s primary cause. In addition, more funding was to be provided for the NRA-ILA and the planned move to Colorado was cancelled. By the end of the night, the old guard had been unseated and Carter was to take over the organization. This “Revolt at Cincinnati” has become a legendary part of NRA lore and represents one its proudest moments. A 2017 issue of *American Rifleman* commemorated the 40th anniversary as a “unique and proud moment in the history of the association when members rose up in a spontaneous movement and took back their NRA from internal players who were hell-bent on abandoning the defense of the right to keep and bear arms which they found embarrassing” (NRA).

¹⁹ “The Teen Killer Who Radicalized the NRA,” *The Daily Beast*, 2017

After the Revolt

The decade after the revolt represented a golden age of sorts for the NRA. Upon taking over, the orchestrators of the coup shifted the group far to the right and latched on to the wave of evangelical conservatism sweeping the nation in the Reagan era (Winkler 2011). Membership levels went through the roof, as did income levels. The NRA had finally achieved internal stability and seemed to grow stronger each year. Quite peculiarly, the NRA's surge came in a time where legitimate threats to gun rights were rare and where gun ownership and hunting levels were declining (Melzer 2009). The NRA had multiple policy wins during this time, including the passage of the 1986 Firearms Owners' Protection Act and the defeat of the original Brady Bill in 1987. By the late 1980's, however, things started to change for the worse. The leadership that took over once Harlon Carter's tenure ended in 1985 was inept. This could not have come at a worse time. Pressure against the NRA was building after the Brady Bill started to grow in support. The assassination attempt on President Reagan and the so-called "cop-killer bullets" dominating the news cycle had made the public far more sympathetic to gun control.

In 1991, the position of executive vice president was handed off to Wayne Lapiere, who still holds the position today. Lapiere, a lobbyist by trade, has guided the NRA through plenty of rocky times since taking over. He oversaw a renewed focus on the states, in which the NRA aided in the enactment of "right-to-carry" laws across the nation (Melzer 2009). Lapiere and the NRA also served as perpetual thorns in the side of President Bill Clinton, who hoped to pass modest gun control legislation. Despite the NRA's vehement opposition, Clinton was eventually able to sign both the Brady Bill in 1993 and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 1994. After these losses, the NRA experienced another awful year in 1995. Shortly after Timothy McVeigh – an NRA member – perpetrated the Oklahoma City bombing, Lapiere infamously referred to federal law enforcement agents as "jack-booted thugs" in a fundraising letter (unrelated to the bombing). This

caused an exodus of NRA members, including the public resignations of high-profile lifetime members like former President George HW Bush.²⁰

Lapierre only dug the whole deeper for himself when he apologized and disavowed the comments he had made. The fanatic contingent of the NRA saw this as giving in and appearing ashamed of the organization's mission. The organization plunged into chaos until a Hollywood legend and "icon of frontier masculinity" stepped in to save the day: Charlton Heston (Melzer 2009, 41). Heston campaigned with Lapierre to purge the NRA of its most radical component and improve its image. Heston and Lapierre won the battle, with Heston replacing a fanatic as vice president before becoming president a year later. He was a hugely charismatic man and was able to revive the NRA's reputation while still appeasing the anxious members who worried that threats to gun control rights loomed at every corner. Because of Heston, the organization lifted itself up once again, gaining countless new members, adding to its resources, and once again making its influence heavily felt in Congress (Melzer 2009). He crafted the organization into the one we recognize today.

Part II

IX. The Political Attitudes and Behavior of NRA Members

Melzer (2009) documents that NRA members are overwhelmingly white, conservative, Republican, and male. However, his work is mainly qualitative and relies on interviews with a relatively small sample of NRA members and observations made at NRA meetings. For this reason, in this section I look at survey research and examine whether Melzer's impression is correct. I examine what kind of people are more likely to join the NRA. I also see how NRA

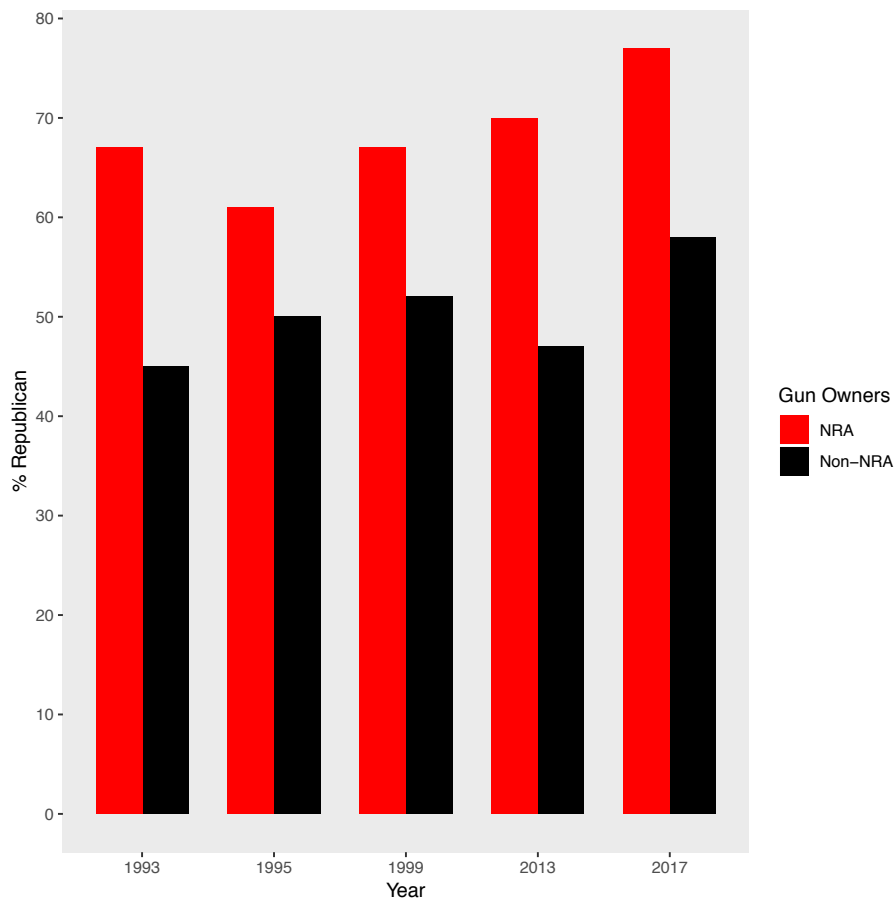
²⁰ "Letter of Resignation Sent By Bush to Rifle Association," The New York Times, 1995

members and non-NRA gun owners are different from one another and how these differences have changed over the last two-and-a-half decades. Lastly, I explore how these differences manifest themselves in the political behavior of both groups.

Trends in the Racial and Political Compositions of Both Groups Over Time

It is overwhelmingly the case that NRA members identify with the Republican Party. Notably, this relationship has only grown stronger over the years. These findings are visualized in Figure 1 below. In 1993, when the NRA was vehemently battling Bill Clinton, 67% of its self-identified members considered themselves Republicans.²¹ By 2013, this number jumped to 70%. It reached

Figure 1. Share of Republicans Among Gun Owners by NRA Membership



²¹ My analysis considers those who “lean” Republican to be Republican (see Schmidt 2017)

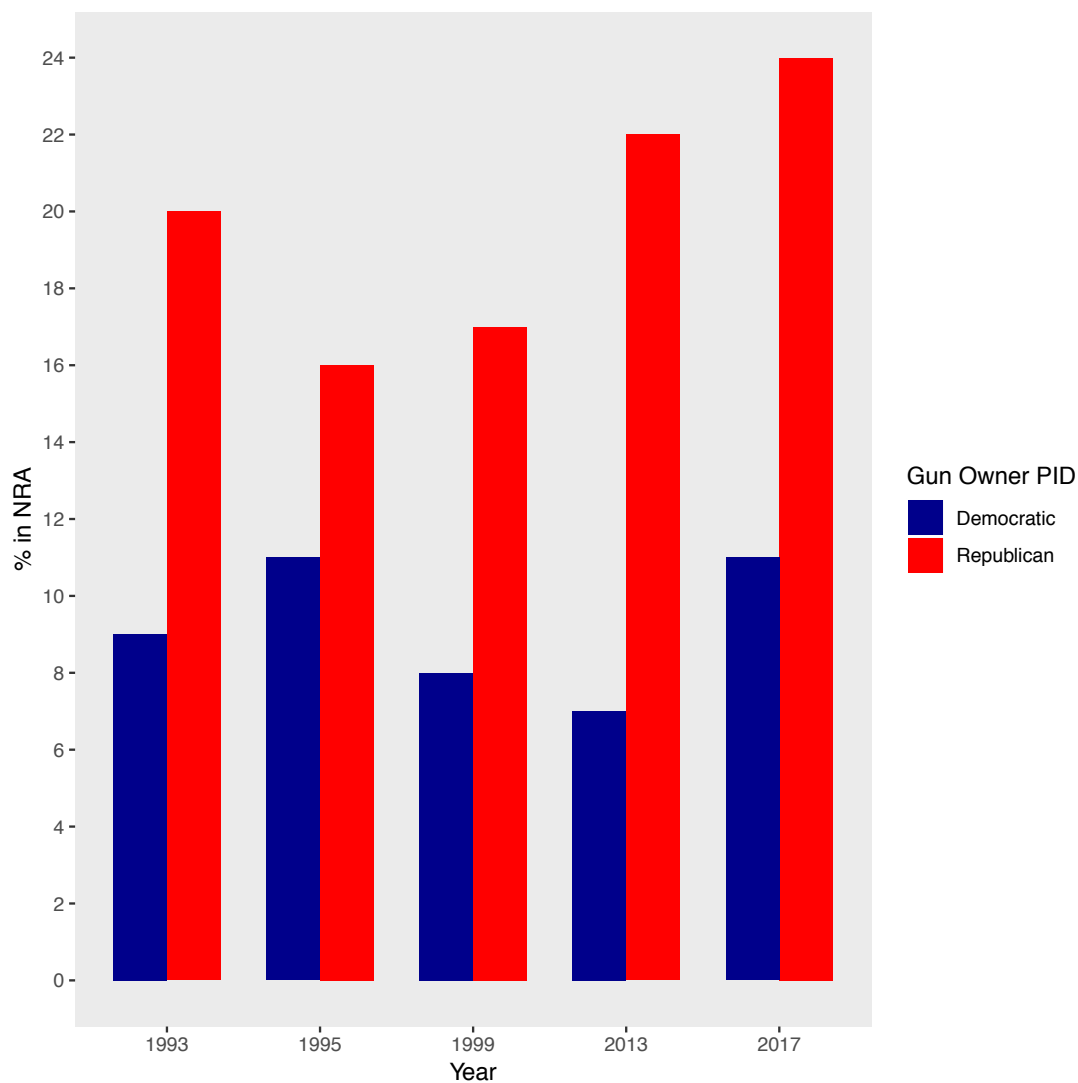
a whopping 77% in 2017. The partisanship of gun owners not in the NRA, on the other hand, has been slightly more volatile, ranging between 45% Republican in 1993 and 58% Republican in 2017. The data show that gun owners not in the NRA were also becoming more Republican from 1993 through 1999, though the share of Republican non-NRA gun owners dropped a sizeable 5 points between 1999 and 2013. The difference in the percentage of gun owners not in the NRA and gun owners in the NRA who are Republican is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in 2017 and 1999. This being the case, I can pretty confidently reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the two groups in their partisanship. NRA members are clearly more likely to be Republican than their non-NRA counterparts. To test whether this difference in partisanship has grown larger over time, I pooled my data from the 1990s and 2010s. Table 3 presents results for a logistic of regression where the sample is restricted to gun owners. Republican partisan identity is the dependent variable. The independent variables are an indicator for whether the gun owner took the survey in 2010 and an indicator for whether the gun owner is an NRA member. I also include a variable capturing the interaction between these two variables. I find that NRA members in the 2010s are indeed more likely to be Republican. This change over

Table 3. Results for Pooled Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Republican
NRA Member	0.057 (0.052)
2010s Respondent	0.158*** (0.022)
NRA Member X 2010s Respondent	0.147** (0.061)
Constant	0.322*** (0.016)

Observations	2,375
Log Likelihood	-1,640.866
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,289.731
<hr/>	
<i>Note:</i>	* ** *** p<0.01

Figure 2. Probability of NRA Membership Given Year and Party Identification



time is statistically significant.

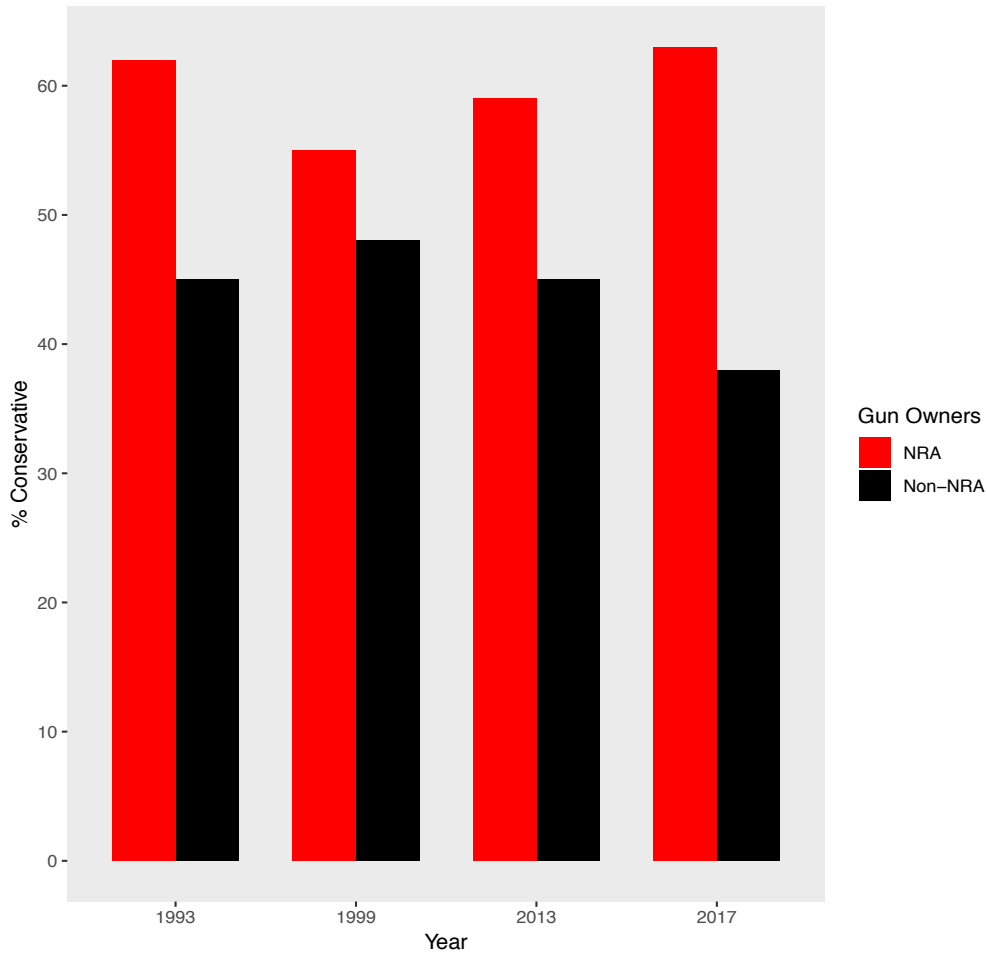
It is also useful to present these variables in the opposite direction – that is, looking at the probability of being an NRA member given a year and party identification. Those results are displayed in Figure 2 above. When looking at Democratic and Republican gun owners across the

years studied, it is evident that Republican gun owners have a far higher probability of joining the NRA than Democratic gun owners. This relationship has also generally grown stronger over time, with 24% of Republican gun owners being NRA members in 2017 compared to 22% in 2013, 17% in 1999, 16% in 1995 and 20% in 1993 (this high number is likely due to the 1993 poll having by far the smallest sample size of gun owners). The over-time trend in NRA membership for Democratic gun owners is bumpier than for Republican gun owners, but for each year, Democratic gun owners are much less likely to be NRA members than Republican gun owners. The gap between Democratic gun owners and Republican gun owners in their share of NRA membership has also mostly gotten larger over the years. In 1995 and 1999, this difference was 5 points and 9 points respectively, compared to 15 points and 13 points in 2013 and 2017. From these findings, it is likely safe to assume that Republicans find NRA membership more enticing than Democrats do and are thus more likely to become members.

What about ideology? Figure 3 makes it quite clear that NRA members are also far more likely to identify as conservatives than their gun owning counterparts not in the NRA. In 1993, 62% of NRA members identified as either “conservative” or “very conservative,” whereas 45% of non-NRA members identified this way, a 17-percentage-point difference. This difference shrunk to 7 points in 1999, when a low of 55% of NRA members labeled themselves conservative while non-NRA gun owners became 3 percentage points more conservative. By 2013, the share of conservatives among non-NRA member gun owners again dropped slightly to 45%. Then, by 2017, it dropped even further, to 38%. NRA members, meanwhile, became more conservative by 2013 than in 1999 and then peaked in 2017, with 63% of NRA members considering themselves either “very conservative or conservative.”

Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix B break down the ideological identification of both groups even further. Interestingly, the modal ideological identification for gun owners not in the NRA for all samples except 1999 is “moderate.” Still, gun owners, even those who do not have NRA membership, are overwhelmingly more conservative than they are liberal. This holds true for all four years for which ideology data are available. NRA members, however, are far more likely to

Figure 3. Share of Conservatives Among Gun Owners by NRA Membership



identify on the extreme side of the spectrum, as very conservative, than non-NRA gun owners. Table 4 provides the probability a conservative, moderate, or liberal gun owner is an NRA member for each given year. In 1993, 19% of conservative gun owners were also NRA members and 24% of liberal gun owners were NRA members. By 2017, the share of conservative gun owners in the NRA increases by 9 points, to 28%. The share of liberal gun owners in the NRA, on the other

hand, drops by 13 points, to 11%. Just as was the case with Republican gun owners, conservative gun owners are more likely to be drawn towards the NRA, while liberal gun owners are increasingly repelled by it.

Table 4. Probability of NRA Membership Given Year and Ideology

Year	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
1993	24%	7%	19%
1999	17%	8%	14%
2013	10%	14%	21%
2017	11%	13%	28%

In terms of race, the NRA is actually less white in 2017 than it was in years prior (see Table 3 in Appendix B). The findings in Table 5 show that both white and non-white gun owners have become more likely to join the NRA in recent years. 15% of white gun owners in 1993 were NRA members, compared to 18% in 2013, and 20% in 2017. The large jump in NRA membership from non-white gun owners may in part be a result of recent NRA diversity initiatives, like a 2014 plan to place an “unprecedented focus” on Hispanic outreach. More likely, however, is that it can be attributed to the fact that there were just more non-white owners in the larger sample size of gun owners in the 2017 poll.

Table 5. Probability of NRA Membership Given Year and Race

Year	Non-White	White
1993	7%	15%
1995	8%	14%
1999	8%	14%
2013	5%	18%
2017	16%	20%

A Closer Look at 2017

Pew’s 2017 American Trends Panel Survey is by far the most exhaustive recent investigation into gun owners and has a much larger sample size of gun owners and NRA members to work with

than the other surveys do. This allowed me to further examine other demographic differences between NRA members and non-NRA gun owners. In addition, because it includes questions on a variety of political behaviors and attitudes not included in the other surveys, I was able to make interesting determinations about the ways in which NRA Members and non-NRA member gun owners differ in their *political engagement*. Finally, I benefited from the recency of this survey, which was taken when sorting-induced in-party homogeneity among Republicans reached new highs.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for All Respondents

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Republican	3,844	0.46	0.50	0.00	1.00
Ideology	3,909	3.01	1.11	1.00	5.00
White	3,728	0.81	0.39	0.00	1.00
Male	3,920	0.50	0.50	0.00	1.00
Trump Approval	3,864	1.16	1.29	0.00	3.00
Income	3,854	2.24	0.76	1.00	3.00
Follow News Closely	3,901	0.51	0.50	0.00	1.00
Trust Media	3,910	0.74	0.44	0.00	1.00
Contacted Official	3,911	0.08	0.27	0.00	1.00
Donated	3,902	0.10	0.30	0.00	1.00
Rural or Small Town	3,913	0.44	0.50	0.00	1.00
Trust Government	1,951	0.28	0.45	0.00	1.00
Evangelical	3,907	0.27	0.44	0.00	1.00
College Graduate	3,920	0.54	0.50	0.00	1.00
Never Attended College	3,920	0.15	0.35	0.00	1.00
Age 50+	3,916	0.60	0.49	0.00	1.00
Age 18-29	3,916	0.11	0.31	0.00	1.00

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Gun Owners

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
NRA Member	1,268	0.21	0.41	0.00	1.00
Republican	1,246	0.66	0.47	0.00	1.00

Ideology	1,267	3.38	1.04	1.00	5.00
White	1,212	0.86	0.35	0.00	1.00
Male	1,268	0.67	0.47	0.00	1.00
Trump Approval	1,251	1.69	1.31	0.00	3.00
Income	1,252	2.29	0.73	1.00	3.00
Gun Essential	1,268	0.73	0.45	0.00	1.00
Follow News Closely	1,262	0.53	0.50	0.00	1.00
Trust Media	1,267	0.63	0.48	0.00	1.00
Contacted Official	1,266	0.10	0.30	0.00	1.00
Donated	1,264	0.15	0.36	0.00	1.00
Gun Identity	1,267	0.21	0.41	0.00	1.00
Rural or Small Town	1,267	0.53	0.50	0.00	1.00
Trust Government	638	0.25	0.43	0.00	1.00
Evangelical	1,265	0.34	0.47	0.00	1.00
College Graduate	1,268	0.46	0.50	0.00	1.00
Never Attended College	1,268	0.17	0.38	0.00	1.00
Age 50+	1,267	0.65	0.48	0.00	1.00
Age 18-29	1,267	0.08	0.27	0.00	1.00

Tables 6 (entire sample) and 7 (sample restricted to gun owners) contain unweighted descriptive statistics for all of the variables used in this analysis. Ideology, Trump Approval, and Income are the only variables not coded as indicator variables. Those variables are coded as follows:

- Ideology: 5 = Respondent identifies as strongly conservative, 4 = Respondent identifies as conservative, 3 = Respondent identifies as moderate, 2 = Respondent identifies as liberal, 1 = Respondent identifies as very liberal
- Trump Approval: 0 = Respondent strongly disapproves of Trump, 1 = Respondent disapproves of Trump, 2 = Respondent approves of Trump, 3 = Respondent strongly approves of Trump
- Income: 1 = Respondent makes less than \$30,000, 2 = Respondent makes between \$30,000 and 74,999, 3 = Respondent makes \$75,000 or more

Additional Demographic Comparisons

In 2017, NRA members made up almost 19% of all gun owners. What else can be determined about how this 19% differed demographically from the other 81%? Figure 4 display some very

interesting findings. The share of gun owners over 50 years old is 10 percentage points higher among NRA members than among non-NRA gun owners (59% vs 49%). This may in part reflect generational partisan gaps.²² Men and women – though men to a far greater extent than women – from the silent generation, the baby boomers, and generation X are more likely to support the GOP than those from younger generations. Since I have shown earlier that GOP support is more overrepresented in the NRA than among other gun owners, it makes sense that there are far more individuals over 50 in the organization than among non-NRA gun owners. When looking at the probabilities of NRA membership by demographic group found in Table 8, these findings are put into more context. Gun owners over 50 are more likely to be NRA members than gun owners under 50. 22% of gun owners over 50 are NRA members, compared to 15% of gun owners under 50. Again, this is likely because an increasingly conservative NRA appeals to older, more conservative gun owners. For young gun owners between the ages of 18-29, 21% – a sizeable amount – are NRA members. I expect this is because the NRA firearms training programs and student courses bring a lot of younger, newer gun owners to the organization. The percentage of NRA members between the ages of 18-29 (20%) is also slightly higher than the percentage of that age group among other gun owners (18%).

19% of male gun owners are NRA members and 18% of female gun owners are NRA members. Female gun ownership is up and the NRA (and gun manufacturers) has made its mission in recent years to make guns a symbol of female empowerment in order to attract more women to the organization.²³ The question then of course becomes how women play into the NRA's strategy of mobilizing activists. The difference in the share of males among NRA members and non-NRA gun owners is also negligible, at 1 percentage point (63% male for NRA members vs 62% male

²² "Trends in Party Affiliation Among Demographic Groups," Pew Research Center, 2018

²³ "How the NRA is Trying to Reach Women," Glamour, 2018

for regular gun owners). A similarly small gap exists in regard to the environment in which NRA members and non-NRA gun owners grew up in – 53% of NRA members indicated that they grew

Figure 4. Demographic Comparisons of NRA Members and Non-NRA Gun Owners

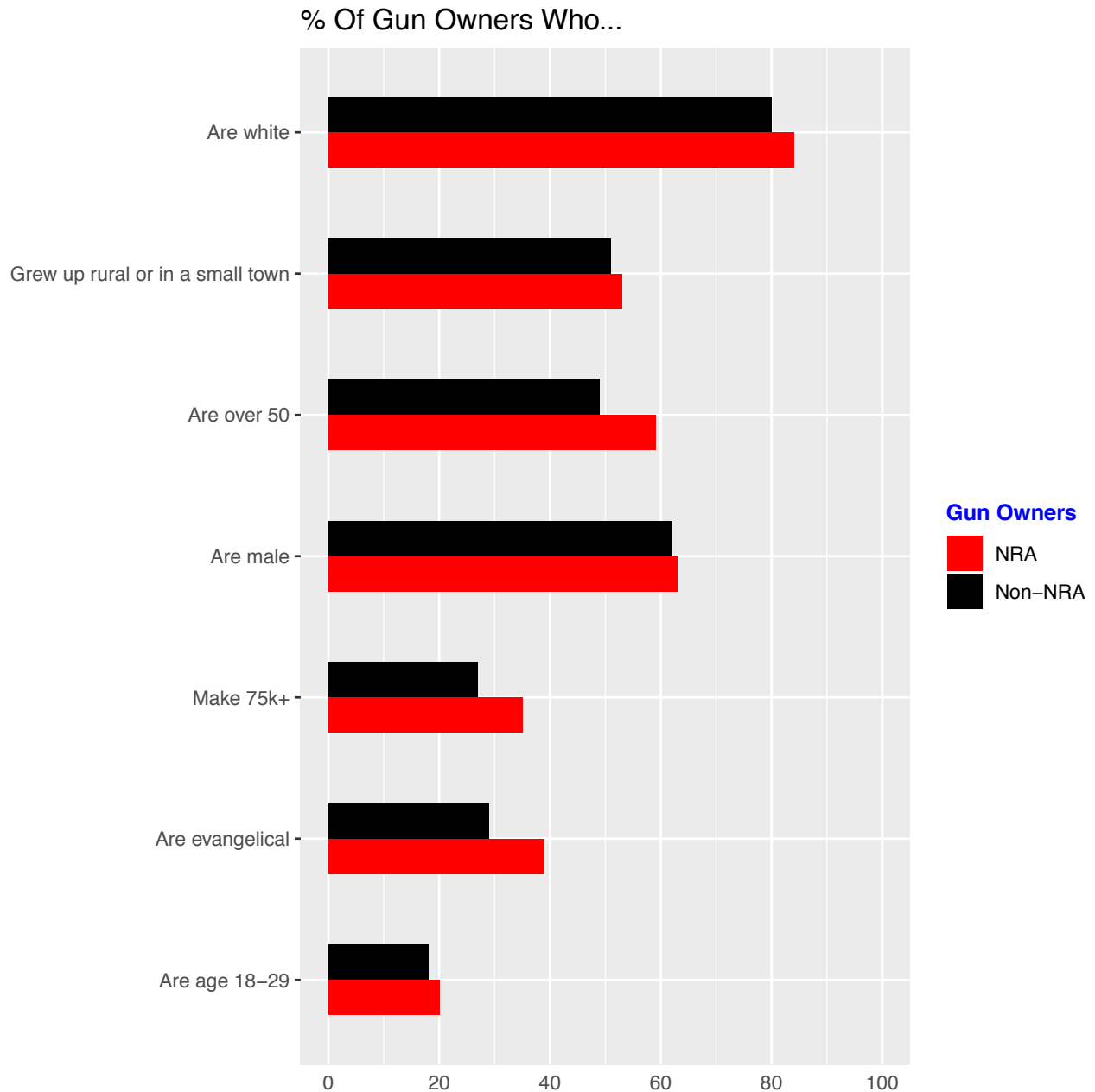


Table 8. NRA Membership Given Demographic Group Membership

Group	In Group	Not in Group	Difference
Male	19%	18%	-1
Make \$75k+	23%	17%	-6
Grew up rural/small town	19%	18%	-1
Evangelical	24%	17%	-7
Over 50	22%	15%	-7
Age 18-29	21%	18%	-3

up in a rural area or small town, compared to 51% of other gun owners. The probability that a gun owner who grew up in such an environment joins the NRA is 19%, which is not much more than the probability that a gun owner who did not grow up in such an environment (18%).

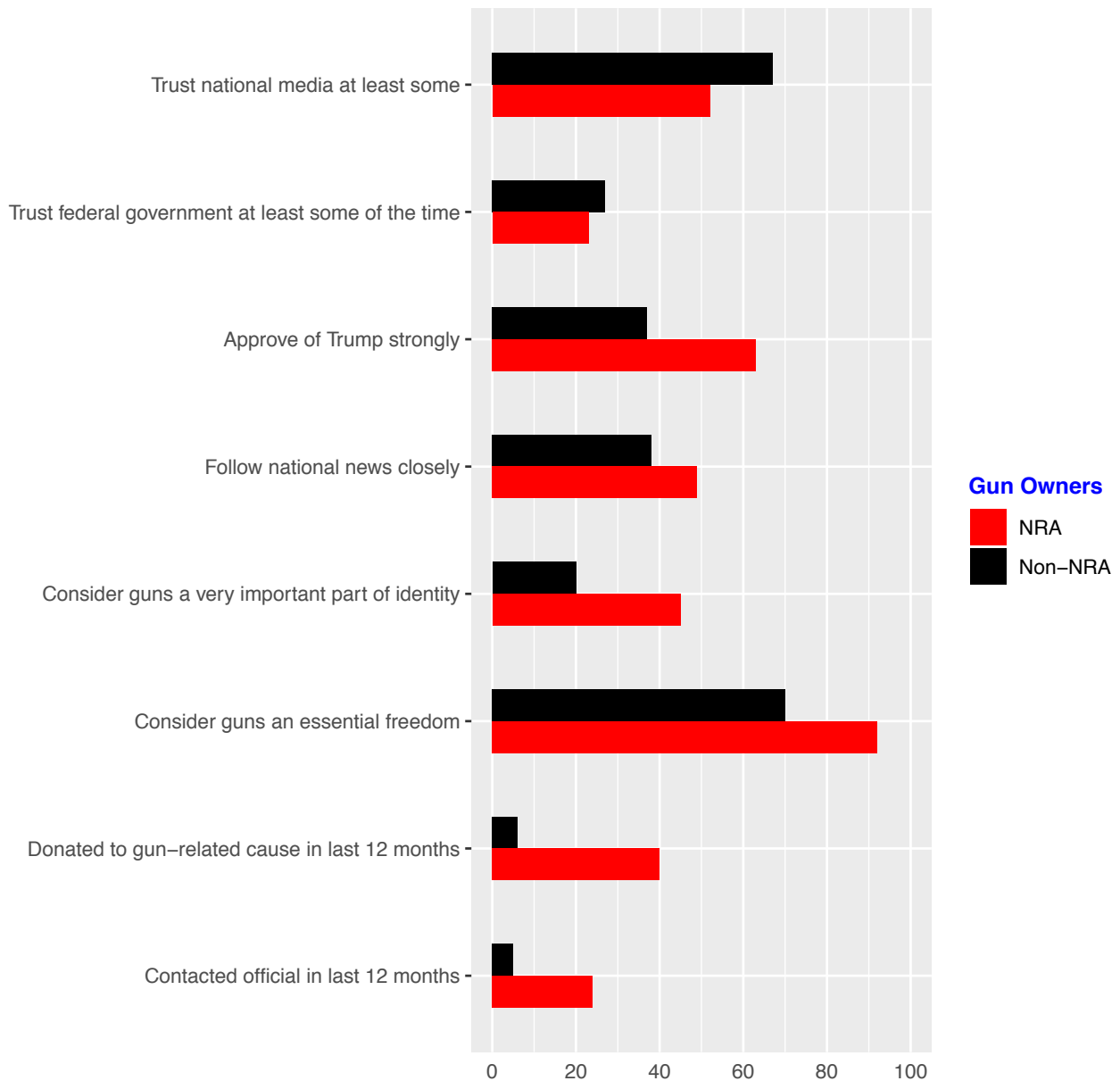
Lastly, the share of evangelicals and those whose total family income is more than \$75,000 is also higher among NRA members than among non-NRA gun owners. Evangelicals are overrepresented both in the NRA and among non-NRA gun owners – they make up 39% of NRA members and 29% of non-NRA gun owners, while making up approximately 25% of the public at large.²⁴ 24% of evangelical gun owners are in the NRA and 23% of those who make more than \$75,000 are NRA members. Again, this potentially reflects trends in social sorting – evangelicals and those with higher incomes are more likely to be Republican and are thus understandably more attracted to the NRA than lower income and non-evangelical gun owners. It is also worth noting that evangelicals are a highly active group politically and that they are staunch supporters of conservative values. The fact that nearly 40% of NRA members are evangelicals potentially speaks volumes about the values and ideological direction that the NRA – superficially, a single-issue gun rights organization – has embraced and what gun ownership has come to represent.

²⁴ “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew, 2015

Examining the Political Behavior and Attitudes of Both Groups

Lots of research has noted how NRA members are far more politically engaged than their non-NRA counterparts (e.g. Schuman and Presser 1981). This clearly holds true in 2017. Figure 5 presents differences between the two groups on a variety of attitudinal and behavioral factors.

Figure 5. Political Comparisons of NRA Members and Non-NRA Gun Owners
% Of Gun Owners Who...



Divisions between the two groups look about how one would expect. In terms of trusting the government and media, for instance, 52% of NRA members trust the media “some” and 23% trust the government “some of the time.” Among non-NRA gun owners, on the other hand, 67% (15 points higher) trust the media at least some and 27% (4 points higher) trust the government at least some of the time. Notably, however, NRA members are more likely to indicate they “follow national news closely” (49%) than non-members (38%). The NRA works hard to make sure members stay informed and follow political events because this makes members better activists. NRA members stay on top of the news because they constantly feel like a single political change could threaten their rights at any moment (Melzer 2009). And, more so than non-members, NRA members are committed to the idea that the right to bear arms is *essential* (92% vs 70%) and are more likely to consider guns a “very important part of their identities” (45% vs 20%). 69% of NRA members consider guns at least “somewhat” an important part of their identities compared to 45% of non-NRA gun owners.

This deep-seated desire to protect gun rights – and thus protect a part of their identity – manifests in higher levels of political engagement. 25% of NRA members had contacted an official about gun policy within the last 12 months of being interviewed, while only 5% of non-NRA gun owners had done the same, a 12-point gap. Similarly, 40% of NRA owners had donated money to an “organization that takes a position on gun policy” within in the last 12 months of being interviewed, compared to only 6% of non-NRA gun owners. These differences are staggering. The numbers do not lie: the NRA’s ability to mobilize its base is astounding. Finally, given their conservative and Republican bent, it is no surprise that 63% of NRA members strongly approve of President Trump (as opposed to 37% for non-NRA members). Interestingly, as shown in Table 9, NRA membership remains a statistically significant predictor of Trump approval even when

controlling for variables like race, sex, ideology, partisanship, and age. A one unit-increase in the indicator for NRA membership associates with a 30% increase in the likelihood of approving of Trump. This is comparable to the decrease in support for Trump that is associated with higher levels of education. Only partisanship is a stronger predictor of Trump approval than NRA membership – a one-unit increase in the Republican indicator variable associates with an almost 181% increase in the predicted probability of approving of President Trump’s performance.

Table 9. Determinants of Trump Approval

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Trump Approval
White	0.123* (0.068)
Male	-0.015 (0.049)
Income	0.052 (0.034)
Conservative	0.193*** (0.028)
NRA Member	0.303*** (0.057)
Republican	1.809*** (0.061)
Evangelical	0.065 (0.050)
Never Attended College	0.078 (0.066)
College Grad	-0.223*** (0.051)
Age 18-29	0.071 (0.092)
Over 50	0.191***

	(0.052)
Constant	-0.477***
	(0.125)
<hr/>	
Observations	1,163
R ²	0.671
Adjusted R ²	0.668
Residual Std. Error	0.756 (df = 1151)
<hr/>	
Note:	* ** *** p<0.01

X. Examining the Advertising in *American Rifleman*

In this section, I gauge the extent to which the products that advertisers are selling says something about what identities they see *Rifleman* readers as holding. Relatedly, I also inspect *how* advertisers are selling their products and what that tells us about the composition of *Rifleman* readers. Advertisers often attempt to tap into the identities of their target consumers. Reed (2004) has noted the tendency of marketers to “create or (re)position products and brands to embody a particular social identity-oriented lifestyle” (286). By doing so, marketers expect consumers who hold that particular identity to connect their lifestyle to the product and thus develop a positive attachment to the brand (Reed 2004). This strategy is most successful when the identity that is primed in the consumer is salient (Forehand and Deshpandé 2004). Advertising is a two-way street, however, and it is not just advertisers who are often identity-focused. Consumers also tend to judge – consciously or subconsciously – the distance between themselves and whatever is represented in the advertisement (Lee, Haugvedt, and Williams 2004). They resonate with a product upon perceiving the similarity between themselves and whatever is featured in the advertisement. Knowing what we know about NRA members – that they are older, whiter, more conservative, and more Republican than their non-NRA counterparts – we should expect NRA advertisements to try to appeal to these identities and heighten positive feelings about the brand among members.

I find that this is exactly what they do. Not only do NRA advertisers largely sell niche products, they rarely sell products catered to women or minorities, nor do their advertisements frequently feature women or minorities. Their advertisements also often tap into the frontier lifestyle of NRA members or into members' feelings of patriotism. Sometimes, they even veer into the political.

Categories

A little over 62% of the *American Rifleman* advertisements were for guns or gun-related products. 10% were outdoors, recreation or hunting-related (not including guns and gun accessories specialized for these areas). Another 4% consisted of security systems, devices, or hardware. 3% consisted of collectibles and 2% were selling insurance or legal services. 4% of products could be considered as falling under two categories (e.g. civil war rifle replicas would count as guns and as collectibles), while 13% were other consumer products or services. Events, health-related products, and non-consumer products each made up less than 1% of the 853 *Rifleman* advertisements studied. Interestingly, the relative frequency of hunting, recreation, and outdoors related products has decreased significantly over time. For the 1976 and 1980 issue, when the NRA was still relatively more geared towards sportsmen, these products made up 13% of all advertisements – for the 2008, 2012, and 2016 issues, that number had dropped by 10 points to 3%. For the three issues between 1992 and 2004, it was at 9%. Notably, gun-related advertisements dropped by 13 points during these years, from nearly 67% in 1976 and 1980 to 54%, eventually rising back up 66% for the three issues studied from 2008-2016. During this time (1992-2004), the relative frequency of security-related products and insurance/legal services increased significantly. Other than those changes, variations in the types of products advertised over time are negligible and not worth extensive exploration.

Do Well-known Brands Advertise in *American Rifleman*?

I had wanted to see what role mass-market products and big brands played in NRA advertising – would they reduce their advertising as the NRA got more political and partisan, or would they just assume that no one outside of NRA members pays attention to what is going on in NRA magazines and not expect any backlash for advertising there? My findings indicate that brand-name products (not including gun manufacturers) were never really likely to be advertised in NRA advertisements to begin with (at least from 1976 onwards). The magazines predominately feature gun manufactures, as well as small businesses and other very niche products. Of the 853 advertisements studied, 17 were advertising brand-name products, with minimal variation by year range. Issues from recent years actually had slightly more brand-name products in them, though this may have just been due to my coding design, which coded brand-name products as ones I had heard of before. I probably knew more of the brands being advertised in 2008, 2012, and 2016 than in years past.

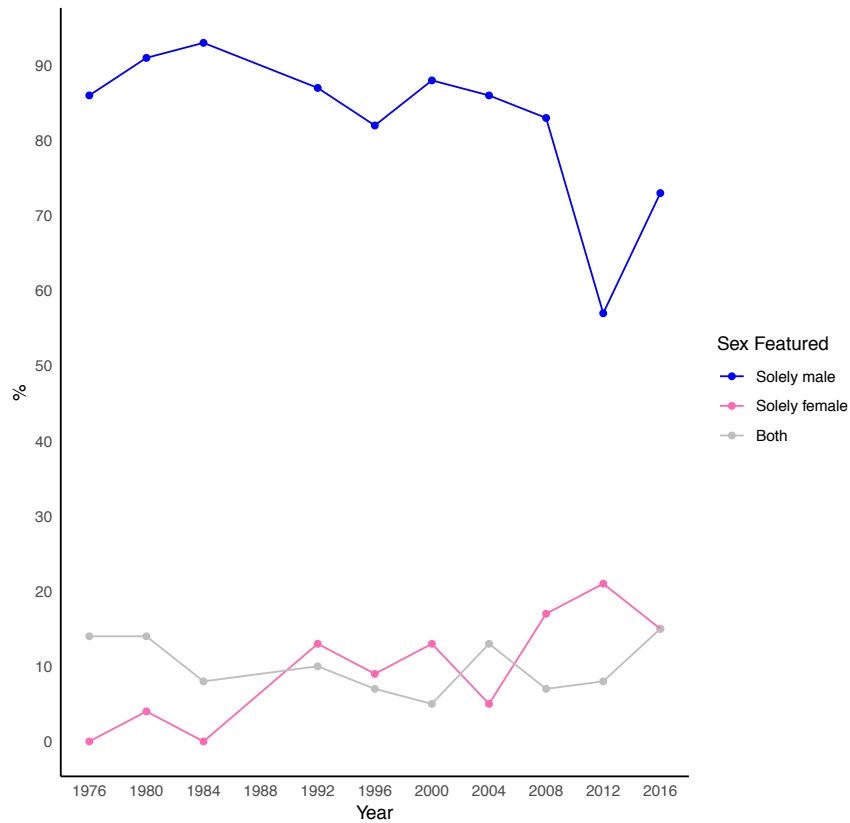
The brand-name products featured in *American Rifleman* are also the type of brands one might expect in an NRA magazine. The clothing and outdoor recreation equipment companies, L.L. Bean and Eddie Bauer each made two appearances in two different issues. Chevy (Chevrolet), which likes to advertise its ‘toughness’ had one advertisement in the 2012 issue I studied, and Yamaha (2 advertisements) and Kawasaki (1 advertisement) also advertised their outdoors-related motorized vehicles. Nikon, which produces hunting equipment like scopes and binoculars, advertised twice. The home security companies SimpliSafe (1 advertisement) and LifeLock (2 advertisements) also make appearances. As the reader has probably realized, brands like these produce products at least somewhat related to the NRA’s focuses (like the outdoors and security) and are more likely to appeal to NRA readers. ProFlowers and Nutrisystem for Men also advertise one time each and are perhaps a little more out of place than the other brand-name products, though they are also likely among the least well-known brand-names I documented. It is not hard to

imagine that many factors can explain why big brands that do not produce at least tangentially NRA-related products do not advertise in the NRA's flagship publication: they want to stay away from politics; they want to specifically stay away from a toxic political brand, like the NRA's; *Rifleman* readers are not their target consumer and they do not benefit as much from advertising to such a niche audience. Presumably, a combination of these factors is at play in explaining the lack of brand-name, mass-market advertisers featured in *American Rifleman*.

Sex and Race in NRA Advertisements

Judging by the features of the language and images used in the advertisements, it is quite clear that advertisers are not expecting to reach many women or minorities with their advertisements. Of the 169 advertisements that featured a person or people and for which it was possible to identify the sex of that person or people, 140 (almost 83%) solely featured men, while a meager 15 (9%) featured solely woman. Still, this tendency has – albeit noisily – decreased over time, as visualized in Figure 6. When aggregating 1976, 1980, and 1984, 90% of all advertisements featured solely men, compared to 86% for the years between 1992 and 2004, and 71% for 2008, 2012, and 2016. It should be noted that 2012 represented an outlier, in which only 57% of advertisements featured only men – though 2012 also featured by far the least advertisements. This change in the share of ads featuring women likely has to do with the mission of gun manufactures and the NRA to draw more women into the world of guns, as was mentioned earlier. For the actual language of advertisements as well as the sex-specific nature of the product being advertised, appeals to masculinity also outweigh appeals to femininity or two both sexes. 77% of products that were specifically marketed to one or both sexes or that featured sex-based language were geared towards males. It should be noted that such explicit appeals to sex were rare overall – only 6% of NRA advertisements studied featured such appeals.

Figure 6. Advertisement Sex Featured Over Time

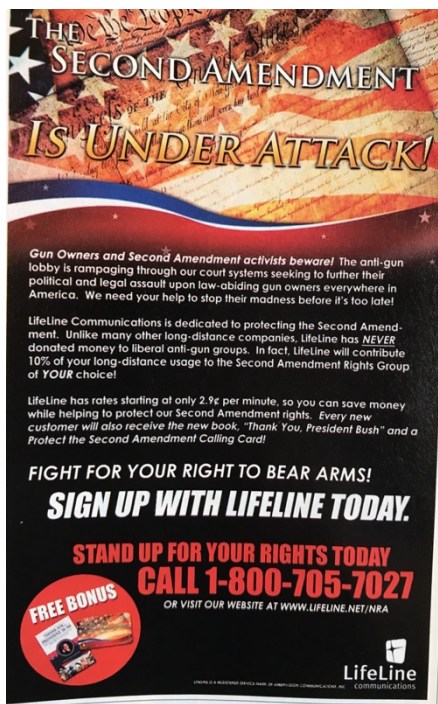


The racial composition of persons featured in the advertisements is even more homogenous. Stunningly, of the 167 advertisements where it was possible to clearly identify the race of the person or people depicted, *not a single one* featured solely a non-white or non-whites. *Only one* advertisement portrayed both whites and non-whites in it, an advertisement for the conservative Young America’s Foundation. This advertisement included a group picture of attendants to a conference at the “Reagan Ranch,” the vast majority of whom were white. Given that most of the advertisements were for guns and accessories, it is seemingly the case that gun manufacturers do not view minorities as a target market they could reach in *American Rifleman*. The evidence backs this up – gun-related products were the most likely to feature images of people (55% of advertisements with people in them were for gun-related products) and those people were

white 100% of the time. My analysis in section IX showed that over time, the share of non-white gun owners as a whole and non-white NRA members has been steadily increasing, making the fact that their lack of representation in *Rifleman* advertising is not even close to being proportional all the more interesting.

Political and Patriotic Messaging in *Rifleman* Advertisements

Very few *Rifleman* advertisements were political in nature. 17 (2%) of the 853 advertisements studied made political references or comments. Nonetheless, I noticed that many of the



advertisements that were political took up significant space and were not resigned to the emporium section at the back of the magazine.²⁵ These political advertisements become more prevalent over time, being featuring none of the time in the 1976, 1980, and 1984 issues, but making up 3% of all advertisements for 1992-2004 and 5% of all advertisements for 2008-2016. Additionally, they become somewhat more controversial over time. In a 1992 *Rifleman* issue I studied, for example, the political advertisements were not all that political. In this issue, ‘Arizonans for Wildlife Conversation’

pitched itself as being opposed to the animal rights lobby. Also in this issue, a cigar advertisement notes that readers “don’t need Castro's permission to enjoy the unique Havana flavor” of their cigars. A little over a decade later in 2004, tracking the NRA’s approach of becoming more

²⁵ The “emporium” in *American Rifleman* refers to a couple of pages that are simply littered with small advertisements that advertisers can purchase at cheap rates, and often houses 8-10 advertisements on each page.

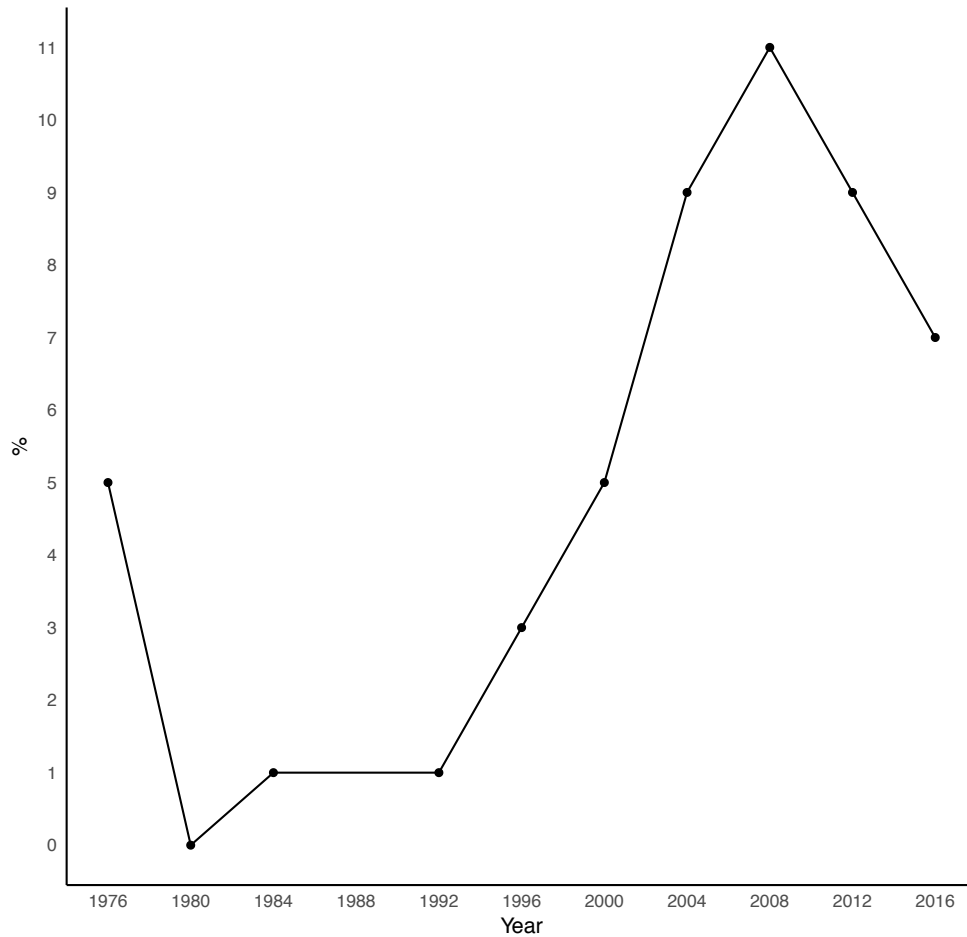
political and more partisan, an advertisement for a telephone communication company reads: “The second amendment is under attack – unlike many other long-distance companies, LifeLine has NEVER donated money to liberal anti-gun groups.” The advertisement also states that new customers will receive the book “Thank you, President Bush,” as well as a Second Amendment calling card. It is no surprise that conservative groups like YAF make appearances and advertise the teaching of Reagan’s values to high schoolers. They know very well that NRA readers tend to lean one way politically.

Like the advertisement for Lifeline (pictured above), many NRA advertisements prominently feature American imagery. While the relative frequency of advertisements that use American imagery as a part of their advertisement is only 5%, this number would presumably be much higher if I had only coded advertisements that included imagery at all (many *Rifleman* advertisements simply consist of small boxes with text in them). Likewise, this does not include products embedded with American imagery (countless NRA advertisements are for collectibles like coins that display eagles or the statue of liberty, for example) nor does it include American flags meant to inform readers that a product was proudly made in America. The relative amount of American imagery utilized in advertisements



has also generally increased over the years, as seen in Figure 7 below. Many of the advertisers who use these techniques have little to do with America, nor do they explicitly explain how their product resembles American values –

Figure 7. Relative Frequency of American Imagery Over Time



of the advertisements that included American imagery, only a third also included appeals to American values. Advertisers seemingly know that NRA members love patriotism and will find a way to fit obvious American imagery into their advertisements, as evidenced by the erectile dysfunction medication advertisement pictured above.

Unfortunately, I did not code for appeals to older age or to veterans. Nor did I code for references to the military and law enforcement. Each of these make frequent appearances in NRA advertisements, however. References and comparisons to American values also make relatively frequent appearances, with about the 3% of all advertisements doing so. All that I have discussed demonstrates quite clearly that businesses believe the individuals they will reach by advertising in

American Rifleman are largely male, white, conservative and love their country. Additionally, patterns I did not code but noticed throughout point to advertisers believing a sizeable contingent of *Rifleman* readers are baby boomers or over the age of 65, veterans, or big fans of the military and law enforcement. These findings do not surprise me as they are in line with the analysis done in section IX, as well as other literature on the NRA (e.g. Melzer 2009).

XI. Subject Scope in *American Rifleman* and *America's First Freedom*

What kind of subjects does the NRA think gun owners – and specifically NRA members – are interested in? Likewise, how far past the domain of guns is the NRA willing to go and to what extent does it feel comfortable mixing in un-related political subjects with its stated focus on guns? In this section, I analyze 115 headlines (for every other item in each magazine's "Features" Table of Contents) and their corresponding articles from both *American Rifleman* (1976-2018) and *America's First Freedom* (2002-2018). It should be noted that by starting with 1976 and analyzing magazines from every other year, it also happens to be the case that each of the issues I studied was written during an election year. This being the case, the number of political articles and discussions may be overrepresented. The numbers presented should thus not be taken as precise estimates of the NRA's allocation of features.

As one might expect given the stated differences in each magazine's purpose, the majority (nearly 75%) of *Rifleman* headlines analyzed pertained to guns and were not political in nature. *Rifleman* articles tend to consist of deep dives into gun manufacturers, new technologies and guns, gun-related history, various types of "how-tos," and gun-related events. Of the 28 headlines studied from *AFF*, on the other hand, only four (14%) were non-political gun-related articles. 20 (71%) dealt with gun politics, 3 (11%) consisted of non-gun related political articles, and 1 (4%)

was a lifestyle piece (a review of a book). *Rifleman* has, however, devoted more space to political topics in more recent decades. Between 1976 and 1992, 9% of the *Rifleman* headlines studied indicated that the article related to gun politics. From 1994 onwards, that number grew to 40%. When one excludes 1994, an outlier year in which every headline studied was political, the relative frequency of political articles is still a sizeable 33% – a 24 percentage-point increase from the period between 1976 and 1992.

Political Content in “non-Political” Articles

How often does a featured article stray from the subject designated in its headline? 14% of the articles in *American Rifleman* that had non-political, gun-related headlines brought up gun-related, political topics in the actual content of the article. 5% brought up political topics with nothing or basically nothing to do with guns. Once again, as has been a reoccurring pattern, this relationship varies significantly depending on the time period studied. From 1994 onwards, political in-article deviations from the non-political, gun-related headline happened 27% of the time, compared to only 7.5% of the time between 1976 and 1992.

Most of the time, these deviations were simply excuses to throw in pro-Second Amendment rhetoric or NRA talking points to otherwise unrelated content. A 2002 article about the guns featured Western films, for instance, noted that Western films reaffirmed the importance of the Second Amendment. In a 2018 profile of a small arms manufacturer Kahr Arms, the company’s founder makes sure to tell the interviewer that his company “is absolutely committed to providing the highest-quality guns and service in the firearms industry” and that they are “also absolutely committed to protecting our Second Amendment rights and the restoration of our liberties enshrined in the original Bill of Rights.” In line with *H2*, these deviations also sometimes come in the service of linking gun ownership to particular political identities likely held by NRA readers.

A 1982 article about the book *Shots Fired in Anger* deliberately included a quotation from the book that discussed the author's interactions with individuals often found at Georgetown cocktail parties, who usually "claim to be liberals" and are "imbued with that particular kind of liberal mush that accords equal sympathy to the rapist and the raped." These liberals are "hesitant to blame individual human beings for any vileness or crime and for a large range of man's viciousness, they blame an artifact, the gun." The same 2018 profile of Kahr Arms discussed a few sentences ago also includes a quote where the founder criticizes the expansion of government, which he claims hurts small businesses. At some point, the article's author also alludes to President Clinton's Federal Assault Weapon's Ban. He mockingly refers to it as the "so-called assault weapons ban" (the NRA argues that the weapons included in that ban are actually semi-automatics and not technically assault rifles).

Political Content in Political Articles

While many political NRA articles technically do only pertain to gun rights, the information and details that are included frequently go beyond simply laying out the facts like a news outlet might. A news outlet, for example, may write that "Democrats hope to tackle the issue of gun control if they take the House in the upcoming midterms." In contrast, the NRA (especially in since the 1990s) uses a re-occurring set of themes and villains to illustrate its points, as well as very extreme language. I do not wish to give the impression that I expect the NRA – an interest group which must mobilize its members to act on its behalf – to treat gun politics like an objective media outlet would. I do, however, wish to show how the NRA's treatment of gun-related political subjects supports my hypotheses. The NRA's rhetoric, as well as its calls to action are laced with appeals to Republicans and an outright hatred for Democrats.

The NRA employs a cast of reoccurring villains in many of its articles. Chuck Schumer, Hillary Clinton, Eric Holder, Ted Kennedy, Dianne Feinstein, Sarah Brady, George Soros, Michael



Bloomberg, and the UN, among others, *constantly* make appearances in its articles and appear over vast periods of time. All of these villains are either Democrats, and/or represent “elites”, “globalism” and “cosmopolitanism” (words frequently used by the NRA). Writers pepper in references to these villains,

often times out of the blue, though I have not coded these references as being “off topic” political subjects simply because they nonetheless are usually (though not always) discussed in relation to guns or gun policy. In a 2004 *Rifleman* article warning gun owners about the potential consequences of a John Kerry victory, the author claims that Kerry would appoint the likes “Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer” to the Supreme Court. Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer in this case, and in many others,



serve as stand-ins for something much bigger: the threat of gun-control. Much like in the editorials analyzed previously, gun control is intrinsically tied to Democrats and liberals.

The organization also likes to verge on the conspiratorial, if not go outright conspiratorial. Many of these villains are implicitly or explicitly deemed to have absurd amounts of power and awful intentions, rendering them existential threats. A 2010 *Rifleman* article describes New York City Mayor (at the time) Michael Bloomberg as the “puppet master of the anti-gun movement.” The 2004 article on John Kerry tells readers they can “expect multi-billionaire” and “sugar daddy”

George Soros to “control the White House, the U.S. Senate, and the Supreme Court.” A 2004 *AFF* feature on the UN begins by writing about a microbe referred to as the “cell from hell” which emerged suddenly in 1991 and “killed more than a billion fish.” Then, it claims that “America faces a similar threat on the banks of Manhattan’s East River, at the headquarters of the United Nations.” Along the same lines, NRA writers often utilize the language of warfare to convey their points. For example, a 1998 feature about the NRA’s annual “Meetings and Exhibits” in Philadelphia commented on gun bans in Australia and England, saying: “these people lost their freedom in a cultural war no less than if they had been taken over by an invading Army.” The NRA has a tendency to tell its readers to prepare for the worst. Smaller scale threats to gun rights (like state laws) are almost always depicted as likely to cause snowball effects and become larger. A 2008 *Rifleman* article compares a possible pro-gun control outcome in *DC v. Heller* to the infamous *Dredd Scott* decision. Likewise, year after year, contemporary elections are described as the most important election gun owners have ever faced, and the cost of losing an election is almost always described as being the complete destruction of gun owners’ freedom and rights.

It is clear that the NRA does not view liberal and Democratic gun owners as part of their coalition, or as part of the politicized identity they are trying to build. No Democrat could read things like that which I have discussed and not be offended, alienated, or angered. Conversely, the NRA knows its audience: conservative Republicans. It is quite interesting, however, just how much the characteristics of this audience may have changed over time. In reading political features from the earliest issues of *Rifleman* I studied, it really was striking how moderate the tone used is, and how much less explicitly partisan the arguments are. A 1976 article titled “U.S. Court to Hear CBS Suit” discusses a class action lawsuit on behalf of Michigan hunters against CBS for airing two hunting programs that “deliberately misrepresented and vilified hunting.” The article reads

much like a news report. The authors simply present other organization's criticisms of CBS. They also include CBS' side of the story and do not editorialize at all about it. A different feature from 1976 calls for increases in membership and outlines the gun control threat. It does not mince words – it refers to a “gigantic propaganda campaign” to portray firearms as evil and notes that gun control forces would eventually like to ban all firearms. In spite of this, nowhere does it say this is a fundamental threat to freedom or to gun owners' way of life. Not to mention, it does not assign blame to Democrats or liberals, or tell NRA members who to vote for. It simply speaks of “anti-gun” forces. This type of article could easily appeal to a politically heterogeneous group of gun owners, something which later articles definitely could not.

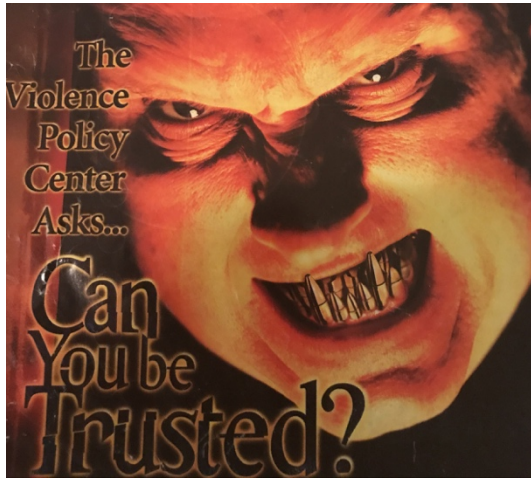
Off Topic Political Digressions in Articles About Gun Politics

The NRA often incorporates content that really has nothing to do with guns in its gun-related political articles. Two-thirds of the gun politics features in *American Rifleman* and nearly two thirds of the gun politics features in *AFF* at some point discuss non-gun related topics. Sometimes these deviations are relatively mild. In a 1984 article about “blanks” (cartridges loaded with gunpowder but without bullets), the author decries state governments who “fearing that fire-breathing dragon of individuality, have seen to it that fireworks have all but disappeared from private hands.” He then encourages NRA members to shoot blanks from their firearms as an alternative to fireworks. Clearly, state bans on fireworks have almost nothing to do with guns or gun rights, though the author finds a somewhat lighthearted way to make them relevant to gun owners. Over time, these deviations tend to get more political and more likely to prime other identities and feelings that readers might hold. Just two years after the 1984 article about blanks, the author of a piece on “Guns and the Media” makes sure to note that the major and minor “gatekeepers” of the media model themselves after the “urban elite” and hold “cosmopolitan

views.” Later, in 1994, a feature on member responses to an “Emergency Survey,” details the need to lock up criminals. I should say that the NRA ties this to gun rights by presenting tough-on-crime laws as solving the problems that advocates of gun-control want solved. This demonstrates some of the difficulties I had when deciding whether subjects could be coded as “off-topic.” Ultimately, however, I deemed that gun policy and criminal justice policy could not be conflated and thus coded “locking up criminals” as not being directly related to the NRA’s primary focus.

Crime is a reoccurring non-gun-rights-related theme in NRA articles. A 1996 article mentions President Clinton’s “soft on crime” judicial appointments. Likewise, the aforementioned 2004 article on Kerry also indicates he would implement “soft-on-crime policies.” Crime is both a politically and racially charged issue, so it is probably no surprise that the NRA uses tough-on-crime rhetoric to appeal to its largely white and conservative membership. Another similar topic – in that the NRA has some interest in it despite not directly pertaining to gun rights – is campaign finance, which also makes somewhat frequent appearances. In an otherwise softball-filled interview with presidential candidate John McCain in a 2008 issue of *AFF*, Wayne LaPierre makes sure to ask about McCain’s sponsorship of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act. LaPierre, while asking his question, LaPierre remarks that many in the NRA find it “unconstitutional” and dislike that it “restricts the NRA’s ability to broadcast ads lobbying on legislative issues in the 60 days before a federal election.” Interestingly, LaPierre does not just claim to speak for the NRA’s leadership, he also claims to speak for its members: “Many gun owners believe that this provision severely restricts their ability to participate in the legislative process.”

As it relates to my hypotheses, the most relevant ventures into non-gun-related topics are those that most explicitly evoke other political identities. Usually, these come in the form of the



descriptions used to denigrate anti-gunners. A 2002 *AFF* cover story about a report produced by the Violence Policy Center describes the “smear campaign” waged by Violence Policy Center officials against gun owners. It does not just describe the Violence Policy Center as an anti-gun organization, however. It also tars it as a *liberal* organization,

concerned with “creating a liberal utopia.” Similarly, a 2006 *Rifleman* feature on the “failed” advocacy group Americans for Gun Safety, makes sure to include a detail about board member Ray Schoenke, who had “supported myriad liberal causes in recent years.” These other liberal causes are presumably separate from gun issues. Yet, for the NRA, this detail is worth including specifically because the NRA wants to link gun control to liberals and liberalism.

Along the same lines, an *AFF* article from the same year titled “Our Rights Hang in the Balance” discusses the consequences of a potential Nancy Pelosi Speakership and John Conyers Chairmanship of the House Judiciary Committee. It tells readers that Nancy Pelosi exhibits “San Francisco values” (which most certainly means culturally *liberal* values) and that Pelosi is “rated an extremist by the American Conservative Union.” The American Conservative Union ratings do not distinguish pro-gun legislators from anti-gun legislators – they distinguish *conservative* legislators from *liberal* legislators. Anti-gunners like Nancy Pelosi are extreme, out-of-touch liberals, while gun owners are the tradition-respecting, America-loving, mainstream. In a feature found in the 2010 *American Rifleman* issue I studied, the author mocks a former Coalition To Ban

Handguns leader for blogging on The Huffington Post – “a website where the political fringe gathers to rant against mainstream America.” A 2016 *American Rifleman* feature, meanwhile, praises textualism and originalism for upholding traditional social conventions. A quote from a 2012 *AFF* article on self-defense legislation sums up the conflict between the two groups: “we witness violence and drug gangs in our communities, see the collapse of our southern border, and fear for our safety. We are angered as our American values and culture are sacrificed upon the altar of international acceptance.”

Entirely Off Topic Articles

Perhaps most telling of how the NRA perceives and taps into the identities of readership are the articles it dedicates to political issues entirely unrelated to guns. While these are relatively rare, the fact that they make appearances at all is quite fascinating. The most likely reason why the supposedly single-issue NRA would choose to write about subjects like immigration and the “war on cops” is because it wants to expand the range of topics that fall under the jurisdiction of gun owners. Even Mark Chestnut, a top NRA editor, is self-aware enough to know the inclusion of such articles is a little strange. He prefaces a 2010 *America’s First Freedom* article titled “Terror on the Border” (inspired by the recent murder of an NRA member at the border) by noting that “while immigration is not an issue on which the NRA has ever taken a stand, the issue's link to gun control is undeniable.” Wayne LaPierre, who is interviewed for the article, demonstrates a similar awareness, but finds a way to hastily glue the two issues together: “immigration might not be our issue, but the crisis on our Southern border is a perfect illustration of the same dishonesty and corruption that have infected the gun debate for decades.” The argument goes something like this: just like politicians lie about gun control, President Obama’s DHS secretary Janet Napolitano lies about the border being secure. In addition, gun laws are selectively enforced, as are

immigration laws. That, apparently, is enough to warrant *cover story* article about the threat of illegal immigration.

Another article from a 2016 *America's First Freedom* issue, with the headline “An Attack On Our Cops Is An Attack On All Of Us” (following the murder of five Dallas police officers) is similarly loosely tied to guns. The article has racial undertones throughout, attacking President Obama for talking about racial disparities in the criminal justice system (in regard to the police killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling) when “the facts weren't clear” and implying the racially motivated killing of the police officers demonstrated the “costs of considering police guilty until proven innocent.” The author makes sure to place the blame with liberals and Democrats, writing “in Democrat-controlled cities all across the country, police feel that they’re on their own” and that liberals spend their time “attacking police” and “pushing to release criminals from federal prisons.” He also finds a way to tap into anti-immigrant sentiment, noting that liberals want to “declare hundreds of American cities as ‘sanctuaries’ where federal immigration laws are nullified as official policy.” The inclusion of these subjects and the ideologically conservative approach taken to them provides glaring evidence for the fact that the NRA has great latitude for making identity-based political appeals to its members (*H3*).

XII. Identity Reinforcement in NRA Editorials

It has been established that the NRA has quite a homogenous membership and is aware of it. Now, it must be further explored how the NRA deliberately taps into the identities contained within this homogenous membership (*H2*) and whether this homogeneity plays a role in the NRA’s ability to cultivate a politicized gun owner identity (*H1*). In order to do so, I look at editorials usually found in the beginning pages of *American Rifleman* (which are the same as in *America's First Freedom*). While I had 21 *American Rifleman* magazines to work with, both the 1980 and 1982 issues I had

did not include the editorials I would need to utilize them in my systematic study. As such, these issues have been excluded from my analysis. I ended up with a total of 35 editorials I could observe for my analysis.

Politics and Partisanship

The editorials found in the earlier issues I studied were less likely to be political in nature (only three of the six from that time period dealt with politics). They reflected the concerns of the NRA before its radical shift came into full swing: recreational shooting, professional shooting, and hunting. Even the political editorials from this time period were much milder in tone than later editorials and dealt with somewhat less controversial subjects. A 1976 editorial, for instance, argued against the notion that technological advances in gun-building rendered the Second Amendment outdated. A 1986 editorial wrote about proposed hunting regulations. Most importantly, none of these six editorials employed an identity frame (focusing on the impact of a given matter on gun owners' "lifestyles and/or their values"²⁶ instead of technical outcomes) and none of them made any partisan or ideological attacks. Of the two editorials in the 1990 issue I studied, both were political, but only one employed an identity frame. The editorial that used identity framing still did not make any partisan or ideological distinctions between gun owners and anti-gunners, though it did express that gun owners represented American values while anti-gunners held values antithetical to them.

Starting with 1992, a year after Wayne Llapierre became Executive Vice President of the organization, the editorials become almost exclusively political in nature – only *one* of the editorials (found in the 2010 issue) between then and 2018 did not pertain to politics. Still,

²⁶ See Lacombe 2018

editorials from the 1992, 1994, and 1996 issues I studied do not implicitly or explicitly designate gun owners as Republicans or anti-gunners as Democrats. From 1998 onwards, only three of the 22 editorials studied from that time span do not either implicitly or explicitly define the out-group as Democrats, while only two do not define the in-group as Republican. This provides support for *H4*, which holds that the NRA's process of gun owner-partisanship reinforcement will have increased over time.

The NRA's rhetoric is consistent with Abramowitz and Webster's (2016) claim that negative affect for the opposing party increases party loyalty and corresponds with an increase in political participation. The editorials are much more likely to explicitly express that anti-gunners are Democrats than they are to explicitly express that gun owners are Republicans. Of the 19 instances in which pro-gun control individuals or forces are described as Democrats, Democratic politicians, supporters of the Democratic party, or as supporting specific Democratic legislative activity, 16 do so explicitly and 3 do so implicitly. Almost exactly the reverse is true for pro-gunners, who are implied to be Republicans 17 times and explicitly expressed to be Republicans 3 times. NRA communications tend to spend more of their time on the actions and horrible nature of anti-gunners who must be stopped than on the "good guys." Often times, the editorials will say something like this: "if Hillary Clinton or Barrack Obama win the White House, and if gun rights majorities are not returned to the U.S. Senate and House, I guarantee that Rebecca Peters and her boss George Soros will be writing the gun control agenda... into international soup cans and park benches" (NRA 2008). Here, LaPierre does not explicitly say to vote Republican, though it is heavily implied that members should vote for a Republican "gun rights" majority. Perhaps the NRA thinks it cannot be accused of fragrant partisanship if it does not make its support of

Republicans *that* obvious. Alternatively, and more likely, the NRA knows that heightening antipathy for Democrats has useful strategic benefits.

Ideology

Far more rare than partisan associations with the in-group and out-group are ideological associations. 8 of the 35 (nearly 23%) editorials imply that the gun owner in-group is conservative (usually because they place gun owners in opposition to liberal gun owners) and none explicitly make that designation. Anti-gunners, meanwhile, are explicitly expressed to be liberal 3 times and implicitly expressed to be liberal 6 times. An editorial from 2000, for instance, refers to the "the nationwide grassroots effort coordinated by the Alliance for Justice," which the author describes as "leftist", putting "and I use this term deliberately" in parentheses afterwards. A 2012 editorial writes about a plot by President Obama to "buy back the enthusiasm he's lost" by implementing "government programs targeted at voters whose support he believes might be recoverable." Anti-gun politicians and groups are also frequently called socialist and/or linked to liberal billionaire George Soros. An editorial from the same year refers to the "George-Soros-funded, far left, Media Matters" and an editorial from four years prior refers to gun control advocates as Soros-funded globalists. A Wayne LaPierre editorial from 2018 is bluntly titled: "In Today's Democratic Party, Democrat Equals Socialist." In this editorial, LaPierre goes off on multiple tangents that have nothing to do with gun ownership – he talks about a new breed of Democrats, "European-style Socialists," who "believe in a complete redistribution of wealth and government control of major components of the U.S. economy, such as our health care system." He then discusses free tuition, progressive bloggers, the Soviet Union, Venezuela, Mao, George Soros, Tom Steyer, free speech on college campuses, and liberal hatred for Trump. So, while these ideological designations of the in-group and out-group only appear about a quarter of the time, when they do appear, they are

quite clearly reinforcing conservatism and gun ownership while excluding liberals and associating liberalism with gun control advocates (*H2*). Likewise, such distinctions are more common and more extreme in recent years (*H4*).

Patriotism and Partisanship

Given these labels of socialism, communism, and ‘globalism’ ascribed to anti-gunners, it is perhaps not surprising that anti-gunners, the out group, are described as anti-American or holding anti-American-values in 60% of all the editorials studied. This number rises 12 points to 72% when only considering issues from 1990 onwards and 25 points to 85% for 2000 onwards. Conversely, gun owners are expressed to be patriots or as holding American values 54% of the time, again showing the pattern discussed earlier in which the NRA denigrates the outgroup slightly more than it positively describes the ingroup. Usually, such attributions of “American-ness” come in the form of representations of gun owners as being protectors of freedom. Anti-gunners, meanwhile, are most often painted as destroyers of liberty. A 2002 (when Republicans held majorities in Congress) editorial notes: “with just a slight shift in the Congress, our freedoms could face enormous dangers.”

Sometimes, however, the supposed hatred anti-gunners have for American values and traditions is made more explicitly clear. One 2014 editorial accuses the “lawless core of Obama’s administration” of “poisoning the tree of liberty” and eroding “our national values, our Constitution, and our culture through” schemes designed to “fundamentally transform the United States of America.” Again, anti-gunners are not just described as pushing for gun control, they are described as truly evil people attempting to upend the American way of life. Hence, it is unsurprising that identity frames are employed 55% of the time for all years studied and 72% of the time since 1990. It is probably no coincidence that these numbers mirror the relative

frequencies of attributes of anti-American attitudes to anti-gunners. The editorials also sometimes do not hesitate to tap into the feeling of status threat and racial anxieties (see Mutz 2018) likely held by the older, white, conservative NRA membership. The same 2014 LaPierre editorial also goes on a tangent about undocumented immigrants, explaining to readers that “illegal aliens” had 88,000 convictions in 2013, thousands of which were for “homicide, sexual assault, kidnapping, aggravated assault, drugs and weapons.” What better way to mobilize your membership than stoking up fears about the possibility of them losing their country to a lawless ‘other?’ In fact, it would likely be very difficult for the NRA to cultivate a politicized identity around gun ownership if it did not draw striking distinctions between gun owners and anti-gun owners, and reinforce each under their respective partisanship and ideologies (*HI*).

Calls to Action

The data also tentatively support the idea that the in-group and out-group distinctions propagated by the NRA come in the service of mobilization. Calls to action were coded when the editorial included an explicit call for NRA members to act on behalf of the NRA’s political goals. These were included in 65% of all political editorials studied and 71% of all political editorials studied from 1990 onwards. A 1990 call to action tells readers to send money to the ILA, be single-issue voters, express their concerns to public officials and the media, and sign up other new members. Such requests are typical of *Rifleman* calls to action, though they are often phrased in more emotional, extreme ways in more recent years. Due to my small sample size and the high correlations between my independent variables (see Table 10), it is not that fruitful to regress calls to action on multiple out-group characterizations. Instead, I present results for bivariate OLS regressions below in Table 11, though I also include one column in which all predictors are included to see which is most predictive.

Table 10. Correlation Matrix for Outgroup Characterizations in Editorials

Variable	Identity Frame	Outgroup Dem	Outgroup Liberal	Outgroup anti-American
Identity Frame	1	0.636	0.500	0.773
Outgroup Dem	0.636	1	0.318	0.715
Outgroup Liberal	0.500	0.318	1	0.444
Outgroup anti-American	0.773	0.715	0.444	1

N = 35,

Table 11. Predictors of Calls to Action

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Call To Action				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Identity Frame	0.707*** (0.121)				0.565** (0.208)
Outgroup anti-American		0.595*** (0.142)			0.049 (0.226)
Outgroup Liberal			0.370*** (0.121)		0.118 (0.115)
Outgroup Dem				0.383*** (0.118)	0.038 (0.142)
Constant	0.188** (0.089)	0.214* (0.110)	0.444*** (0.086)	0.331*** (0.105)	0.171* (0.099)
Observations	35	35	35	35	35
R ²	0.507	0.347	0.222	0.243	0.528
Adjusted R ²	0.492	0.327	0.199	0.220	0.465
Residual Std. Error	0.358 (df = 33)	0.412 (df = 33)	0.449 (df = 33)	0.444 (df = 33)	0.367 (df = 30)

Note:

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

I will begin by discussing the bivariate regressions found in columns 1 through 4. Here, the use of an identity frame is the biggest predictor of the inclusion of a call to action. A one-unit increase in this variable corresponds with an almost 71% increase in the likelihood of the inclusion of a call to action. The second strongest predictor is the ascription of anti-American values and attitudes to anti-gunners, for which a one-unit increase associates with a 59.5% increase in the likelihood of call to action. One-unit changes in the outgroup-as-liberal variable and the outgroup-as-Democrat variable associate with 37% and 38.3% increases in the predicted probability of including a call to action, respectively. For the multivariate regressions found in column 5, the use of an identity frame is also the strongest predictor – its usage associates with a 56.5% increase in the likelihood of the inclusion of a call to action, a 13.5 percentage point drop from the value in column 1. The other three predictors are generally included in an editorial that employs an identity frame, so this result is understandable. To sum, these results show that it is quite likely that the NRA is aware of and deliberately taking advantage of the homogenous nature of its membership (*H2*). Calls to action are more likely to be paired with identity framing and identity-based descriptions because the NRA knows this is a powerful way of developing and strengthening the highly mobilizable gun owner identity it tries to form in its members.

XIII. Conclusion and Implications

My thesis has been concerned with two core questions. The first pertains to the extent to which the NRA has deliberately attempted to tie gun ownership to a Republican partisan identity and the ways the existing political identities of NRA members have influenced its ability to do so. The second relates to how the NRA has strategically relied on such reinforcement to facilitate collective action. As to the former, I have shown that the NRA attracts a certain kind of gun owner, one that is whiter, older, more conservative, and more Republican. I have also demonstrated that the

organization's membership has become more politically homogenous over time. This is a story told by both the survey research I examined and the advertising in the NRA's flagship magazine I analyzed. The content in its editorials and features supports the notion that the NRA knowingly taps into these identities and tries to associate gun ownership with a Republican partisan identity. When addressing the reader in its editorials, the NRA designates anti-gunners as Democrats and liberals while designating pro-gunners as Republicans and conservatives. Likewise, through my analysis of the features found in both *Rifleman* and *AFF*, I found that the NRA knows what kind of content will resonate with its readers. I theorized that the NRA would not risk facing backlash when incorporating overtly partisan political messages into its content because its membership would largely be in agreement with those messages. The scope of potentially controversial content in the NRA's magazine makes it quite plain that this is indeed the case.

My evidence for whether the NRA has purposefully taken advantage of partisan reinforcement as a way of mitigating the collective action problem is less concrete. I attribute the NRA's efficacy to its ability to get its members to take action. While my analyses do not provide much direct evidence in support of this, they supplement analyses done by other scholars (e.g. Lacombe 2018) which do find direct evidence that the root of the NRA's success is its strength in mobilization. My examination of NRA editorials has shown that the NRA uses identity-based frames to invoke member action. These frames serve to strengthen in-group favorability by painting gun owners as pro-American defenders of freedom and painting their anti-gun opponents as anti-American villains who pose an existential threat to national traditions and the gun-owner way of life. They highlight the consequences if members do not follow through on the call to action and continue to build a sense of gun-owner solidarity, further politicizing the gun owner identity and making it easier to activate gun owners when necessary. At the same time, by linking the

Republican party to gun ownership and attempting to foster negative affect for the Democrats, the NRA likely increases Republican party loyalty among its member and makes them more likely to participate politically in the service of Republican priorities.

This work provides useful insight for further explorations of partisanship and identity reinforcement. It explores how interest groups – in this case, the NRA – are influenced by social sorting and the alignment of other identities with partisanship. It also demonstrates examples of avenues interest groups might to use these political developments to their advantage. Additionally, I contribute further to the extant literature on the NRA by examining the role of the NRA's homogeneity in allowing it to further its political objectives. I specifically complement Lacombe's (2018) work on how the NRA has cultivated a politicized identity on its members, by showing that the NRA does not do this in isolation: it taps into existing political identities, namely partisan and ideological identities, in its effort to build a mobilizable gun owner identity.

With additional time and resources, I would have liked to test my theory with the generalizable hypotheses I developed. One way I could have done this would be to be to look at additional case studies, like the AARP. The AARP, just like the NRA, has a narrow focus – senior advocacy – and a clearly definable membership (as opposed to a loose association). I believe a comparison of the AARP (or other groups like it) with the NRA would have been especially useful, given the AARP's more politically heterogenous membership. Its members have more cross-cutting identities, which is probably significantly reflected in the ways the AARP goes about mobilizing its members. Unlike the NRA, the AARP's communications are presumably much more limited in scope and much less involved in the culture war, because the AARP could quickly start offending people in a way that the NRA might not. This means it is less likely to tap into

culture war attitudes as a means of member activation. Unfortunately, I can only speculate about these differences, though hopefully future work can test the generalizability of my hypotheses.

I argue that the NRA has benefited from social sorting and partisan reinforcement, but it is quite clear from my theory and analysis that strategic consideration of reinforcement is by no means a fool-proof method for overcoming the collective action problem. Nor is the use of identity-based mobilizing a guarantor of long-term success. The NRA has had to sacrifice the ability to maximize its membership numbers by driving off liberals and Democrats. Its inflammatory rhetoric and demonization of the other side has made the organization a toxic one. The NRA draws negative attention to itself on a regular basis. Corporate partners have cut their ties with it in recent years.²⁷ Some members are exhausted by the constant calls to action, the overstatement of the threats to gun rights, and the vilification of the anti-gun Americans (Melzer 2009). This was perhaps bound to happen. At some point, just like with the boy who cried wolf, people grow weary of claimed threats that never actually materialize.

Left-leaning gun control groups have not been able to match the NRA's might because they have relied on persuasion instead of identity and have failed to develop a grassroots base (see Han 2017). The NRA, however, has abandoned persuasion entirely and thus risks falling apart if political trends change or if its core support begins to drop off. Its hyper-focus on identity allows it to easily attain its short-term goals but this could come at the cost irreversible long-term damage, in which case gun control groups could perhaps finally establish their strength in American politics. Nevertheless, if the NRA's history has taught us anything, it is that it almost always finds a way to adapt to its environment, even in times of organizational instability and weakness. Rather than waiting for the NRA to falter and fold, gun control advocates should learn from its successes

²⁷ "Corporate partners cut cord with NRA as gun control debate rages," Reuters, 2018

and avoid its mistakes. That may be easier said than done, however. The NRA may only give up the fight for gun rights when it is pried from its “cold, dead, [Republican] hands.”

Appendix A: Coding Instructions

Coding *American Rifleman* Editorials

In a spreadsheet, create 11 columns labeling them *monthYear*, *pageNum*, *Political*, *identityFrame*, *inGroupIdeo*, *inGroupPID*, *inGroupAmerican*, *outGroupPID*, *outGroupAmerican*, *callToAction*, *Note*.

Then, enter the appropriate numeric codes in the spreadsheet as described below for each editorial.

monthYear - What month + year was the issue published?

- Format “xx-xxxx” e.g. “12-2008”

pageNum - What page is the editorial found

Political - Is the editorial political in nature?

- Code “o” for default / no
- Code “1” if editorial does any of the following:
 - it refers to gun control more broadly
 - it refers to any other legislation or policy
 - it refers to any other political / politicized issue
 - it refers to national government institutions
 - it refers to international government institutions
 - it refers to recent political events
 - it makes any culture war appeals (e.g. refers to “traditional values” or “elites”)
 - it refers to a politician or multiple politicians
 - it is an advertisement for a political candidate (*take note of this if this is the case*)
 - it refers to one or both political parties
 - it makes appeals to political ideology
 - it refers to media bias or implies that the media is biased against the NRA / gun owners

identityFrame - does the editorial frame political discussion in social identity terms?

- Code “o” for default / editorial does not frame political discussion in social identity terms (e.g. if an editorial about a potential gun confiscation policy notes that this would be nearly impossible because of the high number of guns in America)
- Code “1” if the discussion focuses on the impact of a given matter on gun owners’ “lifestyles and/or their values,”²⁸ (e.g. if an editorial about a potential gun confiscation policy notes that out-of-touch elites in Washington want to prevent law-abiding gun-owners from exercising their freedoms, e.g. if an editorial says that if Hillary Clinton wins, snowflakes will force the LGBT agenda down the throat of average Americans ‘like you’)
- *Note: must include impact on lifestyle + values - if it just says “this law will be bad for gun owners,” that is NOT ENOUGH to serve as an identity-frame*

inGroupIdeo - does the editorial express that gun owners are conservatives?

- Code “o” for default / no
- Code “1” if yes and it does so explicitly (e.g. “When debate ended and the dust cleared, a conservative, constitutional originalist, pro-Second Amendment judge was sworn in as a justice on the Supreme Court; our freedom won, and your support helped make that victory possible.”)

²⁸ Based on Lacombe (2018)

- Code “2” if yes, but it does so implicitly (e.g. “On behalf of our 5 million members, the NRA congratulates Neil Gorsuch on his confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court,” or if it implies gun owners support limited government, traditional values, etc.). *Note: if language in the editorial implies or states that anti-gunners are liberals and directly places them in opposition to gun owners (e.g. “these liberals want to take away your guns”), **inGroupIdeo** should then be coded as “2” and **outGroupIdeo** should also be coded accordingly*

inGroupPID - does the editorial express that gun owners are supporters of: the Republican party; specific Republican politicians; specific Republican legislative activity?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if yes and it does so explicitly (e.g. “The Supreme Court was one of the reasons many NRA members and other gun owners strongly supported Donald Trump in November’s election, fearing what kind of justice Hillary Clinton might put on the high court”)
- Code “2” if yes, but it does so implicitly (e.g. “An important avenue where President Donald Trump and our friends in the Senate have been able to move swiftly is...”). *Note: if language in the editorial implies or states that anti-gunners are Democrats and directly places them in opposition to gun owners (e.g. “these Democrats want to take away your guns”), **inGroupPID** should then be coded as “2” and **outGroupPID** should also be coded accordingly*

inGroupAmerican - does the editorial express that gun owners are patriotic Americans and/or that they hold American values?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if the editorial describes gun owners as patriots, and/or as representing/holding values encompassed by one or multiple of the following foundational elements of the American political culture²⁹:
 - Liberty - are gun owners described as defenders of rights and freedom?
 - Equality - do gun owners believe that everyone deserves equal chances for political participation and for success in life?
 - Democracy - do gun owners believe that the government must be held accountable to the people?
 - Civic Duty - are gun owners described as caring about their communities and helping it when possible?
 - Individual Responsibility - are gun owners described as taking responsibility for their own actions and well-being?

outGroupIdeo - does the editorial express that anti-gunners (pro-gun control individuals/forces) are liberals or hold liberal values?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if yes and it does so explicitly (e.g. “We’ve often said that if liberal elites spent some time in the America that you and I hold dear, they’d soon recognize the folly of their anti-gun ways,” “liberals/progressives/the far left want to take your guns”)
- Code “2” if yes, but it does so implicitly (e.g. “Those in Hollywood and the members of the media want to take away your guns,” or if it implies anti-gunners support welfare, big government, the LGBT agenda, etc.)

outGroupPID - does the editorial express that anti-gunners (pro-gun control individuals/forces) are Democrats, Democratic politicians, supporters of the Democratic party, or support specific Democratic legislative activity?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if yes and it does so explicitly (e.g. “If you happen to be looking for even more reasons to dislike Democrat Hillary Clinton as a presidential candidate than her complete disdain for the Second Amendment...”)

²⁹ See Wilson and Dilulio; 2008, p.78

- Code “2” if yes, but it does so implicitly (e.g. “Further, with a one-vote Republican majority in the Senate, Kavanaugh’s supporters have no margin for error.”)

outGroupAmerican - does the editorial express that anti-gunners are anti-American or hold anti-American-values?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if the editorial describes anti-gunners as acting in opposition to or holding values contrary to one or multiple of the following foundational elements of the American political culture:
 - Liberty (e.g. “America’s gun owners and voters, are not being told the truth about this movement’s true goal—turning our country into an unrecognizable, socialist nation devoid of the basic freedoms that the founders enshrined in the Constitution”)
 - Equality
 - Democracy
 - Civic Duty
 - Individual Responsibility (“Young Americans are taught... government control over self-destiny”)

callToAction - does the editorial include an explicit call for NRA members to act on behalf of the NRA’s political goals?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if the editorial does any of the following:
 - Calls on members to donate to the NRA, renew their memberships, encourage others to become members so that the NRA can advance its political goals
 - Calls on members to vote
 - Calls on members to contact public officials
 - Calls on members to engage others on behalf of the NRA’s political objectives (e.g. asking them to tell their neighbors that John Kerry is anti-gun).

Note - Is there anything particularly interesting about this editorial?

- If yes, type what is particularly interesting about it (e.g. “the editorial refers to George Soros as a communist who wants to destroy the American way of life”)

Coding Magazine Subject Scope

In a spreadsheet, create 8 columns labeling them *Magazine*, *monthYear*, *pageNum*, *Category*, *Outreach*, *offTopic*, *politicalTopic*, *Note*.

Magazine - What magazine is the item in?

- AR for *American Rifleman*
- AFF for *America’s First Freedom*

monthYear - What year + month was the issue published?

pageNum - What page is the item found?

Step 1: Headline categories

- Open the magazine to the Table of Contents section that is specifically for *features* and, if included, *special reports* (but skip editorials if these are included under special reports). For every other feature/special report headline, code the following:

Category - What category do the item's headline and sub-headline indicate it *best* falls under?

- Code "0" for default / item falls under magazine's designated topic but is not political in nature
Note: this can be fairly broad - a gun-related article could be hunting, new gun technology, etc.
- Code "1" if the item falls under the magazine's designated topic but it is political in nature. In this case, the item is political in nature if it relates to gun policy or retirement-related policy.
- Code "2" if the item is political in nature but has little or nothing to do with the magazine's designated topic (e.g. "How Does Venezuela Like Socialism Now? Having seen her own country mired in socialism, pro shooter Gabby Franco doesn't want the United States to follow the same path)
- Code "3" if the item is a lifestyle piece. This includes subjects like health and fitness, tourism, leisure, fashion, decorating, and culture.
- Code "4" for other
- Code "99" if you can't tell

Step 2: Locate the feature in the magazine

- Flip to the page number associated with that item in the Table of Contents

offTopicList - What is the first political topic being talked about that does not *directly* relate to the magazine's focus?

- List the topic e.g. "flag burning," "black lives matter," "Tom Brady," "
- Code "0" if no topic that is unrelated to guns comes up

*Note: the key word here is "directly". For example, in the NRA magazines, things like "Democrats" and "Michael Bloomberg" will tend to be discussed in relation to guns or gun policy. As such, they should not be included under **offTopic**. Something like "Black Lives Matter" or "flag burning" may be tenuously linked to gun control activism by a writer but would not count as directly relating to the magazine's focus and would thus fall under **offTopic**.*

politicalTopic - What is the first political topic being talked about that *does* relate to the magazine's focus (i.e. gun rights for the NRA).

- List the topic
- Code "0" if no political topic comes up

Note Is there anything particularly interesting about this feature?

- If yes, type what is particularly interesting about it

Coding *American Rifleman* Advertisements

In a spreadsheet, create 10 columns labeling them *monthYear*, *pageNum*, *productType*, *massMarket*, *languageSex*, *languageAmerica*, *languagePolitical*, *imageSex*, *imageRace*, *imageAmerica*, *Note*.

Then, enter the appropriate numeric codes in the spreadsheet as described below for each advertisement. Do not include advertisements for NRA products e.g. membership renewal, NRA conferences.

monthYear - What year + month was the issue published?

pageNum - What page does the advertisement start on?

productType - What type of product is being advertised?

- Code “0” for guns/bullets/gun accessories (e.g. silencer, grip)
- Code “1” for sport/recreation/hunting/outdoor (includes outdoor clothing and knives)
 - Not, do not include bullets, guns, or scopes that are marketed for hunting. These should still be coded “0”
- Code “2” for events (non-NRA, e.g. YAF conference)
- Code “3” for collectibles (e.g. coins)
- Code “4” for security service/hardware (e.g. Lifelock)
- Code “5” for insurance/legal services
- Code “6” for health-related products (e.g. vitamin supplement, life alert)
- Code “7” if the product could be included in two or more of the above categories
- Code “8” for consumer products & services that do not fit into the above categories (e.g. personal accessories, beer, car rentals)
- Code “9” for other, non-consumer products (e.g. business-to-business)

massMarket - Have you heard of this product or service?

- Code “0” if you have not heard of this product or service
- Code “1” if you have heard of this product or service
 - *Note: do not code gun manufacturers you have heard of as mass market*

languageSex - Does the advertisement’s language make any sex-specific appeals/references?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” for appeal/reference to masculinity (e.g. “Real men love Glocks,” “Every father needs to get this for his daughter”) *or* if product is specifically targeted to men (e.g. Viagra, specifically male shoes, “every sportsman/outdoorsman/frontiersman”)
- Code “2” for appeal/reference to femininity (e.g. “No woman should go without a Glock”) *or* if product is specifically targeted to women
- Code “3” for appeal/reference to both sexes (e.g. “both boys and girls love their Glocks”). *Note: Advertisements that say something like “everyone will love this product” do not count as making sex-specific appeals. Sex must be explicitly mentioned.*

languageAmerica - Does the advertisement’s language make any appeals to American values?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if advertisements makes appeals to one or multiple of the values that form the foundations of American political culture and that readers will recognize as being distinctly a part of the American “Way of Life.” These include:
 - Liberty (e.g. “Let words of Freedom Ring out in Bold Style”)
 - Equality (e.g. “Smith rifles wants everyone to be able to exercise their rights, so we produce rifles that all Americans can afford”)
 - Democracy (e.g. “For generations, it has been a beacon of democracy to the world... Now America Remembers is proud to introduce a handsome patriotic firearm in Tribute to our great country – The Land of Liberty Tribute Revolver.”)
 - Civic duty (e.g. “This necklace is crafted in Patriot-tough Solid Stainless Steel,” “Our We the People” Men’s Twill Jacket, is a stylish way to show that you’re a proud American.”)
 - Individual responsibility (e.g. “At a Young America’s Foundation High School Conference at the Reagan Ranch, the student in your life will expand his or her knowledge of personal responsibility...”)
- *Note: “American-made” does not count as an appeal to American values.*

Political - Is the advertisement at all political in nature?

- Code “0” for default / no
- Code “1” if the ad does any of the following:
 - it references gun legislation or policy
 - it refers to gun control more broadly

- it refers to any other legislation or policy
- it refers to any other political / politicized issue
- it refers to national government institutions
- it refers to international government institutions
- it refers to recent political events
- it makes any culture war appeals
- it refers to a politician or multiple politicians
- it is an advertisement for a political candidate (*take note of this if this is the case*)
- it refers to one or both political parties
- it makes appeals to political ideology
- it refers to media bias or implies that the media is biased against the NRA / gun owners

imageSex - What is the sex of the person(s) featured in the advertisement?

- Code “0” if the advertisement does not feature a person
- Code “1” if the advertisement only features a woman/women
- Code “2” if the advertisement only features a man/men
- Code “3” if the advertisement features both a man and woman
- Code “99” if you cannot tell

imageRace - What is the race of the person(s) featured in the advertisement?

- Code “0” if the advertisement does not feature a person
- Code “1” if the advertisement only features a minority/minorities
- Code “2” if the advertisement only features a white person/white people
- Code “3” if the advertisement features both a minority and a white person
- Code “99” if you cannot tell

imageAmerica - Does the advertisement depict American imagery?

- Code “0” for default / if the advertisement does not feature American imagery
- Code “1” if the advertisement features American imagery (e.g. an eagle, a flag)
 - Note: do not include company logos as advertisement images

Note - Is there anything particularly interesting about this advertisement?

- If yes, type what is particularly interesting about it (e.g. “it implies NRA members are Donald Trump supporters”)

Appendix B: Additional Data on Gun Owners

Table 1. Ideology of Gun Owners Not in the NRA

Year	Very liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Very conservative
1993	1%	9%	46%	38%	6%
1999	2%	15%	35%	40%	8%
2013	2%	14%	39%	36%	9%
2017	4%	13%	45%	26%	12%

Table 2. Ideology of Gun Owners in the NRA

Year	Very Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Very conservative
1993	6%	11%	20%	41%	22%
1999	0%	25%	20%	43%	12%
2013	0%	9%	32%	48%	11%
2017	2%	7%	28%	40%	23%

Table 3. Percentage Share of Whites Among NRA Members and Non-NRA Gun Owners

	1993	1995	1999	2013	2017
	% White				
NRA Members	96	93	94	95	84
Non-Members	90	88	89	85	79

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