



What Gun Control Advocates Can Learn from Citizen Mobilization by the National Rifle Association

Matthew Lacombe, Case Western Reserve University

Despite internationally high rates of gun violence and deaths, the United States does little to regulate ownership and use of firearms. This situation is puzzling given strong — and long-standing — public support for gun control policies. Scholars and other observers point to decades of effective efforts by the National Rifle Association to block or weaken proposed gun regulations as a major reason for this mismatch between public preferences and legal outcomes.

How does the National Rifle Association — called “NRA” for short — achieve its objectives? Some view the NRA’s political sway as a product of the money it contributes to policymakers. Compelling research, however, indicates that political engagement by NRA supporters is a key ingredient —perhaps *the* key ingredient — in the NRA’s success. Citizens who support the NRA are highly politically active relative to other Americans, including gun control supporters. The engagement gap between the politically active minority of Americans who oppose gun controls and the less active majority who would like to see such limits is an important reason for the weakness of gun regulations in the United States.

My research helps explain *why* NRA supporters are so politically involved and *how* the NRA mobilizes them into action. Over the course of many decades, I find, the NRA has constructed a collective identity around gun ownership, allowing people to see guns as more than just tools for recreation or self-defense. For participants in this self-conscious group, guns express shared values, traditions, and beliefs. By arguing that gun control proposals are a threat to values cherished by many gun owners, the NRA is able to turn its supporters against even minor proposed regulations that most Americans see as reasonable.

Gun control proponents, as well as leaders of movements on other issues, can learn from the NRA’s approach. Specifically, they can attempt to build or strengthen genuine social connections among their grassroots supporters and craft messages that motivate people to take action on behalf of shared values and identities.

Collective Identity and the NRA

To learn how the NRA became rooted in a shared identity, I collected nearly eight decades of the NRA’s *American Rifleman* magazine, spanning from 1930 to 2008. I examined the editorials written by the association’s top officials, to assess the extent to which they portray gun owners as a distinct, cohesive social group, as well as the extent to which they call their supporters into political action by portraying the group as under threat from gun control advocates. My data are revealing on several scores:

- The vast majority of NRA appeals describe gun owners as a collective group with a number of distinct characteristics and values – depicting them as law-abiding, average citizens who are self-sufficient,

patriotic, brave, and freedom-loving. Gun owners are consistently contrasted in NRA communications with “out-groups,” including media reporters and politicians. Those opponents are depicted as big city elitists who use propaganda to support extremist policies that would empower bureaucrats and harm liberty.

- The NRA emphasizes gun control proposals as an affront to gun owners and their beliefs, rather than invoking evidence-based arguments about their infeasibility.
- When NRA supporters are asked to take political action, NRA leaders frequently depict them as under dire, existential threat from proposed regulations, using fear to motivate pushback.
- Identity-based themes and appeals are regularly reinforced in popular NRA programs that draw more than a million participants per year. Branded as more than ways to improve skills and knowledge, NRA programs are presented as events for liberty-loving Americans.

Beyond analyzing NRA communications, I also collected and reviewed all letters to the editor in four major newspapers that discussed gun control from 1930 to 2008. These letters show that pro-gun letter writers echo the arguments espoused by the NRA, mentioning the same positive characteristics about NRA supporters and the same negative characteristics to describe their opponents. Like the NRA, these letters also depict proposed regulations as attacks on gun owners as a group. In contrast, letters written in support of gun control show much less evidence of a shared identity and are more likely discuss the potential impacts of gun control laws in abstract rather than personal terms.

Do NRA appeals mobilize members? The answer is yes, I find. When the NRA asks gun rights supporters to take action, they do so in large numbers. Documents in the archives of presidents and members of Congress show that NRA calls to action are followed by large spikes in the number of letters and phone calls received in opposition to gun control. Consistently, letters and calls from opponents outpace those from supporters of gun control. This imbalance in contacting officials was present as early as the 1930s and has persisted into the current decade. Moreover, there is evidence that the imbalance has directly informed how policymakers act on possible legislation, dissuading them from taking action against firearms.

What Others Can Learn from the NRA

Leaders of gun control efforts and other groups can learn from the NRA's approach. They can, in the first place, seek to arouse and sustain grassroots support by encouraging members to meet in person and to develop relationships, fostering a sense of shared identity. The NRA may have the advantage of being able to build on longstanding gun and hunting clubs, but gun control advocates can tap into existing social networks and discuss policies in relation to values and identities many Americans already hold. Recent efforts by groups such as Moms Demand Action and the Parkland, Florida students have done just this – reframing America's gun control debate as a matter of parental responsibility and the protection of children and young people.

Read more in Matthew Lacombe, “The Political Weaponization of Gun Owners: The NRA's Cultivation, Dissemination, and Use of a Group Social Identity” *Journal of Politics* (Forthcoming).