



Democracy at Gunpoint: American Gun Owners and Attitudes Towards Democracy

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Abstract

In recent years, research on gun ownership has grown substantially but there has been less exploration of variation within gun owners. This study examines the differences in support for democracy between gun owners and non-gun owners, and in doing so makes an important contribution to the political science literature on group behavior and attitudes. We utilize OLS regression to analyze data from the 2020 American National Election Studies and 2016 General Social Survey public opinion surveys and find that there is a stark divide among gun owners on support for measures of democratic norms. Gun owners are more supportive than non-owners on some measures, but on others there was no relationship between owning a firearm and democratic attitudes. We suggest this is because partisanship—specifically support for Donald Trump—pulled gun owners’ attitudes in opposite directions. These results are consistent with previous work on cross-pressured voters and highlight the limits of group influence in a world where citizens have multiple identities. We conclude that gun owners don’t appear meaningfully different from non-owners on measures of democratic support.

Keywords Gun politics · Gun ownership · Democratic attitudes · Public opinion · Group behavior

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Introduction

While there is a worldwide decline in democracy and erosion of democratic norms, the US has historically exhibited some of the highest levels of support for democracy globally (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1966; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010; Norris, 2011). There are also subgroups of Americans who may be more or less likely to support democracy. In the midst of a deadly global pandemic, peaceful but armed protests took place at the nation's capitol and state houses across the country in the summer leading up to the 2020 presidential election, bringing about much discourse regarding support for democratic norms among Americans, as well as discussions about the role of guns in a democracy. Many pro-gun control organizations used this opportunity to discuss the threat firearms pose to American democracy. As a result of this discourse, popular rhetoric began to describe gun owning citizens as anti-democratic. This is a bold and unsubstantiated claim that requires an investigation into the democratic attitudes of gun owners. Owners are a distinctive political group of highly participatory citizens whose attitudes often dominate political discourse (Joslyn, 2020; Middlewood, 2021; Middlewood et al., 2019). Much of this political identity is attributed to gun culture (e.g. Lacombe et al., 2019; Mencken & Froese, 2019; Schwartz, 2021), which holds ownership as an essential pillar of democratic ideals. References to this democratic right consistently appear in firearms related gear like pro-gun t-shirts and bumper stickers, incorporating both patriotic elements and bits of the Constitution. These are simplistic, but convincing, reasons to delve deeper into this question—are gun owners less supportive of democratic norms than non-gun owners?

Considering gun culture's emphasis on democracy and constitutional rights, we posit that gun owners *as a group* benefit from democracy and the protection of gun rights and therefore theoretically should be just as supportive of democratic norms as their non-gun owning peers; however there are instances where other identities may be more salient than gun ownership, thus creating attitudinal divisions within the group. We find gun owners are slightly more supportive of some measures of democratic norms than their non-gun owning counterparts, but do not appear to be substantially different in a meaningful way. On the measures where gun ownership has no statistical effect on democratic attitudes, it is because there is a stark division between gun owners who voted for Donald Trump and those who did not. We argue that on these democratic measures, partisan identity is more salient than gun ownership.

Our study is important for political science research on group behavior and attitudes and for researchers of gun owners broadly. We build upon the discipline's existing literature on gun owners, which treats gun owners as a unique political group distinct in their behaviors and attitudes (see Joslyn, 2020).¹ Like many

¹ We purposefully avoid labeling gun owners as an issue public or issue advocacy group as not all gun owners strongly identify as such socially and politically, and therefore do not meet Converse (1964) and Ryan and Ehlinger's (2023) criteria for such labels. A pro-gun issue public or advocacy group would consist of gun owners who strongly favor gun rights and care deeply about the issue, which is not the case for all gun owners.

social groups, gun owners are not monolithic, they are influenced by a mix of drives and inclinations, including attitudes that may be divisive within the group itself. We find that there are noisy subgroups within gun owners that are responsible for the overriding impression of undemocratic values. The attitudes among gun owners that undermine democratic principles undeniably pose a real threat to American democracy, but should not be attributed to gun owners as a whole. By generalizing the attitudes which are portrayed by some subgroups within the larger whole, it can sometimes mask a more complicated truth. Gun owners are a prime example of this selection bias. Our study draws conclusions that not only contribute to research on gun owners, but also for the broader political science research regarding the behavior of political groups.

Importantly, this article approaches these questions from a foundation that America's gun culture is rooted in widespread, lawful possession of firearms by a large segment of the population (see Yamane, 2017). Often, discussions of gun culture devolve into discussions of gun violence, and while gun violence is a serious problem in the US, a vast majority of lawful gun owners do not experience or perpetrate gun violence. Some would argue gun culture is better exemplified by the overarching position that “guns are normal and normal people use guns,” as coined by Yamane (2017).

Defining Democracy

Democracy is a system where “rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of the elected officials” (Schmitter & Karl 1991, p. 76). It is in this public realm where “the making of collective norms that are binding on society [and] backed by state coercion” are formed (Schmitter & Karl 1991, p. 77). Democratic norms and political culture emerge and ultimately make democracy *possible*. Without buy-in from the populace, democracy is little more than an idea. Thus, public support helps democracy survive (Easton, 1965; Lipset, 1959). We examine citizens' values and attitudes towards the political system and towards the role of citizens in a democratic system, informed by what Almond and Verba (1963) call “political orientations—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of self in the system” (13). Thus, support for democratic norms impacts the overall support of democracy and democratic institutions.

Democratic Political Culture

The importance of a democratic political culture in both old and new democracies is demonstrated in numerous studies (e.g. Booth & Richard, 2015; Dalton, 2004; Diamond, 1993; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 2011; Rose, 1997; Seligson, 1994). In an ideal world, the majority of voters in a democracy would embrace a democratic political culture, recognizing that democratic principles extend beyond mere participation in elections. True integration into political processes, according to Azpuru (2023), is demonstrated by numerous factors: citizens' keen interest in actively engaging,

exhibiting high levels of political efficacy, adhering to democratic norms in their behavior, and employing democratic means to express dissent and engage with elected representatives. While this type of participatory political culture is important for a democracy, we know gun owners participate in spades. Prior research shows that gun owners are strongly integrated into the political process; studies show that gun owners are more likely to vote than non-owners (e.g. Joslyn, 2020; Middlewood, 2021; Middlewood et al., 2019; Schwartz, 2021). Joslyn (2020) and Middlewood et al. (2019) suggest that gun owners are also more likely to pay attention to political news, engage in political discussions, and post about politics on social media. Additionally, Joslyn (2020), Middlewood (2021), and Middlewood et al. (2019) find that gun owners contact public officials, contribute money to political organizations, and sign political petitions more often than non-owners. All signs point to strong integration of gun owners in political processes.

However, as Azpuru (2023) notes, integration is not the only important dimension of democratic political culture. Integrated citizens must demonstrate allegiance to a democratic system by endorsing the principles, practices, institutions, and leaders of democracy, including the rejection of authoritarian principles (see Bratton & Mattes 2001; Mishler & Rose 2002). Put simply, upholding democracy as a comprehensive concept is a fundamental characteristic of individuals within a democratic political culture. These norms are instilled through political socialization, which involves ongoing interactions with other individuals or social groups throughout one's life (Azpuru, 2023). Prior studies show Americans largely support democracy and democratic norms (McClosky, 1964; Prothro & Grigg, 1960; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018) and elite opinion is generally unified in its support of democratic values (e.g. Chong et al., 1983). Thus, democratic values are built into the political culture of the United States at the individual, elite, and societal levels—much like gun culture. Scholars of political culture argue that the values, beliefs, and skills of the mass public have an important impact on democratic institutions and better predict the long-term stability of democracy than society's level of democracy at any given point in time (Inglehart & Welzel, 2002). We suspect that the deep entrenchment of democratic norms in American gun culture influences gun owners' attitudes towards democratic principles and practices, but that there may also be other motivating factors that may influence their democratic attitudes.

Notably, the meaning of democracy for individual citizens can be subject to motivated reasoning. Citizens who support a regime can claim to explicitly support democracy while simultaneously supporting undemocratic individuals and actions because those actions fit within citizens' molded understanding of what democracy means (Bryan, 2023). For example, the issue of maintaining safety and security (see Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981, 1996; Duckitt, 1989; Martin, 1964; Rokeach, 1960; Stenner, 2005), including aggressive responses to external threats (see Huddy et al., 2005; Perrin, 2005), has long been associated with authoritarian dispositions. To borrow phrasing from Stenner and Haidt (2018), "democracy does not breed democrats." Citizens living in a liberal democracy like the United States are not necessarily supportive of democracy in all circumstances. Hyper partisanship and polarization can serve as a force for motivated reasoning and, as we will explore further in the following sections, influence citizens' support for democracy.

Gun Culture & Democracy

Gun culture runs deep and is as old as the Republic. Its foundations began in the colonial, revolutionary, and early republican eras in the United States (Yamane, 2021). The United States is unique in being the “only modern industrial urban nation that persists in maintaining a gun culture” (Hofstadter, 1970). While contemporary gun ownership has taken on many symbolic meanings, historically, guns were tools necessary for hunting, self-defense, national defense, and symbols of citizenship (Yamane, 2021). As gun historian Clayton Cramer (2009, p. 236) observed, firearms were “symbols of being a citizen with the duty to defend the society.” This earliest iteration of gun culture² espouses the potential need for citizens to take up arms and defend democratic freedoms, hence its enshrinement in the Second Amendment.

While American gun culture has evolved significantly, the contemporary version incorporates all of the earlier iterations of gun cultures in our history—Yamane (2019) asserts that the United States has gun *cultures* (plural) rather than *culture* (singular). Thus, the core of Gun Culture 0.0 still resonates with firearms enthusiasts today. Guns remain a symbol of democracy and freedom for many owners. Many gun rights supporters argue that an armed citizenry is “a final, emergency bulwark against tyranny” (French, 2018) and that gun ownership is an essential component of democratic citizenship (Burbick, 2006). Ownership allows individuals to consciously commit to what they perceive as the “American way,” which includes strong patriotism and citizenship that values civic engagement (Kohn, 2004). For many owners, guns are a tangible expression of patriotic citizenship. Gun culture and American political culture’s foundational values of freedom, self-determination, and civic responsibility overlap (Joslyn, 2020). Kristin Goss perfectly sums up this reality in her 2013 *Newsweek* op-ed “Why We Need to Talk About Guns Goss (2013):”

Gun politics is not simply about differences on policy proposals. Gun politics is about what it means to be a good American. It’s personal. Even gun owners who don’t belong to the NRA believe, as my dad did, that gun ownership is a civic virtue, a hallmark of American self-reliance and duty... for gun owners, ownership is evidence of their civic spirit.

Ideals of citizenship and civic duty are ingrained in the very foundation of American gun ownership, fundamental to gun owners’ perceived role in society, and upheld through their political behavior. Owners often perceive themselves as model citizens by carrying a firearm and fulfill these claims by consistently engaging in the political process, suggesting that they should care about the health of democracy—or are at least strongly motivated to uphold democratic practices that allow them to pursue their own political interests.

This is not to say all gun owners have the same attitudes on every issue. There is a mix of drives and inclinations within any political group. Meaningful variance has been found across social contexts, even within the same identity group (see Djupe & Lewis, 2015). We expect gun owners to elucidate this heterogeneity just as well as other

² Sometimes known as Gun Culture 0.0.

political groups. Individuals hold a wide range of distinct and potentially overlapping identities and these are important drivers of political attitudes and actions. Individuals can identify with multiple groups and thus may be mobilized toward different political ends (Margolis, 2018). Lacombe et al. (2019) find gun ownership to be a social and political identity that influences behavior, though other studies show gun ownership is not the only salient identity that can shape citizens' political attitudes. Gun owners are multifaceted and there is significant variance among gun owners based on gender (Middlewood, 2019; Middlewood et al., 2019), partisanship (Yamane et al., 2021), race (Bowen et al., 2023), age (Vegter & Middlewood, 2023), and geographic region (Ellison, 1991; Middlewood, 2021). We suspect gun ownership shapes citizens' attitudes on democracy, but that it is not the only salient identity in owners' opinion formation.

Identity Effects

Many scholars of gun politics tend to view gun owners as a homogenous group shaped by the values foundational to gun culture, but this could not be further from reality. Approximately 75 million heterogeneous Americans own firearms. In fact, gun ownership is becoming increasingly diverse with distinct subgroups—for example, gun ownership includes a growing population of liberal gun owners (Yamane et al., 2021), women gun owners (Kelley, 2022; Middlewood, 2019; Middlewood et al., 2019); Black women gun owners (Bowen et al., 2023); young gun owners (Vegter & Middlewood, 2023); and rural gun owners (Middlewood, 2021). Thus, gun ownership, like other large political groups, is full of competing identities and political divisions that can pull gun owners in various attitudinal directions.

Different types of gun owners may be prone to varying levels of support for democratic norms. One might consider how the Foa et al. (2020) finds that young people in the United States are increasingly dissatisfied with democracy, while Vegter and Middlewood (2023) note that gun ownership matters more as an identity to young gun owners in the United States. Therefore, this distinct subgroup—while small compared to gun owners as a whole—may reject some of the democratic ideals embedded in mainstream gun culture in effort to elevate their ownership in their personal hierarchies of values. Additionally, women gun owners experience their gender differently than their non-owning counterparts and participate in politics at higher rates (Middlewood et al., 2019). Given their increased participation, they may experience increased political efficacy and greater support for the system within which they participate. Though first researchers must establish the nuanced attitudes among gun owners as a whole in considering their support for democracy, further analysis of these subgroups may lead to interesting insights—especially on how these different gun cultures may lead to varying levels of support for democracy among gun owners in the United States.

Partisan Effects

It is unrealistic to expect gun owners to form political opinions in a social vacuum (see Mutz, 2013). Public opinion on government policy has long been group-centric and is strongly influenced by the attitudes citizens possess toward groups that are

perceived to benefit from certain policies (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Additionally, every public issue is contested and partisan elites attempt to impose their own meaning on the issue at hand (see Gamson, 1992; Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, 1989).

As with all political attitudes, the saliency of pro-democracy attitudes cultivated by gun culture could potentially be affected by external influences like partisanship and elite framing. As Joslyn (2020) notes, pro-gun groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) astutely exploit the belief that gun ownership is an important element of democratic citizenship. While only 4.3 million of the 75 million gun-owning Americans belong to the NRA and its influence in the gun-owning community has been rapidly declining over the past decade (Mak, 2021), the organization still has a large influence on gun politics. The NRA's advocacy frequently activates the public's distrust of government and celebrates the Second Amendment as the one thing standing against a tyrannical government. In fact, the NRA refers to the right to bear arms as "America's first freedom," because it protects all other civil liberties found in the Bill of Rights (Cook & Goss, 2014, p. 158). This protection against a tyrannical government and the "first freedom" description are prime examples of how, when framed in a particular way, some gun owners may lean into anti-government sentiments if and when it is politically beneficial to do so. The NRA's tactics to politically mobilize gun owners, while seemingly democratic on the surface, are harmful and weaken democracy because the organization relies on fear-based mobilization (Lacombe, 2021b). Often, the frames used by elites permeate public discussions of politics, teach supporters how to think about and understand complex political problems, and influence public opinion (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Thus, NRA tactics make compromise less achievable, contribute to polarization and the delegitimization of political opponents, encourage politicians to violate long-standing norms, and ultimately reduce democratic accountability and responsiveness (Lacombe, 2021b). This approach has increased affective polarization among some gun owners, portraying gun enthusiasts as patriotic defenders of American heritage and its enemies (usually gun-control supporters) as villains. Lacombe (2021b) argues that the NRA's use of fear-motivated group identity has been magnified by the group's rising prominence within the Republican Party, especially during Donald Trump's presidency, expanding from its members to broader swaths of the gun-owning and conservative electorates. For example, the NRA frequently vilifies not only gun-control supporters, but also the Democratic Party and the media (Lacombe, 2021b). This raises important questions about partisan effects on gun owners' commitment to democracy.

There is contradicting literature on the relationship between partisanship and citizens' commitment to democratic norms. Numerous studies show that for many Americans, partisanship can take precedence over a commitment to democratic values (e.g. Albertus & Grossman, 2021; Berliner, 2022; Carey et al., 2020; Graham & Svolic, 2020) and some aspects of supporting democracy, notably those that deal with the power and rules of government, are subject to change based on the appeal of partisan gain (Bryan, 2023). On the other hand, Holliday et al. (2024) find that while partisan elites have increasingly eroded democracy, citizens of both parties remain staunchly opposed to violations of democratic norms,

even when their own representatives engage in anti-democratic actions, including election denialism. Their analysis found that commitment to democratic norms is not a matter of partisanship, but, importantly, Americans may broadly support the tenets of democracy but they are simultaneously willing to support elected officials who do not.

The relationship between gun ownership and partisanship is complicated. For some gun owners, party ID and gun ownership may be reinforcing identities, but still others face a difficult trade off on which identity is the most salient in a given context. Gun ownership predicts support for Republican candidates in presidential (Joslyn et al., 2017), gubernatorial (Gimpel, 1998), and congressional (Joslyn, 2020) elections. However, gun ownership is distinct from partisanship on a number of behavioral and attitudinal measures (Joslyn, 2020). From 2004 to 2016, for example, Joslyn (2020) found gun owners expressed surprising variation in their feelings towards presidential candidates. In 2016, 61% of gun owners may have cast their ballot for Donald Trump, but he was also the only Republican presidential candidate in two decades to be rated unfavorably by a majority of gun owners in ANES survey data. On a feeling thermometer from 0 to 100, over 20% of gun owners rated him at a 0 (very unfavorable), 4% at a 50 (neither favorable or unfavorable), and only 6% at 100 (very favorable). For comparison, in 2008, 10% of gun owners rated Barack Obama at a very favorable 100.

Citizens' support for democracy may also be specifically molded by politically salient issues (Bryan, 2023)—like gun ownership, partisanship, or a particular presidential candidate. Arguments that highlight salient identities may activate group sentiments that then become the dominant lens in which individuals evaluate issues and form attitudes (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). This can easily crowd out other identity-based considerations or potentially strongly reinforce one identity-based issue when a second identity is in alignment.

When social and partisan identities are made salient in a political environment, complicating how individuals form opinions (see McCabe, 2022), citizens have to confront multiple, often competing, frames for interpreting political issues and events. Klar (2013) finds that when one identity is salient, it has undue influence over preferences, even in the presence of a competing identity. In competitive information environments, citizens tend to align their positions with the stronger identity (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Thus, they are forced to make a trade off in deciding which identity or group alliance is more important in a given context. For example, gun ownership may be crowded out by partisan identity when measuring support for democracy, if partisanship is the individual's more salient identity. Alternatively, gun ownership and partisanship may be reinforcing identities in some contexts. In practice, this means that gun owners—like members of all identity groups—may take an à la carte approach to democracy, picking and choosing which elements of democracy to support based on the particular identity that is salient at the moment. The goal of this study is not to determine the causal mechanism of gun owners' support for democracy. Instead, we analyze support for democratic norms by a powerful political group while acknowledging the complexity of the individual calculi of gun owners in particular.

Data and Methods

To test the relationship between gun ownership and democratic support using OLS regression analysis, we utilize the 2020 wave of the American National Election Studies (ANES; $N=5441$) and the 2016 wave of the General Social Survey (GSS; $N=5901$) public opinion surveys. Both surveys were conducted before the years' respective presidential elections from nationally representative samples of American adults.

Measuring Democracy

Our dependent variables test support for diverse measures of democracy. The literature surrounding support for democracy is broad and robust; measuring democratic attitudes has been shown to predict prospects for democracy (Claassen, 2020a; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Qi & Shin, 2011), as well as impact individual voting behavior (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Gunther et al., 2007) and other forms of political participation (Bakule, 2021). In this study, we will measure diffuse support for democracy (see Easton, 1975), which focuses on citizen support for the political community and democratic regime. By focusing on diffuse support, we attempt to highlight support for principles of democratic governance while avoiding measuring specific support for or satisfaction with the government of the day, its leaders, and its policies. As Linde and Ekman (2003) find, questions that pertain to satisfaction with democracy³ do not accurately capture support for the basic political arrangements of democracy, we therefore utilize measures of two key elements of democracy (and democratic survival) outlined by Mainwaring (2022): first, normative preference and commitment to democracy by political actors, which can help sustain democracy even in difficult circumstances. Second, the existence of institutions that serve as constraints on executive power—for example, checks and balances between the legislative branch and executive branch is fundamental in presidential systems. Both normative preferences and institutions are essential to understanding democratic support (Mainwaring, 2022; Norris, 1999). Our primary focus is on the support of democratic norms and their application in a democracy. Numerous studies conceptualize democratic norms and support for democracy in this way (e.g. Anderson et al., 2021; Welzel, 2007). While the measures in this study are bound to publicly available data and thus pose some limitations, utilizing a battery of questions allows us to account for multiple elements in respondents' support for democracy without them needing to make tradeoffs (see Norris, 2011; Welzel, 2011). In choosing our measures, we use two of Norris' (1999) three dimensions of democracy⁴: support for the principles of democratic regimes and support for the institutions of representative

³ For example, the 2020 ANES survey asks the question “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States?” but we do not include this question in our analysis.

⁴ We do not utilize Norris' (1999) second dimension, assessing the performance of the regime in practice because questions that directly ask about satisfaction with democracy are closely associated with presidential approval ratings (see Azpuru 2024).

democracy. These operationalizations are typical of studies that assess democratic support using survey questions (see Claassen, 2020a) and with the literature on perceptions on democracy by the populace (see Anderson et al., 2021; Welzel, 2007). Though, we acknowledge that there are some limitations to our conclusions based on the measures we chose. Namely, we measure support for democracy in the abstract while it is entirely possible that individuals may support these abstract sentiments while holding conflicting views about threats to democracy in practice, especially in a country with growing affective polarization (see Bryan, 2023; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). Our focus on threats to democracy relies on respondents connecting *concrete threats* to *examples* of these threats, but we acknowledge that these connections may not always be at the forefront of a respondent's mind when answering these questions. Even so, we believe our findings accurately capture perceptions of democratic norms broadly. These limitations and our findings reinforce the need for continued research on political groups and their overall perceptions of democratic norms.

The first set of ANES variables concern support for democratic norms. We use survey questions to assess support for checks and balances, consequences for elected officials that engage in misconduct, agreement on verifiable facts, the harmfulness of a strong presidency that isn't constrained by Congress and the courts, and the appropriateness of a president investigating political rivals.⁵ All dependent variables are coded so that higher values indicate higher levels of support for democratic norms. We consider all five questions to be distinct and therefore consider them separately.

We also analyze two dependent variables from the 2016 GSS survey that measure support for democratic norms in the form of civil liberties—organizing public meetings and organizing public demonstrations against the government.⁶ While we find the inclusion of GSS useful, it does have some limitations compared to ANES. Most prominently, it is a much smaller sample and also does not contain a measure of who respondents voted for in the 2016 presidential election. As such, the GSS data is excluded entirely from the second half of this analysis.

The second set of ANES dependent variables pertains to a free press, which is an essential institution in democracies. We measure support for restricting journalists' access to information about government decision-making, concern for undermining the news media's ability to serve as a check on government power and a general trust in the media variable. This last variable does not measure a free press, but does provide important insights into the results of the first two measures. As with our previous dependent variables, higher values indicate higher support for a free press and we consider both questions to be distinct and therefore consider them separately.

⁵ See Appendix for all survey question wording and variable coding.

⁶ We include analysis of the GSS data for three primary reasons: First, the ANES survey does not ask questions about protest, which is an important civil liberty in democratic regimes. Second, GSS provides separate measures of personal gun ownership and home gun ownership, while ANES only provides home gun ownership. Third, including the GSS data allows us to validate our ANES findings with those from another dataset in the same general time period—though, admittedly, the state of democracy in the United States was slightly better in 2016 than it was in 2020; FreedomHouse gave the United States a score of 86 out of 100 in 2020, 90 in 2016, and 83 in 2024.

Independent Variables and Controls

Our main independent variable captures gun ownership as a dummy variable, comparing gun owners with non-owners. Gun owners make up 40.65% of the ANES sample. As noted, gun owners are a diverse group and these datasets account for this variance. In the ANES data, 46% of gun owners identified as women, over a third as Democrats, and 43% did not vote for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. In GSS, gun owners make up 22% of the sample; the partisan breakdown was about the same, with 35% of gun owners identifying as Democrats. However, the GSS sample had significantly less gender diversity; only 30% of gun owners in the sample were women.

There are a myriad of factors that may influence attitudes toward democratic norms and therefore, we control for: age, race, gender, education level, partisanship, evangelical identification, partisan strength, community type, and geographic region. All control variables were measured the same, regardless of whether they were from ANES or GSS, and are detailed in the Appendix.

Results

Our theory hinges on the relationship between gun ownership and support for democratic norms and institutions. We hypothesize that gun owners will be more supportive of democratic norms than their non-owning counterparts. To test this, we first look at support for democratic norms. Table 1 shows that gun owners are more likely to support checks and balances than non-gun owners, believe that elected officials are deserving of consequences for misconduct, and believe it is important for Americans to agree on basic facts even when they disagree politically. These relationships have weak coefficients, but are statistically significant.

There was no significant relationship between gun ownership and the belief that it would be helpful if the president was not restricted by Congress and the courts or the assessment of appropriateness for a president to investigate a political rival. Unlike the other democratic measures, we suspect that these particular scenarios trigger partisan saliency. Both of these variables are strongly connected to specific actions of former-president Donald Trump. Throughout his presidency, Trump routinely made large-scale unilateral decisions that further eroded the US system of checks and balances (Goldgeier & Saunders, 2018) and positioned himself as an authoritarian leader (Kellner, 2018).⁷ Furthermore, attitudes toward the appropriateness of investigating political rivals could be interpreted as a preference for Trump's actions when he called upon Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Trump's political rival Joe Biden. While gun owners are quickly becoming more diverse in their political views, they have historically been more likely to support Donald Trump (Joslyn, 2020), Republicans in general

⁷ The phenomenon of elected leaders claiming to support democracy while simultaneously attacking the very democratic institutions that brought them to power is not unique to the United States and it has broadly characterized the global "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

Table 1 Gun owners' support for democracy

Variables	Checks and balances N = 4832	Consequences for misconduct N = 4838	Agree on facts N = 4827	Strong president N = 4827	Investigate rivals N = 4818
Gun owner	0.595** (0.025)	0.04* (0.021)	0.061* (0.029)	0.029 (0.021)	0.004 (0.02)
Age	0.004*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
White	0.175*** (0.028)	0.166*** (0.024)	0.078** (0.032)	0.119*** (0.024)	0.073*** (0.073)
Women	- 0.09*** (0.023)	0.009 (0.02)	- 0.105*** (0.027)	- 0.003 (0.02)	- 0.003 (0.019)
Education	0.134*** (0.01)	0.071*** (0.008)	0.096*** (0.011)	0.089*** (0.009)	0.047*** (0.008)
Party ID	- 0.043*** (0.008)	- 0.038*** (0.007)	- 0.024** (0.009)	- 0.055*** (0.007)	- 0.087*** (0.006)
Evangelical	0.016 (0.031)	- 0.04 ^o (0.026)	0.056 ^o (0.035)	- 0.034 (0.026)	- 0.095*** (0.025)
Ideology	- 0.01 (0.011)	- 0.003 (0.009)	- 0.051*** (0.012)	- 0.014 (0.009)	- 0.047*** (0.009)
Partisan strength	0.012 (0.011)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.028* (0.013)	- 0.023** (0.01)	- 0.038*** (0.009)
Rural	- 0.058** (0.024)	- 0.002 (0.021)	- 0.056* (0.028)	- 0.072*** (0.021)	- 0.065*** (0.02)
South	- 0.036 ^o (0.024)	- 0.04* (0.021)	0.008 (0.028)	- 0.019 (0.021)	- 0.04* (0.02)
Constant	3.987 (0.058)	4.177*** (0.05)	3.97*** (0.067)	2.417*** (0.05)	2.865*** (0.047)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

(Gimpel, 1998; Joslyn, 2020; Joslyn et al., 2017), and to be responsive to presidential partisanship (Ratcliff, 2022). Thus, gun owners may be divided on these measures, pulled in opposite directions based on support for the former president and his actions. Trump-supporting gun owners may be unwilling to condemn anti-democratic actions given their particular affinity for the former president, while those who didn't support Trump may find these actions unacceptable. We explore this further in the second part of this analysis.

Older Americans, whites, men, the college educated, Democrats, liberals, strong partisans, urban and suburban dwellers, and non-Southerners are also more supportive of these democratic measures, as shown in Table 1. The compelling findings from Table 1 are that gun owners don't appear to be all that meaningfully

Table 2 Gun owners' support for democratic protests against government

Variables	Meetings N = 787	Demonstrations N = 787
Gun owner	0.061 ^o (0.035)	0.073* (0.034)
Age	- 0.003*** (0.001)	- 0.004*** (0.001)
White	0.052 ^o (0.034)	- 0.02 (0.033)
Women	- 0.039 (0.029)	- 0.023 (0.028)
Education	0.049*** (0.013)	0.041*** (0.012)
Party ID	0.005 (0.008)	- 0.001 (0.008)
Evangelical	- 0.028 (0.03)	- 0.038 (0.029)
Ideology	- 0.018 ^o (0.011)	- 0.014 (0.011)
Partisan strength	0.013 (0.019)	0.008 (0.014)
Rural	- 0.043 (0.041)	- 0.121*** (0.04)
South	- 0.053* (0.029)	- 0.076** (0.028)
Constant	0.893*** (0.07)	3.245*** (0.068)

2016 General Social Survey. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

different from non-owners in their support for democratic norms. While some measures do show statistical significance, the coefficients are fairly weak.

Table 2 displays the GSS models analyzing gun owners' support for civil liberties via protest rights. In both models, gun ownership predicts support for democratic protests against the government. These relationships, though consistent with the pro-democracy elements of gun culture, have fairly small coefficients suggesting gun ownership has a weak effect. Thus, gun owners once again do not appear all that meaningfully different from non-owners.

Furthermore, unlike the models in Table 1, younger people are significantly more favorable of meetings and demonstrations that protest the government. This is perhaps because young people are significantly more likely to protest than take part in other political activities (e.g. Campbell, 2013; Moeller et al., 2014).

Table 3 Gun owners' support for free press

Variables	Restrict journalist access N = 4832	Media check on gov- ernment N = 4830	Trust in Media N = 4834
Gun owner	0.006 (0.022)	0.04 (0.037)	- 0.082** (0.03)
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.001)
White	0.101*** (0.025)	0.099** (0.042)	- 0.092** (0.034)
Women	- 0.079*** (0.020)	- 0.03 (0.034)	- 0.105*** (0.028)
Education	0.07*** (0.009)	0.051*** (0.015)	0.023* (0.012)
Party ID	- 0.075*** (0.007)	- 0.178*** (0.011)	- 0.208*** (0.009)
Evangelical	- 0.036 (0.027)	- 0.002 (0.045)	- 0.018 (0.037)
Ideology	- 0.074*** (0.01)	- 0.203*** (0.016)	- 0.172*** (0.013)
Partisan strength	- 0.04*** (0.01)	- 0.019 (0.017)	0.047*** (0.014)
Rural	- 0.076*** (0.021)	- 0.088** (0.036)	- 0.037 (0.03)
South	0.004 (0.021)	- 0.04 (0.036)	0.025 (0.029)
Constant	2.903*** (0.051)	4.491*** (0.086)	3.401*** (0.071)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

When it comes to the media, gun owners are far less consistent in their support of a free press. As displayed in Table 3, there is no significant relationship between gun ownership and the belief that media should be free to criticize the government without restriction nor the belief that media should not be undermined in its service as a check on government power. Gun owners do, however, display lower levels of trust in the media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly compared to non-owners, though there is once again a small coefficient. This significance may be a result of a perceived anti-gun bias in reporting and editorializing from many mainstream media outlets. Democrats, liberals, whites, the highly educated, and urban and suburban residents consistently support a free press, while older Americans, men, and strong partisans show various levels of support for media freedoms.

The media's importance in a democracy is undeniable; providing citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; Strömbäck, 2005). However, as these results demonstrate, opinions of and trust in the media has become extremely polarized in recent years, indicating that not all Americans continue to see the media—or at least the media in its current form—as a key democratic institution. We suspect these measures, similar to the two in Table 1, pull gun owners in opposite directions because of the partisan divides made salient by former-president Trump's vocal and ongoing criticism of the news media (see Meeks, 2020). For example, during his speech at the NRA's annual meeting in 2019, Trump drew loud applause when he attacked the media as “fake” and Lacombe (2021b) finds that NRA members are significantly more likely to say that the media prevents political leaders from doing their job.

A free press is of little democratic use if citizens do not trust the news, which the third model in Table 3 suggests gun owners do not, though once again with a small coefficient. Modern media criticism is often spurred by political ideologies (Gunther, 1988) and certain worldviews (Fawzi, 2019) and it's undeniable that public trust in the media has rapidly declined over the past four decades. Gallup reports that in the period between 1972 and 2016, public trust in the media declined from 72% at its height, to just 32%. Lewis (2020) suggests that broad distrust of journalism today is due to the institutional weakness of the press, which was arguably weakened further during the Trump administration. Some research suggests lack of trust in news media is correlated to less use of mainstream media and greater use of non-traditional information sources (see Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Mourão et al., 2018). We believe this explanation makes the most sense in the context of gun owners. Further research along this avenue is warranted, but is beyond the scope of this article.

As evidenced in Tables 1 and 3, there are a variety of democratic measures for which gun ownership broadly does not predict support. These survey questions measure different democratic norms upon which gun owners seem to hold contradictory views. We suspect this is because, for some gun owners, these survey questions make partisan⁸ identity salient. Citizens often become more supportive of anti-democratic actions when their preferred political side can benefit. Individual interpretations of democracy can mold to fit one's partisan self-interest. For example, citizens may emphasize the need for a strong president, and obey such authority, when their preferred party is in power. This results in an à la carte approach to democracy where gun owners may piecemeal an understanding of democracy that fits their partisan self-interest.

We believe partisanship was likely made salient because these survey questions pertain to aspects of democratic norms that had been regularly politicized and attacked by Donald Trump throughout his presidency. Thus, results reflect a partisan division beyond standard party identification, ideology, and partisan strength, which are all controlled for in the models. The NRA also became deeply intertwined with the GOP and conservative politics during the Trump presidency, including in the

⁸ While we use the term “partisan” here, we specifically mean support for Donald Trump and acknowledge that there were Republicans who did not vote for Trump in both 2016 and 2020.

vilification of political rivals. For example, at the 2018 meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), Wayne LaPierre, the former long-time CEO and vice president of the NRA, stated that the Democratic Party is “now infested with saboteurs who don’t believe in capitalism, don’t believe in the Constitution, don’t believe in our freedom, and don’t believe in America as we know it.” (Goodwin 2018)

To test the impact of partisanship on gun owners’ support for democratic norms, we broke down the subset of gun owners further and compared gun owners who voted for Donald Trump in 2020 to gun owners who did not—i.e. those who voted for Joe Biden or a third party or independent candidate. 57% of gun owners in the ANES sample voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, while 43% did not. Of the gun owners who did vote for Trump, around 75% are over forty years old, nearly 90% are white, 55% identify as men, 40% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 90% identify as a Republican. Though, it is notable that 10% of Republican gun owners did not vote for Trump, which is higher than the typical partisan defection. Concerning gun owners who did not vote for Trump, 30% are under forty, 73% are white, 40% identify as male, 54% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and only around 14% are Republican—a much more diverse group.

Table 4 displays the results of the analysis assessing democratic norm support among Trump-voting gun owners. On these measures, where gun owners did not differ from non-owners in previous models, Trump-voting gun owners were significantly less likely to express support for democratic norms than gun owners who voted for an alternative candidate. The models in Table 4 show Trump-voting gun owners are less concerned about institutional checks on presidential power and think it’s appropriate for a president to ask foreign leaders to investigate political rivals. In measures of a free press, gun owners were only united in their shared distrust of media, but when we look at subgroups, Trump-voting gun owners are far less supportive of a free press than their non-Trump-voting counterparts. The models in Tables 4 and 5 all have fairly large coefficients, suggesting strong relationships between Trump-voting gun owners and anti-democratic sentiments. These results provide some necessary nuance to the results in Tables 1 and 3. Gun owners as a group are not united in their support for all measures of democratic norms. They, like members of other political groups, face cross pressures that can be mobilized to different political ends.

Furthermore, we ran additional models with interaction variables to test the relationships, shown in Tables 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. We first tested the effect of the interaction between Republican attachment and gun ownership⁹ on support for democratic norms and found no significant relationship. The results show that being a gun-owning Republican has no significant effect on an individual’s support for any of the democratic norm measures used in this study. The single model that does show a significant effect of this interaction is trust in the media. Unsurprisingly based on the literature and previous models, gun-owning Republicans are significantly less likely to trust the media ($p > 0.035$, $b = -0.126$). To continue testing the relationship between partisanship and gun ownership, we ran additional models to determine if

⁹ Comparing gun-owning Republicans to all non-owners and gun owners who are not Republican.

Table 4 Trump voting gun owners' support for democracy

Variables	Strong president N = 1547	Investigate rivals N = 1543	Restrict Journalist access N = 1546	Media check on gov N = 1547	Trust in media N = 1549
Trump voting gun owner	- 0.296*** (0.062)	- 0.595*** (0.06)	- 0.391*** (0.063)	- 0.970*** (0.106)	- 0.916*** (0.077)
Age	0.002** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	- 0.001 (0.001)	0.006** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.001)
White	0.05 (0.051)	0.082° (0.049)	0.118* (0.052)	0.147° (0.088)	0.004 (0.063)
Women	- 0.005 (0.036)	0.032 (0.035)	- 0.086** (0.037)	0.026 (0.063)	- 0.129*** (0.045)
Education	0.081*** (0.016)	0.026° (0.015)	0.053*** (0.016)	0.008 (0.027)	0.012 (0.02)
Party ID	- 0.012 (0.015)	- 0.013 (0.015)	- 0.031* (0.015)	- 0.074*** (0.026)	- 0.102*** (0.019)
Evangelical	- 0.012 (0.043)	- 0.14*** (0.042)	- 0.002 (0.044)	0.092 (0.075)	- 0.039 (0.054)
Ideology	- 0.01 (0.018)	- 0.012 (0.017)	- 0.065*** (0.018)	- 0.134*** (0.031)	- 0.139*** (0.022)
Partisan strength	- 0.014 (0.019)	- 0.015 (0.018)	- 0.048** (0.019)	0.023 (0.032)	0.103*** (0.023)
Rural	- 0.034 (0.037)	0.002 (0.035)	- 0.08* (0.037)	- 0.078 (0.063)	0.053 (0.045)
South	- 0.028 (0.037)	- 0.045 (0.037)	0.05 (0.037)	- 0.012 (0.064)	0.069 (0.046)
Constant	2.485*** (0.105)	2.65*** (0.102)	2.903*** (0.108)	4.321*** (0.182)	3.401*** (0.131)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.001$

** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$

° $p < 0.10$

Table 5 Interaction between gun owners and republicans on measures of support for democracy

Variables	Checks and balances N = 4832	Consequences for misconduct N = 4838	Agree on facts N = 4827	Strong president N = 4827	Investigate rivals N = 4818
Gun owning republicans	- 0.010 (0.049)	0.010 (0.042)	- 0.046 (0.056)	- 0.028 (0.042)	- 0.066 ^o (0.04)
Gun owner	0.059 ^p (0.036)	0.031 (0.031)	0.081* (0.041)	0.040 (0.031)	0.035 (0.029)
Republican	- 0.094** (0.049)	- 0.121 (0.033)	- 0.032 (0.044)	- 0.190*** (0.033)	- 0.031*** (0.031)
Age	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
White	0.157*** (0.028)	0.155*** (0.024)	0.067* (0.032)	0.109*** (0.024)	0.062** (0.023)
Women	- 0.089*** (0.023)	0.01 (0.02)	- 0.105*** (0.027)	- 0.004 (0.02)	- 0.006 (0.019)
Education	0.136*** (0.01)	0.072*** (0.009)	0.097*** (0.011)	0.092*** (0.009)	0.052*** (0.008)
Evangelical	0.008 (0.031)	- 0.053* (0.026)	0.052 (0.035)	- 0.040 (0.026)	- 0.104*** (0.025)
Ideology	- 0.033*** (0.010)	- 0.017* (0.009)	- 0.064*** (0.012)	- 0.028*** (0.009)	- 0.054*** (0.008)
Partisan strength	0.023* (0.012)	0.042*** (0.01)	0.035** (0.013)	- 0.003 (0.01)	- 0.004 (0.009)
Rural	- 0.061** (0.025)	- 0.005 (0.021)	- 0.058* (0.028)	- 0.076*** (0.021)	- 0.072*** (0.02)
South	- 0.039 ^p (0.024)	- 0.041* (0.021)	0.007 (0.028)	- 0.020 (0.021)	- 0.041* (0.02)
Constant	3.931 (0.063)	4.111*** (0.053)	3.935*** (0.072)	2.296*** (0.054)	2.659*** (0.051)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

the interaction between Trump-voting and gun ownership yielded similar results.¹⁰ There was no significant effect across all measures save one. On the appropriateness of investigating political rivals, Trump-voting gun ownership approaches significance ($p > 0.083$) but has a small negative coefficient ($b = -0.072$). In this model, gun ownership alone is not significant, while Trump vote is and has a fairly large

¹⁰ The 2016 GSS data does not include a presidential vote variable and therefore we do not test this interaction for the organizing meetings and demonstrations variables.

Table 6 Interaction between gun owners and republicans on measures of support for democratic protests against government

Variables	Meetings	Demonstrations
	N = 787	N = 787
Gun owning republicans	- 0.018 (0.066)	0.028 (0.064)
Gun owner	0.066 (0.047)	0.058 (0.046)
Republican	0.065 ^o (0.038)	0.009 (0.037)
Age	- 0.003*** (0.001)	- 0.003*** (0.001)
White	0.039 (0.034)	- 0.024 (0.033)
Women	- 0.038 (0.029)	- 0.022 (0.028)
Education	0.049*** (0.013)	0.041*** (0.012)
Evangelical	- 0.031 (0.03)	- 0.039 (0.029)
Ideology	- 0.023* (0.011)	- 0.017 ^P (0.011)
Partisan strength	0.007 (0.014)	0.006 (0.014)
Rural	- 0.045 (0.041)	- 0.123*** (0.04)
South	- 0.053* (0.029)	- 0.076** (0.028)
Constant	0.938*** (0.074)	1.054*** (0.072)

2016 General Social Survey. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$
 ** $p < 0.01$
 *** $p < 0.001$
^o $p < 0.10$

negative coefficient ($p > 0.000$; $b = - 0.449$). In every model, Trump vote on its own is significant with fairly large negative coefficients.

We ran additional robustness checks to investigate collinearity in these models and included them in the Appendix. By including partisanship, ideology, and partisan strength as controls in the Trump-Gun Owner models, collinearity was possible. In these robustness checks we re-ran all of the Trump-Gun Owner models three times: using only party ID as a control, only ideology as a control, and both ideology and partisan strength as a control. No significant differences were found in the results.

These findings suggest that gun-owning Trump voters are not unique compared to the rest of the population on any democratic measures. While support for Donald

Table 7 Interaction between gun owners and republicans on measures of support for free press

Variables	Restrict journalist access N = 4832	Media check on government N = 4830	Trust in media N = 4834
Gun owning republicans	- 0.062 (0.043)	- 0.084 (0.072)	- 0.126* (0.06)
Gun owner	0.035 (0.032)	0.079 (0.053)	- 0.019 (0.044)
Republican	- 0.256*** (0.034)	- 0.769*** (0.057)	- 0.857*** (0.047)
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.001)
White	0.089*** (0.025)	0.092* (0.042)	- 0.012*** (0.034)
Women	- 0.082*** (0.020)	- 0.039 (0.034)	- 0.115*** (0.028)
Education	0.074*** (0.009)	0.062*** (0.015)	0.036*** (0.012)
Evangelical	- 0.044 ^o (0.027)	- 0.015 (0.045)	- 0.035 (0.037)
Ideology	- 0.091*** (0.009)	- 0.217*** (0.015)	- 0.195*** (0.013)
Partisan strength	- 0.011 (0.010)	0.057*** (0.017)	0.134*** (0.014)
Rural	- 0.083*** (0.022)	- 0.103** (0.036)	- 0.054 ^o (0.03)
South	0.002 (0.021)	- 0.04 (0.036)	0.023 (0.029)
Constant	2.731*** (0.055)	4.01*** (0.092)	2.854*** (0.076)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

Trump leads gun owners towards less democratic sentiments than other gun owners, that un-democraticness seems to be largely drowned out when compared to the population as a whole. This is a positive discovery for American democracy, suggesting that while a subset of gun owners may be inclined to support democratic backsliding, they are a fairly small part of the greater population.

However, it also of concern that when the issue of gun rights is made salient by the Republican Party and/or its candidates—a group which has engaged in practices

Table 8 Interaction between gun owners and trump voters on measures of support for democracy

Variables	Checks and balances N= 3961	Consequences for Misconduct N= 3967	Agree on facts N= 3956	Strong president N= 3957	Investigate rivals N= 4818
Gun owning trump voters	- 0.071 (0.051)	0.026 (0.042)	0.022 (0.06)	- 0.019 (0.045)	- 0.072 ^o (0.041)
Gun owner	0.054 (0.036)	0.001 (0.030)	0.027 (0.043)	0.037 (0.032)	0.024 (0.03)
Trump voter	- 0.146*** (0.047)	- 0.238*** (0.039)	- 0.212*** (0.055)	- 0.285*** (0.041)	- 0.449*** (0.038)
Age	0.003*** (0.007)	0.003*** (0.006)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
White	0.155*** (0.030)	0.131*** (0.025)	0.086* (0.036)	0.128*** (0.027)	0.082*** (0.025)
Women	- 0.091*** (0.024)	0.017 (0.02)	- 0.101*** (0.027)	0.013 (0.021)	0.012 (0.02)
Education	0.112*** (0.010)	0.046*** (0.009)	0.072*** (0.012)	0.076*** (0.009)	0.034*** (0.009)
Party ID	- 0.021* (0.01)	- 0.001 (0.008)	- 0.003 (0.012)	- 0.017* (0.009)	- 0.03*** (0.008)
Evangelical	0.053 ^o (0.032)	- 0.016 (0.026)	0.071* (0.037)	- 0.023 (0.028)	- 0.071** (0.026)
Ideology	0.001 (0.012)	- 0.004 (0.01)	- 0.039** (0.014)	- 0.0004 (0.010)	- 0.019* (0.01)
Partisan strength	- 0.006 (0.012)	0.017 ^o (0.010)	0.020 (0.015)	- 0.014 (0.011)	- 0.03*** (0.009)
Rural	- 0.046 ^o (0.026)	0.005 (0.021)	- 0.036 (0.030)	- 0.07*** (0.023)	- 0.051** (0.021)
South	- 0.027 (0.025)	- 0.017 (0.021)	0.024 (0.03)	- 0.007 (0.022)	- 0.037 ^o (0.021)
Constant	4.159*** (0.067)	4.349*** (0.055)	4.095*** (0.079)	2.416*** (0.06)	2.739*** (0.055)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

of questionable democratic nature in recent years¹¹—it could potentially activate owners' undemocratic sentiments in response. We cannot test this directly, but using an additional ANES variable on ease of access to firearms, we find that there does not seem to be a connection between support for gun rights among the gun owning

¹¹ In 2018 (the most recent year available), the V-Dem Institute labeled the Republican Party as high on the anti-pluralism index, giving the party a score of 0.719 on the scale from 0-1, with 1 being the highest possible score.

Table 9 Interaction between gun owners and trump voters on measures of support for free press

Variables	Restrict journalist access N = 3952	Media check on gov- ernment N = 3959	Trust in media N = 3964
Gun owning trump voters	− 0.069 (0.046)	0.062 (0.077)	− 0.044 (0.061)
Gun owner	0.042 (0.033)	0.034 (0.055)	− 0.005 (0.044)
Trump voters	− 0.361*** (0.043)	− 1.043*** (0.071)	− 0.867*** (0.057)
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.013*** (0.001)
White	0.135*** (0.028)	0.139*** (0.046)	− 0.020 (0.037)
Women	− 0.077*** (0.022)	− 0.009 (0.037)	− 0.120*** (0.029)
Education	0.054*** (0.009)	0.029* (0.016)	0.019 (0.013)
Party ID	− 0.031*** (0.009)	− 0.06*** (0.015)	− 0.118*** (0.012)
Evangelical	− 0.034 (0.029)	0.031 (0.048)	− 0.016 (0.039)
Ideology	− 0.048*** (0.011)	− 0.146*** (0.018)	− 0.109*** (0.014)
Partisan strength	− 0.03** (0.011)	0.014 (0.019)	0.077*** (0.015)
Rural	− 0.081*** (0.023)	− 0.048 (0.039)	0.009 (0.031)
South	0.022 (0.023)	− 0.034 (0.038)	0.037 (0.031)
Constant	2.797*** (0.061)	4.164*** (0.102)	2.952*** (0.081)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

sample and anti-democratic sentiments. Tables 10 and 11 examine the democratic sentiments of gun owners that favor gun rights (i.e. those that want to make it easier to access firearms) and we find that there is no significant relationship. Gun owners who support stronger gun rights are not more or less democratic than the rest of the population, suggesting that strong support for gun rights—like that found in the NRA and Republican Party—does not necessarily lead gun owners to support undemocratic actions. In fact, gun owners (independent from the interaction with gun rights) remain more likely to support more than half of our democracy measures. On

Table 10 Interaction between gun owners and gun rights on measures of support for democracy

Variables	Checks and balances N=2793	Consequences for misconduct N=2795	Agree on facts N=2788	Strong president N=2791	Investigate rivals N=2790
Gun owners × gun rights	0.048 (0.094)	0.070 (0.08)	- 0.037 (0.111)	0.038 (0.078)	0.004 (0.067)
Gun owners	0.067* (0.037)	0.053 ^o (0.031)	0.083* (0.043)	0.057* (0.030)	0.009 (0.026)
Gun rights	- 0.112 ^o (0.068)	- 0.089 ^o (0.058)	- 0.040 (0.080)	- 0.211*** (0.056)	- 0.419*** (0.049)
Age	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.002 ^o (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
White	0.215*** (0.035)	0.153*** (0.029)	0.084* (0.041)	0.155*** (0.029)	0.041 ^o (0.025)
Women	- 0.108*** (0.03)	0.028 (0.025)	- 0.132*** (0.035)	- 0.013 (0.025)	- 0.044 (0.021)
Education	0.120*** (0.013)	0.069*** (0.011)	0.103*** (0.015)	0.072*** (0.010)	0.037*** (0.009)
Party ID	- 0.05*** (0.010)	- 0.042*** (0.009)	- 0.028** (0.012)	- 0.061*** (0.008)	- 0.07*** (0.007)
Evangelical	- 0.062 (0.043)	- 0.097** (0.036)	0.028 (0.050)	- 0.030 (0.035)	- 0.075** (0.031)
Ideology	- 0.035** (0.136)	- 0.017 (0.012)	- 0.073*** (0.016)	- 0.02 ^o (0.011)	- 0.041*** (0.01)
Partisan strength	- 0.013 (0.015)	0.004 (0.013)	0.008 (0.018)	- 0.043*** (0.012)	- 0.05*** (0.011)
Rural	- 0.068* (0.032)	- 0.03 (0.027)	- 0.056 (0.038)	- 0.059* (0.026)	- 0.026 (0.023)
South	- 0.031 (0.031)	- 0.048 (0.026)	0.008 (0.037)	0.007 (0.026)	- 0.001 (0.022)
Constant	4.229*** (0.077)	4.347*** (0.065)	4.156*** (0.090)	2.550*** (0.063)	2.955*** (0.055)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

investigating rivals and both measures of a free press, gun owners are not significant, so they do not differ from the non-owning population. Whereas, on five of the seven measures, supporters of stronger gun rights (regardless of ownership) are less likely to support the democratic norm. It seems, then, that gun rights and gun ownership are not mutually exclusive in their effect on support for democratic norms. We cannot make causal statements from these findings, but they do pose questions about gun owners' potential for undemocratic sentiments if they may perceive gun rights as being under threat. Further research along this avenue is warranted.

Table 11 Interaction between gun owners and gun rights on measures of support for free press

Variables	Restrict Journalist access N = 2788	Media check on government N = 2794
Gun owners × gun rights	− 0.034 (0.079)	0.193 (0.131)
Gun owners	0.004 (0.031)	0.013 (0.051)
Gun rights	− 0.08 (0.057)	− 0.42*** (0.095)
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
White	0.112*** (0.029)	0.074 (0.048)
Women	− 0.085*** (0.025)	− 0.091* (0.041)
Education	0.065*** (0.011)	0.056*** (0.017)
Party ID	− 0.072*** (0.008)	− 0.161*** (0.014)
Evangelical	− 0.086* (0.036)	− 0.189*** (0.06)
Ideology	− 0.066*** (0.011)	− 0.179*** (0.019)
Partisan strength	− 0.053*** (0.012)	− 0.07*** (0.021)
Rural	− 0.020 (0.027)	− 0.057 (0.045)
South	0.005 (0.026)	0.024 (0.043)
Constant	2.939*** (0.064)	4.639*** (0.107)

Data from the 2020 ANES. Estimates derived from OLS regression models. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

^o $p < 0.10$

Discussion & Conclusion

We believe these findings will surprise many. Our analysis contributes to the growing research on gun owners by showing that this group is not monolithic. Owners face a mix of drives and inclinations, like any other political group. Some gun owners may be more authoritarian—and perhaps even more forceful, and less civil—while others may go about their advocacy in ways that are fully consistent with standard democratic norms. While gun owners as a subgroup of citizens may be

important to the durability of American democracy in some aspects, they are also a diverse group whose support for democracy may at times be undermined by other political factors. As Goodman (2022) highlights, recognizing and responding to democratic threats can be confusing and potentially conflicting for individuals who want to be both good partisans and good citizens. It seems as if some gun owners experienced this internal conflict in 2020, and political preference rather than democratic citizenship was more salient for some owners.

Our findings support Lacombe's (2021a, 2021b) argument that these negative impacts on democracy are magnified by the NRA's increased influence in the Republican Party during the Trump presidency. Akin to this finding, recent research by Wintemute et al. (2024) found "MAGA Republicans" are more likely to endorse political violence. Considering Wintemute et al.'s (2024) results and discourse around gun owners and the January 6th insurrection, we believe measuring gun owners' attitudes on measures of political violence would be a fruitful avenue for future research. We do not include these measures in this article because conceptions of democracy do not typically include measures of political violence (see Coppedge et al., 2011), most academic studies on support for democracy do not include political violence measures (e.g. Anderson et al., 2021; Bloom & Arikan, 2012; Claassen, 2020a, 2020b; Graham & Svobik, 2020; Magalhães, 2007; Svobik, 2019; Welzel, 2007). When studies have included measures of violence, it is typically violent crime, not political violence (e.g. Claassen & Magalhães, 2022).

The findings in this article make an important contribution to the political science literature on group behavior and attitudes. We find that neither popular narrative—that gun owners are a pillar of American democracy nor that gun owners are inherently anti-democratic—is supported. In most instances, gun owners and non-owners are not meaningfully different from each other in their democratic support. Gun owners, like other political identity groups, are not homogenous and with that diversity comes variance in attitudes towards important democratic norms. These results are consistent with previous work and highlight the limits of group influence in a world where citizens have multiple identities. As our results suggest, partisan cues that threaten a particular identity may be strong enough to change opinions. It is also possible these cues may encourage group members to act on such opinions. Future research should dig deeper into these nuances.

As gun owners become increasingly diverse, future studies like ours will allow scholars to better understand gun owners' varying preferences for how our democratic system should operate. Especially considering the ways in which citizens understand democracy can impact their political participation (see Canache, 2012; Oser & Hooghe, 2018). Those with high support for democracy are more likely to be active in politics, which in this case could mean that pro-democracy gun owners are those that are the most participatory of an already highly participatory group. However, as more diverse citizens purchase firearms, it could also impact the group's levels of political participation. Individuals who have conflicting pressures—coming from competing identities such as partisanship, religion, class, and social status—vote at lower rates, delay making decisions about which candidates to support, and are generally less politically involved (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell

et al., 1960), and are less knowledgeable (Hutchings, 2001) relative to those without such cross pressures.

Advanced democracies generally do not experience rapid democratic backsliding, instead they undergo a gradual erosion of democracy through small, layered changes that add up over time (Goodman, 2022). Our findings highlight the variance within political groups that can have important implications for this reality. Multifaceted groups can contain subgroups that support democracy and those that are more inclined toward authoritarianism. Gun owners are a prime example of the tensions that can exist within political groups. Researchers should remain cognisant of these assorted attitudes within broader groups as they can contribute to the spread of anti-democratic sentiments and may expedite this gradual erosion. Though simultaneously, gun owners' slight inclination towards pro-democracy attitudes and high levels of political participation may have the potential to help brace American liberal democracy through the current period of erosion—lending credence to the popular idea that “guns are a ‘small d’ democratic weapon”.¹²

This article further supports the need for researchers to take a normality approach to studying gun owners. Gun owners are extraordinarily ordinary within the sphere of political groups. Gun owners, like other political identity groups, are diverse in their values, ambitions, and advocacy practices, and are remarkably similar to non-owners in their democratic attitudes.

Data Replication

Data for replication purposes are stored on Harvard's Dataverse. ANES: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DDOIOU>. GSS: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/L3B79K>.

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Declarations

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¹² Statement made by historian Joanne Freeman live on CNN on July 14, 2024.

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