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## A Call to Action: Addressing the Root Causes of American School Shootings

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the United States, guns are the leading cause of death among children and teens.
- Since 1999, the U.S. has experienced 386 school shootings.
- In 2022, there were more American school shootings than in any year since 1999.
- School shootings rise when gun ownership increases.
- Gun ownership increases when there is a sitting Republican President.
- The Gun Control Act of 1968, and the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban, provide insight to the existing issue today.
- The Federal Assault Weapons Ban from 1994-2004 decreased firearm violence.
- The majority of Americans, both Democrat and Republican, support federal universal background checks on firearm purchases and a new Assault Weapons Ban.

### INTRODUCTION

This white paper focuses on the issue of school shootings. This is uniquely an American problem. The First and Second Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, as well as the history of federal law, and key court cases provide the backdrop for school shootings today. America's Culture Wars are also a contributing factor.<sup>1</sup> The Culture Wars have hampered any gun control legislation from passing in the Congress, and ultimately contribute to the increase of American school shootings.

The First Amendment grants every American the freedom of speech.<sup>2</sup> By extension, the Amendment also

protects some forms of hate speech, which is only considered illegal if it poses a direct threat to a specific group or individual.<sup>3</sup> All too often, hate speech turns into violence. The freedom of speech sometimes becomes the freedom to hate.<sup>4</sup> Frequently, school shooters act upon this hatred which fosters violence in American schools.

The right to bear arms is enshrined in the Second Amendment.<sup>5</sup> Several times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly during periods of domestic instability, the American Congress acted to restrict gun ownership. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Gun Control Act of 1934 as a response to increased gangster violence during Prohibition. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed an amended version of the Gun Control Act in 1968, following the increase of political assassinations, violent social movements, and major riots. Some organized movements heavily utilized firearms. The Black Panthers, a militant Civil Rights group, was notorious for owning firearms, which they used to defend their cause. Many white Americans felt insecure. President Johnson and politicians of the 1960s responded with enhanced gun control. Similarly, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, American gun violence increased, especially in cities. The homicide rate spiked. In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the first Federal Assault Weapons Ban. Clinton was convinced of the law's capacity to decrease American firearm violence.<sup>6</sup>

As the three time periods from the 20<sup>th</sup> century show, politicians have historically responded to domestic unrest and violence with law enforcement. Specifically, the Congress has responded to the issue of violence with gun control. American violence was never a politicized issue, as both Parties traditionally unified to pass gun control legislation if it meant protecting the lives of citizens. Unfortunately, Culture Wars are plaguing contemporary American politics. Because of increased polarization and heightened intolerance in today's politics, any gun-control legislation is temporarily halted. Why has the safety of American children become politicized? As precedent shows, gun-control is swift when American lives are at risk. Given the present-day health crisis of school shootings, which are increasing at an alarming

rate, now is the time to enact commonsense gun regulation.

## POLICY

### *Policy Issue and Context*

In the United States, guns are the leading cause of death among children and teens.<sup>7</sup> In just this year alone (2023), 74 people have been injured or died because of school shootings.<sup>8</sup> Gun violence in American schools is not limited to a particular region, making it a pressing national issue. Since 1999, more than 356,000 students experienced gun violence at their school, and there was a total of 386 school shootings.<sup>9</sup> In 2022, there were more school shootings than in any year since 1999.<sup>10</sup> The rise of American school shootings partially stems from a culture of increased violence and gun ownership supported by ultra-conservatives.

The causes and reasons for the spike in U.S. school shootings since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are critical policy issues today. They are defined by a Constitutional framework that includes the First and Second Amendments.

Ronald Reagan's presidency (1980-1988) sparked a new type of Conservatism in American politics and culture. This was a right-wing reaction to gay rights, feminism, crime, and gun control legislation.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the rise of social movements in the 1960s which emphasized individual freedoms and liberalism, triggered an ultra-conservative backlash against rising Progressive voices in American politics. Conservatives emphasized traditional values. Ronald Reagan was the first president endorsed by the National Rifle Association, which contributed to the current-day entanglement of American politics and gun legislation.<sup>12</sup> Reagan gained wide support from Americans in favor of the Second Amendment. He blamed gun violence on the irresponsible use of firearms.<sup>13</sup> The history of American Conservatism, along with the histories of the First and Second Amendments provide insight into gun violence, Gun Culture, and American politics. School shootings and violence are deeply rooted political issues that require research at the intersection of American history and politics.

An increasingly prevalent Gun Culture within the Republican Party cultivates youth violence and hate speech. America's present day Culture Wars contributes to a polarized country in which hate-speech fuels an increasingly partisan system. Ultra-conservatives advocate for the Second Amendment with virtually no exceptions, while progressives demand quick action, including a national assault weapons ban.<sup>14</sup> As the

polarization within the United States continues to intensify, politicians are unlikely to find common ground on gun legislation. Unfortunately, this divisiveness will result in more school shootings. The current lack of gun control legislation in the U.S. is a major problem for the advancement of school safety. This research aims to improve public policy concerning mass school shootings by establishing the historical context and legal framework for one of our country's most prevalent and pressing contemporary issues.

The history of key court cases also informs the rise of U.S. school shootings. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several court cases supported by ultra-conservatives' illustrate not only their political agenda, but also their advocacy for freedom of speech, including violent or discriminatory rhetoric. Overtime, the freedom of speech as a Constitutional right was interpreted to tolerate more hate speech. Yes, ultra-conservatives are inconsistent on the issue. They refuse to extend the same First Amendment protections to others, including teachers' freedom of instruction in public schools. The news of teachers getting fired or suspended due to classroom instruction is becoming increasingly common. For example, in Florida a teacher can be fired for saying the word 'gay,' or teaching critical race theory.<sup>15</sup> Why are American teachers limited in their First Amendment right while hate speech is tolerated?

What are the leading causes of youth violence, and ultimately school shootings, in American public schools? Americans are starting to wonder when this violent cycle of school shootings will end, and at what point there will be bipartisan agreement to craft gun-control policies, including Federal background checks. How many students and children must be killed before Republican legislatures finally decide to take action with Democrats to ban or restrict assault weapons and firearms? How many more children are going to be murdered at school before Republicans start to value children's lives over monetary compensation from the NRA? Americans are slowly beginning to ask these questions and are already protesting for nation-wide change. It's time for the pro-life party to live by their teachings and protect American youth. Why not ban the most harmful device used in mass murder?

### *Literature Review Overview*

Youth and gun violence in the United States gets worse by the year. Policy analysts and scholars have addressed the issue, along with its consequences for public schools and students. There is less research on how the ultra-conservative movement within the Republican

Party influenced and perpetuated violence in America's youth, and ultimately in American public schools (see Appendix A). This overview of policy will look at papers addressing the issues of youth violence, gun violence, and present-day U.S. Culture Wars. While there is a considerable amount of research on Conservative policy within the United States, there is less literature that addresses the group's influence on Americans, let alone the influence of conservatism on children and students.

Several policy papers center on the issues of youth violence and extremism. Scholars such as Jeffrey Fagan and Peta Lowe published articles related to youth violence and extremism. Fagan's 2002 article *Policing Guns and Youth Violence*, focuses on the epidemic of youth violence in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States.<sup>16</sup> He argues that policing alone cannot contain youth violence, but by carefully balancing law enforcement with community collaboration, police departments can ultimately help to shift social norms which contribute to youth gun violence. Peta Lowe's work explains why young people are prone to extremist violence and details why a response is needed from the global community.<sup>17</sup> Much of the research regarding youth violence comes from the global community. This highlights the need for more research in the United States.

There are also policy papers published on the issue of American gun violence and children. The Center for American Progress, an American Liberal think tank published a report titled, *America's Youth Under Fire*, in which they argue that young people in the United States, particularly minorities, bear the brunt of the nation's gun violence.<sup>18</sup> The authors contend that young people are at the forefront of efforts to stop shootings by advocating for stricter gun control policies. The report includes statistical information for each state within the U.S., including data on gun violence in Rhode Island. Fortunately, Rhode Island falls below average on the national scale for the number of gun-related deaths.

There are a handful of researchers focused on the rise of Far-Right ideology globally. In 2020, Vincent Auger, a political science professor, published an article, *Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?*<sup>19</sup> In his article, Auger argues that violence committed by individuals and groups associated with Far-Right ideologies is increasing globally. There is also research on American Culture Wars nationally. In 2021, Brookings Institute, a centrist think tank, published a report titled, *Is the U.S. headed for another Civil War?*<sup>20</sup> It analyzed data collected by a national survey, which asked the question "is another civil war likely?" The survey found that a plurality of Americans

(46%) believe that a future civil war is likely. Diving deeper, the authors found that a civil war seemed more likely for younger people (53%), than for older ones (31%), and for those residing in the American South (49%). Other contributions include, a National Education Association article, *The Culture War's Impact on Public Schools*, which argues that political attacks on inclusive curriculum divides communities and undermines public education.<sup>21</sup> The article adds that the targeting of public education is largely funded and supported by ultra-conservatives.

A policy paper published by the center-right think tank, American Enterprise institute, outlines and addresses the ideal American education system according to conservatives.<sup>22</sup> The paper largely ignores the issue of gun violence and focuses instead on parental shared values including responsibility, community, and self-determination.

While scholars address American issues such as youth violence, gun violence, and culture wars, there is a lack of research on the influence of Far-Right Conservatism on public school students. For years, ultra-conservatives have perpetuated gun violence in America with extremist beliefs on gun laws and a staunch protection of the Second Amendment.

## LAW

### *Legal Overview*

The First and Second Amendments to the U.S. Constitution establish the foundation for comprehending Americans' perspectives on free speech and firearm regulation. However, over the past two centuries, the U.S. Congress has drafted laws that refine the first two Amendments based on contemporary concerns. More recent legislation includes the National Firearms Act of 1934, the Gun Control Act of 1968, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2009, and the (pending) Parental Bill of Rights of 2023 (see Appendix B).

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Firearms Act of 1934 to address concerns in American society during the time of Prohibition. In the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s, there was an increase of organized crime in American neighborhoods due to Prohibition gangsters.<sup>23</sup> In 1934, President Roosevelt passed the first National Firearms Act to combat the increase of crime and violence that plagued American society.<sup>24</sup>

An amended version of the National Firearms Act was passed in 1968. It is more commonly referred to as the

Gun Control Act. Like Roosevelt, who signed the National Firearms Act in 1934 as a reaction to violence, President Lyndon B. Johnson advocated for the Gun Control Act of 1968 as a response to increasing volatility in American society during the 1960s. Upon signing the legislation, Johnson stated, “All of our people who are deeply concerned in this country about law and order should hail this day.”<sup>25</sup> Like the Republican Party today, which has adopted law and order as one of its platforms, the Democratic Party of the 1960s was deeply concerned about the recklessness of society, especially given the contentious social movements and unprecedented political assassinations of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>26</sup> The shootings included the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, the 1968 murder of Martin Luther King Jr, and the murder of Senator Robert F. Kennedy that same year.<sup>27</sup> President Johnson responded to the fears of public violence, assassinations, and unpredictability with the amended version of the 1934 National Firearms Act: the Gun Control Act of 1968.<sup>28</sup>

As seen from the above two cases, 20<sup>th</sup> century American politicians generally passed gun regulation laws as a response to increased crime and violence. Why are contemporary U.S. politicians not reacting to perhaps the biggest violent issue of American society today? American schools’ unsafe reputation is continuing to grow as firearms victimize students at an alarming rate.<sup>29</sup> The U.S. child firearm mortality rate doubled from 2013 to 2021.<sup>30</sup> Today, firearms contribute to the deaths of more children than any other injury or illness. It is time for the polarization and Culture Wars that are plaguing American Congress to be put aside in order to enact commonsense gun regulation.

In addition to federal laws passed in response to American societal issues, several court case decisions have defined “the norm” for school safety and behavior. However, many of these decisions are outdated and require a re-examination to fit the current needs of students, teachers, and society.

*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1969. In 1965, students in Des Moines planned to wear black armbands to public school in protest against the Vietnam War. When Des Moines public school principals learned of the protest plan, they crafted a policy that forced students to remove the armbands. The students, along with their parents, sued the Des Moines School District for violating their First Amendment Rights. Ultimately, the case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States.<sup>31</sup> The Supreme Court ruled in a 7-2 majority that the actions of the Des Moines School District

violated students’ First Amendment rights. The case set the precedent that American students are guaranteed First Amendment rights, even in public spaces, unless there is proof of a threat to the operation of a school. Essentially, students are always assured their freedom of speech in public schools, even when it may violate the wider interests of public safety.

The precedent that students are guaranteed freedom of expression was tested again in the 2001 case of *Boman v. Bluestem Unified School District*. When a seventeen-year-old student, Sarah Boman, hung a violently explicit poster in her Kansas public high school, she was suspended. Her poster included the words “who killed my dog” and “I’ll kill you.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, a federal district court judge ruled that the Kansas school district violated Boman’s free speech rights under the First Amendment. The decision in this case further solidified American students’ First Amendment rights while at school, but begged the question; What constitutes a threat to the function of a school? At what stage are words indicative of physical violence? Given the volatile state of American school safety today, it is time to re-evaluate how much leverage students have in crowded public settings. This is especially true when we see an increase in youth violence coupled with light gun regulation in many states.<sup>33</sup> Policymakers should continue to ask questions about how best to deter violence in public schools.

## HISTORY

### *Historical Framework*

In the United States, guns are the leading cause of death among children and teens.<sup>34</sup> In just this year alone (2023), at least 35,275 people have died from gun violence in the U.S., including 1,157 teens and 246 children. On average, 118 people die each day from gun violence in America.<sup>35</sup> Since 2020, there has been a total of 243 American school shootings, everywhere from college campuses and K-12 schools.<sup>36</sup> School shootings are not limited to select regions within the United States. Gun violence is a pressing national issue.

Firearm violence is not a new American phenomenon. Since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, politicians have wrestled with how to curtail shootings, while at the same time adhering to the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which grants every American citizen the right to own a firearm.<sup>37</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were three time periods during which firearm violence increased sharply: the 1930s, the 1960s, and the 1980s. The increasingly violent state of American society during these times, caused the U.S. Federal

Government to respond with swift legal action and gun control legislation. Today, gun violence is at its highest level in American history, and students bear the brunt of the repercussions. Why is the U.S. government not responding to the 21st century firearm 'epidemic'?<sup>38</sup>

During the 1930s, the United States saw an increase in crime and firearm violence. In the Midwest, heavily armed criminals were rampant, and cities saw a rise in organized crime.<sup>39</sup> Gun violence during the decade was tied to the Mob and Prohibition. Big name gangsters made large sums of money smuggling alcohol, and machine guns caused havoc on the streets.<sup>40</sup> As a reaction to aggressive, wild, and sometimes 'lawless' American neighborhoods, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Firearms Act of 1934. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), the Act was a direct response to gang violence. It imposed criminal, regulatory, and tax requirements on weapons favored by criminals such as machine guns and sawed-off shotguns. Specifically, the Act required the registration of fully automatic firearms (machine guns), rifles, and shotguns with the federal government.<sup>41</sup>

In the 1960s, the American government again responded to increased urban violence and firearm usage. The key piece of legislation was the Gun Control Act of 1968. The 1960s were volatile. Tensions were exacerbated by Vietnam War protests and an unprecedented number of political assassinations. A primary concern among American politicians during the decade was to put an end to domestic unrest. In 1967, politicians' concern about the safety of America rose in response to the 158 riots that erupted in Black urban communities throughout the country.<sup>42</sup> The riots included mass looting, arson, and extreme street violence. That summer, the governor of Michigan, George W. Romney, declared a state of emergency and ordered the National Guard to Detroit.<sup>43</sup> Eventually, Romney asked President Lyndon B. Johnson to send federal troops into the city, and two brigades were dispatched from the Army's Airborne Divisions.<sup>44</sup> The violent events in the 1960s led to the swift and bipartisan passage of the 1968 Gun Control Act. The Law imposed federal licensing on the manufacture and sale of firearms, and a ban on all interstate transportation of weapons to or from individuals not licensed as dealers, manufacturers, importers, or collectors.<sup>45</sup>

During the 1980s, American society again saw an increase of organized crime and firearm violence. In 1980, the rate of American homicides peaked at 10.2 homicides for every 100,000 people.<sup>46</sup> The late 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw a significant rise in American school shootings. In 1989, a

shooting at an elementary school in Stockton, California left five children dead. Twenty-four-year-old, Patrick Purdy walked onto Cleveland Elementary School grounds, and fired over one hundred rounds from a semiautomatic rifle.<sup>47</sup> Due to increased firearm violence in cities and the emergence of fatal school shootings, the American Congress responded with the passage of the National Assault Weapons Ban, which was included in the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. The Bill, signed into law by President Bill Clinton, changed the federal criminal code to prohibit the manufacture, transfer, and possession of semiautomatic assault weapons for a period of ten years. It expired in 2004.<sup>48</sup>

Gun violence in the United States is not new. Since the 1930s, the federal government, as well as state governments, have struggled to reconcile gun control with the Second Amendment. Congress passed firearm legislation only after incidents of extreme gun violence. Going forward, the federal government must pass gun control legislation and not wait for the slaughter of more innocent victims.

#### *Historiographical Overview*

Today, the United States education system is experiencing an epidemic of broad-scale violence and youth extremism. American culture continues to embrace an increasingly popular Gun Culture, especially in the American South. Historians have written about education, both at the national level as well as in individual states including Rhode Island. There is considerable scholarship on the tumultuous period of the 1960s. However, America's present Culture War, and more specifically, the rise of a Gun Culture, has drawn little academic attention. There is some literature that addresses the recent rise in U.S. Culture Wars, but there is significantly less scholarship that addresses the story of America's Gun Culture (see Appendix C).

Some scholars have addressed Rhode Island's education system paying particular attention to the major events that shaped the Rhode Island schools: early reforms and the Providence School Board Reform Movement. Rhode Island Historian, William Shade, published an in-depth analysis of Rhode Island's education system beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> He studied the early 19<sup>th</sup> century's state educational reforms, and examined how they impacted and shaped Rhode Island schools up to the present day. Historian Patrick Harshbarger analyzed Rhode Island's early 20<sup>th</sup> century School Board Reform Movement, which began in 1898 and continues to impact the makeup of today's Providence School Board Committee.<sup>50</sup>

The history of the American education system as a whole has drawn substantial scholarship. American History expert, David Denker published an article on the history of American education in 1955 which was particularly insightful.<sup>51</sup> Denker's research divided the country's educational history into four main phases: Colonial schools, post-Revolutionary and democratized schools, post-Civil War's rapid development of schools, and Cold War schools. Naturally, Denker's research excludes information past the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, causing a need for updated scholarship.

America's Culture Wars have gained an increased amount of academic attention, especially after the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a smaller amount of literature on Culture War's influence on American schools, but some authors have addressed the relationship. The American Historian Richard Jensen studied the impact of Culture Wars on national public entities.<sup>52</sup> Jensen's research attempted to map the political, economic, and cultural disputes over national programs such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), as a means of exploring how U.S. Culture Wars have shaped them. Additionally, Diane Ravitch studied the self-censorship that was practiced by the Educational Publishing Industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how this move fueled America's Culture Wars.<sup>53</sup> Ravitch drew attention to the issue of educational control in the U.S. and raised concern about how leaders might develop and implement school curriculum.

It can be argued that the American 1960s is over-written. Numerous scholars have addressed the period, which is generally characterized as volatile, unprecedented, and eruptive. Historian M.J. Heale published his own historiographical essay on the 1960s.<sup>54</sup> He argued that the era separated the earlier political culture of industrialism from the emerging culture of post-industrialism. The decade saw the rise of unprecedented events including multiple political assassinations, contentious social movements, and international instability due to the Cold War. Because of the instabilities of the 1960s, Heale argued, the decade can be morphed into almost any shape to fit a particular story/agenda. He was correct in his claim, as different leading figures have interpreted the "Sixties" to either fit their Conservative or Progressive agendas.

It is not uncommon for people, especially foreigners, to associate guns with America. The United States was founded on the preface that ordinary citizens have the right to bear arms (which later expanded to include non-militia orientation). As a result, a unique Gun Culture has proliferated since the country's founding. Few scholars

have addressed the history of guns in the United States, never mind their involvement in fostering a distinctive American culture. In 1996, the American Historian Michael Bellesiles published an article about the origins of American gun ownership, which he stated began just before the American Revolution in 1760.<sup>55</sup> Bellesiles explains that firearm ownership was uncommon in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. American gun ownership only became common with the onset of Industrialization, when the gun market became monetized and grew substantially. More important for guns influence on culture is Spencer Glendon and Edward Glaeser's 1998 research on firearms.<sup>56</sup> Glendon and Glaeser argued that guns represented the American ideals of privacy and individualism for its citizens. The authors also connected firearm ownership to suspicion of Democratic institutions, such as the courts. There is little research on the relationship between Gun Culture and education, and consequently no historical scholarship on Gun Culture's influence on American students. Today, with the unprecedented rise of mass shootings, especially in schools, it is crucial that scholars address these themes in order to construct the bigger picture of why this might be happening. No constructive policy changes can be made without a proper understanding of the issue's intersected histories.

#### *Trend Analysis: The Escalation of Gun Violence in the United States*

This analysis illustrates the historical trends in gun ownership and mass shootings in the United States. The data suggests that the ultra-conservative movements led by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump led to an increase in gun ownership, and with that, a rise in American school shootings. States with increased gun ownership are at higher risk of firearm homicides than states with lower rates of gun ownership.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 1 shows that from 1980 to 1990, there was a 2% increase of households in the United States owning one or more firearms.<sup>58</sup> With the presidency of Ronald Reagan in 1980, household gun ownership spiked to 45%, as compared to 43% in 1972. Shortly after Reagan's presidency in 1990, gun ownership reached its highest point during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 47%.

Before the ultra-conservative movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and specifically before Reagan took office in 1980, it was common knowledge among the American public that the Second Amendment did not give individuals the right to bear arms. Rather, the overwhelming consensus was that the Second Amendment gave state militias the right to bear arms, not

ordinary citizens.<sup>59</sup> However, Reagan’s emergence in American politics, and the fact that he was the first president endorsed by the NRA, fundamentally changed the perception of gun ownership in the minds of the American public, and further gave birth to the ultra-conservative view of the Second Amendment today.<sup>60</sup> Reagan’s Conservative emphasis of America in decline contributed to the increase in gun ownership during the 1980s, as a necessary tool to regain American strength and identity.

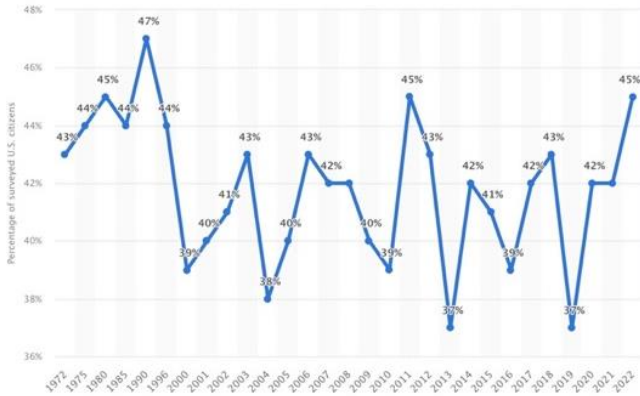


Figure 1: Percentage of households in the United States owning one or more firearms.

The most recent ultra-conservative movement, led by President Donald Trump also triggered a rise in American gun ownership. According to Figure 1, in 2016, when Donald Trump entered office, 39% of American households owned at least one firearm. In 2018, after only two years of Trump’s presidency, the percentage grew to 43%. According to Figure 2 a Pew Study from 2017 shows that 67% of Americans cited protection as the major reason for gun ownership.<sup>61</sup> It is important to note that Donald Trump’s campaign relied on the power of fear, and that influence likely increased American gun ownership. Like Ronald Reagan’s political tactic in the 1980s, Donald Trump grew mass support through his mission to “save” America from the evil within, and not only did this instill a culture of fear, but it increased firearm ownership. After just one year into Trump’s term, many Americans felt the need to own a firearm for protection. His rhetoric made his supporters feel victimized.<sup>62</sup> Essentially, ultra-conservative rhetoric and propaganda facilitated a rise in American gun ownership.

According to Figure 3, an increase in gun ownership correlates with an increase in American school shootings.<sup>63</sup> As shown in Figure 1, during and immediately following Donald Trump’s presidency, gun ownership rose from 39% in 2016 to 45% in 2022. Figure 3 shows the steady increase of American school shootings since 2016. During the 2015-2016 academic year, there were a total

### Most gun owners cite protection as a major reason for owning a gun

% of gun owners saying each is a major reason why they own a gun

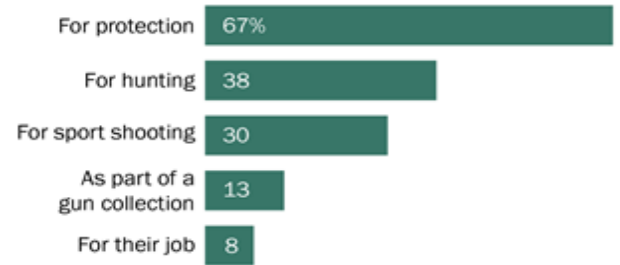


Figure 2: Most common reasons for U.S. Gun Ownership

of 27 school shootings. Just three years later, during the 2019-2020 academic year, there was a total of 75 school shootings. School shootings became nearly three times more likely during a spike of 4% in gun ownership.

This research argues that the trend of American gun ownership correlates to the rise of American school shootings. The data suggests that more guns in American households results in school shootings. Additionally, ultra-conservative rhetoric likely increased American gun ownership, as seen during the Reagan and Trump presidencies. Ultra- conservative rhetoric has historically painted a picture of American decline which fueled ongoing culture wars. When gun ownership increases, school shootings increase.

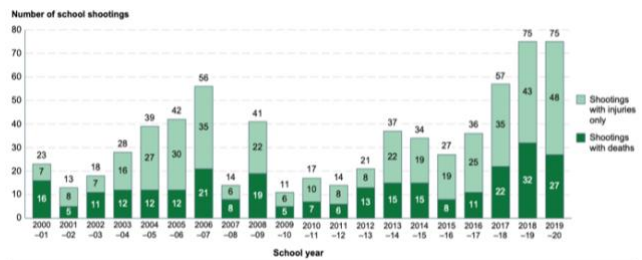


Figure 3: Number of School Shootings by the Academic Year

### Analogue #1: The 1960s

What events caused America’s political parties to unite during the 1960s and pass the Gun Control Act of 1968? The 1960s were a volatile time in American history. The decade featured an unprecedented number of political assassinations and the eruption of numerous divisive social movements. During the 1960s, politicians on both ends of the political spectrum put aside their party differences, and they found common ground over shared concerns. At the forefront of the American political agenda by the end of the decade was an end to domestic unrest. The 1960s can shed light on how

bipartisan cooperation enabled quick and reactive gun control legislation in response to national unrest and wide-spread violence. The Gun Control Act of 1968 only passed because of bipartisan actions from all branches of the Federal Government.

Three years into the decade, political assassinations began. On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.<sup>64</sup> According to the Warren Commission Report, established by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate Kennedy's assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed Kennedy in his presidential motorcade during a parade.<sup>65</sup> Not only was Kennedy murdered during the incident, but the same gunman also shot and severely injured the Texas governor at the time, John B. Connally.<sup>66</sup> Although Connally survived the shooting, the political violence on November 22, 1963 ended with the death of a sitting American president. A few years later, on February 21, 1965, the Civil Rights leader and African American nationalist, Malcolm X was shot and killed while delivering a speech in New York City.<sup>67</sup> Malcolm X was a prominent political figure of the Civil Rights Movement, and the news of his assassination shook the country, especially in African American communities. Not long after the murder of Malcolm X, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968. The brother of John F. Kennedy, Robert, was a well-established political figure. He was a New York Senator, and he was also a candidate in the 1968 presidential election. Robert was shot and killed at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, while awaiting campaign results.<sup>68</sup> That same year, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., (MLK) was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. A prominent Civil Rights leader who advocated for peaceful measures as the source for true political change, King was shot and murdered while standing on his balcony at a local Memphis hotel.<sup>69</sup> In response to the unprecedented number of political assassinations during the 1960s, politicians passed the Gun Control Act of 1968 to gain control of domestic unrest, and to re-impose law and order over the land.

The 1960s also saw a rise in contentious social movements in the United States. While many of these social movements, like the Civil Rights Movement under MLK and the anti-Vietnam War Movement, were peaceful, others were not. The Black Panthers and some Student Movements were violent in nature.<sup>70</sup> The Black Panthers Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was founded in 1966 in Oakland, California by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.<sup>71</sup> The group was the decade's most influential militant Black power organization, and according to their mission statement, they defended the use of violence.<sup>72</sup>

The Black Panthers confronted politicians, challenged the police, and aimed to fundamentally change American society.<sup>73</sup> During the decade, the Black Panthers were allegedly responsible for numerous murders, shootouts, and violent acts.<sup>74</sup> Because the Black Panthers focused on Black self-defense, the group was notorious for owning a large number of firearms and weapons. They openly carried guns under the belief that African Americans needed to protect themselves from a corrupt government.<sup>75</sup> In 1967, the Black Panthers participated in a protest outside of the California State Capital Building (Figure 4).<sup>76</sup> This was not an isolated incident. Throughout the country, but most frequently in California, members of the BPP were seen with firearms. The threat and use of gun violence by the Black Panthers launched the Gun Control Movement of the 1960s. It gained support across a wide range of groups in American society. Many White Conservatives, the police, all branches of the Federal Government, and even the NRA advocated for gun control as a response to the increase of Black firearm ownership and violence.<sup>77</sup> In 1967, Governor Ronald Reagan of California signed the Mulford Act into state law. The Act prohibited Californians from carrying loaded firearms without a state license. It was crafted with the goal of disarming members of the Black Panther Party.<sup>78</sup> Many White Americans were frightened by the possibility of a 'Black revolution' in the country, so they came together to demand legal action against the perceived threat.<sup>79</sup>



*Figure 2: Black Panther Members Stand Outside the California State House (1967)*

In 1967, politicians' concern about the safety of America intensified in the face of 158 riots that erupted in Black urban communities.<sup>80</sup> These riots represented disputes between Black citizens and White police officers, and often ended in violence.<sup>81</sup> The most notorious riots took place in Detroit, Newark, and Los Angeles. The 1967 riots resulted in at least 83 deaths and 17,000 arrests across the country.<sup>82</sup> In Detroit, a riot lasted for nine days and ended with 85 African Americans arrested and 43



dead (Figures 5 and 6). The riots included mass looting, arson, and extreme street violence.<sup>83</sup> That summer, the governor of Michigan, George W. Romney, declared a state of emergency and sent the National Guard to Detroit.<sup>84</sup> Eventually, Romney asked President Lyndon B. Johnson to send federal troops into Detroit, and two brigades were dispatched from the Army's Airborne Divisions.<sup>85</sup> After the violent summer of 1967, politicians at every level of government formed bipartisan coalitions. President Johnson issued an executive order establishing the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the domestic unrest, while Michigan politicians recommended measures to establish a coalition to promote racial justice.<sup>86</sup> Civil unrest and Black violence in the summer of 1967 managed to unify American politicians.

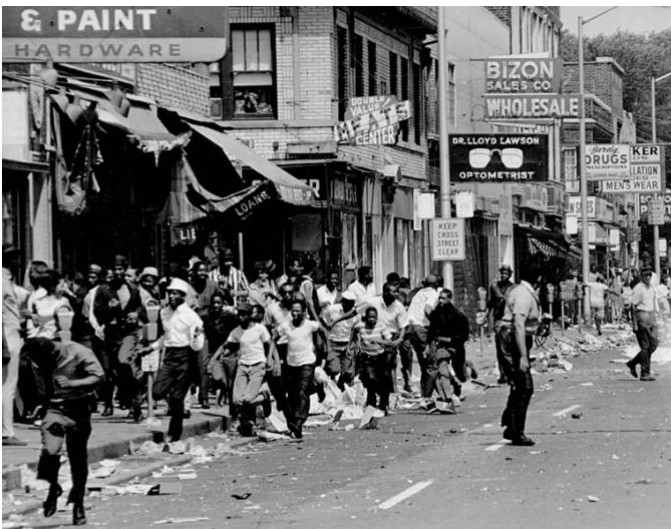


Figure 4: Detroit, Summer 1967

Violent events in the 1960s led to the swift and bipartisan passage of the 1968 Gun Control Act. Political assassinations and forceful social movements drove all branches of the Federal Government to take the legal action necessary to bring order back to the country. The violent riots of 1967 catalyzed reactionary political action. Essentially, most politicians, from both sides of the political spectrum, agreed that gun control legislation was crucial for the safety and security of American streets.<sup>87</sup> The Gun Control Act of 1968 represented Congress' response to a violent and out-of-control American society. Its bipartisan passage showcased that domestic safety was an issue not bound by political affiliation. Rather, the politicians who passed the Act in 1968 exemplified the benefits of political unity. Washington D.C. politicians were able to put aside political affiliations, and solely focus on the safety and security of the country. Given that the U.S. is currently witnessing a mass shooting epidemic and a skyrocketing number of youth casualties

due to firearms, why is the American Congress apprehensive about passing life-saving legislation right now?



Figure 3: Detroit, Summer 1967

### Analogue #2: The 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban

In August of 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was passed. Title XI of the Act, the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, prohibited the manufacture, transfer, and possession of semiautomatic assault weapons. It also banned magazines that accommodated ten rounds or more. The legislation had a "sunset clause" giving the ban an expiration date of 2004.<sup>88</sup> The Act passed for several reasons, the most important of which was America's rising crime rate, along with political mobilization from both parties to respond to domestic violence. The Federal Assault Weapons Ban reflected a nationwide reaction to an increasingly violent society. After the ban expired, it was evident that American gun violence had decreased during the ten-year period between 1994-2004.<sup>89</sup> NRA support in Congress also decreased during the ban, however after its expiration, NRA lobbying steadily rose.

### Homicide victimization rates, 1950-2010



Figure 5: Homicide Rate, 1950-2010

In 1994, President Bill Clinton, supported by a concerned American public, signed the Federal Assault Weapons Ban into law. Figure 7 shows American homicide victimization rates from 1950-2010.<sup>90</sup> From the early 1960s to the end of the 1970s, the homicide rate doubled. In 1980, the rate peaked at 10.2 homicides for every 100,000 people. The rate spiked again in the late 1980s and early 1990s to 9.8 homicides for every 100,000 people.<sup>91</sup> Americans were disturbed by this growing homicide and crime rate, especially in cities. The use of firearms in robberies was becoming widespread.<sup>92</sup> Rising crime drew the attention of politicians.

On November 27, 1978, the San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Harvey Milk were assassinated.<sup>93</sup> The two politicians were murdered by Dan White, another Supervisor on the Board. White shot and killed Moscone and Harvey after failing to be reelected to office. The following decade, on January 17, 1989, five children were murdered at their school in Stockton, California. The twenty-four-year-old, Patrick Purdy walked onto Cleveland Elementary School grounds, and fired over one hundred rounds from a semiautomatic rifle.<sup>94</sup> Purdy had an extensive criminal record from his teenage years, including charges for prostitution, drug dealing, and the possession of an illegal weapon. Two years before the shooting, he had been jailed for firing a semi-automatic weapon. California was shaken by the school shooting incident, given the weapon used and the age of the victims.<sup>95</sup> Purdy's violent murders in 1989 were hate crimes. He targeted Vietnamese and Cambodian children who had resettled in California after the Vietnam War.<sup>96</sup>

In the aftermath of the Stockton Schoolyard Shooting, California politicians and gun control advocates pushed for gun control within the state.<sup>97</sup> That same year, California passed the Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act, which banned the ownership and transfer of over fifty specific brands and models of firearms, which were classified as assault weapons. It banned mostly rifles, but also some pistols and shotguns.<sup>98</sup> The Act's passage shepherded in the Automated Firearms System, which provided California police with information about registered handguns and assault weapons.<sup>99</sup> After multiple mass shootings in California during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, politicians responded with quick legal action. California residents were unsettled by the level of firearm violence in the state, and after witnessing political and child murders, they understood that legal action was necessary to deter future violence.

In 1992, former mayor of San Francisco Dianne Feinstein was elected to the United States Senate to represent California. In 1978, Feinstein witnessed the assassinations of her coworkers Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk, which heavily influenced her political advocacy. While senator, Feinstein championed gun control and led the fight in Congress for the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban.<sup>100</sup> Her top priority was gun regulation, and her strong advocacy came to fruition, when in 1993, the Bill she co-authored passed in the Senate. Her aim was to end the manufacture and sale of fourteen categories of semi-automatic assault weapons.<sup>101</sup> However, the Bill took another year to pass in the House. In May of 1994, a bipartisan group of former Presidents, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, wrote a letter to the House of Representatives, urging them to pass the Bill. Finally, in August of that year, the Bill was passed in the House, and was signed into law by the President on September 13.

### Mass shooting deaths in the US from 1981 to 2017

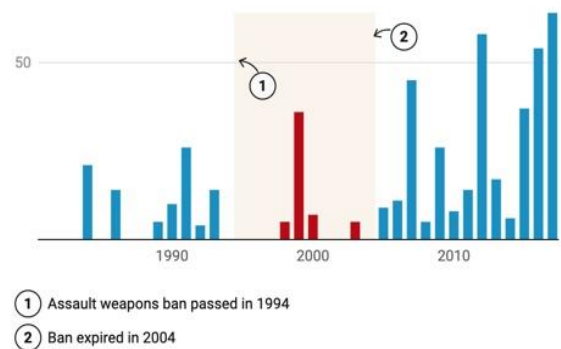


Figure 6: Mass Deaths, 1981-2017

The National Assault Weapons Ban lowered the criminal use of firearms, and reduced the gun murder rate in the United States.<sup>102</sup> Criminal use of assault weapons declined 20% from 1994 to 1995.<sup>103</sup> During the Ban, mass shooting fatalities were 70% less likely to occur.<sup>104</sup> Figure 8 shows mass shooting deaths in the U.S. from 1981 to 2017.<sup>105</sup> As seen from the chart, from 2004 onward, there was an immediate and continuous rise in American shootings. Even including the 1999 Columbine High School Shooting, the ten year period of the Assault Weapons Ban saw lower average annual rates of both mass shootings and firearm deaths than before and after. According to a study by Northwestern Medicine, the ten-year ban likely prevented as many as 11 mass shootings, and had it remained in place after 2004, it might have averted as many as 30 more mass shootings.<sup>106</sup> In 2019,

the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary reported that the Ban reduced gun massacres by 37%, and after the Ban expired, gun massacres rose by 183%.<sup>107</sup> If the Assault Weapons Ban lowered the number of gun-related deaths in the United States, why is it not in effect today? Currently the U.S. is experiencing its highest rate of mass shootings in history. Deaths are especially high among youth.<sup>108</sup> As the data shows, a national ban on assault weapons saved a considerable number of American lives.

After the National Assault Weapons Ban expired in 2004, NRA lobbying in Washington increased.<sup>109</sup> Figure 9 shows annual lobbying by the National Rifle Association (NRA).<sup>110</sup> From 2005 to 2009, NRA lobbying increased each year at an alarming rate. Whereas, during the Assault Weapons Ban, the group’s lobbying steadily decreased. An increase of NRA lobbying in Washington is dangerous for American domestic society. The group routinely expounds a series of common myths, specifically designed to undermine legitimate arguments for commonsense gun reform. The NRA falsely argues that mental health is to blame for gun violence, and that gun violence happens everywhere, not just in the United States.<sup>111</sup> The NRA continues to be an active player in American politics. In 2021, it spent \$4.2 million on lobbying.<sup>112</sup> This is a dangerous statistic, given the group’s tendency to spread misinformation and encourage firearm ownership. As long as the NRA continues to donate money to politicians, gun control reform will be more difficult. The freeze of American policy on commonsense gun regulation highlights the NRA’s influence in politics. While the NRA continues to donate millions of dollars to Washington politicians, there is little hope they will enact proper gun control measures.

increase in the total number of American gun-related deaths.<sup>113</sup> The issue of firearm violence is impacting the American education system. From 2000-2021, there were a total of 276 casualties from active shooter incidents at American elementary and secondary schools. During the same time, there were 157 casualties in active shooter incidents at postsecondary institutions.<sup>114</sup> In total, there have been 783 shootings with deaths or injuries at American elementary and secondary schools since 2000. Since the 2015-2016 academic year, school shootings have grown at an unprecedented rate (excluding the 2019-2020 school year, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic).<sup>115</sup> The history of American firearm violence provides deeper insight for policymakers to understand the current situation. It is important to highlight the historic patterns of American gun violence and instability, so as to break the vicious cycle of inappropriate firearm use.

American gun ownership increases when there is a sitting Conservative president, as well as when there are majority Conservatives in Congress. From 1980 to 1990, there was a 2% increase in American households owning one or more firearm.<sup>116</sup> Ronald Reagan became president in 1980, and against the backdrop of the Cold War, he leaned in heavily to Conservative ideology. Most notable was Reagan’s Conservative approach to foreign policy. His administration sought to achieve “peace through strength.” During Reagan’s two terms in office, he increased defense spending by 35%.<sup>117</sup> In 1990, two years after Reagan left office, gun ownership reached its highest point during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 47%.<sup>118</sup> It appears that when the highest level of power asserts vitriolic Conservative rhetoric, and paints American policy as ‘we vs. them,’ American civilians feel the need to own a firearm for self-protection.

During Reagan’s presidency from 1980-1988, the Senate was also Conservative/Republican. Together, Reagan and the Republican Senate were determined to restore traditional values and increase military spending.<sup>119</sup> Reagan was the first American president endorsed by the NRA. This support, and the Conservative approach to politics in the Senate, fundamentally changed the perception of gun ownership in the minds of the American public. It was Reagan’s era that gave birth to the ultra-conservative view of the Second Amendment today.<sup>120</sup> In a 1983 speech at the Annual Members’ Banquet of the National Rifle Association, Reagan remarked, “We will never disarm any American who seeks to protect his or her family from fear and harm.”<sup>121</sup> Against the backdrop of the Cold War, Reagan’s fear induced rhetoric was not uncommon. In 1983, the President famously labeled the Soviet Union as an “evil

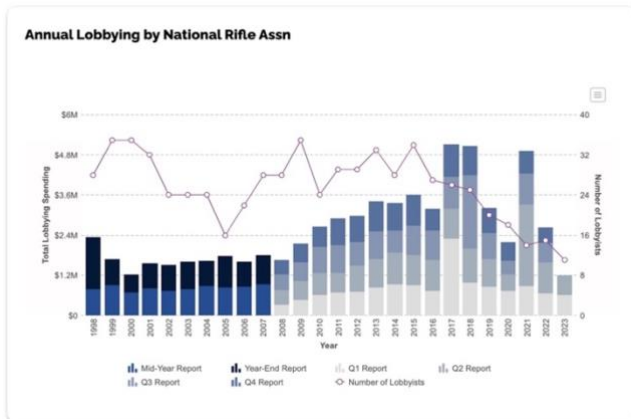


Figure 7: Annual Lobbying by the NRA

APPLIED HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

As of 2021, approximately eight in ten U.S. murders involved a firearm. Since 2019, there has been a 23%

empire.”<sup>122</sup> During this time of heightened ideological tension, Reagan stressed a theme of national decline, with the goal of restoring American Christian values and patriotism.<sup>123</sup> Ultra-conservatives seemed to reinvent themselves as militant crusaders against a Progressive agenda that included gay rights, and equity for women and people of color.<sup>124</sup> The government’s approach to public policy instilled fear in the American public and subconsciously promoted self-protection through firearm ownership.

American gun ownership again increased during the presidency of Donald Trump from 2016 to 2020. In 2016, when Donald Trump entered office, 39% of American households owned at least one firearm. In 2018, after only two years of Trump’s presidency, the percentage grew to 43%.<sup>125</sup> During Trump’s presidency, both the House and Senate were also controlled by Republicans. This political atmosphere was rife with Conservative ideology. Trump vocalized a long list of adversaries, ranging from American news media companies to foreign heads of state. He imposed strict immigration restrictions and withdrew from multiple international organizations, all under his ‘America first’ and isolationist agenda.<sup>126</sup> Trump hooked his base, using tactics he learned from the Reagan administration. He emphasized American society in decline and gained wide support of his ‘national renewal’ campaign.<sup>127</sup> Trump’s Conservative rhetoric and ‘savior-like’ identity dovetails with the increase of American household gun ownership during his presidency. From the perspective of Trump supporters, it was logical to buy firearms given their fear of ‘others’ and the perceived threats to traditional American society. However, Trump’s definition of ‘other’ was commonly left ambiguous, as he sometimes coined the term for foreigners, journalists, or even the entire justice system.<sup>128</sup> The legacy of Trump’s presidency includes a decline of trust in the democratic system, and consequently deepened the concept of self-protection for many Americans, leading to the rise in gun ownership.

The 1960s and the 1990s provide precedent for the United States’ current state of affairs. America in the 1960s experienced an increase of firearm ownership, political instability, and social unrest. Because of the rise of crime during the decade, most notoriously remembered for its political assassinations, and volatile domestic tensions, U.S. politicians passed the 1968 Gun Control Act. It is important to note that the Act passed swiftly and efficiently because of consensus in the American Federal Government. In 1968, the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court was dominated by Democrats. Most politicians understood the threat of

violence on American streets and were unified in their goal to stabilize a chaotic country. In 1994, the U.S. Federal Government again reached consensus and passed the Assault Weapons Ban. This was in response to increased firearm violence and crime. In the early 1990s, the American homicide victimization rate spiked to 9.8 homicides for every 100,00 people. This was in stark contrast to the figures just one generation before in 1960, when the rate was only 4 homicides for every 100,000 people.<sup>129</sup> President Bill Clinton, and the Democrats in Congress, reacted quickly to the issue of firearm violence during the 1990s and pushed for a permanent assault weapons ban. Several events catalyzed American politicians, including the 1989 Stockton Schoolyard shooting. The tragedy in California, more commonly known as the Cleveland Elementary School shooting, was the first American school shooting. It left five children dead. The killer, Patrick Purdy fired hundreds of rounds on the school playground with his semiautomatic rifle.<sup>130</sup> Partly in response to this unprecedented and previously unimaginable form of violence against American children, Congress successfully passed gun control through the Assault Weapons Ban under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.

While the passage of the 1968 Gun Control Act was relatively swift, the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban was not.<sup>131</sup> In 1994, the Senate was controlled by Republicans which led to a slower and dragged-out process in Congress to pass the Bill. Whereas the 1968 Act was introduced to Congress just a year before its passage, the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban was introduced to Congress by Senator Dianne Feinstein in 1992, two years before its enactment. It took another year of concessions for it to be passed in the Senate in 1993. In May of 1994, a bipartisan group of former presidents, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan wrote a letter to the House of Representatives urging them to pass the Bill.<sup>132</sup> Ultimately, the Bill only passed because of political compromises including an agreement that the Ban only be enacted for ten years.

Both the 1960s and the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban are relevant to the issues of increased firearm violence and school shootings today. In both cases, the U.S. Federal Government responded to acts of domestic violence with new legislation. When American society witnessed mass violent demonstrations during the 1960s, as well as the growth of firearm use, the government reacted. Again, during the 1990s when American gun ownership and crime increased, the government reacted with gun control legislation. Both the 1968 and 1994 laws restricting gun ownership reflect politicians’ unified

response to domestic threat. While Democrats and Republicans disagreed on politics, both parties agreed that American safety was not a polarized issue. Politicians from both ends of the political spectrum were able to put aside their ideological differences and work together to prioritize the safety of American citizens. Today, American students are bearing the brunt of gun violence, and are dying at an unprecedented rate due to firearms. The safety and security of American citizens need not be a political issue, as demonstrated by the 1960s and early 1990s. Congress' current divisiveness, which make student-deaths a political issue, is morally bankrupt. While freedom of political parties forms the root of American democracy, it is important to remember that domestic safety trumps political debate. There will be no political debate, and in turn no democracy, if children continue to be unjustly murdered at an alarming rate.

Gun control legislation does not get passed when American politics is highly polarized. Today, American politicians are highly ideological. More commonly than not, they believe in and vote for sets of policies, with little bipartisan overlap.<sup>133</sup> Unfortunately, Party identification has surpassed common-sense ideals, which will only lead to stronger polarization, as each side continues to harbor a strong dislike of the other. Because of this division in the U.S. government, top priority issues like gun violence and school shootings are being overlooked, with Party association dictating the merit of the conversation.

Why is the safety of students' lives being characterized as simply another political argument? In a democracy, politicians are supposed to represent the best interests of their districts and the people within them. Statistics and experiences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, demonstrate that loosely regulated gun control is not in the best interest of American students. Going forward, U.S. policymakers must prioritize their jobs as representatives and put aside Party affiliations on common-sense issues to protect the lives of innocent Americans. Lives can be saved with the implementation of a permanent assault weapons ban. If Americans continue to defend the Second Amendment and reject a ban, then federal laws requiring background checks and permits are a wise starting point. There is little expectation that one of the most radical solutions, repealing the Second Amendment, will happen. But unfortunately, another radical solution, arming teachers, stands more chance of success. A solution that proposes increasing the number of guns in schools is foreseeable. The death of American students is a pressing national issue. If American policymakers can at least agree on the severity of the issue, and that the root of the problem is

access to firearms, then the conversation can become meaningful. Both sides do not need to take extreme measures, but instead need to combat the issue with the integrity and importance it deserves. Federal gun control legislation, beginning with stricter background checks must be immediate for the sake of children's lives, the stability of American schools, and the safety of teachers.

## POLICY OPTIONS AND ANALYSIS

### *Policy Options Overview*

In 2022, President Joe Biden signed into law the first federal gun control legislation since the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban, a gap of nearly 30 years.<sup>134</sup> The bill included \$750 million to help states implement crisis intervention programs, which can be used to manage red flag programs. Red flag laws, also known as Extreme Risk Protection Order laws, allow courts to temporarily seize firearms from anyone believed to be a threat to themselves or others.<sup>135</sup> The 2022 bill also expanded the background check system for prospective gun buyers under the age of 21, and poured more federal money into mental health resources in communities and schools across the country.<sup>136</sup> However, given the increased polarization within the U.S. Federal Government, many of the measures Biden wanted to be included in the bill were omitted. Approximately half (49%) of Americans believe that making it harder for people to legally obtain guns, will result in fewer mass shootings. The other 50% of Americans believe that enacting gun control will make no difference, or it might even result in more mass shootings.<sup>137</sup> However, based on the same survey administered by Pew Research, nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults agree with the 2022-gun control bill signed by President Biden.<sup>138</sup> Because of polarization plaguing American politics, gun control is delayed. These statistics represent Americans' inclination to side with an issue based on their party affiliation, yet current legislation disregards the majority's opinion that gun violence is a serious problem.

### *Option 1: Arm Teachers*

One policy option that is heard, especially among the American Right, is to arm teachers at school. About two-thirds of Republicans agree that arming teachers is the best solution to gun violence in public schools.<sup>139</sup> Since the rise of school shootings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many American teachers feel threatened in their classrooms. Owning a firearm for self-protection, therefore is assumed to reassure teachers of their safety. Under this logic, politicians believe that the answer to gun violence

lies in more guns. In the case of an active school shooter, teachers can return fire and protect not only themselves, but their students. However, should teachers be responsible for the protection of their students' lives? Traditionally, the teaching profession assumes that scholars of their field are responsible for educating youth and guiding students towards academic success. Should teachers be expected to now arm themselves and risk their lives for their profession? More than half of educators believe that arming teachers is not the solution to gun violence, and only 20% say it will make schools safer.<sup>140</sup> In fact, the School Social Work Association of America opposes the law enforcement approach to the gun-violence problem in schools. They believe that schools must not have more armed police or security guards because this approach has not made schools safer in the past. Resources can be used instead to support programs and safety alternatives that do work.<sup>141</sup> Instead of answering an issue of violence with more violence, many teachers agree that systems of threat reporting and intervention, as well as a climate that encourages adults to prevent violence before it occurs, are more beneficial policy options than arming educators.<sup>142</sup> The United States is the only country in the world to allow concealed carry for educators. Thirty-two states have this provision.<sup>143</sup> Ironically, the U.S. is also the only country in the world witnessing a mass shooting epidemic in their schools. The argument that the solution to gun-violence is more guns lacks any merit. Historical trends in gun ownership and school violence demonstrate that to be the case. Furthermore, young students are especially prone and influenced by their surroundings, so how will the presence of firearms in the classroom subconsciously affect the developing minds of young learners? It will simply encourage an atmosphere of violence, danger, and threat. Increased ownership of firearms is also proven to increase violence. Data shows that when the percentage of American firearm ownership increases, there is an uptick in American school shootings. For example, from 2016 to 2022, gun ownership increased 6%. During the same period, active school shooter incidents substantially rose each year.<sup>144</sup> More guns are not the solution to the issue of mass shootings.

### *Option 2: Permanent Assault Weapons Ban*

From 1994 to 2004, an Assault Weapons Ban was law in the United States. However, because of political concessions, the bill had a ten-year limit, and expired in 2004. The Act banned a group of military-style semiautomatic weapons and prohibited ammunition magazines capable of holding more than ten rounds.

Recently, academics have published on the effects that the Ban had on gun violence. Generally, scholars agree that the Assault Weapons Ban decreased the total firearm-related homicides from 1994-2004. Most notably, the Ban decreased gun violence in three of the most dangerous American cities: Memphis, Detroit, and Houston.<sup>145</sup> Another study found that at the onset of the Ban, prices of assault weapons rose substantially, in turn reducing the availability of assault weapons to criminal users in the very short run. Unfortunately, a surge in assault weapons production just before the Ban caused prices to fall in the long-term.<sup>146</sup> Another problem the Ban caused was the increase of firearms smuggled into the country from abroad. Therefore, to achieve the desired effects of the 1994 Ban, a new system must be introduced to deter the flow of illegal firearms into the country.<sup>147</sup> A high concentration of unregistered and illegal weapons from abroad allows citizens, and more specifically criminals, to purchase and sell these weapons. If the Federal Government unifies and prioritizes American safety above political disagreement by enacting another permanent Assault Weapons Ban, it is crucial that they learn from past mistakes. American voices throughout the country are advocating in favor of a permanent Ban. In 2023, the National Parent Teacher Association reiterated their call for a permanent Assault Weapons Ban to save the lives of American students.<sup>148</sup> If Conservatives want parents to continue to play a larger role in the education system, they can start by listening to the biggest national parent organization in the country. The PTA represents parents' interests and concerns in schools at the local level. They condemn school violence and are concerned about the safety of their children. It is telling that the PTA issued a statement calling for another Assault Weapons Ban. Congress might consider listening. Some politicians are staunchly in favor of another Ban. Dennis Kucinich, the Former Democratic Mayor of Cleveland, Ohio published a position paper on the issue of gun violence and school shootings, calling for a permanent Assault Weapons Ban.<sup>149</sup>

### *Option 3: Universal Background Check Requirement Under Federal Law*

In the United States, federal law only requires background checks for guns purchased at federally licensed gun dealerships. However, only 40% of firearms sold in the U.S. are sold through a federally licensed dealer.<sup>150</sup> The majority of guns are sold at gun shows and flea markets. It is crucial to note that private gun sales are not subject to regulations nor the federal background check requirement. According to the National Association

of Arms, there are more than one hundred gun shows every weekend in the United States. Annually, there are approximately 5,200. The Association also estimates that more than five million Americans attend gun shows every year, and that such shows generate billions of dollars annually.<sup>151</sup> There is no logical reason for the U.S. government to not enforce universal background checks on the sale of all guns in the country, especially given the rate of youth deaths related to firearms. In addition, most states do not have laws requiring background checks. In 21 states there are some restrictions on gun show sales, but they are not consistent. School shootings are less likely in states with mandatory background checks on gun and ammunition purchases.<sup>152</sup> For example, Rhode Island state law requires all firearm purchases to complete and sign an application form, which the seller must then send to the state police or local chief of police for a background check. Rhode Island has also never experienced a school shooting.<sup>153</sup> Given that Conservative states are less likely to enforce regulations around the Second Amendment, the Federal Government needs to step in and enact commonsense gun-safety legislation. Most Americans can agree that all firearm sellers, whether federally licensed or private, must not sell deadly weapons to individuals with histories of mental illness or domestic abuse. When will politicians prioritize students' lives over commodity revenue? The enforcement of a universal background check for firearm purchases need not be so politicized, especially given the level of danger and responsibility required to handle such forceful weapons.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is unlikely that the U.S. will sabotage its devotion to the Second Amendment, there are two policy options that are reasonable for politicians to consider. Based on data from the first Federal Assault Weapons Ban from 1994–2004, Congress must reenact a second and permanent ban on these military style weapons. Additionally, federal law must require universal background checks. The majority of Americans support these actions. Today, background checks for gun purchases are only mandatory at federally licensed gun dealerships. However, most guns in the U.S. are purchased from private sellers at gun shows and flea markets. This must be regulated.

Recent scholarship has examined and analyzed the first Federal Assault Weapons Ban, which only lasted for ten years. Scholars generally agree that the ban lowered firearm deaths and decreased violent crime. Data proves that the firearm homicide rate spiked during the early 1990s, but after the ban was implemented, the rate

significantly decreased. How can politicians look at hard data, and still argue against a ban? Their position is equivalent to advocating against saving lives. The Republican Party, which values law enforcement and a 'hard on crime' approach to politics, is undermining its own agenda. If Conservatives want to reduce crime and decrease American violence, especially in cities, the enactment of a permanent assault weapons ban is essential. Yes, many Conservatives are obsessed with guns, but citizens do not need weapons of mass violence. A pistol or a rifle is a safer alternative for hunting or protecting oneself, and there is no need for the ordinary citizen to have easy access to weapons of war.



*Figure 8: One Year After the 2022 Uvalde School Shooting*

Politicians must also support universal background checks for all gun purchases in the United States. The majority of voters, Democrat and Republican, agree on this action. It is a commonsense measure. It is not extreme. Criminals and the mentally ill must not own deadly weapons.<sup>154</sup> If background checks are already required for all federally licensed gun purchases, the same restrictions must apply to gun shows and private sales. Studies prove that most weapons are purchased privately. The rest of the world is already appalled by the United States' stance on guns. Criminals having easy access to deadly weapons genuinely horrifies many people living outside of the U.S. If the United States wants to continue supporting the Second Amendment, then it makes sense to also regulate its provisions. Congress does for other Amendments. For instance, there are limitations on the freedom of speech. Republicans have obsessed and debated over the Fourteenth Amendment, which grants every American the right to life, liberty, and property. Can politicians work and converse productively about the Second Amendment in the same way they do the Fourteenth?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Drew Desilver, *The polarization in today's Congress has roots that go back decades* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2022), [URL](#).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Const. amend. I.

<sup>3</sup> "Hate Speech and Hate Crime," *American Library Association*, accessed November 28, 2023, [URL](#).

<sup>4</sup> "Hate Crimes and Gun Violence," *Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence*, accessed November 28, 2023, [URL](#).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Const. amend. II.

<sup>6</sup> Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, Pub L. No. 103-322, 108 Stat. 1796 (1994). [URL](#).

<sup>7</sup> "17 Facts About Gun Violence and School Shootings," *Sandy Hook Promise*, 2023, [URL](#).

<sup>8</sup> "74 people have been killed or injured by guns at American schools this year," *NPR*, March 29, 2023, [URL](#).

<sup>9</sup> "More than 356,000 students have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2018, [URL](#).

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## APPENDIX A – LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth and gun violence in the United States gets worse by the year. Policy analysts and scholars have addressed the issue, along with its consequences for public schools and students. There is less research on how the ultra-Conservative movement within the Republican Party influenced and perpetuated violence in America's youth, and ultimately in American public schools. The United States is engaged in a Culture War with ultra-conservatives at one end of the spectrum, and Progressives at the other. This overview of policy will look at papers addressing the issues of youth violence, gun violence, and present-day U.S. Culture Wars. While there is a considerable amount of research on the history of Conservatism within the United States, there is less literature that addresses the group's influence on Americans, let alone the influence of conservatism on children and students.

Several policy papers center on the issues of youth violence and extremism. Scholars such as Jeffrey Fagan, a Columbia Law Professor, and Peta Lowe, the former Director for Juvenile Justice in the New South Wales Department of Justice, published articles related to youth violence and extremism. Fagan's 2002 article *Policing Guns and Youth Violence*, focuses on the epidemic of youth violence in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States.<sup>1</sup> He argues that policing alone cannot reduce youth violence, but by carefully balancing law enforcement with community collaboration, police departments can ultimately help shift the social norms which contribute to youth gun violence. His Australian counterpart, Peta Lowe's 2020 article titled *Youth and Violent Extremism* explains why young people are prone to extremist violence and why a response is needed from the global community to counter violent extremism in children.<sup>2</sup> Much of the research regarding youth violence comes from the global community. This highlights the need for more research in the United States.

There are also policy papers published on the issue of American gun violence and children. Scholars Chelsea Parsons, Giovanni Rocco, Maggie Thompson, and Eugenio Weigend co-authored an article in 2018 for the Center for American Progress, an American Liberal think tank, titled *America's Youth Under Fire*.<sup>3</sup> In their report, the authors argue that young people in the United States bear the brunt of the nation's gun violence and many of them are at the forefront of efforts to stop it by advocating for

stricter gun control policies.<sup>4</sup> They show that the U.S. gun violence epidemic disproportionately affects young people, and particularly young people of color. While their research focuses on the United States, the authors include statistical information for each state within the U.S., including data on gun violence in Rhode Island. The data, collected from the Center for Disease Control (CDC), found that Rhode Island falls below average on the national scale for the number of gun-related deaths. In fact, Rhode Island is rated number 36 in the country for the number of gun-related deaths per year. Parsons and her colleagues provide information on who exactly is most susceptible to gun violence in the country, which is influenced by race, ethnicity, and gender.

There are a handful of researchers focused on the rise of Far-Right ideology globally. In 2020, Vincent Auger, a political science professor, published an article, *Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?*<sup>5</sup> In his article, Auger claims that violence committed by individuals and groups associated with Far-Right ideologies is increasing globally. He starts with David C. Rapoport's analysis that there have been four "waves" of terrorist activity since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: an "anarchist" wave, an "anti-colonial"/nationalist wave, a "Leftist" wave (influenced by Marxist ideologies during the Cold War), and finally a "religious" wave. He then argues that the current Right-Wing terror represents a present fifth wave, including within the United States.

From a national perspective, there is research on American culture wars. In 2021 William Gale and Darrell West published a policy paper for Brookings Institute titled, *Is the U.S. headed for another Civil War?*<sup>6</sup> Brookings Institute is a nonpartisan think-tank located in Washington D.C. and is known for its centrist leaning content that is factually motivated. The purpose of Gale and West's article was to analyze data collected by a national survey, polled by John Zogby, an American public opinion pollster, which asked the question is another civil war likely. The survey found that a plurality of Americans (46%) believe that a future civil war is likely, 43% feel it is unlikely, and 11% are unsure. Diving further into the data, Gale and West found that a civil war seemed more likely for younger people (53%), than for older ones (31%), and for those residing in the American South (49%). The sole source utilized in their article was the 2021 National Survey Poll. The use of one source is a limitation of this article. Other scholars have also contributed to this discussion. Tim Walker is a Senior Writer for the National

Education Association, and his research focuses on the influence of American culture wars on public schools in the United States. In his article, *The Culture War's Impact on Public Schools*, Walker argues that political attacks which target inclusive curriculum and divide communities are undermining public education and its role in educating for American democracy.<sup>7</sup> Walker adds that the targeting of public education is largely funded and supported by ultra-conservatives. There is a pressing need for new discussions on American Culture Wars and its impact on the country's public education system, and ultimately on students themselves.

A policy paper published by Frederick Hess, the Director of Education Policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, outlines the ideal American education system according to Conservatives. The American Enterprise Institute is a center-right think tank located in Washington D.C. that researches government, politics, and social welfare. The purpose of Hess' article, *The Next Conservative Education Agenda*, is to address education policies that Conservatives promote.<sup>8</sup> Hess argues that the Right have a chance to carry a mantle of

broadly shared values which can appeal to both Conservatives and Moderates alike. The three main values that Hess argues can be shared among all parents include responsibility, community, and self-determination. While Hess is right in his claim that most Americans support these values, he underestimates the role of individual interpretation. Does the role of responsibility differ for Conservatives and Liberals? Might responsibility for Conservatives focus on different elements of life compared to the Liberal idea of responsibility? The limitation to Hess' research is that he claims certain attributes are shared among all Americans, but he ignores individual interpretations.

While scholars address American issues such as youth violence, gun violence, and culture wars, there is a lack of research on the influence of Far-Right Conservatism on public school students. For years, ultra-Conservatives have perpetuated gun violence in America with extremist beliefs on gun laws and a staunch protection of the Second Amendment.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Fagan, *Policing Guns and Youth Violence* (The Future of Children 12, no. 2, 2002): 131-151, [URL](#).

<sup>2</sup> Peta Lowe, *Youth and Violent Extremism* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), [URL](#).

<sup>3</sup> Chelsea, Parsons, Giovanni Rocco, Maggie Thompson, and Eugenio Weigend, *America's Youth Under Fire* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2018), [URL](#). Chelsea Parsons is the Vice President of Gun Violence Prevention at American Progress and Giovanni Rocco is the press associate for Generation Progress, where he works to uplift the voices of young people in the media. Maggie Thompson is the executive director of Generation Progress, although prior to her joining Generation Progress, she served in the Obama administration at the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Eugenio Weigend is the associate

director for Gun Violence Prevention at American Progress and his work focuses on public security.

<sup>4</sup> Katie Reilly and Kim Bubello, *See Photos from the National School Walkout Led by Students Protesting Gun Violence* (Time USA, accessed May 2, 2023), [URL](#).

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Auger, *Right Wing Terror: A Global Fifth Wave?* (Perspectives on Terrorism 14, no. 3, 2020): 87-97, [URL](#).

<sup>6</sup> William Gale and Darrell M. West, *Is the U.S. headed for another Civil War?* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2021), [URL](#).

<sup>7</sup> Tim Walker, *The Culture War's Impact on Public Schools* (Washington D.C.: National Education Association, 2023), [URL](#).

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Hess, *The Next Conservative Education Agenda* (Washington D.C.: National Affairs, 2020), [URL](#).



## APPENDIX B – LEGAL FRAMEWORK

*Federal*

How has American legal precedent influenced a violent culture in the United States? More specifically what are the driving forces causing violence in schools, hate speech, and out-of-control gun ownership? The answers lay in ultra-Conservative ideology and their exploitation of American legal precedent. The First and Second Amendments to the U.S. Constitution are central to understanding how ultra-conservatives have adapted America's founding laws to fuel their own political movement, which is driving this country's school shooting epidemic. Further, the Conservative outlook on gun control policies and hate speech influences a younger generation to view different groups in a violent light. America's present-day culture wars accentuate difference, and cause citizens to view "the other" as a threat to the country. The Far-Right's practice of not preaching tolerance ultimately breeds a violent culture that manifests in frequent school shootings.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution grants every American citizen the freedom of speech, among other civil liberties.<sup>1</sup> In an increasingly polarized country that feeds on hatred of differences, how can violent speech or hate speech be curtailed? Is hate speech considered free speech? The Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 originated in Public Law 42-22, the National Defense Authorization Act. It addressed hate speech and its legal status in American public society. The law defines hate speech as "a prominent characteristic of a violent crime motivated by bias."<sup>2</sup> According to the law, hate speech includes racist and discriminatory speech towards another individual based on their skin color, ethnicity, and religion. In turn, hate speech can serve as the trigger for hate crimes, inherently motivated by bias and prejudice. U.S. ultra-conservatives spread hate speech through social media platforms, such as TruthSocial. This platform provides a common ground for Conservatives unwelcome on the Twitter platform (now renamed "X").<sup>3</sup> The spread of hate speech is the first step in instigating mass violence, and ultra-conservatives defend their First Amendment right against the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, stating that it hinders their civic right to free speech of any kind and in any form.<sup>4</sup>

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects an individual's right to bear arms.<sup>5</sup> The United

States is in the midst of a public health crisis due to the misuse of firearms and the availability of weapons on a mass scale. According to a recent Pew Research study, there was a 43% increase in American deaths related to guns between 2010 and 2020.<sup>6</sup> The United States is the only developed country in the world experiencing a severe public health crisis related to the misuse of firearms, and it is particularly impactful on children.<sup>7</sup> Public Law 73-474, the National Firearms Act was enacted in 1934 during the midst of the Great Depression.<sup>8</sup> It imposed a tax on the making and transfer of firearms. Additionally, it included an occupational tax on individuals and businesses that import, manufacture, and deal firearms. The Act was a federal response to the rise of organized crime in the U.S., and therefore only applied to firearms typically used by criminals. Consequently, it failed to include illegal and black-market firearms not listed under the Act. The National Firearms Act was amended in 1968 with the Gun Control Act.<sup>9</sup> The new revised version of the Act further regulated guns in the country and aimed to control interstate and foreign commerce in firearms. It included transportation and licensing provisions. The amended version of this Act expanded the definition of what was considered a "machine gun," and brought more firearms in the country under federal regulation. In 1986 the National Firearms Act was amended a second time to create the Firearm Owners' Protection Act.<sup>10</sup> This new legislation prohibited the transfer or possession of machine guns, although it included exceptions for government agencies, and those who lawfully possessed a machine gun before the Bill's enactment which was on May 19, 1986. The political debate about gun ownership continues in the United States. Ultra-conservatives demand the right to bear arms based on the Second Amendment. According to most Conservatives, there can be no revisions or prohibitions on firearms because of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In addition to their use of the first two Amendments of the U.S. Constitution, ultra-conservatives also justify the spread of hate-speech using other federal legislation. These include the No Child Left Behind Act and the (pending) Parental Bill of Rights. Public Law 107-110, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and was aimed at helping disadvantaged students. Section 118 of the Act concerns parental involvement in public schools, as well as parental consent

to children's academic lessons.<sup>11</sup> The law states that educational agencies that receive federal funding must develop "jointly with, agree on with, and distribute to, parents of participating children" a written parent involvement policy sheet. One of the hopes for the No Child Left Behind Act was to build strong parental involvement in the public school system to improve the academic quality of American schools. Today, many ultra-conservative parents in the United States use the No Child Left Behind Act to assert their power and voices in local public schools to implement their own political agenda. For example, in Florida parents are notorious for getting involved in the state's public education system. The teaching of critical race theory is banned from public schools because Conservatives believe that it fits into a larger progressive liberal narrative.<sup>12</sup> Does the prohibition of certain lessons in the classroom take away teachers' First Amendment right to their freedom of speech? Ultra-conservatives defend freedom of speech until it is used against their own political agenda. Or they take advantage of their First Amendment right by injecting their values and beliefs into public school classrooms.

In March of 2023, the Parental Bill of Rights passed in the House, although its status in the Senate is pending.<sup>13</sup> The Parental Bill of Rights establishes various parental and guardian rights over K-12 education. This Bill gives parents legal rights to review school curriculum, books, and other educational resources before they are used in classrooms and schools. If the Bill is passed, parents will have more access to information on their children's teachers, access to school records, and they will be able to physically visit their child in school during school hours. The passage of this Bill also requires the Department of Education to withhold federal education funds from states not in compliance. Given that there is an existing issue of intruder access into schools, how does giving more individuals access to the inside of schools alleviate the problem? American Culture Wars are embedded in the proposed Parental Bill of Rights. If passed, the bill might cause increased harm to the public school system and American students. The more parents become involved in school curriculum, the more likely it is for educational content to become morphed and adapted to fit parents' political values and beliefs. How much of a role should parents play in the education of their children? American teachers are qualified and certified to teach the country's youth, but parents' interference in the classroom continues to contribute to

a system that undermines the role of accredited educators. If the Bill is passed, this cycle will continue. Communities will need to consider who possesses a greater degree of authority in students' education: approved and trained educators or parents?

### *Rhode Island*

Rhode Island is traditionally a progressive and liberal state. The Rhode Island General Assembly includes the state's Representatives and Senators, and Democrats dominate. The

Rhode Island General Assembly published the last physical copy of the Rhode Island Code in 1956, although revisions and new laws are reflected in the online version. In the state, there are specific laws that intersect with the First Amendment and the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, including its criminal and education laws. It is important to understand Rhode Island criminal offense and education laws in order to create a deeper understanding as to how the state interprets the first two Amendments. Do Rhode Island Criminal Offense laws contradict those at the federal level? How do Rhode Island Education laws incorporate the increasing need for safe and secure schools? The study of Rhode Island law acts as a case study to better understand measures that states are taking to assure school security and safety.

Historically, Rhode Island education Law focuses on the needs of students and teachers, but more recent laws concern students' First and Second Amendment rights. Several Education laws pertain to Rhode Island's interpretation of the First Amendment, such as those listed in Chapter 12 of the Rhode Island Codebook under the "Rights and Duties of Teachers Generally," and "Students Journalists' Freedom of Expression." One Rhode Island law asserts that all teachers must "implant and cultivate in the minds of all children committed to his or her care the principals of morality and virtue."<sup>14</sup> However, there is no definition given for morality nor virtue. Is morality subjective? How about virtue? Without a proper consensus or definition of these two terms, how are teachers able to implement morality and virtue into their lessons? Additionally, Title 16 Chapter 109 of Rhode Island Education Law centers on student journalists' freedom of expression. The law states that student journalists can exercise freedom of speech in both school-sponsored media and non-school sponsored media.<sup>15</sup> This freedom does not apply to slander or acts that interfere

with federal laws. The 1969 *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* Supreme Court case protects students First Amendment rights at school, unless they pose a credible threat to the safety and function of their school.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Rhode Island students are free to express themselves in public schools, until they present a harm to the functionality of their school. How are school authorities able to deter violence in schools if students are given unlimited freedoms until after they already posed a credible threat?

Along with Rhode Island Education laws that pertain to the First Amendment, there are several criminal offense and education regulations tied to the Second Amendment. These Rhode Island laws were crafted in order to deter violence in the state, and ultimately within its public schools. Rhode Island General Law § 16-21-18 prohibits students from bringing or possessing firearms on school premises.<sup>17</sup> The law sets penalties for children who bring a firearm to school, and the term ‘weapons’ is defined in accordance with federal law 18 U.S.C. § 921, and details specific firearm definitions.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Chapter 47 of Rhode Island Criminal Law prohibits the possession of firearms by minors.<sup>19</sup> Any person under the age of eighteen in Rhode Island cannot own or use any firearm unless they are in the presence of a parent, guardian, or supervising adult. More specifically, minors are only allowed to handle a firearm at a shooting range, under the supervision of an adult. Finally, Chapter 47

requires a license or permit for any adult carrying a pistol.<sup>20</sup> The law states that Rhode Islanders cannot carry any weapon besides a pistol (with a permit) except when on their own property.

Rhode Island education and criminal offense laws provide the context for understanding the vulnerability of the state’s schools to gun violence. Laws at the federal level that revolve around the applicability of the First and Second Amendments contribute to the larger issue of present-day culture wars and school shootings in the nation. There is an unprecedented epidemic of youth and gun violence in the U.S. today. Policy makers must look at the fundamental cause of the violence in order to fix the issue. Instead of solely blaming the attacker or placing the blame on mental health, Americans must focus on the root of the issue, hate-speech and violent threats. The use of hate-speech, especially by ultra-Conservatives, has long-lasting implications that catalyze in school-shootings. Rhode Island politicians have crafted laws to specifically target youth violence and school security. There is a purpose for these laws, and perhaps other American legislatures can take guidance from Rhode Island to craft their own laws to combat school violence and deter shootings.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Const, art. 1, sec. 8, cl. 3.

<sup>2</sup> The National Defense Authorization Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 42-22 § 249 (2010), [URL](#).

<sup>3</sup> Tiffany Hsu, “News on Fringe Social Sites Draws Limited but Loyal Fans, Report Finds,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2022, [URL](#).

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Batchis, “Conservatism and the First Amendment,” *Stanford University Press Blog*, June 3, 2016, accessed September 11, 2023, [URL](#).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Const, art. 1, amend. II.

<sup>6</sup> John Gramlich, “What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, February 3, 2022, [URL](#).

<sup>7</sup> Evan Gumas & Munira Gunja, et al., “The Health Costs of Gun Violence: How the U.S. Compares to Other Countries,” *The Commonwealth Fund*, April 20, 2023, [URL](#).

<sup>8</sup> The National Firearms Act of 1934, Pub. L. No. 73-474 § 5801 (1934). [URL](#).

<sup>9</sup> Gun Control Act of 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-618 § 922 (1968). [URL](#).

<sup>10</sup> Firearm Owners Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 99-308 (1968). [URL](#).

<sup>11</sup> No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. No. 107-110 § 118 (2001). [URL](#).

<sup>12</sup> Bobby Caina Calvin, “Florida bans ‘critical race theory’ from its classrooms,” AP News, June 10, 2021, [URL](#).

<sup>13</sup> Parental Bill of Rights, H.R. 5, 118 Congress (2023-2024). [URL](#).

<sup>14</sup> R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-12-3. [URL](#).

<sup>15</sup> R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-109-3. [URL](#).

<sup>16</sup> *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

<sup>17</sup> R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-18. [URL](#).

<sup>18</sup> United States Code, Ch. 44 § 921. [URL](#).

<sup>19</sup> R.I. Gen. Laws § 11-47-33. [URL](#).

<sup>20</sup> R.I. Gen. Laws § 11-47-8. [URL](#).

## APPENDIX C – HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The history of public-school education in Rhode Island is broad and largely focused on the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is limited research on public school violence in Rhode Island or the influence of guns on Rhode Island student youth. At a national level, there is more academic scholarship on the United States' education system. This essay will examine the historiography of education in Rhode Island, and at the national level, as well as the impact of Culture, and the rise of Conservatism in American politics since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It will also address the significant scholarship on the history of the 1960s, analyses of the 1994 National Assault Weapons Ban, and a brief examination of historical scholarship pertaining to the unique American Gun Culture.

Historians have addressed the Rhode Island education system, and many centered on economic reforms. William Shade, a Historian and professor at several universities, published an article in 1976, "The 'Working Class' and Educational Reform in Early America: The Case of Providence Rhode Island."<sup>1</sup> Shade's research studied the 19<sup>th</sup> century Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufactures Society and its role in shifting Rhode Island educational reform. Additionally, Patrick Harshbarger published an article in 1985, "The Providence School Board Reform Movement, 1898-1924."<sup>2</sup> Similar to other scholars, Harshbarger focused his article on the Providence School Board Reform Movement. The movement began in 1898 and lasted until 1924. Harshbarger contextualized the origin of the Rhode Island school committee, the changes it made, and how the Reform Movement impacted the fundamental makeup of the Providence School Committee.

There is some scholarship on economic educational reforms in Rhode Island history, including an article authored in 1977 by Lawrence Grossman titled "George T. Downing and Desegregation of Rhode Island Public Schools, 1855-1866."<sup>3</sup> Grossman's article illuminated this 19<sup>th</sup> century African American activist, and argued that there was a lack of research and publication about Downing and his impact on Rhode Island education. Grossman's article filled a hole in historical literature by addressing the issues of race within Rhode Island educational history, and he explained how race was a key issue in Rhode Island schools during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Additionally, in 1876, the Commissioner of Public Schools in Rhode Island, Thomas B. Stockwell published his book *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island From 1636-1876*.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of Stockwell's book was to record the rise and progress of the Rhode Island School System. He provided insight into many of the school districts in Rhode Island. Stockwell compared districts with one another and included information about the number of schools and privatized education which took place within citizens' homes. Stockwells' book is limited in the sense that it was published in 1876 and therefore it did not include information past the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the national level, there is a wide variety of scholarship on the history of education in the United States. One such article, "American Education: A Brief History," published by David Denker, an Assistant Professor of American Studies at Rutgers University, addressed the history of the American education system by dividing it into four historical phases.<sup>5</sup> Denker's article was limited as it was published in 1955, and did not contain current information. There was also research by Charles Bowen, the Secretary of the Navy's Advisory Board on Education and Training, on various American reformers and their efforts to improve American education. In his article, "Change in the Education System," Bowen argued that administrators responsible for college entrance requirements have had a profound influence and impact on American secondary education.<sup>6</sup> He made several claims in his article about the future of American education, which limited Bowen in his research because his futuristic predictions cannot be proven.

The recent U.S. Culture Wars debate and rise of Far-Right extremism within the Republican Party has sparked historical scholarship. Richard Jensen, an American Historian at the University of Illinois, published an article in 1995, "The Culture Wars, 1965-1995: A Historian's Map."<sup>7</sup> In his article, Jensen focused on the historical roles of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Jensen's research attempted to map the political, economic, social, and cultural disputes over these national programs, as a means of exploring one of the central political issues of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the "Culture Wars." Another scholar who focused on Culture Wars in 20<sup>th</sup> century America was Diane Ravitch, a Historian of Education and Research Professor at New York University. Her article, "Education after the Culture Wars," observed the extraordinary self-

ensorship that was practiced by the Educational Publishing Industry in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Ravitch was a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and served on the federal agency board for National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). Her research was shaped by her Conservatism. She served on George W. Bush's Republican administration.

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ultra-conservatism is on the rise in the United States. There is a solid amount of scholarship concerning the Far-Right within the Republican Party, including its political origins and responses from the country's citizenry. Ultra-conservatism contributes to America's increasingly prevalent 'Gun Culture,' which is especially prevalent in the American South. In 2020, the American Historian and Journalist Rick Perlstein published a book, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980*.<sup>9</sup> Perlstein researched the rise of the new Far Right in American politics, and how it was highly influenced by the Reagan Administration. He argued that Conservatives such as preachers and segregationists reinvented themselves as militant crusaders against a Progressive agenda that supported gay rights, feminism, and abortion. Perlstein touched upon themes in his book such as the rising Liberal wave in American politics and the 20<sup>th</sup> century "war" over the Democratic Party which was transformed under President Jimmy Carter's Administration in the 1970s. In addition to Rick Perlstein's book, Paul Kengor published a book in 2014 titled, *11 Principles of a Reagan Conservative*.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of Kengor's book was to analyze President Ronald Reagan's speeches and political actions to gain a better understanding of his beliefs and values. Kengor argued that the values at the center of Reagan's Conservatism included freedom, faith, family, the sanctity of human life, American exceptionalism, lower taxes, limited government, anti-communism, and individualism. Kengor asserted that these values paved the way for the rise of a new Far Right and ultra-Conservatism in the United States today.

There is an abundance of research published on the politics, culture, and economics of America during the 1960s. The American Historian M.J. Heale published a historiographical essay on the 1960s for *Reviews in American History*. In his literature review titled, "The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography," Heale argued that debate on the era is highly unstructured because there are more secondary sources than primary ones.<sup>11</sup> He asserted that an agreed

narrative was never constructed, so his work aimed to fill the gap in scholarly literature. Heale's review focused on themes such as unprecedented prosperity and a youthful population, political changes rooted in class and economics to race and culture, and the imperatives of the Cold War. Heale also included sources in his review which focus on an era in which the personal became the political and therefore the distinction between politics and culture became dissolved. The era also helped separate the political culture of industrialism from the political culture of post-industrialism. Heale's research argues that the "Sixties" can be morphed into almost any shape to suit a particular agenda.

America's Gun Culture was a topic of research starting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, however it has received limited historical attention. There is even less resources that address its impact on American youth. In 1996, the American Historian Michael Bellesiles published an article for the *Journal of American History*, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865."<sup>12</sup> The purpose of Bellesiles' article was to address the history of gun ownership in American society since 1760, just before the American Revolution. Bellesiles' research focused on the question, what was the popular attitude toward firearms in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries? He asserted that, contrary to popular belief, American gun ownership was unusual in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and only became common with the onset of industrialization. Bellesiles' claimed that gun ownership grew with the gun industry, and that the newly founded firearms industry relied on the American government not just for capital development, but for the support and enhancement of its markets. Two years later, Chairman of the Department of Economics at Harvard University, Edward L. Glaeser, and the Economics Researcher Spencer Glendon published an article for the *American Economic Review*, "Who Owns Guns? Criminals, Victims, and the Culture of Violence."<sup>13</sup> In their research, Glaeser and Glendon argued that private weapons, such as guns, represent a means of privately defining property rights. Their research examined guns to understand the places where private justice dominates public property. Essentially, they aimed to understand the demand for guns in American culture. Glaeser and Glendon's research is limited in the sense that it excludes information about Gun Culture's impact on youth, but it does draw attention to the fact that gun-ownership is linked to suspicion of the Courts, and gun-ownership is highest where police are less available.

Finally, some research focuses on the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. However, there is far less historical research on the impact that the 1994 Act's "Sunset Clause" had on American domestic society, and overall safety. Instead, most scholars approach this topic from the public health and statistical perspective. Mark Gius, an Economics Professor, published an article for *Applied Economics Letters* in 2014, "The impact of state and federal assault weapons bans on public mass shootings."<sup>14</sup> The purpose of Gius' article was to present a case study which determined the effects of American federal and state assault weapons ban on public mass shootings. Using data from 1982 to 2011, Gius found that both state and federal assault weapons bans had statistically significant negative effects on mass shooting fatalities. However, he argued that only the federal assault weapons ban had a significant impact on mass shooting injuries. Gius' research is notable because it is one of the first to examine the effects of the Assault Weapons Ban on public mass shootings. Research on the politics of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban is limited. In 1994, a Professor at the State University of New York, Tony G. Poveda published an article for the *Social Justice Journal*, "Clinton, Crime, and the Justice Department."<sup>15</sup> The purpose of his research was to examine criminal

justice policy during the Clinton Administration, and explore how it departed from the policies of the Reagan-Bush years. Poveda's study focused on the Congressional crime debate of 1993 and 1994, and how the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives each passed their own versions of the Act. Poveda drew attention to the fact that Republicans and Democrats wanted different outcomes from the Bill, and ultimately the Act was sent to a joint committee of the Senate and the House to work out the differences.

While there is ample research focused on the history of education in Rhode Island and in the United States, as well as the history of Culture Wars in the U.S., there is a lack of scholarship on the impact of extreme-Conservatism on American youth and education. There is even less scholarship on how a Gun Culture is perpetuating youth violence. There must be more research on the historical origins of Culture Wars and the rise of hate-speech from ultra-Conservatives, and how these influences impact American students and create a violent culture within schools across the nation and in Rhode Island.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Shade, "The Working Class' and Educational Reform in Early America: The Case of Providence, Rhode Island," *The Historian* 39, no. 1 (1976): 1-23, [URL](#).

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Harshbarger, "The Providence School Board Reform Movement, 1898-1924," *Rhode Island History* 44, no. 2 (1985): 47-57, [URL](#).

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Grossman, "George T. Downing and Desegregation of Rhode Island Public Schools, 1855-1855," *Rhode Island History* 56, no. 4 (1977): 99-105, [URL](#).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas B. Stockwell, *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island From 1636-1876* (Providence, Rhode Island: Providence Press Company, 1876), [URL](#).

<sup>5</sup> David Denker, "American Education: A Brief History," *Current History* 29, no. 169 (1955): 145-152, [URL](#).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Bowen, "Change in the Education System," *Educational Horizons* 49, no. 4 (1971): 108-112, [URL](#).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Jensen, "The Culture Wars, 1965-1995: A Historian's Map," *Journal of Social History* 29 (1995): 17-37, [URL](#).

<sup>8</sup> Diane Ravitch, "Education after the Culture Wars," *Daedalus* 131, no. 3 (2002): 5-21, [URL](#).

<sup>9</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980* (New York, London, Sydney, New Delhi: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Kengor, *11 Principles of a Reagan Conservative* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> M.J. Heale, "The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography," *Reviews in American History* 33, no. 1 (2005): 133-152, [URL](#).

<sup>12</sup> Michael A. Bellesiles, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865," *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 425-55, [URL](#).

<sup>13</sup> Glaeser, Edward L. & Spencer Glendon, "Who Owns Guns? Criminals, Victims, and the Culture of Violence," *The American Economic Review* 88, no. 2 (1998): 458-462, [URL](#).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Gius, "The impact of state and federal assault weapons ban on public mass shootings," *Applied Economics Letters* 22, no. 4 (2014): 281-284, [URL](#).

<sup>15</sup> Tony G. Poveda, "Clinton, Crime, and the Justice Department," *Social Justice* 21, no. 3 (1994): 73-84, [URL](#).