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Trends In Public Opinion On US Gun Laws: Majorities Of Gun Owners And Non–Gun Owners Support A Range Of Measures

ABSTRACT Gun policy is a prominent topic of debate in the 2020 US election cycle. Tracking evolving public attitudes about gun policy is critical in this context. Using data from the National Survey of Gun Policy fielded in 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019 by the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, we examined trends in support for more than two dozen gun policies over time by gun ownership status and political party affiliation, and across states. Most policies that we considered had majority support across the study period. We identified increases in public support over time for licensing and universal background checks of handgun purchasers, stronger regulation of gun dealers, and extreme risk protection orders. Gun owners and non–gun owners were highly supportive of requiring tests to demonstrate safe handling before carrying a concealed weapon, but there were large differences in support for other concealed carry policies by gun ownership status. A new item included in the 2019 survey showed that 84 percent of Americans supported requiring first-time gun purchasers to take a safety course. While gun policy continues to be characterized as highly polemical, large majorities of both gun owners and non–gun owners strongly support a range of measures to strengthen US gun laws.

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Discourse on gun policy issues is playing a significant role in the 2020 US election cycle following the August 2019 mass shootings in El Paso and Odessa, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio. In the years since the December 2012 mass shooting tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut, gun policy issues have been increasingly prominent in election politics. A research study conducted by the Wesleyan Media Project found increased attention to gun issues in election-related political advertising, with references to guns appearing in about 1 percent of political ads that aired in 2012 and in over 6 percent in 2016.[1] While 70 percent of the gun-related political ads

that aired in the 2016 election cycle were in favor of gun rights, there has been speculation about whether advocacy following the February 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida, will precipitate a shift toward more advocacy of gun violence prevention in the 2020 election cycle.[2] The last national election in 2018 witnessed an increased willingness on the part of both incumbents and challengers to run on gun violence reduction stances, including using "F" ratings from the National Rifle Association as part of their reelection strategies.[3]

Gun violence prevention is increasingly being recognized as a critical health issue by the American Medical Association,[4] American College of

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Physicians,[5] American Nurses Association,[6] and others. There has been a flurry of gun policy changes at the state level over the past few years. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia now have laws concerning extreme risk protection orders, fifteen of which have been enacted since 2016. These laws create a civil restraining order process in which family members and law enforcement officers can petition a court to have guns temporarily removed from a person who exhibits dangerous behavior. The orders also temporarily prohibit the people subject to them from purchasing new guns.

Furthermore, the shooting in Parkland, Florida, that killed seventeen students and staff members and injured seventeen others prompted the passage of a state law that raised the minimum age for buying rifles in the state from eighteen to twenty-one, established a three-day waiting period for all gun purchases, and banned bump stocks (devices that allow semiautomatic weapons to be fired rapidly).

On the other hand, there has also been movement at the state level to deregulate civilian gun carrying. In early 2019 three states (Kentucky, Oklahoma, and South Dakota) passed laws that allow civilians to carry concealed handguns in public with no training or application process.

Public opinion data on gun policies at the national and regional levels can provide a road map for policy makers attempting to navigate this contentious and dynamic gun policy environment. In this study we compared public support over time (in 2015 and 2019) for eighteen gun-related policies, including purchaser licensing and universal background check laws, policies that prohibit certain people from purchasing or possessing guns, bans on assault weapons and large-capacity magazines, stronger regulation of gun dealers, temporary firearm removal policies, safe storage laws, mandatory minimum sentencing for a person who knowingly sells a gun to someone legally prohibited from having one, and gun restoration laws that allow people who had lost the right to have a gun because of involuntary commitment for mental illness to have that right restored if they are deemed not to be dangerous.

In addition, we compared gun owners and non–gun owners in terms of their support in 2019 for five concealed carry measures and five other policies that were not included in our prior surveys (the measures and other policies are listed below). Finally, pooling survey data collected in 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019, we examined variations across states in public attitudes about four gun policies: an assault weapons ban, a universal background check law, purchaser licensing, and safe gun storage laws.

Study Data And Methods

DATA SOURCE Our data came from four waves of the National Survey of Gun Policy of the Center for Gun Policy and Research, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, that were administered during the month of January in 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019. We fielded the surveys using large, national online panels from the survey research firm GfK in 2013 and 2015 and from NORC AmeriSpeak in 2017 and 2019. Both panels are probability based and are designed to be nationally representative of the US adult population. The GfK panel is sourced from address-based sampling and random-digit dialing, and the sample covers approximately 95 percent of US households. NORC's AmeriSpeak Panel is sourced from NORC's area probability sample (the NORC National Frame) and address-based sample, and the panel covers 97 percent of US households. Both panels provide sample coverage for households with listed and unlisted phone numbers, as well as those with cell phones only. Interviews using the GfK sample were administered on the web, and interviews using the AmeriSpeak sample were administered online and by phone. Panel participants receive a small number of surveys each month, including the National Survey of Gun Policy, and are encouraged to participate via cash awards and other incentives.

The four waves of the National Survey of Gun Policy were cross-sectional, and respondents were ages eighteen and older. Each survey had a high completion rate (69 percent in 2013, 70 percent in 2015, 75 percent in 2017, and 80 percent in 2019). Sample sizes were 2,703 in 2013, 1,326 in 2015, 2,124 in 2017, and 1,680 in 2019. For analyses that included the pooled sample, the sample size was 7,833. To generate estimates for each survey wave that were representative of the US population, we used survey weights based on data extracted from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey to adjust the sample for known selection deviations and survey nonresponse.

For all surveys, we oversampled gun owners. Gun ownership status was defined using two identically worded screening questions across all four survey waves: "Do you happen to have in your home or garage any guns or revolvers?" and "Do any of these guns personally belong to you?" A gun owner was defined as a respondent who was the personal owner of at least one firearm. Additionally, we collected detailed information about respondents' characteristics, including sex, age, education, income, race/ethnicity, household size, marital status, housing type and ownership, employment status, state of residence, and political party affiliation. Online ap-

These data suggest high levels of support for safety training among gun owners and non–gun owners alike.

pendix A compares survey weighted and unweighted sociodemographic characteristics and the political party affiliation of the study sample in 2019 to national samples using data from the Current Population Survey and American National Election Studies.[7] Comparisons with prior-year surveys are detailed elsewhere.[8–10]

METHODS We compared public support for eighteen gun policies in 2019 and 2015. We chose to compare 2019 to 2015 rather than 2013 because a number of new gun policies were added in the 2015 survey wave. We examined gun policies in six categories: purchaser licensing and background check policies, policies prohibiting certain people from purchasing or owning guns, policies about assault weapons and large-capacity magazines, policies regulating licensed gun dealers, temporary firearm removal policies for high-risk people, and other policies. We also compared support by gun ownership status and political party affiliation for all policies. Next, we compared support for five concealed carry policies (questions about four of the five policies were asked for the first time in 2019) between gun owners and nonowners and by political party affiliation in 2019. The policies included those requiring safety training for people with a permit to carry a concealed firearm in public, requiring a state to recognize a concealed carry permit from another state, allowing the carrying of a concealed firearm onto a college or university campus, allowing the carrying of a concealed firearm onto the grounds of a school for students in kindergarten through grade twelve, and allowing the carrying of a concealed firearm in public without a license.

Additionally, we compared support among gun owners and nonowners and by political party affiliation for five other policies asked about for the first time in 2019, which included requiring safety training for first-time gun purchasers; prohibiting a person convicted of a violent crime with a maximum penalty of one year from carry-

ing a gun in public; prohibiting making or possessing a gun without a serial number (for example, guns made with a 3D printer), which renders it untraceable; requiring the owner of a semi-automatic rifle to be at least age twenty-one; and "stand your ground" laws that allow a person with a gun who feels threatened by another person to shoot or kill that person even if the gun owner could safely retreat.

To examine variation in gun policy support across states, we chose four policies that were included in all four survey waves: assault weapons ban, universal background check, purchaser licensing, and safe gun storage policies. We pooled the four waves of survey data and created maps that displayed public support for each of these four policies by state during 2013–19. Levels of support were measured categorically: 0–24 percent, 25–49 percent, 50–74 percent, or 75–100 percent. We suppressed eleven states—Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wyoming—with insufficient sample sizes, defined as fewer than fifty respondents. Each of the four policies differed in overall public support by no more than 5–7 percentage points over the four survey waves. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to collapse the data across years.

We used identical question wording for items asked in multiple survey waves. We used Pearson's chi-square test to assess differences in support over time between gun owners and non–gun owners and by political party affiliation. Each of the four surveys was approved as exempt by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board.

LIMITATIONS This study should be considered in the context of certain limitations. First, while online panels offer an alternative to increasingly challenging telephone surveys, their strengths and weaknesses should be considered with care. Importantly, the survey research panels used in this study employed probability-based recruitment that is consistent with well-established standards.[11] We compared respondents' sociodemographic characteristics and political party affiliations (both weighted and unweighted) with national rates to confirm their representativeness of the US adult population, as shown in appendix A.[7] Each of the surveys was cross-sectional, so we were not following the same respondents over time.

Second, since gun policies are often considered within specific jurisdictions, we examined opinions on four policies at the state level. However, since survey weights were developed to allow the presentation of nationally representative data, results at the state level might not be rep-

resentative of each individual state. Moving forward, it will be important to collect data with larger state-specific sample sizes and state-specific weights to more precisely gauge public opinion on a broad range of gun policy issues at a more granular level. Such data would offer greater insights into the feasibility of future action on gun policy at the state level.

Finally, it was beyond the scope of this study to identify the factors that have driven changes in public support over time or across geographic regions or population subgroups.

Study Results

SUPPORT FOR EIGHTEEN GUN POLICIES IN 2015 AND 2019 Exhibit 1 indicates that public opinion on eighteen different gun policies shifted rela-

tively little from 2015 to 2019, and the changes observed were in the direction of greater support for gun violence prevention. (Appendix B presents the levels of support for all policies.)[7] For example, there was a 5-percentage-point increase in support for requiring purchaser licensing (from 72 percent to 77 percent), a 5-percentage-point increase for safe gun storage laws (from 69 percent to 74 percent), and a 4-percentage-point increase for universal background check laws (from 84 percent to 88 percent). Public support also increased for the two key elements of extreme risk protection order policies: from 71 percent to 76 percent for authorizing law enforcement officers to temporarily remove guns from people who had been determined to pose an immediate threat to themselves or others, and from 72 percent to 80 percent for

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EXHIBIT 1

Percent of respondents who supported 18 different gun policies in 2015 and 2019
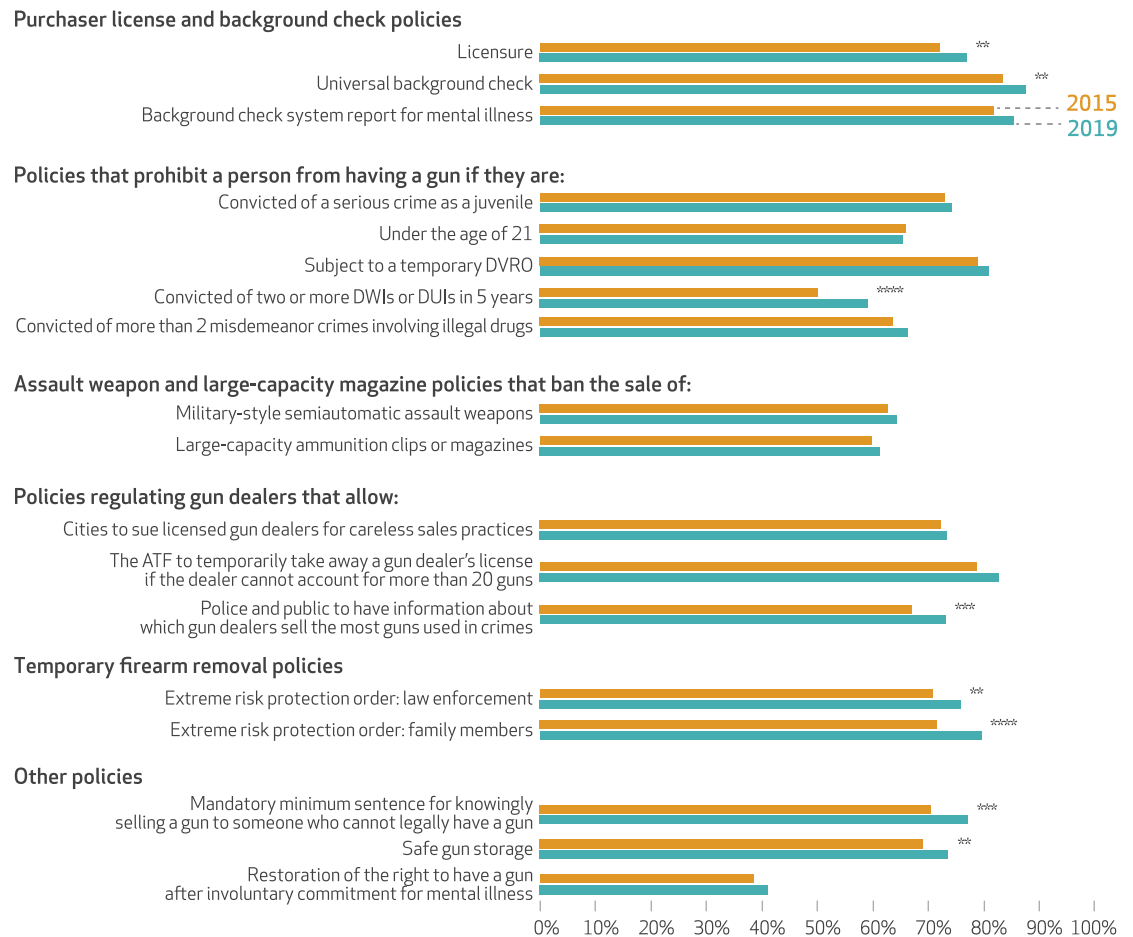
SOURCE Authors' analysis of data for 2015 and 2019 from the National Survey of Gun Policy of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research. **NOTES** "Background check system report for mental illness" refers to checking whether people have been involuntarily committed for mental illness or declared mentally incompetent. "Extreme risk protection order" policies refer to whether law enforcement officers or family members can petition a court to have guns temporarily removed from a person who exhibits dangerous behavior. DVRO is domestic violence restraining order. DWI is driving while intoxicated. DUI is driving under the influence. ATF is Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01 ****p < 0.001

allowing family members to ask a court to temporarily remove guns from a relative in this circumstance. For fourteen of the eighteen policies, Democrats reported significantly higher levels of support than Independents or Republicans did, but in all cases except one (an assault weapons ban), majorities of both Republicans and Independents supported all policies. (Appendix C presents support levels by gun ownership status and political party affiliation in 2019.)[7]

SUPPORT FOR CONCEALED CARRY POLICIES BY GUN OWNERSHIP IN 2019 The highest support levels and smallest support gaps by gun ownership status were for safety requirements (exhibit 2). Overall, 81 percent of respondents supported requiring a person who has applied for a license to carry a concealed gun in public to pass a safety test, with a 10-percentage-point support gap between non–gun owners (83 percent) and gun owners (73 percent). (Appendix D presents specific support levels for these policies.)[7]

There was much lower overall support for the other four concealed carry policies that we examined, and wider support gaps by gun ownership status. Forty-nine percent of respondents supported requiring a state to recognize a concealed carry permit from another state, even if that other state's permitting standards were lower, but non–gun owners and gun owners differed substantially in their support for this policy (43 percent versus 64 percent). Only 36 percent of respondents overall supported allowing a person
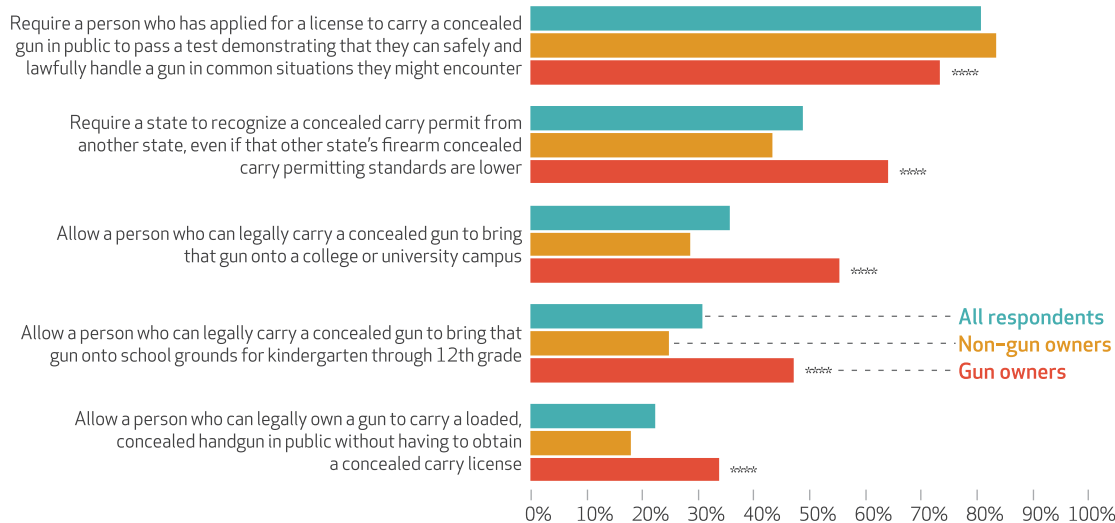
to carry a concealed gun onto a college or university campus, and 31 percent supported allowing a concealed gun onto the grounds of a school educating children from kindergarten through grade twelve. Both of these policies also had large support gaps by gun ownership: 29 percent of non–gun owners versus 55 percent of gun owners in the first case, and 25 percent of non–gun owners versus 47 percent of gun owners in the second. Only 22 percent of respondents supported allowing the concealed carrying of firearms in public without a license. Again, support for this policy differed by gun ownership status, with 18 percent of non–gun owners and 34 percent of gun owners in favor. (Differences for concealed carry policies by political party affiliation are shown in appendix D.)[7]

SUPPORT FOR OTHER GUN POLICIES BY GUN OWNERSHIP IN 2019 Eighty-four percent of all respondents and 74 percent of gun owners supported requiring first-time gun owners to take a course on safe handling and storage before buying a gun (exhibit 3). Seventy-eight percent of respondents overall and 73 percent of gun owners supported prohibiting a person convicted of a violent crime from carrying a gun in public. Seventy-five percent of all respondents and 69 percent of gun owners supported prohibiting a person from making or possessing an untraceable gun without a serial number, such as a gun made with a 3D printer. Seventy-three percent of all respondents and 61 percent of gun owners supported requiring an owner of a semiautomat-

EXHIBIT 2

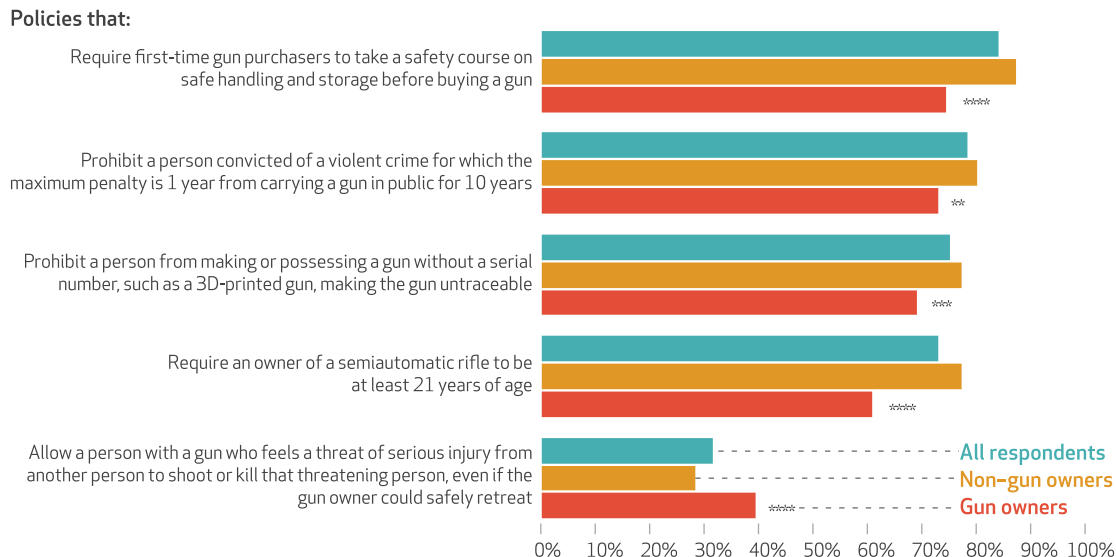Percent of respondents who supported concealed carry policies, by gun ownership status, 2019

Policies that:

- Require a person who has applied for a license to carry a concealed gun in public to pass a test demonstrating that they can safely and lawfully handle a gun in common situations they might encounter ****
- Require a state to recognize a concealed carry permit from another state, even if that other state's firearm concealed carry permitting standards are lower ****
- Allow a person who can legally carry a concealed gun to bring that gun onto a college or university campus ****
- Allow a person who can legally carry a concealed gun to bring that gun onto school grounds for kindergarten through 12th grade ****
- Allow a person who can legally own a gun to carry a loaded, concealed handgun in public without having to obtain a concealed carry license ****

All respondents / Non–gun owners / Gun owners

SOURCE Authors' analysis of data for 2019 from the National Survey of Gun Policy of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research. ****$p < 0.001$

EXHIBIT 3

Percent of respondents who supported policies on gun safety training, prohibitions on gun ownership among young people or those convicted of violent crimes or on owning untraceable guns, and 'stand your ground' policies, by gun ownership status, 2019

Policies that:

Require first-time gun purchasers to take a safety course on safe handling and storage before buying a gun ****

Prohibit a person convicted of a violent crime for which the maximum penalty is 1 year from carrying a gun in public for 10 years **

Prohibit a person from making or possessing a gun without a serial number, such as a 3D-printed gun, making the gun untraceable ***

Require an owner of a semiautomatic rifle to be at least 21 years of age ****

Allow a person with a gun who feels a threat of serious injury from another person to shoot or kill that threatening person, even if the gun owner could safely retreat ****

All respondents
Non–gun owners
Gun owners

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

SOURCE Authors' analysis of data for 2019 from the National Survey of Gun Policy of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research. **NOTE** The last policy listed is a "stand your ground" policy. **$p < 0.05$ ***$p < 0.01$ ****$p < 0.001$

ic rifle to be at least age twenty-one. Only 31 percent of respondents overall (and 40 percent of gun owners and 28 percent of non–gun owners) supported a "stand your ground" policy that allowed a person with a gun who feels a threat of serious injury from another person to shoot or kill that person, even if the gun owner could safely retreat. (Differences for these other policies by gun ownership status and political party affiliation are shown in appendix E.)[7]

GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN SUPPORT FOR GUN POLICIES IN 2013–19 We examined support for four gun policies across thirty-nine states in the period 2013–19: assault weapons ban, universal background check, purchaser licensing, and safe gun storage laws. (For maps depicting support levels by state, see appendix F.)[7] For thirty-six of these states, 50–74 percent of the public supported an assault weapons ban. Support was 75–100 percent in New Jersey and New York and less than 50 percent in Idaho. In all thirty-nine states, support for universal background check laws was 75–100 percent. Requiring a person to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before buying a gun had 75–100 percent support in California and twenty-two states along the eastern seaboard or in the Midwest and 50–74 percent in sixteen states. Support for the safe gun storage policy, which required that a person lock up the guns in the home when they were not in use, was 50–74 percent in most states, with higher levels in California, Connecticut, Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Discussion

In this article we provide a snapshot of national support for gun policies among the American public in 2019. We compared support levels over time, among gun owners and non–gun owners, by political party affiliation, and across different regions of the country. These data provide updated information on public attitudes about gun policy following high-profile mass shooting events—including the 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida—and support for policies not examined in prior survey research.

A number of important themes emerge when these results are taken together. First, these data suggest high levels of support for safety training among gun owners and non–gun owners alike. Large majorities supported requiring first-time gun purchasers to pass a safety course. In addition, both groups strongly supported testing to demonstrate knowledge of safe and lawful handling in the context of concealed carry laws. Currently, every state allows for civilian concealed gun carrying, but there is significant variation in training requirements. Thirty-five states require people to apply for concealed carry permits. Twenty-nine of these states re-

In 2019 there was a higher level of public support for allowing law enforcement to access data on guns used in crimes.

quire applicants to undergo safety training, but only sixteen require applicants to actually fire a gun during that training. Fifteen states do not require permits, meaning that there is no application or screening process and no training requirements. No state requires people carrying concealed handguns to first demonstrate safe and lawful use and decision-making capacity analogous to licensing for drivers of motor vehicles. This is in direct contrast to the broad public support we found for safety training and demonstration of ability among people carrying concealed guns in public.

Second, as states have moved to pass extreme risk protection order laws over the past few years, public support for these policies has increased. As noted above, seventeen states and the District of Columbia have enacted extreme risk protection order laws. Increases in public support may due to a growing recognition that this type of law creates a mechanism for early intervention in scenarios where a person is behaving dangerously but does not meet any other criteria (such as having a felony conviction) that would prohibit them from having a gun. In addition, the application of extreme risk protection order laws to suicide prevention may contribute to growing public support: The limited available evidence suggests that the majority of these orders are issued in response to concern about self-harm and that laws concerning them are associated with reductions in firearm suicide rates.[12–14] Finally, broad and increasing public support suggests that initial fears expressed by some gun rights advocates that extreme risk protection orders would be used inappropriately for widespread firearm removal have not been realized.

Third, results indicate increasing support for gun dealer accountability and data access. In particular, relative to 2015, in 2019 there was a higher level of public support for allowing law enforcement to access data on guns used in crimes. This may suggest an increasing aware-

ness of the importance of using data to reduce gun diversion and enhance information sharing across agencies to increase public safety. Additionally, access to data on the sources of guns used in crimes is key to understanding the impacts of policies on the diversion of guns to criminals.

Fourth, the most notable area where there were sizable gaps in support between gun owners and non–gun owners (and by political party affiliation) was in the context of policies about concealed carry unrelated to safety training. Our results regarding carrying guns in public are especially relevant for a pending US Supreme Court case. In January 2019 the court agreed to hear its first case in almost ten years to squarely address the Second Amendment to the US Constitution. In 2008 and 2010 the court held that the Second Amendment grants people the right to own handguns in their homes, striking down laws that essentially banned these weapons.[15,16] Left undecided, however, was whether this right extends to carrying guns in public. The new case, *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. New York*, involves a New York City law that forbade, with very limited exceptions, people with only a "premises license" from transporting their firearms outside their residence.[17] Oral arguments in the case are likely to be heard in the fall of 2019. New York City has changed the relevant law, but it is not clear whether this will make the case moot in the view of the Supreme Court. Public opinion, while not directly affecting the legal issues in the case, may nevertheless indirectly influence the Court.[18]

Our analysis of gun policy support by state showed fairly uniform attitudes across the US about universal background check and assault weapons ban policies. However, we observed greater variation in support for policies requiring people to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before purchasing firearms and policies requiring gun owners to safely store their guns when not in use to prevent access by youth. While support for universal background check policies was universally high across states, support for an assault weapons ban was somewhat lower—less than 75 percent—in almost all states. This finding suggests that there is somewhat less appetite among the US public for policies that ban certain types of firearms.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide an updated snapshot of the American public's views on gun policy in 2019. Despite vigorous ongoing policy discourse about guns, our findings indicate that large majorities of both gun owners and non–

gun owners strongly support a range of measures to strengthen US gun laws.

Given the attention being paid to gun issues at the federal, state, and local levels, it will be important to continue to track trends in public opinion on support for gun rights and gun violence reduction measures leading up to the 2020 election and beyond. ∎

NOTES

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