

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Kristin A. Goss: Disarmed

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2006, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

The Gun Control (Participation) Paradox

ON APRIL 20, 1999, two alienated teenagers armed with an arsenal of semiautomatic firearms calmly made their way into their suburban Denver high school and began shooting indiscriminately. The young gunmen shot fellow students as they ate lunch on the school lawn, as they ran for cover in the school cafeteria, and as they crouched in terror in the school library. When the shooting spree at Columbine High School was over, one teacher and fourteen students (including the shooters) lay dead, and another twenty-one were wounded. With satellite trucks and cameras stationed outside the besieged school, coverage of the massacre was beamed live to television stations across the nation.

Columbine, the Colorado state flower and the massacre's ironic shorthand term, may have been the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, but it was not the first. Between 1997 and 2000, there were three dozen mass shootings in schools, workplaces, and other seemingly safe spaces across the United States. But Columbine seemed "different," as one gun control leader noted at the time. "The focus on gun control seems to be more immediate and more lasting."¹

On April 20 and in the weeks that followed, the nation indeed was galvanized to confront gun violence. Newspapers and talk radio featured impassioned testimonials about the historically tragic role of guns in America. Amid a popular outcry, pro-gun legislators' efforts to ease access to firearms stalled in state legislatures, including Colorado's. President Bill Clinton renewed calls for congressional passage of modest gun control measures, and previously reluctant lawmakers made tentative moves in that direction. Donations poured in to national gun control organizations, and their memberships grew.² And thousands of people, including students from Columbine and other Denver-area high schools, gathered for an unprecedented protest against the nation's mighty champion of gun rights, the National Rifle Association (NRA), whose long-planned annual meeting was held in Denver two weeks after the Columbine shootings.

As it turned out, Columbine *was* different in some ways—but sadly routine in others. The aftermath of Columbine looked a lot like the aftermath of many other high-profile shootings in American history: collective outrage, followed by a momentary flurry of unorganized calls and letters and donations from thousands of individuals, and then a quick return to

the status quo.³ In the months after Columbine, Americans witnessed four particularly traumatic shootings: a white supremacist's racially motivated killing spree in Illinois and Indiana in July 1999 that killed two people and wounded nine; an indebted day trader's massacre at his home and two Atlanta brokerage houses later that month (thirteen dead, including the shooter's wife and children, and twelve injured); a white supremacist's attack in August 1999 on a Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, California (five injured), and on a Filipino postal worker (who died); and a six-year-old boy's fatal shooting of his classmate in February 2000 at an elementary school near Flint, Michigan. If ever the country had been primed to confront its gun violence problem, this was the time.

Within two years of Columbine and the traumatic shootings that followed, leading American newspapers decided to investigate the political fallout from these dramatic national events. What they found was not the stuff of banner headlines. Instead, headline after headline told a story of mass political quiescence. "New Gun Control Politics: A Whimper, Not a Bang," concluded the *New York Times*.⁴ "Hill Reaction Muted on Latest Shooting; Lawmakers Largely Silent on Gun Control," the *Washington Post* reported.⁵ "Rampages Elicit Little Outcry for Gun Control," sighed the *San Francisco Chronicle*.⁶ Even though Columbine had seemed different, like a watershed moment that would radically alter the history of gun politics in America, in fact very little had happened legislatively or electorally. The nation seemed to have returned to normal, with Columbine and the other shootings nothing but a terrible memory.

The headlines notwithstanding, Columbine and the other high-profile shootings that followed appear to have accomplished what countless other gun violence traumas failed to do. These shootings planted the seeds of a sustained, visible, grassroots, nation-spanning gun control effort. New leaders emerged, new tactics were pioneered, and new interest groups formed. Whether a full-fledged movement will arise remains to be seen; that question is best left to future scholars. But Columbine bequeathed the present generation of scholars an equally engaging question: If a gun control movement were to arise in America, why didn't it happen before Columbine? Where was this missing movement?

Columbine was a shock but not a surprise. The United States witnesses sensational shootings with numbing regularity. The nation also experiences an epidemic of gun violence about once a decade. In recent surveys, roughly one in three American adults reported that someone "close" to them "such as a friend or relative," had been shot.⁷ This means some 63 million American adults have been secondary victims of gun violence.⁸ More to the point, polls back to 1973 consistently have found that about 20% of Americans have been threatened by a gun or shot at. Thus, in any

given year, *between 25 million and 46 million people* report having had a close call with a gun at some point in their life.

Perhaps not surprisingly, public opinion polls routinely show crime and violence to be at or near the top of Americans' list of problems facing the nation. Polls also show crime and violence to be one of the issues citizens most want the government to address. For the seventy years that scientific surveys have been conducted, Americans have strongly and consistently favored at least one approach to the violence problem: stricter government regulation of firearms. And yet, decades of poll findings notwithstanding, each high-profile shooting or violence epidemic produces little more than a brief flurry of citizen outrage—a burst of emotion followed by a return to political normalcy. To be sure, millions of Americans bemoan the loss of life and the breakdown of moral order that these events reflect, and a small fraction of those citizens go so far as to write letters of protest to their local newspaper or their Congress member. In Congress and in state legislatures, a few elected officials invariably use the opportunity to advance gun control legislation. But most political leaders lie low, assuming that the public agitation will prove fleeting, just as it has so many times before. And prove fleeting it inevitably does.

Studying the gun control issue in the early 1970s, Hazel Erskine observed: "It is difficult to imagine any other issue on which Congress has been less responsive to public sentiment for a longer period of time."⁹ That insight is at the heart of the well-known "gun control paradox": Most people want strict gun laws, but they don't get them—why? This book argues that there is a deeper puzzle: Most people want them, but they don't mobilize to get them—why? I refer to this as the "gun control participation paradox." This book seeks to explain that puzzle. To put the question in stark, if overly simplistic, terms, Why is there no *real* gun control movement in America?¹⁰

The answer, as it turns out, is multifaceted and far reaching, encompassing an array of structural constraints, historical developments, and organizational choices. But if there is one overarching explanation it is this: Gun control advocates were not nearly as successful as their opponents were in using American federalism to advance their cause. Sometimes this was the result of choices made by gun control proponents; sometimes it was the result of roadblocks that their opponents placed in the way; and sometimes it was the result of factors that systematically favor certain types of groups over others. In the end, the gun control case illustrates a stubborn lesson: The framers of the Constitution rigged the U.S. political system to frustrate the ambitions of bold policy reformers and to reward those who build consent from the ground up. Their plan succeeds to this day.

This introductory chapter serves several purposes. It outlines the scope and nature of gun violence in America, presents the core research question, and justifies the question in quantitative terms. The chapter then couches the question in theoretical terms and dispenses with some of the “obvious” explanations. Finally, the chapter presents a summary of the argument that unfolds in the chapters to come.

AN AMERICAN GUN CULTURE?

Between 1992 and 2001, more than 336,000 Americans died by gunfire,¹¹ and more than 5.4 million were threatened or injured by gun-wielding robbers or other assailants.¹² More than one-third of the deaths occurred on the tail end of what the press and public health officials dubbed an “epidemic” of firearms violence, which lasted from 1988 through 1994. During that time, the annual gun fatality rate reached 15 deaths per 100,000 people—only a small fraction of the deaths from heart disease, but more than the rate of death from common afflictions such as leukemia, liver disease, or AIDS.¹³ Even in “nonepidemic” years, the firearms death rate in the United States is considerably higher than that in any other advanced industrial nation. For example, the rate at which Americans were killed by guns in 1997 (a relatively peaceful year in the United States) was thirty-four times the rate of gunshot deaths in the United Kingdom, and more than three times the rate in Norway or Australia.¹⁴

On top of the hundreds of thousands of “everyday shootings” each year, the United States has regularly witnessed high-profile killings that have garnered significant public attention. One-third of the U.S. presidents since the Civil War (nine of twenty-seven) have been assassinated or threatened by assailants with guns, and many other high-profile Americans—politicians, civil rights leaders, entertainers—have been felled by bullets. In the late 1990s, even as the overall gun violence rate was declining, the United States witnessed a series of “rampage shootings” in schools, workplaces, and other “safe spaces.” Between 1997 and 2001, at least thirty-six such incidents attracted widespread media coverage.¹⁵ Together, these episodes resulted in the death of 139 people, including more than 30 schoolchildren, and the wounding of at least 188 students and adults.¹⁶

It is often argued that, relative to other advanced industrial nations, the United States has unrestrictive gun laws. For example, Canada passed a comprehensive scheme of gun registration after a man killed 14 women and wounded 13 others at a Montreal university in 1989. Australia outlawed semiautomatic and automatic assault weapons, and imposed strict registration and owner licensing for other firearms, after a man killed 35

and wounded 18 at a tourist spot in Tasmania in 1996. The United Kingdom banned private possession of handguns after a gunman killed 16 schoolchildren and a teacher in Dunblane, Scotland, also in 1996.

Guns are less tightly regulated and more easily purchased in the United States than in other Western nations. To be more specific, American firearms regulations are comparatively less restrictive in at least five senses. First, the laws have concentrated more on penalizing misuse than on controlling access; the laws are post hoc (punitive) more than ex ante (preventive). Second, broad availability has been taken for granted. Thus, regulations have focused on *keeping guns from* certain groups (minors, felons, addicts, the mentally ill) rather than *restricting availability to* a small class of potentially vulnerable individuals who can show a particular need to own a firearm (security guards, small-business owners in high-crime areas, women threatened by stalkers). Third, the laws have been relatively decentralized; as a result, gun control regulation has varied widely across jurisdictions, with strict controls concentrated in a handful of cities and states and most places having relatively few restrictions. Fourth, regulation has centered on sales conducted through primary markets, such as federally licensed gun stores; relatively few policies have sought to regulate or circumscribe informal sales. Fifth, laws have been subject to political compromise, leaving multiple “loopholes” whose shortcomings can be exploited by both gun control and gun rights advocates. The modern gun control forces’ most far-reaching achievement in twenty-five years—the Brady Law, enacted in 1993—did little more than plug part of an existing loophole by requiring criminal background checks on a limited category of gun buyers.

The pattern of firearms regulation in the United States, coupled with its high gun violence rate, led historian Richard Hofstadter to proclaim America the quintessential “gun culture.”¹⁷ Interestingly, the popular image of America as a gun culture is at odds with more than fifty years of public opinion polls, which have found both widespread concern about gun violence and overwhelming support for measures to restrict access to firearms. Summarizing the findings, Tom W. Smith observed: “One of the few constants in American public opinion over the last two decades has been that three-fourths of the population supports gun control.”¹⁸ For example, in more than two dozen surveys conducted between 1959 and 1994, roughly 70% to 80% of respondents have favored “a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun.”¹⁹ In polls going back to 1968, similarly large majorities have supported a federal law to require registration of all gun purchases.²⁰ Milder proposals, such as requiring gun buyers to take a safety course and restricting youths’ access to guns, have received support from a larger fraction of the population.²¹ Only a ban on gun possession has not drawn

majority support over the past several decades, though 30% to 40% of the population, and a larger share of American women, have consistently supported a handgun ban.²²

The image of America as a gun culture is also at odds with attitudes toward gun ownership. In a survey conducted every year from 1975 to 1998, only about 20% of Americans generally or definitely thought there should be a gun in every home. That fraction has been dropping steadily since the early 1980s, to about 16%. By contrast, between 50% and 60% of respondents generally or definitely *did not* believe every home should have a gun, and that percentage has been rising.²³ Likewise, roughly 45% of Americans think guns in the home reduce safety,²⁴ compared with 41% who think a gun makes the home safer. At least since the early 1970s (when data began to be collected in a systematic way), gun possession in the United States has been declining. The fraction of people reporting a gun in the home in the late 1990s ranged from 37% to 43%, down from 48% to 54% in the mid-1970s (see figure A-1 in appendix A).²⁵ There is no doubt that there is a gun *sub*-culture in the United States, but it does not necessarily comprise a majority of gun owners. Indeed, one of the most persistent findings in public opinion research is that a majority of *gun owners* support moderate gun control measures.²⁶

THE GUN CONTROL PARADOX, PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD

Most people want strict gun control, but they don't get it. Why? The textbook answer to the gun control paradox is straightforward. American gun owners are intense, well organized, and willing to vote for or against candidates purely on the basis of their position on gun control. Gun owners' groups, notably the National Rifle Association and its state affiliates, provide an array of incentives to attract members and then turn those membership dues toward political action.²⁷ America's political system, with its multiple layers and divided powers, favors committed and well-organized groups such as the NRA, even if only a small minority of citizens embrace their views.²⁸ As Robert Spitzer notes, "The nature of interest-group politics is such that the energized and intense backers of the NRA have repeatedly proven the axioms that a highly motivated, intense minority operating effectively in the interest-group milieu will usually prevail in a political contest over a larger, relatively apathetic majority."²⁹

The traditional answer to the gun control paradox focuses on the strength of gun control's opponents. However, in any contest one side is only as strong as the other side is weak. This is a seemingly obvious point. But, in the case of gun control, scholars have focused almost exclusively on explaining why the gun rights side is strong while assuming away the

more interesting and challenging question of why the gun control side is so politically weak. In focusing exclusively on the anti-gun control forces, the “textbook answer” to the gun control paradox has two core problems. First, it may be partially incorrect. The pro-control majority may not be apathetic so much as lacking in meaningful opportunities to reveal intensity. Second, far from settling matters, the “unorganized majority” explanation begs—but is silent on—the more interesting question, Why are gun control sympathizers unorganized?

In challenging the textbook answer, I do not dismiss its core insight: Gun rights forces are intense, vocal, well organized, and capable of blocking policy proposals. My argument is simply that a single-minded focus on the strength of the gun rights side makes little sense, because in a pluralist democracy one cannot understand outcomes without considering the actions of all the players. There may be a connection between one side’s strength and the other side’s weakness; the two variables may not be independent. But merely demonstrating that one side is strong does not illuminate whatever causal connection may exist between that strength and the other side’s weakness. That is, the mechanisms through which the gun lobby plies its organizational advantage have been underexplored. More important, a single-minded focus on the strong side needlessly distracts our attention from the potentially important dynamics on the weaker side. As this book will demonstrate, gun control advocates have played a role in suppressing their own movement.

In a larger sense, this book argues that the “gun control paradox” itself is misspecified. In its classic formulation the paradox has seized on the discrepancy between polls, which favor strict gun control, and policy outcomes, which do not. But polls alone don’t usually change policy; political action does. Thus, I argue that the true paradox is the discrepancy between what people tell pollsters (“We want strict gun control”) and what people’s actual behavior suggests (“We are indifferent”). The gun control paradox properly understood is: *Why do Americans who want strict gun control not mobilize, in large numbers in a sustained way, to get it?*

Oddly, the participation paradox does not appear to have been explored before, at least in any systematic way. Rather, scholars have assumed the presence of a “movement” without questioning the many ways in which gun control advocacy does not resemble a conventional movement at all.³⁰ Given the American public’s apparent concern with gun violence, why aren’t citizens mobilized on a broad and sustained scale to control firearms? Why does the gun control movement (assuming that the various advocacy efforts qualify as a movement) bear so little resemblance in scope or drama to the great movements of the last century: movements against alcohol and smoking, for example, or for civil rights and women’s equality? Any good intellectual puzzle has the potential to shed light on

political questions far broader than the one at hand. And so it is in this case. The curious absence of broad public participation in what has been called “the great American gun war”³¹ may tell us something interesting, not only about the politics of gun control in America, but also about patterns of political activism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

MOVEMENTS VERSUS LAWS

This is a study of participation around the gun control cause in America from the 1960s to 2000. I have introduced two paradoxes—the gun control paradox and the gun control participation paradox—to guide the study. Both, of course, are simplifications of reality. The gun control paradox notwithstanding, America *does* have gun laws; and the participation paradox notwithstanding, Americans *do* participate in favor of gun control. Although both the laws and the participation have one common feature—they are constrained relative to what one might expect—they should not be confused. Before moving on to tackle the gun control participation paradox, it is important to clarify two fundamental, important questions: What about all those gun laws? And what exactly constitutes a movement?

Participation and Laws Are Not the Same

This is a study of popular participation, or lack thereof, around the issue of firearms control. It is not a study of gun laws. Participation, not policy, is the dependent variable. One must be careful not to conflate participation and policy; they are not the same thing, though, as I later demonstrate, they can be causally related. Equally important, one must be careful not to assume that, because there are gun laws, a mass movement must have been in place to put them there. Social movements are not necessary for policy change. Many laws—including, as it turns out, gun control laws—have passed with little or no organized prodding from citizens. Elites simply take it upon themselves to champion legislation.

Consider state gun control laws. In a sweeping study, Jon Vernick and Lisa Hepburn estimated that by the beginning of 2000, there were 275 state gun control laws on the books, ranging from handgun permit requirements to gun-crime sentencing provisions.³² Interestingly, nearly 40% of those laws had been put in place before 1970, well before gun control supporters began to organize; they were not movement-inspired laws. Of the laws put in place since, there is no clear pattern that would suggest the presence of a mass movement behind them.

For example, during the 1970s, when gun control groups began to form, there was indeed a spurt in gun-related lawmaking—but it was focused on mandatory minimum sentences and sentencing enhancements for gun crimes, neither of which was a policy focus of early gun control leaders. During the 1980s, very few state gun laws passed. During the early 1990s, when there was a pronounced rise in gun law passage, most of the states that were responsible for the legislation (states such as Utah, Kentucky, Nebraska, Delaware, and New Mexico) had no gun control organizations, or particularly weak ones, suggesting again that these laws were not movement inspired. (For a graph showing the incidence of gun laws from 1970 to 1999, see figure A-2 in appendix A.) Indeed, both quantitative and qualitative evidence makes clear that gun control lawmaking has been driven by events far more than by organized citizen prodding. The increase in early 1990s lawmaking, for example, came on the heels of an epidemic of juvenile gun violence that had gripped most major cities since the late 1980s. The laws of this era were focused on restricting youths' access to firearms, particularly in states that had permissive laws and weak or non-existent citizens' gun control groups. Over all, the pattern of state gun control lawmaking in the 1970–1999 period suggests two conclusions. The vast majority of the laws were modest measures, and as a rule they were instigated by elected officials, not grassroots movements.

Although movements are not required for legislation to pass, movements matter in important ways. Movements increase the probability that elected officials will act and that the proposed reforms will be substantive instead of merely symbolic. Movements are particularly important for policy proposals that, like gun control, are (1) broadly popular but face well-organized opposition, and (2) can be portrayed as challenging political-cultural values. Always looking to the next election, American politicians are reluctant to take policy risks. Popular participation provides them with reliable information about their constituents' preferences and with the political cover to cast difficult votes. Movements also facilitate policy making by conducting research, disseminating new ideas aimed at changing social norms, recruiting citizen advocates, and lobbying legislators. Thus, although movements are not necessary for lawmaking, they make it much more likely. It is telling that the foundation of American national gun laws, the Gun Control Act of 1968, came in response to an unprecedented nationwide organizing effort on behalf of individuals affected by the back-to-back assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. The law strengthened the federal licensing system for firearms dealers, providing among other things that only federally licensed dealers could ship firearms across state lines; required federally licensed dealers to keep sales records; banned dealers from selling guns to high-risk persons (e.g., drug addicts, mentally disabled people, youths);

prohibited interstate sales of handguns; and barred imports of small weapons not meant for sporting purposes (i.e., “Saturday night specials,” though not their parts).³³ With the exception of the Brady Law, which required a background check to enforce the “prohibited persons” provision, the 1968 act’s core provisions have remained largely unchanged.

At the state level, there has been more activity, including scattered victories for pro-control forces. But taken as a whole, the pattern of state firearms lawmaking in the 1980–2000 period signals, if anything, the presence of an *anti*-gun control movement, coordinated by the NRA and carried out in cooperation with its state and local affiliates. Under intense pressure from the gun rights movement, scores of states passed laws removing law enforcement’s discretion over who may obtain a permit to carry a concealed weapon, stripping from local governments the right to regulate firearms, and barring lawsuits against gun manufacturers. Unlike the pro-control laws, which were ad hoc, fitful, uncoordinated, and driven largely by events, these anticontrol laws were pushed through systematically, legislature by legislature, in a series of well-financed, well-organized, nationally coordinated grassroots campaigns. Gun rights advocates’ quick success provides telling evidence of the weakness of the gun control “movement.” While gun control advocates have been organized and successful in a small handful of states, they have been no match for the decades-long antiregulatory movement spearheaded by national, state, and local gun rights organizations.

Most movements worthy of the name are successful. They may not get everything they want (in part because goals tend to expand with success), but history shows that strong movements eventually achieve most of what they initially sought. The Prohibition movement secured a constitutional amendment banning alcohol sales; the civil rights movement dismantled segregationist laws and spurred a significant decline in white racism; the antismoking movement turned cigarette use from a glamorous norm to a heavily regulated form of deviance. Although movements are not required for policy making, any exploration of policy outcomes—or nonoutcomes—must include an examination of the scope and nature of popular participation around the issue in question.

What Is a “Movement”?

The online humor magazine the *Onion* once lamented in a headline that a protest march had fallen one person short of success.³⁴ Although clearly facetious, the headline inadvertently captures an important truth, not only about protest marches, but also about social movements more generally. Deciding whether a mobilization does, or does not, count as a movement would seem to require some sort of quantitative measure of “move-

ment,” some magic threshold beyond which the mobilization clearly qualifies. But for any particular situation, what is that numerical threshold? How many people, or actions, or events, must be involved? What kinds? How long must mass mobilization be sustained? If it is geographically bounded—say, limited to one city or state—is that a movement? One can immediately see the problem: Trying to provide a quantitative answer to those questions would involve pulling numbers out of a hat, and surely there would be no consensus about what those numbers should be. Thus, for perfectly understandable reasons, scholarly definitions of “movement” dodge the fundamental question: At what point does a mobilization become a movement?

In practice, there have been two answers to that question. The first is, “When advocates call themselves a movement,” which is most of the time. The second is, “When the term ‘movement’ becomes commonly accepted by the media and other public commentators as a way of describing a mobilizing effort.” In short, the term “movement” is subjective, not objective; post hoc, not ex ante; qualitative, not quantitative. Movements are collective judgment calls. We know a movement when we have seen it.³⁵ In that tradition of judgment calls, I will state my opinion up front: There has not been a true gun control movement in America. Reasonable people may disagree; indeed, even gun control leaders themselves come down on both sides of the question. But regardless of whether one concludes that there has, or has not, been a gun control movement, most observers agree that the effort has been at best a movement constrained. This is a study of how and why a popular issue has failed, mostly, to become a popular movement.

Even if “movement-ness” is inherently nonquantifiable, a baseline definition is necessary to lay out the core *qualitative* features. William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer define a movement as “a sustained and self-conscious challenge to authorities or cultural codes by a field of actors (organizations and advocacy networks), some of whom employ extra-institutional means of influence.”³⁶ *Thus, social movements are (1) organized, (2) sustained, (3) visible, and (4) locally rooted forms of political action aimed at (5) changing norms and laws.* While it is convenient to speak in shorthand, dichotomous terms—in terms of movements and nonmovements—mass mobilization is of course a fluid concept, a continuous variable. Recognizing this fact allows one to move beyond endless definitional disputes (she says it takes seven protests to count as a movement, but he says it only takes six) and to tackle the question at hand. Thus, this study borrows from E. E. Schattschneider’s concept of expansion in the scope of political conflict, or more simply “conflict expansion.”³⁷ Conflict may expand along three dimensions: breadth (the number and types of people involved); depth (the intensity of their

engagement); and length (their commitment over time). This book examines the difficulties that gun control advocates have had in widening, deepening, and lengthening citizen involvement in their cause. For the sake of ecumenicalism, I will use the terms “nonmovement” and “constrained movement” interchangeably.

HOW DO YOU KNOW A NONMOVEMENT WHEN YOU SEE ONE?

Consider the following mental exercise. If you wanted to affect gun control policy, what would you do? Although this question has never been asked of a representative sample of Americans, an informal poll suggests that the answer would be “send money to Sarah Brady.” Five years after her husband, White House press secretary James Brady, was shot in the head in the assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981, and shortly after her five-year-old son found a loaded handgun in a friend’s truck, Sarah Brady joined the board of Handgun Control, Inc., a Washington-based lobbying organization. Soon thereafter, she became the public face of gun control, appearing before Congress, headlining fund-raising events, and affixing her name to millions of direct-mail solicitations.³⁸ That “Sarah Brady” has become synonymous with gun control activism in America dramatizes a central assertion in this book. In terms of paradigms of policy change, gun control fits an interest-group model (a small cadre of elites working through staff-driven nonprofit organizations to push legislative change in Congress) far better than it fits a social-movement model (elite-directed masses pushing social as well as policy change in multiple private and governmental arenas).

Indeed, when surveying news reports on gun control, especially at the state and local level, the first thing one notices is not what is in the story but rather what is missing from it: evidence of broad-based citizens’ groups pushing the issue. Even in states where gun control policies are under active consideration, and where some sort of gun control organization is known to exist, there is seldom evidence that the citizens’ group initiated the policy debate or is visibly mobilizing citizens behind the proposal. Often, leaders of citizen groups are not even quoted. This is a reflection not of reporter bias but of the reality that gun control battles typically are led by lone legislators, not by social-movement organizations. In gun control debates, elected officials act on behalf of an unorganized public, rather than at the behest of an organized one.

This book readily concedes that gun control has attracted a small but committed group of activist leaders who have tried to change laws over the years; indeed, gun control activism has been institutionalized in the

TABLE 1.1
Media Adoption of “Movement” Mantle

# Mentions (per year)	<i>Gun Control MVT</i>		<i>Antiabortion MVT</i>	
	WP (1977–2002)	WP & NYT (1980–2002) ^a	WP (1977–2002)	WP & NYT (1980–2002)
Median	0	1	16	33
Mean	0.7	1.4	16	35
Mode	0	0	17	29
Range ^b	0–4	0–5	7–38	13–68
Total (all years)	19	33	412	797

^a *New York Times* (NYT) and *Washington Post* (WP) counts for 6/1/80–4/29/02 (NYT came online in June).

^b The year 2002 is not included, because counts are for less than half the year. The upper bound figures for gun control (4 and 5 mentions) appeared in 2001; the lower bound (0) was found in many years covering all four decades under study.

nation’s capital since the mid-1970s. And, at least since the 1930s, America has witnessed uncoordinated bursts of activism around gun control. But these bursts of popular outrage—and often the local and state voluntary groups they have nourished or given rise to—have quickly faded into quiescence. Even as gun control policies are debated regularly in the nation’s legislatures, popular involvement has been contained and fleeting. Whatever gun control “movement” might exist at any time, or in any given locality, it has never reached the size, scope, or duration of the Prohibition, civil rights, environmental, and women’s movements. Relative to its potential, the gun control “movement” has underperformed.³⁹ The gun control movement is a movement constrained, a movement that does not move very far very often. The constraints are captured by the following five measures.

Media (Non) Adoption

If there had been a gun control movement in America, surely it would have been acknowledged by reporters and editorialists. Yet the phrases “gun control movement” or “movement for gun control” have appeared infrequently in major U.S. newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.⁴⁰ Table 1.1 summarizes the findings. For comparison’s sake, I have included counts of references to “antiabortion movement,” “pro-life movement,” and “movement against abortion.”

As the table shows, the “movement” label was affixed to antiabortion advocacy approximately twenty-four times as often as it was affixed to gun control advocacy. Figure 1.1 shows the data in longitudinal terms. It

is clear that, even in down years, the antiabortion forces have merited far more movement affirmation than have the gun control forces.

The findings on gun control—usually zero “movement” mentions, or on average fewer than one or two per year—are particularly surprising in that both the *Times* and the *Post* for decades have keenly focused on the gun issue. Both newspapers have long taken a strong pro-gun control stance in their editorial pages; are based in a city where gun control routinely makes the political agenda; cater to a largely pro-control urban audience; and cover political affairs across the nation, not just in the home city. In other words, for at least four different reasons, if there were a vibrant gun control movement in America, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* surely would have noted it by bestowing on gun control advocates the movement mantle and covering their noteworthy activities. As I demonstrate below, the gun control coverage was there, but the recognition of a gun control “movement” basically was not.

(Lack of) Scholarship

The leading scholarly books on the gun control issue, even those purporting to be about “the gun control movement,” contain scant evidence of any such movement. Indeed, these books center on other aspects of the gun control issue: the strength of the NRA, the dynamics of public opinion, the various congressional debates, and so forth. There are no comprehensive chronicles of the gun control “movement” that would be comparable, for example, to the civil rights movement studies of Doug McAdam, Aldon Morris, and David Garrow or to the women’s rights movement studies of Jo Freeman and Anne Costain.⁴¹

For example, Alexander DeConde’s *Gun Violence in America: The Struggle for Control* (2001) repeatedly refers to the “gun control movement” but never really describes the identity, scope, organization, or activities of the putative movement. Although interested in the struggle *for* control, the book’s attention is primarily focused on the struggle *against* control, led by organized gun owners. Another history, Gregg Lee Carter’s *Gun Control Movement* (1997), spends just 30 pages, only about one-fourth of the text, exploring the subject in the book’s title. Those pages focus almost exclusively on the legislative activities of three Washington-based interest groups, stretching the “movement” definition beyond reasonable bounds. Probably the best analytic history of the gun control issue, William J. Vizzard’s *Shots in the Dark: The Policy Politics, and Symbolism of Gun Control* (2000), spends just 2 pages out of 184 describing gun control advocacy groups, all in Washington, and includes only a scattered few paragraphs on campaigns to secure new gun laws. Robert J.

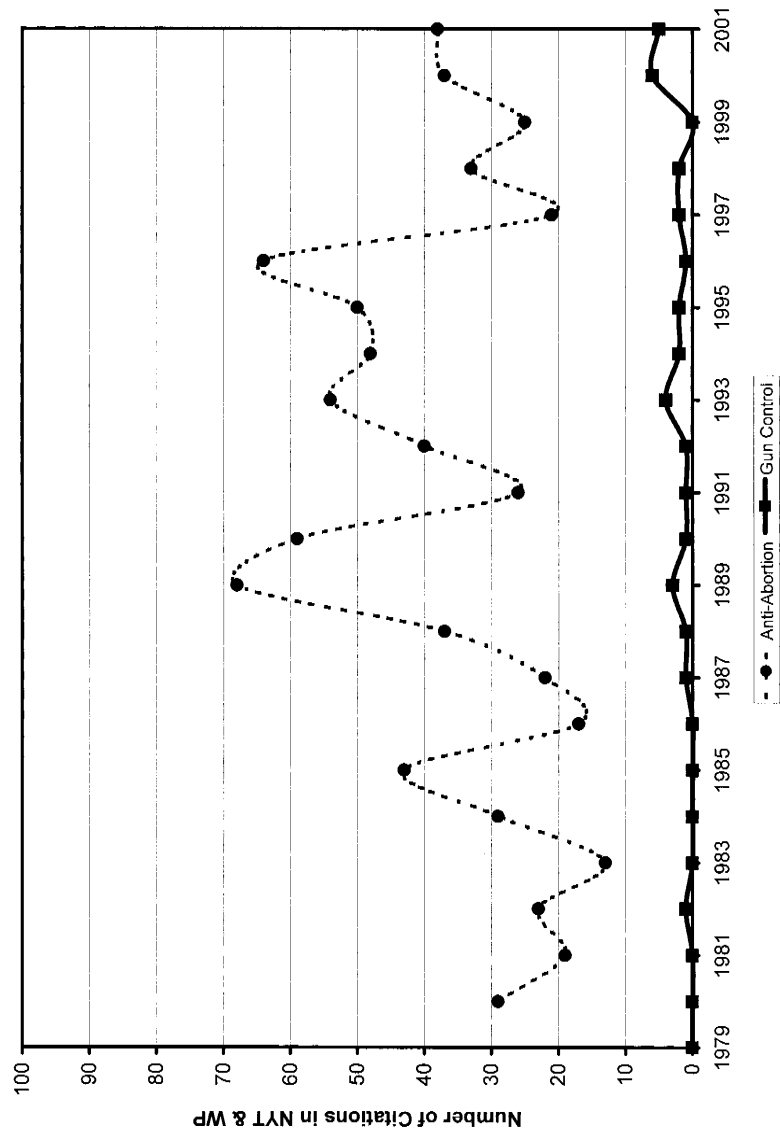


Figure 1.1. “Movement” Label in Major Newspapers: Gun Control vs. Antiabortion. Source: Nexis search.

Spitzer's *Politics of Gun Control* (1998) likewise devotes just 2 pages (out of 153) to a discussion of the pro-control side, in this case a quick overview of one Washington-based interest group.

(Gaps in) the Agenda

The third “nonmovement” indicator concerns the relative infrequency of mentions of gun control activism in news stories about gun control politics. The logic behind this indicator is that, when an issue is on the agenda of political leaders, we should expect issue advocates to be prominently featured. This is so because advocates are often responsible for pushing issues onto political leaders’ agendas, and even when advocates have not initiated action, they are likely to intensify their public efforts once leaders are paying attention. To measure the agenda gap, I constructed a data set consisting of a count of all stories on gun control in the *New York Times Index* between 1958 and 2000.⁴² Figure 1.2 shows, year by year, the number of stories about the gun control issue juxtaposed with the number of stories within that larger group that provide some evidence of a mobilized public. I defined “evidence” quite broadly: If a Washington-based interest group testified in a congressional hearing or wrote a letter to the editor, the action counted; if a store decided to stop selling guns, that action also counted. As the graph shows, although gun control has been on the agenda since the early 1960s, citizen mobilization has remained low and relatively flat, although it began to inch up in the second half of the 1990s.

The graph shows that the *New York Times* ran an average of 76 stories per year about the gun control issue, with a range of 1 (1962) to 385 (1999). However, the number of stories citing some evidence of a mobilized citizenry averaged just 10 per year, with a range of 0 (various years) to 82 (1968). Of the 3,247 stories published, just 13% of them (418) mentioned citizen engagement. If we exclude two peak years (1968 and 2000), the number of mentions drops to 272, or 8% of the total stories. The graph is consistent with the conclusion that gun control is an elite-led issue: It appears to secure and maintain agenda status because of the efforts of legislators and other political leaders, not because of an organized and mobilized citizenry.

Individual Participation

The fourth measure of “nonmovement-ness” revolves around the relatively low level of individual participation in organized gun control efforts. These measures are some of the hardest to obtain, so the findings must be considered with care. Here, I weigh one salient measure: membership in advocacy groups.

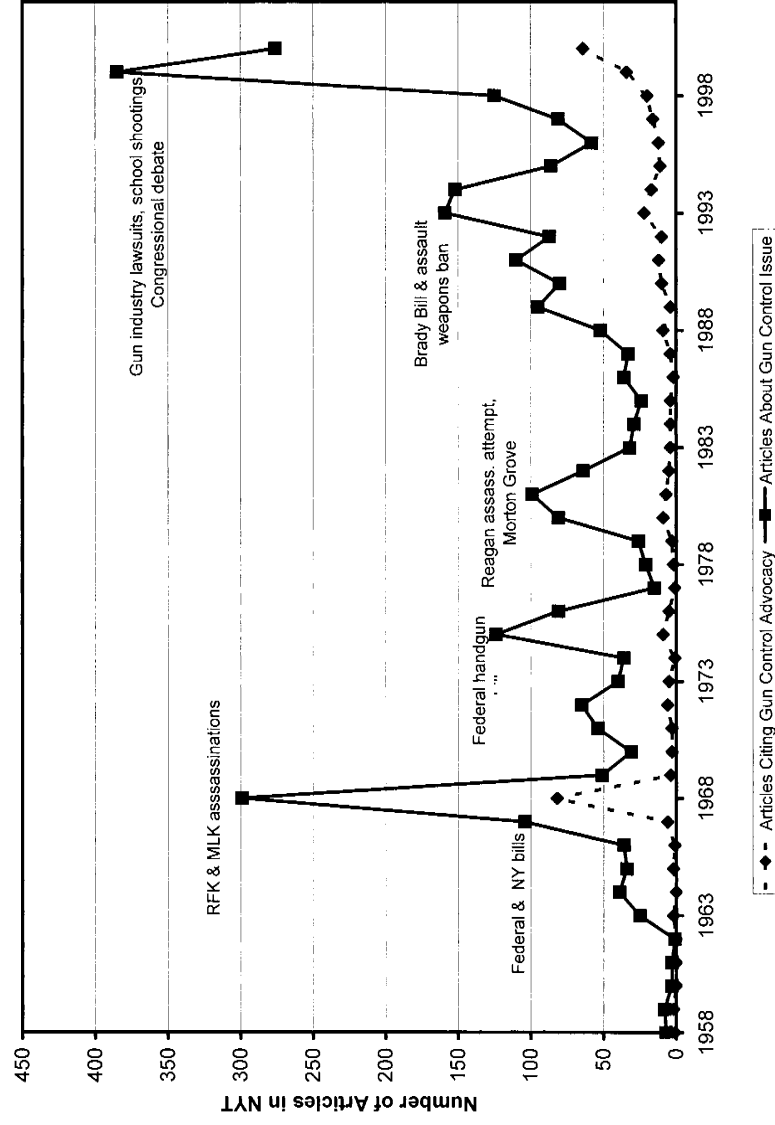


Figure 1.2. An Issue without a Movement. Source: *New York Times Index*, 1958–2000.

Consistent with the constrained-movement thesis, membership in the two leading national gun control groups (the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence) pales in comparison with membership in organizations at the forefront of other social-reform campaigns. In 2005, the Brady Campaign reportedly had fewer than 200,000 members, and the Coalition another 20,000. Assuming, as the groups do, that there is a 10% overlap in their membership rosters, that equals at most 218,000 national-group members.⁴³ In addition, my 2002 survey of state gun control groups suggests that the best-organized groups typically had 500 to 1,500 members apiece. In a sample of ten well-established groups, the average membership in 2002 was 1,700 people, and the median was 1,150. The combined membership for all state gun control groups probably numbers fewer than 50,000 people.⁴⁴ Assuming that these figures are not wildly exaggerated, and assuming (surely wrongly) that there is no membership overlap between the state and national groups, total membership in gun control organizations would be at most 268,000 people and almost certainly fewer. That means that gun control groups have just 8% of the membership that the anti-drunk-driving movement had in the mid-1990s (Mothers Against Drunk Driving, 3.2 million, 1995) and 7% of the membership in the National Rifle Association (approximately 4 million, 2004).

Supporter Assessments

The final measure of constraint is the assessments of gun control advocates and opponents. Both sides have an incentive to brand gun control efforts a “movement” —the advocates because the word suggests an appealing degree of solidarity and vitality, the opponents because the word conveys a threat around which to rally their forces. Indeed, both sides routinely do refer to gun control advocacy as a movement. But the term appears to be used principally for purposes of rhetorical shorthand. In interviews with leading gun control advocates, the question “Is the gun control movement a movement?” generally meets with a tellingly lengthy pause followed by a highly qualified answer.

One of the striking features of the history of the gun control issue is the degree to which the same arguments and observations echo from decade to decade. In 1964, journalist Carl Bakal, one of the earliest and most vociferous campaigners for gun control, wrote in *Harper's* magazine: “The vast majority of our citizens, including those who own guns for sports or other legitimate purposes[,] have expressed themselves as being in favor of firearms controls. But they are unorganized and, as memories of the Kennedy assassination recede, increasingly apathetic.”⁴⁵ In

1975, Representative John Conyers (D-Mich.), who spearheaded the gun control campaign in the mid-1970s, called gun control supporters “a lumbering silent majority.”⁴⁶ In 1978, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported, “Neither the Carter Administration nor the professional gun controllers have been able to mobilize the consistent public opinion majority in favor of handgun curbs . . . into practical political support for legislation.”⁴⁷

By the early 1980s, the line was much the same. The *Washington Star* noted in 1981 that the “mass sentiment” in favor of gun control “is not well articulated and is no match, at the trench-warfare level, for the singleminded lobbying and spending of the National Rifle Association and other groups.”⁴⁸ Around the same time, a longtime gun rights advocate asserted, “There is no gun-control movement worthy of mention. There are a few isolated situations, but no large movement of people.”⁴⁹ Two years later a state gun control advocate tried to rouse the public with the admonition, “It is time for the sleeping giant to awaken.”⁵⁰

By the 2000s, the gun control forces continued to be described as a latent public, rather than a social movement. Representative Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.), whose husband was killed and son badly wounded in a 1993 mass shooting aboard a Long Island Railroad train and who won a seat in Congress by vowing to secure stricter gun laws, lamented in 1999, “Even though we had been working with an awful lot of gun-control groups, they don’t have the money and they don’t have the organizational skills that the NRA has.”⁵¹ Likewise, a gun control organizer in California lamented, “There’s only one grass-roots movement on guns in America, and that’s the NRA—but there need to be two.”⁵² The following year, Housing and Urban Development secretary Andrew Cuomo reached much the same conclusion, wondering why poor people, public health professionals, and other gun control supporters could not equal the power of the NRA: “There are three million public housing residents. Why don’t they have the same impact that the three million members of the NRA have? There are three million nurses. Why don’t they have proportionate impact? It’s because the NRA is a focused force.”⁵³ Speaking in Washington, D.C., a year after Columbine, Cuomo went on, “You are going to have to win the battle outside of this town. Awaken the sleeping giant—the American people. And the American people are starting to rustle.”⁵⁴ And in 2001, after a four-year spike in school shootings and other so-called rampage killings, a national gun control advocate lamented, “There just (isn’t) a whole lot of outrage. . . . I’m worried that people are seeing this as just part of living in America.”⁵⁵ Around the same time, asked if there is a gun control movement in America, a state gun control advocate observed, “It’s a movement, but obviously not a movement that’s real well organized.”⁵⁶ The equivocal assessment of insiders suggests the fol-

lowing consensus: Yes, various individuals and organizations are pushing hard for gun control in America, but do they add up to a movement? Maybe, but probably not.

CAN YOU STUDY A “NONEVENT”?

Before exploring the substantive challenges facing gun control advocates in America, it is important to justify this book’s motivating question, which is both nontraditional and perilous. Why does something *not* happen? I refer to such questions as “negative-outcome questions.” Social science is in the business of studying phenomena that have happened—the observable, the countable, the tangible. It is not at all clear how one is to study, let alone explain, something that has not happened—the unobservable, the noncountable, the intangible.

Negative-outcome questions require inductive reasoning in a deductive-reasoning discipline. When the potential answers are limitless, where does one look begin to look for the “right” one? How does one know that her induction is correct? Behind the “right answer” problem lurks an even larger issue: Is the question itself valid? After all, there is a potentially infinite universe of woes that have not inspired mass political action, and so there must be a clear rationale for singling out any one of these problems for study. It is not particularly interesting, for example, to ask, “Why is there no antibullfighting movement in Manhattan?”⁵⁷

In “Silver Blaze,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s fictional detective Sherlock Holmes discovers that the solution to his mystery lies in a nonevent: a dog that “did nothing” when it should have been expected to bark. Following Holmes, this book’s core insight is that one cannot understand the emergence and development of movements without also considering *nonmovements*, the nonbarking dogs of American politics. Social science has traditionally focused on the barking dogs: why phenomena start, how they grow. It has almost completely ignored the “silent” questions: why phenomena do not start, why phenomena do not expand, why phenomena end. But studying negative outcomes is fundamental to developing a solid theoretical account of movement formation. As social scientists going back to John Stuart Mill in the mid nineteenth century have understood, causal processes cannot be properly identified unless the outcome to be explained varies from case to case.⁵⁸ There must be variation on the dependent variable. Using case studies of works on economic growth, social revolutions, and class conflict, Barbara Geddes shows the perils of violating the convention. She concludes that positive cases “cannot test the theories they propose and, hence, cannot contribute to the accumulation of theoretical knowledge.”⁵⁹ Yet, amazingly, the canonical social-movement literature

consists entirely of positive cases—movements that have happened. As Maurice Jackson and his colleagues noted in 1960: “Without studies of unsuccessful movements there can be no assurance that the crucial conditions have been properly identified in the study of successful movements.”⁶⁰

By studying only movements that have happened, we risk misunderstanding the causal processes behind those movements. There are two possible sources of error. First, by focusing only on positive cases, we risk attributing causal significance to factors that were merely correlates (thereby upwardly biasing those factors’ importance). Second, and conversely, we risk overlooking variables that are in fact important. Only by studying “nonmovements” can we hope to produce valid causal models. A handful of creative scholars have bucked the social-science establishment by taking on “dog that didn’t bark” questions.⁶¹ Tellingly, these orphan works have become some of the most widely cited material in political science, and they powerfully guide this book.

Understanding the gun control participation paradox, or any negative-outcome question, requires a triangulated research design and the blending of a wide variety of data. The research design, described in greater detail in the next chapter, has three prongs: matched case comparisons, in which gun control is compared with three other issues that are comparable to it along theoretically relevant dimensions; a longitudinal, qualitative analysis of “movement moments” in which the gun control movement had the structural potential to emerge but did not; and a natural (real life) “experiment” in which a gun control entrepreneur attempted to create a national movement. The study uses five categories of empirical data:

1. Secondary literature. This book draws on dozens of historians’ and social scientists’ case studies of movements for social reform.
2. Two massive, never-before-used archives of primary materials relating to gun control. These archives, which were amassed by gun control leaders in Chicago and Washington, comprise thousands of documents, including personal correspondence, confidential strategy memos, records from congressional hearings and debates, interest-group pamphlets and direct-mail pieces, and research reports. Material in one archive dates to the early 1960s and in the other to the early 1970s.⁶²
3. Newspaper archives. I used the Lexis-Nexis database and the *New York Times Index* to create summary measures of the nature of the discourse surrounding gun control and its status on the political agenda.
4. Interviews. I conducted semistructured interviews with roughly seventy current and past gun control activists and spoke informally with many others over the course of three years.
5. Survey data. I carried out a survey of roughly 800 participants in the nation’s first major gun control demonstration, held in Washington in May 2000. In

addition, I resurveyed roughly 220 of those people six to nine months after the march. Besides these original surveys, I made use of national surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, Gallup, and others.

ISN'T THE ANSWER OBVIOUS?

Whether one is at a dinner party or a scholarly meeting, all questions about gun control politics seem to boil down to the same, three-letter answer: N-R-A. The conventional wisdom holds that gun owners and their main interest group are culturally and politically invincible, while the pro-control majority are indifferent or otherwise unmotivated. The conventional wisdom is so powerful and pervasive that it must be considered here. Isn't "the mighty NRA" the solution to the gun control participation paradox? Isn't the answer obvious? The answer is no. A careful deconstruction of the conventional wisdom, including its various components and tangents, shows that it cannot explain the gun control participation paradox. Below, I consider the conventional arguments and show why they are at best incomplete and at most flat-out wrong.

Lack of Intensity?

One of the most persistent claims is that members of the pro-gun control majority are only weakly supportive of the cause and that it is not very important to them. A variation of this explanation is that gun control supporters care about many causes but gun rights supporters care about only one. According to this account, the "participation gap" stems from an "intensity gap," in which anti-gun control forces care passionately enough to organize but gun control supporters do not. This explanation is incomplete at best and flat wrong at worst. While some gun owners certainly are intense—as anyone who has seen them at gun control hearings can attest—there is no reason to believe that they are more passionate than those affected by gun violence: the mothers, fathers, siblings, and spouses who show up to plead for gun control laws and in some cases devote their lives and fortunes to volunteer groups lobbying for the cause. Gun rights supporters appear to be more intense because they are better organized and because people tend to experience threatened losses more intensely than potential gains.⁶³ Contrary to conventional wisdom, a landmark study found that the fraction of gun control advocates who are passionate about their cause was slightly *higher* than the fraction of gun rights advocates who are passionate about theirs.⁶⁴ What's more, because pro-control forces outnumber anticontrol forces by about two to one, the *number* of intense gun control advocates far exceeded the number of in-

tense gun rights supporters. Likewise, a national survey found that 20% of gun permit supporters said “the gun control issue” was “one of the most important” to them, compared with just 12% of gun permit opponents who felt similarly strongly.⁶⁵

The difference between the two groups appears not to be in self-reported intensity but in actual political action on the gun issue. Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser found that gun rights supporters were slightly more likely than pro-control individuals to say that gun control was “one of the most important” issues in how they voted in congressional elections, and gun rights supporters were far more likely to have written a letter and/or given money on the gun issue.⁶⁶ The same pattern continued to appear through the 1990s, but the “action gap” had narrowed. My analysis of the 1996 National Gun Policy Survey found that gun rights supporters were about twice as likely as gun control supporters to have taken some action, such as joining an organization or writing a Congress member, to further their cause. Thus, the “participation gap” may not reflect a difference in intensity as much as a difference in organization. Tellingly, a 1987 poll found that 9% of respondents cited “pro gun control” as an issue that concerned them enough to “take an actual personal role in a movement,” roughly equal to the 10% percent who said they cared enough about *opposing* gun control to get involved. That equal fractions on both sides want to take an active part, while the actual rate of participation is far greater on the gun rights side, suggests that there is, indeed, an organization gap.

Even if we disregard poll evidence and assume that gun control is not a top priority for many people, we still are left without an answer to the participation paradox. No mass movement has ever required all citizens to see the issue as their top priority. Rather, movements require only a committed core of activists and a wider circle of individuals who will show up at demonstrations and take part in other ways. One of the chief tasks of these movement activists and entrepreneurs is precisely to persuade sympathetic bystanders to get involved in the political fray and to provide them opportunities that will motivate them to stay involved. Put another way, commitment does not necessarily precede organization. And, in fact, good organization will nurture commitment.

Racism?

Another common claim is that gun control has failed to inspire a movement because gun violence disproportionately affects members of minority groups and the white majority is sufficiently insulated that it can avoid involvement. According to this theory, white Americans do not feel any personal connection to gun violence or do not think anything can be done

to change what they may secretly see as minorities' proclivity for violence. The racial explanation is at least superficially plausible. African-American and Latino males are disproportionately involved in gun violence, both as victims and as perpetrators.⁶⁷ Virtually all the epidemic increase in gun violence that swept the nation between 1985 and 1993 is attributable to nonwhite males under twenty-five.⁶⁸ Swings in gun violence are clearly more prevalent in urban areas than they are in small towns and rural areas.

However, the racial argument appears to be another account that ultimately does not hold up under scrutiny. The strongest argument against the white-racism claim is that, in fact, lots of whites are personally affected by gun violence. A Gallup poll conducted in 1993 found that roughly one-third of white American adults said someone "close" to them, "such as a friend or relative," had been shot in circumstances other than military combat.⁶⁹ This translates into approximately 50 million whites who have been secondary victims of gun violence. Likewise, polls suggest that roughly 20% of white Americans have been threatened by a gun, or shot at.⁷⁰

There are other reasons to doubt the racial explanation. For one, gun control activism was stronger in the 1970s, when white racism was more prevalent, than in the early 1990s, when racism was at historic lows. Moreover, a cynic might argue that the racism explanation would actually favor a gun control movement: If whites believe that blacks are prone to violence, wouldn't whites rise up in favor of gun control, raising the cost of firearms ownership and burdening those at the lower end of the income spectrum? Indeed, the fact that gun control activism is strong in northern cities with large black populations is consistent with the cynical interpretation but inconsistent with the "uninterested whites" explanation.

Issue-Attention Cycles

High-profile shootings do not happen every day, or even every month. And crime comes in waves. Perhaps advocates have trouble sustaining a movement because the problem is short lived and self-correcting, rather than stable and in need of policy interventions. Again, there are reasons to doubt this explanation. For one, even during down years, gun violence in America remains quite high by international standards. Second, other social movements have arisen in nonepidemic periods. Liquor consumption was actually declining when the Prohibition movement took off, and smoking had been declining for more than a decade before the antitobacco movement gained its footing in the 1980s.⁷¹ A third reason to doubt the cyclical explanation is that the endemic level of violence alone should produce enough primary and secondary victims to fill movement ranks.

Futility?

The futility theory comes in two parts. The first is that Americans do not rise up for gun control because doing so would be pointless given the political strength of gun rights forces. The difficulty with this explanation is that, almost by definition, social movements start from a position of weakness. The civil rights movement, to cite a clear example, began in the virulently segregated South, where the state and white citizens' groups not only politically stifled but also violently repressed movement activism. Although conditions were liberalizing at the national level, the civil rights movement was strongest in the region most resistant to change.

The second dimension of futility has to do with perceptions of whether gun control, as a policy, would be effective. This explanation holds that Americans doubt whether gun control would work, thereby diluting their willingness to spend time and energy on a gun control movement. Judging whether Americans believe gun control would be effective depends on how the survey question is worded.⁷² Generally speaking, polls suggest that Americans do not see gun control as *the solution* to criminal violence, but they do believe that significant reductions in criminal violence are not possible without stricter gun laws. They see gun control as an imperfect remedy, but a useful and necessary one. For example, a 1993 Yankelovich survey asked, "Do you think [stricter gun control laws in general] would decrease the amount of violent crime in this country a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all?" One-third (35%) said a great deal; 25% said a fair amount; 19% said only a little, and 17% said not at all. In other words, 60% thought that gun control would do a decent amount of good. Likewise, when asked whether "legislation designed to reduce the amount of violent crime in this country can do so without imposing stricter gun control laws," fully 65% said that new gun laws were necessary; only 28% said violent crime could be reduced without stricter gun control.⁷³

Rational Self-Interest?

This explanation, usually forwarded by gun control opponents, holds that Americans don't really want gun control, because it is against their self-interest in two ways. First, many Americans own guns, and therefore firearms regulations that applied to the existing stock would impose new costs and burdens on law-abiding citizens. Second, the explanation goes, Americans view guns as necessary for self-defense. They therefore would oppose gun control on the grounds that they might need to use a gun someday and would therefore want firearms to be unregulated and readily accessible. There are several problems with these explanations. First, tak-

ing the reasonable assumption that most gun owners would never join a gun control movement, we are still left with half the population (the non-gun owners) who are presumably available for recruitment. No movement in history has been launched on the basis that the entire population is likely to join. Indeed, if there were that much consensus, a movement would hardly be necessary. The second objection—the “just in case” self-protection scenario—makes sense only insofar as the public also believes that gun control legislation would, in fact, deprive them of obtaining or using a gun when necessary. In a 1996 survey, respondents were asked how concerned they were that “if people were required to register their handguns, the government would use the information to try to confiscate the handguns of law-abiding citizens.”⁷⁴ Only 16% of gun control supporters were very concerned about this possibility. Fully 47% were not concerned at all.

Responsive Federalism?

Finally, perhaps the gun control movement has foundered because the “right amount” of gun control already exists at the state level. While there is a significant correlation between the weakness of gun laws and the strength of pro-gun sentiment across the states, statistical analysis shows that state gun laws are far from a perfect reflection of citizen preferences.⁷⁵ Perhaps more important, it is not clear that there should be a strong correlation between laws and activism. For example, states with weak gun laws and a strong gun culture might indeed suppress pro-control activism—because the pro-control partisans are few in number and might view theirs as a lost cause. But weak laws and a strong gun culture might also *encourage* activism, because gun control partisans could see the pervasiveness of guns as a “problem.” Likewise, residents of states with a weak gun culture and strong gun laws might be encouraged by their victories to pursue ever stricter laws at the state level, and such local success might buoy them to lead a movement for national restrictions. In middle-ground states, with a more even split between pro-gun and pro-control sentiment, one might expect activism on both sides because the “middle ground” laws would not satisfy either.

The Free-Rider Problem?

If none of the above explanations will suffice, perhaps the answer lies not in the peculiarities of the gun issue itself but in the principles of collective action generally. The characteristics of public policies structure the political dynamics that surround them.⁷⁶ By implication, policies will vary in their amenability to mass mobilization. Two policy categories that face

particular challenges in this regard are policies seeking “social regulation” and policies advancing “public goods.” Social-regulatory policies are those that govern individual behavior and communal relations; public goods are those that benefit everyone indiscriminately. Advancing either requires infringing individual liberty. Gun control fits into both categories, and so gun control advocates—and advocates for policies like gun control—face not one challenge but two. These challenges are formidable, but creative entrepreneurs have found ways to surmount them.

The first challenge is that America is imbued with a classical liberal political culture derived from the Founding Fathers and their philosophical patron, John Locke. Contemporary advocates for policies that seek to regulate individual behavior in the name of the commonweal invariably run up against Americans’ faith in the twin tenets of individual liberty and a small central state.⁷⁷ Americans resist social regulation as an affront to their natural rights, and politicians risk an electoral penalty if they seek to deny or even infringe these Creator-endowed, constitutionally enshrined liberties. Consequently, as Anthony King notes, “*the state plays a more limited role in America than elsewhere because Americans, more than other people, want it to play a limited role.*”⁷⁸ Advocates asking the state to play a larger role in social relations face an uphill battle.

Besides being a social-regulatory policy, gun control also is designed to deliver a public good: public safety. As Mancur Olson notes in his classic study, public (or collective) goods also are difficult to mobilize around, but for a different reason—having to do not with communal political beliefs but with individual rationality.⁷⁹ By economists’ definition, a public good has two core characteristics: jointness of supply and impossibility of exclusion.⁸⁰ Jointness of supply means that one person’s consumption does not reduce anyone else’s; nonexclusion means that everyone benefits, not just those who agitate for the good. Economic theory suggests that public goods will be undersupplied: The market will not produce the socially optimal amount. Because everyone receives an equal share of the good, regardless of whether he has helped to secure it, it is rational for each individual to free ride on the efforts and expenditures of others—“let someone else take care of it.” Of course if everyone rationally abstains, the free market will not provide the good absent some form of coercion (say, conscription or taxation). The free-rider problem can be overcome under certain circumstances.⁸¹ But it remains a stubborn problem for collective idealists.

The difficulty with these theoretical solutions to the gun control participation paradox is that we know that history is fraught with examples of movements for social regulation and public goods. Scores of volumes have been written about movements that defy the logic of collective inaction:

the antitobacco movement, the antiabortion movement, and, most spectacularly, the Prohibition movement.

These movements in fact will prove critical to understanding the gun control nonmovement. The next chapter provides a quick sweep of the modern history of gun control politics in America. I have already demonstrated that gun control has never provoked a true grassroots movement, even as gun violence spiraled out of control. The next chapter will demonstrate that, according to conventional social theories of social-movement formation, gun control should have produced a movement. The chapter will then derive the theoretical framework that will guide the rest of the book. The theory situates collective action in a framework of individual costs and benefits. It argues that vigorous movements have always found a way to spread (or socialize) the costs, to concentrate (or personalize) the benefits, and to increase the individual's expectation that his personal costs will result in social benefits (or boost the participation payoff). To derive the theory, the next chapter offers brief case studies of issues that are comparable to gun control except that they *have* inspired true social movements.

WHY NO REAL GUN CONTROL MOVEMENT IN AMERICA?

Even as the United States has suffered through murders of public figures, workplace rampages, schoolroom massacres, and regular epidemics of “everyday” gun violence, the nation has never witnessed a vigorous, nation-spanning social movement to control access to firearms. This is not because Americans are indifferent to gun violence or lack support for enhanced gun control measures. It is not because gun control laws, or the effort to secure them, would be futile. Rather, gun violence has not inspired a mass mobilization in part because the leaders of the pro-control majority have lacked external resources to underwrite such a movement and in part because these leaders have chosen political strategies that are anathema to movement building.

To mount a movement, gun control leaders need external patrons. But these patrons have been largely unavailable. As chapter 3 documents, this is so in part because of the structure of American tax laws, which facilitate giving to charity but enact barriers to philanthropic foundations' support for political advocacy. It is also due in part to the shifting interests of a key set of potential patrons: women's voluntary associations. In an earlier day, female reformers would have provided volunteers and funds to social causes such as gun control; but by the 1970s, when gun control organizing began, women's groups were being diverted toward feminism and its agenda. Finally, gun control advocates have been denied patronage from

government institutions. Gun rights supporters have successfully lobbied for a slew of laws over a thirty-year period that have denied gun control advocates a foothold in sympathetic bureaucracies. Thus, for a host of reasons, socializing the costs of participation has been formidably difficult.

Personalizing gun control has been equally elusive, at least until recently. But unlike the stumbling blocks surrounding patronage, this difficulty is not so easily attributed to the conscious actions of anti-gun control organizations. Instead, as chapter 4 shows, gun control advocates themselves have failed to frame their issue in ways that would activate their mass base of supporters. Seeing their cause as self-evidently good, gun control advocates have framed their policy argument in terms that appeal more to policy experts than to everyday citizens. In particular, advocates have portrayed gun control as a means of crime control, thereby conferring “issue ownership”⁸² on criminal-justice professionals rather than, say, business leaders and parents. This frame has helped to ensure that gun control would be an issue for elite politics rather than mass politics. If issue advocates do not legitimate the authority of lay citizens, why would these citizens think their participation would count? To underscore the argument, chapter 4 documents gun control forces’ recent attempts to reframe their cause in terms that are more compelling to everyday Americans and shows quantitatively that this effort has spurred broader and more intense mass participation.

To complete the argument, chapter 5 documents how national gun control organizations have forgone the opportunity to alter the prospective cost-benefit ratio of participation in a favorable way. Unlike leaders of other reform movements, leading gun control advocates shunned incremental strategies and instead adopted a “rational national” model of policy change to which they remained largely committed through at least the mid-1990s. From the start, they chose to emphasize good policy at the expense of good politics, sacrificing mass pressure and elevating the role of insider expertise. In a sense, then, there has been no sustained, national gun control movement in America because gun control leaders chose, perhaps unwittingly, not to have one. To the extent that some gun control advocates, particularly at the state and local levels, tried to embrace a vision of movement-building incrementalism, their gun rights adversaries used institutional, electoral, and cultural resources to undermine these campaigns. Thus, because they lacked the opportunity to build outward, and certainly upward, gun control advocates had trouble turning mass sympathy into sustained engagement. However, when gun control leaders experimented with incremental approaches, popular participation did expand as the theory would predict. Chapter 6 documents three such cases with a clear, quantifiable link between incrementalism and mobilization.

In broad terms, chapter 7 concludes that the answer to the gun control participation paradox boils down to which side has better exploited the American political system to alter the costs and benefits of individual participation. I argue that the opponents of gun control have accommodated themselves better to the stubborn realities and political inconveniences of a fragmented, federalist system than have the supporters of gun control, whose strategies may have been rational in a policy sense but were politically naive. The struggles of the gun control “movement” stem both from choices that leaders made and from choices that were thrust upon them by a politically savvy and implacable foe. At the same time, the gun control case illuminates a broader set of issues in contemporary American politics. In particular, it highlights the seductive lure of elite politics. Modern liberals, including gun control advocates, model themselves on the civil rights movement, but in doing so they misread the lessons of history. The civil rights movement’s national legislative triumphs, which outlawed discrimination in all public places (1964) and put the weight of federal law enforcement behind local voting rights (1965), came after decades of local organizing around modest measures—changing seating patterns on a bus route or at soda fountains, for example. The civil rights movement stands for the proposition that there are no quick fixes in American politics, but contemporary liberal reformers draw from the movement exactly the opposite conclusion. The gun control case serves as a cautionary tale. The Founding Fathers meant for political reform to be slow and difficult. Movements that adapt their strategies to that reality will expand; movements that do not adapt will falter.