

DEBATING GUN CONTROL IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES:

Divergent Policy Frames and Political Cultures

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The weakness of the antigun lobby in the United States is attributed to the “collective action problem” of trying to mobilize “free riders” behind a public purpose. But the Coalition for Gun Control emerged in Canada to successfully lobby for the Firearms Act of 1995. If the “collective action problem” is not limited to the United States, then are its effects “mediated” by political culture? To address this research question, we content analyze (1) media coverage, (2) party platforms, (3) presidential, and (4) ministerial rhetoric. Three frames represent “restrictive” gun policies that ban or regulate firearms, “punitive” gun policies that penalize the person for the unlawful use of firearms, or “lenient” gun policies that encourage gun ownership and gun rights. Marked differences in framing the gun debate help explain why an antigun coalition emerged in Canada but not the United States.

Keywords: Gun Control, Firearms Policy, Regulation Policy, Framing, Political Culture, the United States, Canada, Collective Action Problem, Free Riding, Interest Groups, Content Analysis, Gun Restrictions, National Rifle Association, NRA.

Debatiendo el control de armas en Canadá y los Estados Unidos:

Marcos políticos divergentes y culturas políticas

La debilidad del lobby anti-armas en los Estados Unidos se atribuye al “problema de la acción colectiva” de tratar de movilizar a los “usuarios libres” detrás de un propósito público. Pero la Coalición para el Control de Armas surgió en Canadá para presionar con éxito la Ley de Armas de Fuego de 1995. Si el “problema de la acción colectiva” no se limita a los Estados Unidos, ¿están sus efectos “mediados” por la cultura política? Para abordar esta pregunta de investigación, analizamos (1) la cobertura de los medios de comunicación, (2) las plataformas de los partidos, (3) la retórica presidencial y (4) la retórica ministerial. Tres marcos representan políticas de armas “restrictivas” que prohíben o regulan las armas de fuego, políticas de armas “punitivas” que penalizan a la persona por el uso ilegal de armas de fuego, o políticas de armas “indulgentes” que fomentan la propiedad y los derechos de las armas. Las marcadas diferencias en el marco del debate sobre las armas ayudan a explicar por qué surgió una coalición anti-armas en Canadá pero no en Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: control de armas, política de armas de fuego, América del Norte, política de regulación, indulgente, punitiva, enmarcar; cultura política; Estados Unidos; Canadá.

加拿大和美国的枪支管制辩论：不同的政策框架和政治文化

美国反枪支游说运动的失败归因于“集体行动问题”，即试图在公共目的背后动员“搭便车者”。但是加拿大的枪支管制联盟为1995年成立枪支法案而进行的游说却获得了成功。如果“集体行动问题”不局限于美国，那么其影响是否由政治文化“调解”？针对这一研究问题，笔者分析了(1) 媒体报道，(2) 政党平台，(3) 总统致辞和(4) 部长发言。三个框架代表禁止或管制枪支的“限制性”枪支政策、惩罚非法使用枪支的“惩罚性”枪支政策或鼓励拥有枪支和枪支权利的“宽容性”枪支政策。枪支辩论框架上的显著差异有助于解释为什么反枪支联盟出现在加拿大，而不是美国。

关键词：枪支管制；枪支政策，北美，管制政策，宽容，惩戒，框架；政治文化；美国；加拿大

The weakness of the antigun lobby relative to the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the United States is attributed to the “collective action problem” of trying to mobilize ordinary Americans behind a

public purpose. That argument belies the importance of political culture as a mediating condition in fostering or frustrating collective action, because antigun lobbies have emerged in Europe and, most importantly for our purposes, the Coalition for Gun Control mobilized activists in Canada to lobby for enactment of the Firearms Act of 1995. A more complete explanation of why an effective antigun mobilization surfaced in Canada but not in the United States needs to consider the political opportunity structure, in which political culture is a component often ignored by institutionalists. The fundamentally unlike political cultures of the United States and Canada are manifested in the divergent frames employed in this public policy debate by the mass media, the major political parties, and the political executives with respect to the relative salience of gun control or gun rights.

Collective Action and Political Culture

Originally, the concept of “political opportunity structure” assessed how the political institutions of city government serve to open or block access by protest groups (Eisinger 1973). It was subsequently embraced by sociologists to evaluate the impact of social movements seeking policy change (see, for example, Tarrow 2011). While institutional attributes are still most important, some sociologists have expanded the concept to include culture (Borland 2004). As Gamson and Meyer (1996, 279) argue, “[o]ppportunity has a strong cultural component and we miss something important when we limit our attention to variance in political institutions and the relationships among political actors.” Their cultural components include “national mood,” “world views,” “myths and narratives,” and “media frames” among others (Gamson and Meyer 1996, 281).

Many observers argue that the political prowess and resources of the NRA are more than a match for U.S. antigun advocates. A number of authors (Melzer 2009; Patrick 2002; Spitzer 2015; Sugarmann 1992, 121) call that interest group rivalry “asymmetrical,” but Goss (2006) argues that the weakness of the antigun lobby is more fundamental than a poor strategy or bad tactics. It is a manifestation of the “collective action problem” that vexes any voluntary organization whose purpose is to advance the public interest. The collective action problem means that most individuals who do not directly and materially benefit from some “collective good” are “free riders” who will have no incentive to become involved in that political struggle. Gun control illustrates a collective good, where the goal is to reduce gun violence, prevent firearms accidents, and increase public safety, whereas gun rights are a tangible benefit for those

individuals who own, use, or personally value ready access to firearms. This collective action problem is grounded in “rational choice theory” popularized by economist Mancur Olson (1965).

Theoretical objections have been raised against Olson’s economic determinism (Udén 1993), and others have explained how collective action emerges despite the absence of economic self-interest. Clark and Wilson (1961) argued that organizations employ not only material but also solidary and purposive incentives to induce people to work for common goals, but it was in 1974 when James Q. Wilson ([1974] 1995, vii) provided a full-throated justification for mobilizing on behalf of collective goods, as he recalled,

The dramatic increase in the membership of civil rights, environmental, civil liberties, political reform, and feminist organizations that occurred in the 1970s could not be explained entirely or even largely by the ability of such groups to exert social pressure or supply selective benefits, though these inducements no doubt played a role. To some extent, members were responding to purposive appeals.

An analysis of rampage shootings in Europe found three episodes in Dunblane (England), Winnenden (Germany), and Kauhajoki (Finland), where high levels of social mobilization helped bring about changes in the gun laws (Hurka 2017, 152–154). As Hurka (2017, 157) explains, “If societal actors manage to organize quickly, they may not directly affect political decisions, but they can at least keep the gun control issue on the political agenda and thereby increase the chances for policy change to occur.” Because the United States seems to be the outlier nation without an effective antigun movement or strong gun control laws, on *prima facie* grounds, the political culture of the United States must be fundamentally different than Europe or Canada. Hurka (2017, 13) also makes this point about American exceptionalism: “It seems relatively safe to say that the United States is the only country in the world in which more permissive gun laws are seriously debated as a viable response to gun violence.”

Gun Politics and Public Opinion in North America

A substantial body of research on public opinion once showed that Americans wanted stronger gun control laws (Erskine 1972, 455; Smith 1980, 300). In the early 2000s, Gallup Polls that compared public attitudes in both countries found not only that a larger majority in Canada (61 percent) than the United States (51 percent) wanted “more strict”

gun laws but that 63 percent of Canadians did not believe that the general public “should be allowed, by law, to own a gun” whereas 65 percent of Americans were opposed when asked whether there “should or should not be a law that would ban the possession of handguns, except by the police and other authorized persons” (Mazzuca 2002). These attitudes may be changing, as over the past quarter century, support for gun controls has dropped from being the majority viewpoint to well under 50 percent in the late 2000s who hold that opinion (Newman and Hartman 2017, 3). A recent review of the surveys led Wozniak (2017, 271) to conclude that “the American public still appears to be relatively closely divided over gun control proposals that would affect firearms ownership in one form or another.” Being closer in proximity to shooting sprees increases public support for gun controls, but that relationship does not negate the impact of “local culture, with pronounced but expected differences emerging between respondents in rural, conservative and gun-heavy areas and those residing in urban, liberal areas with few firearm stores” (Newman and Hartman 2017, 13). There are also partisan differences in public attitudes, as Newman and Hartman (2017, 7) explain,

Democrats support gun control policies, which they believe will limit access to dangerous firearms, and by extension, reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim of a mass public shooting. Republicans, on the other hand, prefer policies that allow law-abiding citizens to carry firearms (concealed or otherwise) for their own self-defense.

Until the first decade of the 21st century, the precedential U.S. Supreme Court case had been *United States v. Miller* (1939), which held that the right to bear arms was a “collective” right by the states to arm their militias not an individual right of self-defense. As Spitzer (2015, 39) points out, “So many lower federal court rulings’ unanimous acceptance of the militia view buttressed the conclusion that the 1939 *Miller* case did indeed embrace the militia view and that it was the accepted legal interpretation.” Virtually, a paradigm shift in constitutional law came when the high court re-interpreted the Second Amendment as guaranteeing a right to bear arms for self-defense. First applied to the District of Columbia, when its handgun ban was overturned in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), the U.S. Supreme Court proceeded to “incorporate” that standard to all states after a similar handgun ban in Chicago was nullified in the landmark case of *McDonald v. Chicago* (2010).

In Canada, a series of shooting sprees in October 1972 and May 1975 prompted a wave of gun laws that eventually culminated in the Firearms Act of 1995. As early as 1975, a Gallup Poll found that 83 percent of Canadians favored compulsory registration of all firearms (New York Times 1975). In the aftermath of those shooting sprees, Bill C-51 was enacted in 1977. It continued the three classes of firearms established in 1969 (restricted, nonrestricted, and prohibited), mandated a Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC) to purchase a firearm, required a background check, and banned automatic weapons unless they were already registered. However, no mass mobilization resulted from those shooting episodes. As Brown (2012, 204) observed, “there had been no powerful gun control advocacy group in the 1970s, meaning that hunting, shooting, and collectors’ organizations commanded the attention of the public unopposed.” That changed on December 6, 1989 when the Montréal Massacre was perpetrated by Marc Lépine at École Polytechnique.

After that event, says Brown (2012, 204), “For the first time, advocates of stronger regulations created a powerful advocacy group.” Especially significant was the fact that Lépine shot 28 people with his semi-automatic rifle but killed fourteen women after he allowed most men to escape unharmed. Lépine’s suicide note was a diatribe against feminists, and widely interpreted as an assault against women, so December 6 has been commemorated as the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women. An immediate effect was the founding of Canadians for Gun Control (CGC) by Heidi Rathjen and Wendy Cukier to advocate wide-ranging gun laws, and in April 1991, the CGC was organized when student activists merged with CGC. This alliance of gun control activism with feminism was unprecedented; according to Brown (2012, 239), “Not until the 1989 Montréal Massacre would women’s groups consistently connect gun control to the issue of women’s safety. The suggestion that the relatively free access to firearms made male violence worse against girl-friends, spouses, and perfect strangers became a common refrain after 1989.”

The Progressive Conservatives under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney enacted Bill C-17 in 1991, which mandated that all FAC applicants take a safety course, a background check, and wait 28 days before being able to purchase a firearm. But pressure mounted for stronger gun controls in the wake of two more shooting sprees in 1992, and the 1993 elections brought to power a Liberal government under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Justice Minister Allan Rock who responded to these renewed calls for stronger gun laws. Bill C-68 was tabled in the Commons on February

14, enacted by the Commons on June 13 and the Senate on November 22, and received Royal Assent on December 5. The Firearms Act of 1995 imposed stricter sentences for the criminal use of firearms, replaced the FAC with a licensure system, reclassified as “prohibited” several firearms in the “restricted” category, and created a registry for all “non-restricted” firearms. By far, this long-gun registry generated the most controversy and even threats by the hunting community of noncompliance. Both the 1997 Reform and PC party platforms pledged to repeal C-68, as did the Canada Alliance platform of 2000, though the PC platform of 2000 specified ending only the long-gun registry. The Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) platforms of 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011 all pledged to scrap the long-gun registry, the top legislative priority for its leader Stephen Harper. In 2012, a majority Conservative Government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper finally passed Bill C-19 (159 to 130, with support from only Conservatives plus two New Democratic Party (NDP) parliamentarians). Eight months after its repeal, Justin Trudeau, in his race to be the Liberal Party leader, told reporters that the long-gun registry was “deeply divisive for far too many people” and a “failed policy” that should not be brought back (Guelph Mercury 2012). The Liberal Party platform of 2015 affirmed what Trudeau said: “We will not create a new national long-gun registry to replace the one that has been dismantled.”

Method and Hypotheses: Framing Gun Control or Gun Rights

The purpose of issue framing “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52). The strategy behind framing is not only to persuade but to define the terms of the debate in ways that advantage your coalition. In doing so, policy frames must resonate with the intended audience and not conflict with deep-seated values of that audience or the wider society. Thus, religious arguments may mobilize true believers, but they are not more effective in persuading others (Marietta 2008), just as moralistic arguments against homosexuality may confront more secular attitudes that value tolerance (Mucciaroni 2011).

Hurka’s (2017, 171) path analysis of 17 rampage shootings in Europe found that

the more causal stories compete for public and political attention, the more difficult it will become for advocates favouring policy change in

the area of gun control to focus the political debate in their favour. If multiple causal stories can be reasonably activated in order to explain the occurrence of a given rampage shooting, the less likely the broad acceptance of the gun control story should become and the chances for a deadlock of the political process increase.

Contested framing did not systematically account for whether gun policies were reformed or not after those European rampage shootings (Hurka 2017, 172), but one U.S. study determined that contested framing mattered. The 1999 shooting spree at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado that killed twelve students and a teacher resulted in only “limited” changes in public policy because there was no consensus about what caused that tragedy. “Political leaders within and beyond Congress moved quickly to advance their favored frames and deny agenda control to their opponents by defining the Columbine shooting in terms of either gun control or popular culture” (Lawrence and Birkland 2004, 1201).

Our cross-national comparison shows that contested values are more indicative of the American political culture whereas a more consensual ethics governed the policy debate in Canada. Moreover, following Hurka (2017; see also Lawrence and Birkland 2004), policy stalemate is more likely to occur when the gun control *and* gun rights frames compete in public debate, whereas policy change is more likely to occur when the gun control *or* the gun rights frame dominates. Thus, we anticipate the latter in Canada, the former in the United States. All this calls to mind Meier’s (1994) argument that morality policy can be one-sided or two-sided, depending on whether everybody agrees that “sinful” behavior must be curbed and punished, or whether there are legitimate differences of opinion about how to address a problem that vexes society. The gun control debate in Canada was more one-sided because owning a firearm is deemed a privilege that can be subjected to government regulation, whereas the two-sided debate in the United States results from the conflicting arguments over whether a “collective” or “individual” right to bear arms was ensconced in the Second Amendment.

First, there is no constitutional guarantee of a right to bear arms in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms analogous to the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Also 44 of the U.S. states have provisions in their own constitutions protecting the right to bear arms (Spitzer 2011, 171). Those provisions ignited a robust debate in the United States over “Original Intent” and the role of firearms in American constitutional law (Bogus 2000). Thus, the founding documents of

the American Republic laid bare the contested values over gun control versus gun rights. Second, comparative analysis reports that the gun culture is far stronger in the United States than in any of the other “settler” societies of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (McLean 2015). Third, content analysis of online social media communications by firearms enthusiasts in the United States and Canada shows that Americans are much more likely to defend their freedom and constitutional right to bear arms whereas Canadians justify guns as a property right or in instrumental terms, for hunting or self-defense (McLean 2018).

In the analyses to follow, three “frames” employed by Fleming and others (2016) to categorize gun policies are used in quantitative and qualitative textual analysis to define the parameters of the debate over gun control and gun rights in Canada and the United States. The three frames represent “restrictive” gun policies that ban or regulate certain *firearms*, “punitive” gun policies that penalize the *person* for the unlawful use of firearms, or “lenient” gun policies that encourage gun ownership and emphasize gun *rights*. Gun rights, or more precisely *Second Amendment rights and freedoms*, is the primary frame used by the NRA (Steidley and Colen 2017). For our purposes, only the “restrictive” frame embraces true gun control in terms of regulating or banning the availability of certain or all types of firearms, and we hypothesize that Democrats would favor gun control measures.

This reasoning is consistent with how Republicans and Democrats attribute causes for social problems. On poverty, Republicans blame personal failings while Democrats blame the free market or institutional shortcomings (Iyengar 1991; Pellegrini *et al.* 1997). Studies of shooting sprees also found Republicans blaming media violence or personality flaws of the assailant whereas Democrats blame weak gun laws or a breakdown of public services (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2013, 2017). In other words, Republicans focus on stigmatizing bad behavior by the individual whereas Democrats look for broader societal causes. Following this logic, to seek stronger penalties for law-breakers who use firearms in criminal acts implicitly accepts the use of firearms by law-abiding people to be legitimate. The lenient frame actually endorses the possession and use of firearms for recreation or self-defense. In sum, both punitive and lenient frames are supportive of gun rights, and we hypothesize that Republicans will favor gun rights. Three of our four hypotheses explicitly test the validity of our assumption that the debate over gun policy is one-sided in Canada but two-sided in the United States.

Media Framing of the Gun Control Debate

Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) argue that media coverage of social problems involves competition for agenda space because no newspaper can cover every issue. For that reason, the media will focus on gun control whenever a shooting rampage shocks the nation or new laws are enacted. Unlike other issues, however, U.S. media coverage of guns in general—and, in particular, the NRA—is so negative, in fact, that strident media bias actually serves to bolster the cause of gun rights (Patrick 2002). The *New York Times* is especially hostile to media appeals by the NRA (Steidley and Colen 2017, 612–13, 621). This leads to our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: If media coverage of gun policy is driven by focusing events and policy adoption, then framing this policy debate in both countries should be more one-sided, and emphasize the need for gun controls, rather than two-sided and focus also on gun rights.

To the degree that heightened media coverage results from shooting spree and legislative debate, we hypothesize that the media will frame the debate mainly in terms of restrictive, and perhaps punitive, but not lenient policies. Mass murders would not be the opportune time for journalists to praise gun rights.

Here our objective is to assess how gun policy was framed in news stories by arguably the leading newspapers of Canada (*Globe and Mail*) and the United States (*New York Times*).¹ Though both newspapers are liberal-leaning in their editorial policies, other scholars (Schwartz and Tatalovich 2018) have relied on them to map media coverage of several moral conflicts, including gun control. To content analyze this issue during periods of heightened media coverage, we chose a timeframe after one dramatic focusing event in each country and one significant policy debate. The U.S. analysis focused on the one year of 1994 when congressional debate led to passage of the Assault Weapons Ban and the one-year period (December 14, 2012 to December 14, 2013) following the

¹We used Factiva to search the key terms *gun control* OR *gun rights* OR *Sandy Hook* and separately *gun control* OR *gun rights* OR *assault weapon* OR *assault weapons* for the assault weapons ban debate in the *New York Times*. For Canada, we used Factiva to search the key terms *gun control* OR *gun rights* OR *École Polytechnique* OR *Montreal Massacre* AND *gun* for the Montreal Massacre and separately *gun control* OR *gun rights* OR *C-68* OR *Firearms Act* for the debate over the 1995 Firearms Act in the *Globe and Mail*.

Table 1.

**Content Analysis of Media Coverage of Shooting Episodes and Policy Debates in
Canada and the United States.**

	Canada media coverage		U.S. media coverage	
	Montreal massacre	1995 firearms debate	Sandy hook massacre	Assault weapons debate
	12/6/89– 12/6/90	1/1/95– 12/31/95	12/14/12– 12/14/13	1/1/94– 12/31/94
Frames				
Restrictive	93.0%	73.0%	81.9%	73.3%
Punitive	7.0%	20.2%	5.7%	10.7%
Lenient	0.0%	6.7%	12.4%	16.0%
<i>N</i> (phrases) ^a	57	178	910	643

^aFrequency counts and column percentages are to clear, specific, and explicit “phrases” in news stories that reference restrictive, punitive, or lenient gun policy change.

shooting spree at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, which claimed the lives of 20 children and six adults. The Canadian analysis focused on the periods December 6, 1989 to December 7, 1990, after the Montréal Massacre and January 1, 1994 to December 31, 1995 when the Firearms Act of 1995 was debated and enacted (see Table 1, Note 1). Both leading newspapers reacted similarly to those horrific shooting sprees by framing their coverage in terms of the need for “restrictive” gun controls. While the restrictive frame dominated the policy debate in both countries, 20 percent of the stories in the *Globe and Mail* focused also on punitive measures, to tighten penalties against unlawful use of firearms, whereas the *New York Times* gave slightly less attention to a discussion of lenient gun policies (16 percent).

Party Framing of the Gun Control Debate

One reason why gun control persists unresolved on the policy agenda in the United States is because its two major political parties have chosen to “own” polarized positions on this issue (Tatalovich 2017), unlike the case with Canadian political parties—which leads to our second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: The framing of the debate over gun control versus gun rights in party platforms will be two-sided and contingent on party affiliation in the United States more than in Canada.

Here, we focus on the gun control planks in each major party platform since the 1960s (see Table 2).² In fact, no major party in the United States or Canada devoted any platform pledges to the issue of gun control during the entire decade of the 1950s, added evidence that this issue did not emerge on the policy agenda until late in the 1960s for the United States and, arguably, not until the 1990s in Canada. Party polarization is obvious for the United States. Of the total 48 pledges of restrictive gun policies, Democratic platforms accounted for 90 percent of them; of the total 57 lenient pledges, Republican platforms accounted for 82 percent of them. While there was greater bipartisanship between Republicans and Democrats on punitive pledges (64 percent to 36 percent), the differential still supports our hypothesis that Republicans would favor harsher sanctions against wrongful use of firearms. Sharp partisanship was not so obvious in Canada. Of the 56 restrictive pledges, most were expressed in Liberal platforms (64 percent), but Progressive Conservatives and Reform together accounted for 25 percent, while the NDP had 11 percent of those pledges. All three parties of the Right collectively pledged most of the lenient policies (70 percent), but Liberals also did so 30 percent of the time. Punitive pledges were also favored more by the Rightist parties (63 percent) than the Liberals (19 percent) or NDP (18 percent). In sum, although left-leaning parties accounted for most restrictive pledges and right-leaning parties expressed most lenient and punitive pledges, rightist parties in Canada were both less antagonistic toward restrictive pledges and less enamored with lenient policies than was the Republican Party.

Gun control has polarized Republican and Democratic congressional voting (Karol 2009; Price, Dake, and Thompson 2002). For example, voting on the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act of 2005 showed that Republicans were significantly more likely to support that NRA-supported legislation (Richards 2017, 480). Multivariate analysis of legislative sponsorship in the House of Representatives during 2003–2010 confirms that Republicans were significantly more likely to sponsor pro-gun and less likely to introduce gun control bills (Richards 2017, 477). These patterns of federal legislative voting and sponsorship

²The text of each party platform is archived in the POLTEXT online platform at Laval University. Each sentence in every party platform was assessed by two independent coders, who then reconciled any differences. For the total $N = 166$ in the United States, the coders agreed 94 percent of the time; for the total $N = 206$ in Canada, the coders agree 91 percent of the time. Accessed at <http://www.poltext.org>.

Table 2.
Content Analysis of the United States and Canada Party Platforms on Gun Policy.

Year	Canada (N=19) (N=4) (N=5) (N=17) (N=10) (N=3) (N=14) (N=39) (N=14) (N=22) (N=17)	Liberals			PC/conservatives			NDP		
		Restrict	Punitive	Lenient	Restrict	Punitive	Lenient	Restrict	Punitive	Lenient
1979		13	5	1						
1993		2	1		1 ^b					
1997					2 ^b	1 ^b	2 ^b			
						11 ^c	6 ^c			
2000					2 ^b	6 ^b	2 ^b			
							3 ^d			
2004					2	6	3	2	1	
2006		4	3	2	6	11	3	2	8	
2008		3	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	
2011		5		7		3	7			
2015		9	2	1		4	1			
Total ^a (N= 164)		36	13	12	14	43	28	6	12	

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Year	The United States	Democrats			Republicans		
		Restrict	Punitive	Lenient	Restrict	Punitive	Lenient
1968	(N=4)	1	1				2
1972	(N=5)	1	1			2	1
1976	(N=8)	3	1	1		1	2
1980	(N=8)	3		1		1	3
1984	(N=3)	1				1	1
1988	(N=3)	1				1	1
1992	(N=10)	4	2	1		1	2
1996	(N=20)	10	2	1	3	3	1
2000	(N=20)	10	1	1	1	3	4
2004	(N=16)	2	1	1	1	3	8
2008	(N=14)	3		3			8
2012	(N=19)	4		1			14
Total ^a	(N=166)	43	9	10	5	16	47

^aTotals exclude 78 “other” frames employed in Canada (N=42) and U.S. party platforms (N=36).

^bProgressive Conservative Party platform.

^cReform Party platform.

^dCanada Alliance Party platform.

comport with a study of the impact of mass shootings on state enactments of gun laws (Luca, Malhotra, and Poliquin 2016). After a shooting spree, the number of enactments that *loosened* gun restrictions increased by 75 percent in Republican-controlled legislatures, but there was no statistically significant effect for Democratic-controlled legislatures.

Rhetorical Framing of the Gun Control Debate

It is anticipated that Republican and Democratic presidents will exhibit symbolic leadership by favoring different policy frames in the gun control debate, though some (see, for example, Spitzer 2015) have observed that presidents of both parties showed a lack of legislative leadership in their support for gun control legislation.

Hypothesis 3: The framing of gun control versus gun rights in U.S. presidential rhetoric will be two-sided and contingent on the party affiliation of the incumbent.

On President Lyndon Johnson, Spitzer (2015, 141) concludes, “The difficulty Johnson faced in achieving enactment of a new gun control measure is underscored by comparing Johnson’s failure to win passage of a gun bill until 1968 with his stunning legislative successes throughout his five years in office.” Passage of the Firearms Owners Protection Act of 1986 “can be traced in large measure to the efforts of two gun control opponents: Senator James McClure (R-ID) and Representative Harold Volkmer (D-MO).” Only “a small role” was played by the Reagan Administration (Spitzer 2015, 145, 148). President Clinton was probably the exception that proves the rule; he refused to abandon the assault-weapons ban when urged to do so (Spitzer 2015, 152) and “aggressively” promoted the Brady Bill in late 1993 (Spitzer 2015, 162).

Our analysis of all presidential statements on gun control (excluding State of the Union Addresses) shows a sharp cleavage in rhetoric between Democratic and Republican incumbents (see Table 3).³ Ninety-five percent of all statements urging a policy that restricts access to certain types

³This analysis is based on the *Public Papers of the Presidents* for 1960–2016 located at the American Presidency Project (APP). Using the search terms *firearm* AND *gun control*, 813 relevant documents were retrieved. Any sentence related to those keywords was coded, resulting in a total of 2,879 sentences being coded as restrictive, restrictive/punitive, punitive, punitive/lenient, and lenient. Accessed at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

Table 3.
Content Analysis of Gun Policy in Presidential Rhetoric, 1965–2016.

President	N	Restrictive	Restrict/punitive	Punitive	Punitive/lenient	Lenient	Other
Johnson	324	254 (78%)	32	25	9	4	0
Nixon	22	14	3	0	5	0	0
Ford	119	22	13	48 (40%)	6	30 (25%)	0
Carter	8	5	1	1	0	1	0
Reagan	125	1	3	66 (53%)	16	37 (30%)	2
Bush-I	224	49	18	106	12	35 (16%)	4
Clinton	1608	1082 (67%)	402	52	13	57	2
Bush-II	26	0	0	4	3	19 (73%)	0
Obama	421	231 (55%)	63	73	9	45	0
Total	2,877	1658	535	375	73	228	8
Republican Subtotal	516 (18%)	86 (5%)	37 (7%)	224 (60%)	42 (58%)	121 (63%)	6 (75%)
Democratic Subtotal	2361 (82%)	1572 (95%)	498 (93%)	151 (40%)	31 (42%)	107 (47%)	2 (25%)

of weapons were expressed by Democrats. Republicans focused on their advocacy of punitive laws that strengthen sanctions against persons who use firearms in criminal acts or justifying lenient measures in defense of gun rights as a constitutional imperative or the personal safety and recreational needs of any law-abiding individual.

For Canada, this discussion is based on a content analysis of the rhetoric by the Minister of Justice before the House of Commons during the period 1970–2013.⁴

Hypothesis 4: The framing of gun control versus gun rights in ministerial speeches in Canada will be more one-sided and not contingent upon the party affiliation of the incumbent.

For that entire period, there were only 176 lines of rhetoric by the Prime Minister, roughly six percent of the total lines of rhetoric by the Justice Minister (see Table 4), which indicates the importance of this cabinet officer with respect to tabling legislation on gun policy and shepherding its passage.

Clearly, the Liberal Justice Ministers talked mainly about restrictive-type gun controls (62 percent of the subtotal), while Progressive Conservative Justice Minister Kim Campbell alone accounted for virtually all of her party's utterances (38 percent of subtotal). All told, restrictive rhetoric accounted for 44 percent of the rhetorical sentences by all 14 Justice Ministers of both parties. Only 14 percent of total sentences focused on punitive policies, but Justice Ministers affiliated with the Progressive Conservatives or Conservative Party accounted for nearly three-fourths (72 percent) of those utterances. Unlike the partisan pattern in U.S. presidential rhetoric (see Table 3), lenient-type gun policies were only 7 percent of total ministerial rhetoric and the Liberals, not Rightist parties, accounted for more than three-fifths of those utterances. The strongest advocates of restrictive gun controls were Kim Campbell, the pivotal figure after the Montreal Massacre, and Allan Rock, who presided during enactment of the Firearms Act of 1995.

⁴Using the Lipad search engine, we retrieved all text mentions of “gun” AND “Allan Rock” [the name of each Justice Minister] from this digitalized Hansard during the period 1970–2013. Accessed at <http://www.lipad.ca>. The same coding categories mentioned earlier were used here.

Table 4.
Content Analysis of Gun Policy in Minister of Justice Rhetoric, 1970–2013.

Name/party	Year	Total	Restrictive	Restrictive/ punitive	Punitive	Punitive/ lenient	Lenient	Other
Turner/Lib	1970	5						5
Lang/Lib	1973–75	26		1	1	3	14	7
Basford/Lib	1975–78	344	156	52	17		19	100
Crosbie/PC	1986	3					1	2
Hnatyshyn/PC	1986–87	8	1				5	2
Lewis/PC	1987–90	30	14				2	14
Campbell/PC	1990–92	724	358	46	41		61	218
Blais/PC	1993	3						3
Rock/Lib	1994–97	761	396	98	80		70	117
McLellan/Lib	1997–01	135	81	14			14	26
Cauchon/Lib	2002–03	456	226	39	5		3	183
Cotler/Lib	2005	24		1	3			20
Toews/Cons	2006	110		2	74	1	3	30
Nicholson/Cons	2007–13	205	1	4	163	2	3	32
Total		2,834	1233	257	384	6	195	759
Liberals Subtotal		1,751 (62%)	859 (70%)	205 (80%)	106 (28%)	3	120 (61.5%)	
PC and Conservatives Subtotal		1083 (38%)	374 (30%)	52 (20%)	278 (72%)	3	75 (38.5%)	

Conclusion

True to Hypothesis 1, media coverage of those shooting sprees and gun policy debates in both Canada and the United States focused almost entirely on the need for restrictive gun controls (the combined media coverage of both events was virtually identical, at 78 percent). As expected, that framing resulted because media coverage was event-driven by horrific shooting sprees or high-profile debates over legislative enactments. Although very little of the media coverage focused on the punitive or lenient frames, it is noteworthy that the former was more apparent in Canadian news whereas the latter was more prominent in the United States.

Beyond that, however, other content analyses showed that the gun control frame was far more prevalent in Canada while the gun rights frame predominated in the United States. Especially noteworthy is the finding that U.S. partisans—in their parties and as presidents—are polarized in how they frame the debate over gun policy. Consistent with Hypotheses 2 and 3, the Democratic Party virtually owned the restrictive gun control frame while Republicans much favored lenient policies on guns. Previous research on legislative sponsorship of gun control legislation in Congress coupled with our analysis of presidential rhetoric largely explain why every major “restrictive” gun control law was enacted during unified Democratic control of Congress and the White House.

Both the National Firearms Act of 1934 and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938 were enacted by Democratic-controlled Congresses and signed by President Roosevelt. The same occurred when President Lyndon Johnson signed into law Title IV of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 and the Gun Control Act of 1968. The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 was enacted by Congress with Democratic majorities and signed by President Clinton, who also signed into law Title XI of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (commonly known as the Assault-Weapons Ban, which expired in 2004 and was not renewed). Two other laws must be classified as “lenient” since they both were supported by the NRA: the Firearms Owners Protection Act of 1985, signed by President Reagan after approval by a Republican-controlled Senate and a Democratic-controlled House, and the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act of 2005 (which shielded from lawsuits licensed manufacturers, dealers, and sellers of firearms and ammunition) enacted under President George W. Bush with GOP majorities in the House and Senate.

In Canada, Liberals favored restrictive gun controls but not so exclusively, and the Rightist parties favored punitive measures but were not entirely opposed to restrictive measures. Consistent with Hypotheses 3 and 4, restrictive gun controls were virtually the exclusive domain of the gun control rhetoric by Democratic presidents; not only did Republicans not support restrictive laws but their presidents also talked more about lenient and punitive policies. In Canada, however, the most lop-sided use of restrictive gun control frames occurred in the aftermath of the Montréal Massacre by PC Kim Campbell and later by Liberal Allan Rock during the debate and enactment of the 1995 Firearms Act. It was also used frequently by Liberal Martin Cauchon who defended the long-gun registry when he served as Justice Minister under Prime Minister Paul Martin.

Our content analysis also showed tendencies for Leftist parties in Canada to favor restrictive policies and Rightist parties to favor punitive policies—though *not* lenient policies, but that ideological disagreement does not reach the level of polarization found in the United States. In retrospect, the 1934 law that first mandated registration of all handguns was enacted by a Conservative government under Prime Minister Richard Bennett (Brown 2012, 151), and enactment of Bill C-17 in 1991 came under the Progressive Conservative Government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. It is also politically significant that, although the long-gun registry was repealed by a Conservative government, its Liberal successor under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has disavowed any desire to renew that provision. In Canada, therefore, a degree of bipartisanship coalesces around the need for some kind of gun controls when faced with the problem of rampage shootings. Such bipartisanship has escaped the United States even in the face of horrific shooting massacres.

Our analysis began by positing that cultural differences in the political opportunity structure best explain the emergence of an effective antigun coalition in Canada but its absence in the United States. To underscore its significance, consider this counter-factual: Would the Coalition for Gun Control have emerged and gained enactment of the 1995 Act in the United States? Would the NRA have been able to block enactment of the 1995 Act in Canada? If both scenarios are unlikely, then the full explanation must consider the divergent political cultures of these two nations. The collective action problem did not preclude organizing the CGC, which shows that the role of rational choice theory in individual decision-making is *mediated* through the political culture of a nation.

If the largely one-sided framing of gun control in Canada reflects an underlying political culture, why is the Canadian ethos so different from

American political values? One possibility is the Lipset (1990) thesis, which argued that Canada is more communitarian whereas the United States has a more competitive, individualistic, and liberal (or rights-oriented; see Hartz 1955) political culture. According to Seymour Martin Lipset, these differences derived from the fact that the United States was founded in “revolution” but Canada was a “counter-revolutionary” society, to mean that its movement toward independence was gradual but never completely severed from its monarchical roots in England. While deference to authority has declined in Canada, as in other industrialized nations, in many respects, Canadian values are closer to European values, with the United States more the outlier or laggard nation (Nevitte 1996). While Lipset’s thesis has its critics (see, for example, Conway 1991; Grabb and Curtis 2005; Grabb, Curtis, and Baer 2000; Kaufman 2009; Tyrrell 1991), its interpretation is consistent with the findings of this analysis, and other studies (McLean 2018) that reported divergent framing of “gun talk” on the social media by firearms owners in Canada as compared with the United States.❷

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