

Second amendment and American society

Deva Ram

Research Scholar at CCUSLAS, SIS, JNU, New Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper will analyse public opinion on the gun rights and actual status of gun rights among various sections of American society. Politics and Society of America hold widely diverse views on the gun rights issue. These differences have at the level of political affiliation, race, gender, geography, economic status and gun ownership. Republican are more supportive than Democrats to gun rights, whites are more likely supportive than racial minorities, men are more supportive than women, and southerners and westerners are more sympathetic than people from other parts of the country.

Keywords: Americans, gun rights, gun control, whites, protestant

Introduction

Gun culture in America is the unique in the world. It stems from the country's colonial history, revolutionary roots, frontier expansion and most importantly the Second Amendment which declares "A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Not only do the Americans possess the most number of firearms in the world- 270 million- but also have the highest gun ownership per capita rate in the world. To be precise, on an average for every ten Americans, nine guns are available.

The right to keep and bear arms is a fundamental right in the United States that was included in the Bill of Rights as the Second Amendment. America's Bill of rights reflects the Founding Fathers' understanding of the necessary links between personal freedom and representative government, as well as their experience with threats to liberty. The Second Amendment secured liberty against national government tyranny by affirming self-defense of states. Few at that time thought that individual freedom needed national protection against states invasions on the rights of people.

The Second Amendment in the US Bill of Rights was an amalgamation of several proposals and a resultant simplification into twenty-seven words. This brevity is often blamed for the enigmatic meaning that has fueled the debate on gun rights. For the last quarter of the twentieth-century, the Second Amendment has attracted increasing attention from the general public, historians of the colonial as well as early American national history, politicians, legal commentators. In view of the multiplication of incidents of gun violence, there has been a stark polarization in society amongst those who favor gun control versus those who promote the constitutional right of the individuals to own guns. This has amplified the quest amongst academicians to determine the intentions of the Founders of the Second Amendment.

The Second Amendment has broadly been interpreted into two different streams of thought: the individual rights view and the collective rights view. Adherents to the individual rights view

contend that the objective behind drawing up the Second Amendment was to establish a fundamental individual right to own firearms for personal protection, hunting and recreation. On the other hand, partisans to the collective rights view, claim that the Founders' intent was to allocate military power into the federal structure. While the first view aids the interest of the advocates of gun rights, the second views yields to the goals of gun control.

The significance of individualism is apparent in the historical tradition of gun ownership in the country, the enduring profile of gun owners, the values and sub-cultural behaviour of gun owners. On the other hand, the drive to control gun ownership as well as the conviction to rely on the government to grant security must be viewed as the manifestation of collectivist values. It has been found through data sources and across time period that legal gun owners possess certain distinct attributes. Research suggests gun owners are usually White, Protestant and male, from rural areas and small towns of the South.

Some sources also suggest that a standard gun owner is Republican as well as married. It is also suggested that gun ownership intensifies with age and becomes the highest amongst the middle aged people. Both T. W. Smith and Adams have suggested that the rate of gun ownership escalates with income. However, T. W. Smith has suggested that education is a poor indicator of gun ownership. Another argument suggests that the Southern subculture is exemplified by the prevalence of violent behaviour. An alternative interpretation champions that structural forces such as relative deprivation and economic inequality are causes of violent crime rates as well as high gun ownership ^[1].

Partisans of stringent gun control measures claim that widespread possession of guns steers towards higher rates of violent crimes. Thus, additional constraints on the distribution of firearms would offer individuals a safer environment. However, advocates of the gun rights perspective put forth

¹ Jo Dixon and Alan J. Lizotte, "Gun Ownership and the Southern Subculture of Violence", *American Journal of Sociology*, 93(2): 383-405.

that possession of guns is important for the purpose of self-defence- a measure that would deter certain potential criminals from committing the crime in the first place [2].

Statistics by the *Pew Research Centre* suggest that Republicans are more likely to possess guns than the Democrats. Whereas merely 16 percent of the Democrats possess rifles, guns and pistols; nearly 31 percent Republicans own such firearms. However even amongst the Republicans who are non-owners of guns, there is a lesser degree of support for gun control than amongst the Democrats or the independents. A comparative study reflects that whereas 32 percent of the Republicans state that stringent gun laws would help in minimising the number of accidental gun deaths, 74 percent Democrats champion the cause of stricter gun laws [3].

In 2013, CNN conducted two surveys of gun owners in America. In January of the same year, approximately 53% of the gun owners were of the belief that the federal government was making an endeavour to take away their right to ownership of guns. Soon after in the month of April, after President Barack Obama and Vice-President Biden made fruitless efforts to convince the Congress to extend the background check initiative, the number shot up to 62% [4].

Since America is a free society, it is founded on the inalienable right of individuals to possess guns for any cause they choose- collecting, hunting, and above all self-defence. In such a free society that is based on such inalienable rights of individuals, the state must not be permitted the capability to infringe into the rights of individuals [5]. According to a recent *ABC-Washington Post* survey, most Americans consider that possessing guns would be a better response to countering terrorism than a likely gun control measure. Eric Pratt, the spokesperson of the Gun Owners of America held that President Obama's thrust on gun control measures was the impetus behind the renewed interest in guns and firearms in the country.

Mr Pratt said, "President Obama's feckless behaviour has destroyed the people's confidence that the government can protect them from terrorism." Further, he mentioned that "That's why Americans are buying guns and getting concealed carry permits in record numbers." In other words, those people who were most worried about the menace of terrorism would in due course of time be the ones who were most likely to contemplate guns as a viable answer to such uncertainty [6].

² Katarzyna Celinska, "Individualism and Collectivism in America: The Case of Gun Ownership and Attitudes Towards Gun Control", *Sociological Perspectives*, Volume 50, No. 2, Summer 2007, pp. 229-247, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.jnu.ac.in/stable/pdf/10.1525/sop.2007.50.2.229.pdf>

³ Michael Dimock, "Why Own A Gun? Protection is Now Top Reason", *Pew Research Centre*, March 12, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/03-12-13%20Gun%20Ownership%20Release.pdf>

⁴ Max Ehrenfreund, "Why So Many Americans Think The Government Wants Their Guns", *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/08/why-so-many-americans-think-the-government-wants-their-guns/>

⁵ Andrew Bernstein, "To Protect the Innocent, We Need More Guns In The Hands of Honest People", *Forbes*, December 26, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2012/12/26/to-protect-the-innocent-we-need-more-guns-in-the-hands-of-honest-people/#3b4a79dd49fb>

⁶ David Sherfinski, "Most Americans Oppose So-Called Assault Weapons Ban: Poll", *The Washington Times*, December 16, 2015,

The *Pew Research Centre* in its report in 2013 assimilated an in-depth statistics on the individuals who claimed to possess guns or had guns in their households. While 31 percent of White people are owners of guns, yet White men constitute a much larger share in this group than white women. Another perspective from which this statistics could be viewed is the ratio of all Americans to that which possess guns. Interestingly, whereas only 32 percent of the population are White men, yet White men constitute as much as 61 percent of owners of guns.

At present, six-in-ten Whites (61%) favour gun rights over gun control. Contrarily, only a third of the Blacks (34%) whereas six-in-ten (60%) highlight the importance to control gun ownership. On the other hand, Hispanics rank gun control over gun rights by an extensive 71% to 25% margin. Amongst those individuals, who have not really attended college, 53% people declared their response in favour of gun rights. Republicans too have openly expressed their support in favour of safeguarding individual gun rights over gun control mechanisms by a broad margin of 76% to 22%. Conversely, the Democrats have advocated their support in favour of control of gun ownership to the protection of individual gun rights by a margin of 69% to 28%.

The glaring disparity in gun ownership brings us to the aspect of gun deaths. Gun deaths are to a great extent shaped by the aspect of races in America. The *Washington Post* had analysed some data of the *U.S Centre for Disease Control and Prevention* and yielded some dramatic results. It was concluded that a white individual was five times more likely to commit suicide with a gun rather than being shot by one. On the contrary, for every African-American who was likely to use a gun to commit suicide, there are chances for five African Americans to be killed by other people possessing guns [7].

Also, the area of residence of an individual greatly influences the question of gun deaths. Gun deaths that occur in urban areas as likely to be cases of homicides, whereas in rural areas suicides are by far the most pre-dominant mode gun death. In states such as Wyoming and Montana, where the rate of guns per capita is the highest, the case of suicides is the highest as well. However, states like New York and Massachusetts, which have low gun ownership rates also have a less number of cases of suicides per capita [8].

Thus, over the years, the debate on the Second Amendment has deeply penetrated into the American society. The society too, alike the political system of the country, continues to remain divided on the issue. Such is the impact of the debate on gun ownership that several individuals identify gun rights as their inalienable right as citizens of the country and the issue continues to be a subject of great deliberation in the 2016 Presidential elections as well.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/dec/16/most-americans-oppose-so-called-assault-weapons-ba/>

⁷ Dan Keating, "Gun Deaths Shaped by Race in America", *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/feature/wp/2013/03/22/gun-deaths-shaped-by-race-in-america/>

⁸ Ibid

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