

A Proposal for a Random Sample to Measure “Gun Culture” and Its Influences

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## Introduction

The Southeastern part of the United States has long been entrenched in history revolved around a culture of honor, and conflict resolution through fatal means. This once conceived notion that carrying weaponry was to signal honor and dignity, is believed to have morphed into a symbol of power and intimidation (Felson, 2010). This tightknit political behavior, labeled as “gun culture”, is an ever-changing metric. To that effect, what influences “gun culture” to change outside of interpersonal relationships and experiences? One such variable that I believe will have a large influence on the density and strength of “gun culture” in a certain area of the United States are special interest groups and organizations that advocate for or against the issue of gun control. One such group that is well known and has been under fire for years from gun control advocates is the NRA, or the National Rifle Association. The NRA, according to the literature, uses a multitude of techniques to maintain their influence through means of funding programs, maintaining close relationships with gun manufacturers, and birthing political influence (lobbying) (Lacombe, 2019).

To better understand the topic, I must first explicitly define the nexus of beliefs known as “gun culture”. “Gun culture” as the term may imply, refers to the implicit positive values that a certain population holds about ownership and the usage of firearms. We can quantify “gun culture” by a multitude of behaviors that dictate a level of interaction between individuals and guns. Such behaviors include a willingness or likelihood to use firearms, a willingness or likelihood to own a firearm, and the rate of concealed carry. These measures along with gun related statistics such gun range attendance, gun program attendance, and most importantly firearm related crime.

In this paper we will explore which ways interest groups interact within the population and the impact that these interactions have on the population's beliefs about "gun culture" as well as general policies regarding gun carry and usage. We will then cross reference this information with gun related statistics from the past 50 years to determine the outcome of "gun culture" beliefs. The question I aim to better understand by the end of this paper is as follows;

**Has "gun culture" changed over the past 50 years in the United States, and have special interest groups and factors such as identity influenced this change (or lack thereof)?**

## Literature Review

The research for this paper is comprised of a multitude of peer reviewed journals that explore different facets of the topic at hand. The first facet regarding the effect interest groups and other organizations have on "gun culture" comes with the polarization of gun control politics and the division of ideology. Rhetoric regarding guns is partisan and follows party lines according to Huff (2017). This assertion along with the influence that interest groups who oppose gun violence (and usage) have on social beliefs toward guns might be associated with the growing polarization of American Politics (Huff, 2017; Richards, 2017). Polarization within "gun culture" is a well-studied phenomenon, as many scholars assert the belief that "gun culture" comes in many forms and has even changed over the last 50 years as a result of morphing attitudes towards this hot button topic. According to Yamane (2017), "gun culture" can be separated into two different types, a "Gun Culture 1.0" and "Gun Culture 2.0". Yamane specifies a difference in the usage of guns, as recreational activities such as hunting, collecting and sport use are referred to as "recreational gun culture" or "Gun Culture 1.0", whereas "Gun Culture 2.0" is centered around the idea of armed self-defense (Yamane, 2017). A paper complimentary to that of Yamane's paper (Carlson 2020) presents a much more social focus that ties this

spectrum of changing “gun cultures” back into this idea of polarization; “Divisive politics of the (gun) Culture Wars... (is a) means of addressing a different set of problems amid the collapse of industrial capitalism and decline of urban and suburban America” (pg. 185).

The next facet we will discuss is the effect special interest groups aim to have directly on the population. One paper gives a great anecdotal example of such an attempt, as he illustrates how the perception of history largely contributes to the beliefs of the gun rights subculture as a whole (Utter, 2000). Passages quoted from early Americans often serve to verify the beliefs and assumed identities of gun rights activists (Utter, 2000). According to the given literature and my interpretations based on it, I believe one of effects special interest groups try to have on a population is radicalization through the presentation of perspective, as individuals will more readily join a collective that they politically align themselves with. Subscribing to that same vein of thought, Huff (2017) takes it a step further by breaking down this effect on the population into a process. Special interest groups use a tactic known as “social marketing”, which is a term used to describe the appeal to people's social and moral beliefs about an issue by branding a topic as one way or another (Huff, 2017). A large emphasis is placed in this article on the “upstream” effect of social interaction, “upstream” meaning that he wanted to evaluate how anti-gun rhetoric passes from personal beliefs to government legislation (Huff, 2017). Although hard to measure, this indirect affect that “gun collectives” have on a population is mirrored in the same way that lobbying influences government officials. Both sides of the political power spectrum seem to have a string attached from special interest groups.

The last facet we will focus our attention towards before presenting some data is the idea of special interest groups and identity. “Gun collectives”, as they are referred to by Blithe and

Lanterman, often possess stigmas associated to them. The stigma that these groups possess are often a projected “hatred” from other groups that aims to “lousy” the groups identity and by associating their beliefs. For instance, the identity of an organization or interest group is directly tied to the values that it holds, which means that groups such as the NRA have unwavering opinions on firearm restrictions because it acts as a means of upholding their identity (Blithe and Lanterman, 2017). To further deepen this idea, we can take from Utter (2000), who noted that not only “gun culture” is affected by this division, but “the two contending sides (of the political debate) play a significant role in defining each other.” (pg. 69). It doesn’t even stop at culture or general political beliefs; this idea of identity even effects the perception of policies themselves. Carlson (2020) presents an interesting duality that “When framed as gun control politics, gun policy is (often) controversial and politically unfeasible, but when framed as tough-on-crime politics, gun policy is (often) uncontroversial and politically feasible.” (pg. 189). It is fair to conclude that perception and identity play a large role in the acceptance of certain values, according to the available literature.

Lastly, we will draw conclusions from information presented in the literature. Richards (2017) used voter data to reinforce the notion we discussed previously, that members of interest groups are often more polarized on the gun debate. One of the most interesting statistics that illustrates this is as follows; “Eleven percent of gun-owning NRA members support a ban on the sale of high-capacity magazines and 7 percent support bans on semi-automatic weapons, compared to 46 percent and 36 percent (respectively) of gun owners not in the NRA” (pg. 474). According to Maani (2020), gun advocacy could be contributing to the gun violence issue in the United States, as “emerging evidence shows a trend toward greater lethality in gun manufacturing, purchases, and traced crime guns.” (pg. 1182). Lastly, Mechling (2014) provides

a more social dilemma regarding The Boy Scouts. He proposes that gun usage and ownership is being reinforced as a masculine and “encouraged habits that business class liked.” (pg. 8).

According to Mechling (2014), “By 1906, the NRA was sponsoring competitive shooting matches for the boys in the junior program. In the next few decades, the NRA expanded its youth programs to include girls.” (pg. 8).

To summarize, these papers provided a great insight to the question at hand. These papers effectively provided a multitude of facets that interest groups use to influence people, and the greater “gun culture” as a whole. One of the limitations of these papers is that they do not cover specific regions of the United States. Although this may not seem like a big deal, those who live in the United States understand that the continental US is large and possesses many regional subcultures. The only other limitation in the literature I had found was that it was difficult to pinpoint exact time frames of transitions to and between different “gun cultures”. What we can conclude is that interest groups hold such a significant weight to “gun culture” and political alignment in the United States; “gun culture” has not only changed, but it is fluid in its change over time.

## Data and Methodology

In the available papers, data was far and few between, making it difficult to collect proper data to answer the research question. We want to figure out the change in attitudes for the whole US population in regards to gun culture, so in order to do that we will set up a survey. The type of survey we would like to use is a quantitative random sample that can measure every demographic we can capture. Since gun culture is a nationwide culture that comes in many forms, we will have to divert our findings to explain the influence on different forms of gun culture. Since we want to measure the change overtime, the survey would come in 5 waves,

measuring different samples of people over the course of 50 years (1 wave conducted every 10 years).

We are specifically trying to measure the affect that special interest groups have on people's adoption of gun culture and the type of gun culture the person subscribes themselves to. In order to measure this, we will provide the same research questions in every wave to stay consistent. Here are 5 questions that will likely be included in our survey:

1. Are you a US citizen?

- Yes
- No (conclude survey)

1.1. What State do you live in (primary residence- 6 months or more lived there per year)?

- \*List 50 States\*

2. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other

3. Age

- 17 years old or younger
- 18 – 21 years old
- 22 – 30 years old
- 31 – 45 years old
- 46 – 64 years old
- 65+ years old

4. Are you a member of any special interest group that advocates **for** gun rights in the United States?

- Yes
- No

4.1. If no, how likely are you to join a special interest group that advocates **for** the protection of gun rights?

- Very Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neutral
- Somewhat Unlikely
- Very Unlikely

5. Are you a member of any special interest group that advocates **against** gun rights in the United States?

- Yes
- No

5.1. If no, how likely are you to join a special interest group that advocates **against** gun rights in the United States?

- Very Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neutral
- Somewhat Unlikely
- Very Unlikely

6. Do you own a firearm legally?



- Yes
- No

6.1. If yes, do you have a concealed carry permit?

- Yes
- No

6.2. If yes, what purpose(s) do your firearm(s) serve? (multiple selection)

- Personal protection (protection of self and loved ones)
- Property protection (protection of possessions)
- Hunting/Fishing
- Sport (all recreational activities that don't include killing or harming)
- Intimidation
- Collection or Display
- Job/Work
- Other

7. How many times have you used a firearm(s)?

- Never
- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- 6-8 times
- 9+ times

8. Which ideology best represents your beliefs about guns?

- "I think no one should be able to own firearms"

- “I think that people are entitled to own handguns, but rifles or high capacity arms should not be ownable”
- “I think that others are entitled to own guns of any kind but I will not own/use one”
- “I think that others are entitled to own guns of any kind and I will/do own guns”
- Other

9. Have you ever experienced or witnessed any form of gun violence?

- Yes
- No

10. How strongly do you agree with the following statement? “The 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment should only protect the ownership of unmodified single fire handguns.”

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. Based off of your own understanding, where would gun usage fall in terms of male gender roles? In other words, how masculine would you consider gun usage?

- (5) Extremely Masculine
- (4) More Masculine
- (3) Somewhat Masculine
- (2) Less Masculine
- (1) Not Masculine

Prior to the administration of the survey, a small briefing will be conducted to ensure people understand the questions being asked. First would be a section assuring that all results will be anonymous and confidential. Next will be a small section stating the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment word for word along with explanation for the term “arms”.

Lastly, a table that displays all of our desired demographic information is essential to help understand what we measure. We aim to measure the beliefs of the general US population, so we will be categorizing our information by age, gender, and state of residence (age helps delineate possible types of gun culture over time, gender helps us better understand the association between masculinity and gun usage/culture, state of residence to measure rates between states). Below is a table with gender accompanied by the population size of the United States, the country we aim to measure with our survey.

	% of US Population	Total in US population
Male	~49.2%	163,073,046
Female	~50.8%	168,376,235
Total	~100%	331,449,281

### Strengths and Limitations

My method of data collection boasts both strengths and weaknesses, both of which will be discussed in this section. Making use of a quantitative research method such as surveying for a difficult to quantify topic like gun culture is bound to produce gaps, but I think that some of what I would measure would prove invaluable to future research. My research question definitely would have been most thorough with a mixed method approach to research, but even I understand that is far too ambitious for such a long study (and novel as far as I am concerned).

So what components of my research are strengths to my argument? The first and most important strength I think my research possesses is the scope of the research. What I mean by this is that the study itself is appropriate for what I attempt to measure. The survey makes it possible to gather generalized data about gun culture factors, which was needed for our research considering some of these comorbid factors have never been measure in tandem with one another prior to my proposed research. Also making use of random sampling eliminates any form of selection bias, which is useful when we want to determine attitudes across such a large population.

The second strength that my research has is that it attempts to contextualize gun culture, which I could find no attempts of in my literature review process. This is important because I am taking the first step into research for a topic, which not only helps myself as a researcher avoid confirmation bias, but it also makes me able to standardize the definitions of gun culture, which as of right now are still fragmented. This research would implicate possible reactivity between special interest groups and the attitudes towards gun usage.

The final strength my research possesses are all the different measurable affect variables. With this study, I will be able to measure for gun culture adherence between gender, age, and location of the subjects. My research also includes minors, which may give us insight on the salience of guns and gun usage for youth in the current culture. All of these factors may indicate the prevalence rate of gun culture between groups, and statistical analysis of the data will highlight risk factors for adherence to gun culture concepts.

In the available literature, one amazing example that shows why choosing a survey is justified is an article surveying the meaning of guns to gun owners. This survey at surface value is practically what my survey is. It doesn't however include identities, gun culture specific

metrics, and is a single wave panel survey rather than a recurring random sample. Clearly illustrated in this paper by Siegel and Boine is that surveying is an effective method, and the statistics generated from this gave valuable insight to the reasoning for people's gun usage or lack thereof. "The survey included measures of gun ownership, gun-related activities, gun owner identity, the symbolic meaning of guns, opinion toward firearm policies, attitudes toward the gun control movement, and civic engagement with gun violence prevention." (Siegel and Boine, 2020).

What about limitations of the research? Well, one of the first limitations would be the length of the study. The desired length of the study would prove time consuming, resource intensive, and difficult to complete with the same researchers. This would also result in the possibility of the research being handled by multiple different researchers, who may interpret information differently, but this may also cause issues in the event the research needs to be tailored in the future.

The second limitation of this study is the sheer size of the survey. Trying to survey as many people as possible in the United States would prove difficult even for the most experienced researchers. This in turn may result in smaller sample sizes, and consequentially less generalizable data. Also, the gun laws of states and even cities differ, so it's entirely possible that people are influenced by these laws which cannot be directly observed in our model (although it can be inferred).

The final limitation that this paper possesses is an inability to measure the effect of specific special interest groups, as well as measure individual behavioral characteristics that are possibly influenced by gun culture beliefs. Mixed methods research would have eliminated some uncertainty and provided better insight into the behavior of individuals influenced by gun

culture. In future research, I propose that mixed method approach be used, with both a random sample and an ethnography measuring the individual characteristics and behavior of people.

Those selected for ethnographic research would have to be within firearm interest groups (for or against guns), or perhaps those who may be indirectly affected by gun culture (victims of gun violence, gun related crime victims for instance).

### Implications and Conclusion

The research I propose could have a few alterations for the future to not only make it more cohesive, but to measure different populations. For starters, we can use the framework of this study to try measuring the level of “gun culture” in other countries that have legal gun usage and ownership. Carryover from the US population data to other countries may be plausible, so future research based off of this study could help to measure the global affect of “gun culture”.

The notion that this method of data collection is enough, however, is far from correct. As I addressed in the previous section, one of the largest limitations that this proposal has is that it’s a purely quantitative research method. The data collected from these surveys are meant to be analytical, and not descriptive. Because of this, all of the data collected would determine nothing more than correlational strength between different external factors. For future research, introducing a mixed method approach is advised. A mixed method approach may give further insight on the different factors, and may allow researchers to observe specific behaviors that relate to topic. Ethnographic research would also allow researchers to document other rationales or factors for the strength of one’s gun culture adherence or generally what position they hold on the issue that are not covered in the survey questions.

The reason for the proposed research is simple. Sensationalized gun violence and an ever-polarizing debate about gun control has led many people to take a stance on the issue. Gun

culture as a whole contributes to the debate because its values are salient in the choices people make and the stances they take. The United States being one of few “First World” nations that still has loose gun restrictions makes for an amazing population to test our research question.

Possible policy implications of our research would alter our perception of gun laws, and perhaps the current state of lobbying restrictions. Policies themselves that may change, however, would likely occur on a smaller scale than the United States as a whole. State and city level legislation regarding firearm possession and usage may change depending on the outcome of the study. I think that the most reasonable change to occur as a result of this research would be possible programs that can help devalue or remove labels from gun usage and ownership, in an attempt to lower the violent crime rate of firearm use.

Bias from the observer is the worst kind, as it ruins the integrity of the entire paper. This is why the survey proves useful as it keeps procedures standard, and research becomes more sterile. Gun violence is an important topic that many have a strong opinion on, which is why standardizing is best for our research question. Without a doubt this research would be valuable, as it would get at one of the underlying social models that contributes to gun violence. Since the research is so limited on this topic, it may also provide a guide for other researchers attempting to categorize gun culture, and can possibly be used in future meta analyses to frame new types of gun culture as they arise.

## Summary

The research this paper proposes research aims to answer the question, “**Has “gun culture” changed over the past 50 years in the United States, and have special interest groups and factors such as identity influenced this change (or lack thereof)?**”. To answer this, I extensively reviewed material from many different peer reviewed journals that varied from

the role of interest groups to the connection between western masculinity and gun attitudes. The literature provided a lot of empiric support that framing of ideas and the way in which political polarization operates are the strongest reasons for the development and cultivation of gun culture. Gun culture itself can be categorized by the ways in which the guns are used. More traditional reasons for gun ownership, such as hunting or sport are categorized as a “Gun Culture 1.0” while gun ownership for the reason of intimidation or protection fall under “Gun Culture 2.0” (Yamane, 2017). The research proposed aims to further the conversation on gun ownership and usage as a whole, and demonstrates a way gun culture can be statistically measured. We may potentially see a correlation between factors such as gender and the prevalence of gun culture, according to the literature and my personal projection. An interesting watch to learn more on the topic is a movie called “Tough Guise 2”, it pertains to the masculinity attribution of gun violence.



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