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Talking Past Each Other: The Diverging Moral Foundations of the Contemporary Gun Debate

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## Author Bios

*Edgar Cook* is a super senior majoring in Political Science and Sociology. His interests include political psychology, morality, and experimental research methods. Along with completing an honors thesis in Sociology, Edgar has also conducted research as a SURF Fellow. He is applying to graduate programs this Fall and hopes to one day get his PhD in Sociology.

*Kaila Howell*: is an undergraduate at UC Berkeley triple majoring in Rhetoric, French, and Comparative Literature with a minor in the History of Art. This paper was written as an honors thesis for her Rhetoric major during the spring and fall of 2014 under the guidance of Rhetoric Professor Michael Mascuch and received the 2015 Department of Rhetoric's Outstanding Honors Thesis Award. The paper was written at the same time that Kaila was writing a second honors thesis for her French major, also, but more tangentially, concerning photography (in particular, photography as a modern mode of viewing reflected in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire). In that same semester, Kaila began research for a third honors thesis, to be completed in Spring 2015, for her Comparative Literature major. It, too, is on the subject of photography, specifically the 1960s photobooks of Los Angeles-based artist, Ed Ruscha. Upon graduating in Summer 2015, Kaila intends to apply to both graduate school in Art History and law school.

*Paul King* graduated from UC Berkeley with highest honors in anthropology in the Spring of 2014. His research and guest lectures investigate alteration and sovereignty of the body through the lens of socio-cultural anthropology. In addition to 14 non-peer reviewed articles, this is his second peer-reviewed article. At UC Berkeley, he and Joel Landfield completed *Ladies and Gentlemen: Phatima Rude*. This gritty documentary follows a San Francisco underground performance artist's struggles and triumphs with poverty, addiction, and gender identity while living in their van. Presently, this documentary has screened in ten film festivals.

*Yu-Han Serena Ma* is a history major from the class of 2015 of University of California, Berkeley. She is intrigued by representations of a "Japanese identity," both those produced by the Japanese people and by foreigners. This essay is her attempt to investigate the process in which that identity was refined by the Japanese state as it reacted to the changing affairs of Japanese society during the early twentieth century.

*Kelly Main* graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in Spring of 2014 with a self-designed interdisciplinary research degree focusing on the politics and aesthetics of public space. During her time at Cal, she worked extensively with the Olive Tree Initiative's efforts to open a

space for education about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on campus and developed the Art for Social Change DeCal, a political printmaking workshop. After traveling to Israel, the West Bank and Jordan in the Summer of 2013, she became deeply interested in urban planning issues such as rapid urbanization, post-conflict reconstruction and resource conservancy. Kelly Leilani's Senior thesis, "Memorial Portraiture and Street Art in Revolutionary Cairo," looked at the aesthetic politics of memory in Egypt from 2011 - 2013 on the basis of materials in Arabic, and received high honors from her department. She has since completed an intensive summer program at the City Planning Institute at Berkeley's College of Environmental Design and is currently working with the Rebuilding Alliance, an organization dedicated to community-based design projects in the West Bank and Gaza. She intends to return to school to study Urban Planning and Urban Design.

*Shannon Thomas* recently graduated summa cum laude from UC Berkeley, double-majoring in Middle Eastern Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies. Currently, Shannon is working as an IDEX Fellow and Strategy Associate at Equal Community Foundation in Pune, India, pursuing an end to sexual violence. Shannon also founded the Olive Tree Initiative at Berkeley and has led several educational and diplomatic trips to Washington DC, New York, Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan. She hopes to return to the Middle East for Hebrew and Arabic fluency, and to nurture her passion for international relations in her Masters Program this coming year.

*Carolyn Zola* is a fourth year History major at UC Berkeley, graduating in 2015. Since transferring from City College of San Francisco, she has focused on U.S. cultural and social history during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, paying special attention to issues of class and gender. She began this project as a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellow under the guidance of Professor David Henkin, and completed it as her senior thesis under the direction of Professor Brian DeLay. Carolyn is interested in the ways in which ideas of race, class, and gender shape each other. She is also interested in the ways in which cultural ephemera reveal powerful ideologies.

# TALKING PAST EACH OTHER

## The Diverging Moral Foundations Of The Contemporary Gun Debate

By Edgar V. Cook II

The debate over gun control has become an increasingly divisive political issue among Americans—so much so that both liberals and conservatives appear to be talking past each other. But what is causing this ideological rift? According to the Moral Foundations Theory, such political schisms arise because liberals and conservatives hold different moral intuitions and respond to divergent forms of moral rhetoric. In line with this theory, I coded political speeches and op-eds in the *New York Times* and found that liberals and conservatives do in fact draw on different moral foundations in their arguments over gun control. Advocates of gun control rely heavily on the “care” foundation in their rhetoric, while supporters of gun rights rely on the “care,” “liberty,” “loyalty,” and “authority” foundations. In this way, both sides of the gun control debate talk past each other by using rhetoric that fails to resonate with the opposition’s moral intuitions. Furthermore, the gun rights side of the debate benefits from using a wider array of moral dimensions in their arguments, which likely appeals to a greater number of moral intuitions. In light of the high number of gun-related injuries and fatalities in the U.S., it is important to understand the role that moral intuitions and rhetoric play in obstructing any meaningful political (or scientific) consensus on gun control.

Keywords: Gun Control, Moral Foundations Theory

## I. Introduction

After the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in December of 2012, the debate surrounding gun control enjoyed a heightened, but brief moment in the spotlight. Democrats seized the opportunity to push for stricter gun control measures, including bills that would enforce universal background checks and ban assault weapons. However, the bravado of the pro-gun-control movement quickly died out, while the laws proposed by Obama and the Democratic Party failed to make it through the House or the Senate. At the state level, although Democratic legislators managed to pass a few new gun laws, the vast majority of gun laws passed in 2013 actually loosened restrictions on gun purchases and ownership, instead of tightening them.<sup>1,2</sup>

The legislative reactions to Newtown reflect a deep partisan divide over guns in the United States. Democrats and Republicans are firmly split over the efficacy of gun control laws and the scope of the Second Amendment. However, the partisan divide over guns has not always been so pronounced; in actuality, it is only within the last 20 years that the gun control debate reached its current levels of extreme sectarianism. In 1993, public opinion data from the Pew Research Center showed Democrats and Republicans exhibiting a modest, though noticeable, difference of opinion over the efficacy and legitimacy of gun-control laws; yet such a difference is nothing like what is seen today. For instance, 61% of Republicans and 76% of Democrats said that they agreed that stricter gun laws would “reduce the number of accidental gun deaths” in 1993, but only 31% of Republicans and 74% of Democrats agreed with the same statement in 2013.<sup>3</sup> According to these figures, the number of Republicans who believe in the efficacy of gun control laws has nearly dropped in half over the last twenty years.

In fact, the past two decades have produced evidence of a growing divergence of opinion between Democrats and Republicans concerning nearly every aspect of the gun control debate. The Pew Research Center survey shows a large divergence in opinion across the board. This divergence is almost entirely due to a shift in Republicans’ opinions towards gun control, as Democrats have generally remained constant in their opinions. In 1993, there was a 13-point difference between the number of Democrats and Republicans who believed that stricter gun laws would reduce the number of gun deaths; this compares to a 42-point difference of opinion in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in 1993 there was a 15-point difference between the number of Democrats and Republicans who believed that stricter gun laws would give the government too much power, whereas there was a 38-point difference between Democrats and Republicans on the same question in 2013. With regard to the question of whether stricter gun laws would make it more difficult for people to protect their homes and families, there was an 11-point difference between Democrats and Republicans in 1993, compared to a 33-point difference between the two groups in 2013. Currently, Republicans and Democrats show the greatest difference of opinion concerning the subject of mass shootings, with 79% of Democrats and only 29% of Republicans agreeing that stricter gun laws will lead to fewer mass shootings.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Yourish, K., Andrews, W., Buchanan, L., and McLean, A. 2013. “State Gun Laws Enacted in the Year Since Newtown.” *The New York Times* December 9. Retrieved May 12, 2014.

2 For instance, laws passed in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, and Kansas shortened the wait time for receiving concealed carry permits and made information about concealed carry permit holders confidential. In total, 70 of the 109 new gun laws passed in 2013 relaxed gun restrictions.

3 Pew Research Center. “Gun Control: Key Data Points from Pew Research.” *Pew Research Center RSS*, July 23. Retrieved May 12, 2014

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Democrats and Republicans also differ greatly in their levels of support for pro-gun organizations such as the NRA. According to another public opinion survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 58% of Conservative Republicans believe that the NRA holds an appropriate amount of influence over gun control laws, whereas only 10% of Liberal Democrats feel similarly. Likewise, 77% of liberal Democrats believe that the NRA has too much influence over gun control laws, compared to only 15% of conservative Republicans who would say the same.<sup>6</sup>

Such large opinion gaps are striking, and may even seem paradoxical in light of the high number of gun-related deaths and injuries that occur annually in the United States. For instance, between 2000 and 2008 there was an annual average of 30,288 gun-related deaths, 68,610 gun related injuries, and 98,897 total people shot.<sup>7</sup> The number of gun-related deaths that occur annually in the United States has grown so high that it nearly surpasses the nation's annual number of vehicle-related deaths and injuries.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, this trend of gun-related violence continued with a total of 30,867 firearm related deaths, 19,766 of which were suicides and 11,101 of which were homicides.<sup>9</sup> From a comparative perspective, the United States also has the highest number of guns per capita (88.8 per 100) and firearm-related deaths per capita (10.2 per 100,000) in the first-world.<sup>10</sup> As Bangalore and Messerli's 2013 study shows, there is a significant positive correlation between guns per capita per country and the rate of firearm-related deaths ( $r = 0.80$ ;  $P < .0001$ ).<sup>11</sup> Such figures, when contrasted against liberals and conservatives' diverging attitudes towards gun control, suggest a partisan divide over the interpretation of evidence and its significance. Liberals and conservatives appear to have very different interpretations of the causes of gun violence and how it should be addressed.

The partisan divide over gun control is therefore interesting for a number of reasons. First, gun control is a high profile political issue that has become increasingly mired in partisan disagreement, despite the growing number of gun-related deaths and injuries that occur annually in the United States. The fact that so much attention has been given to this issue, without any political consensus emerging, would make it appear as though liberals and conservatives are viewing the gun debate from two completely separate perspectives, and essentially talking past each other. Second, other thinkers have offered explanations for the growing divide over gun control that focus on legal, institutional, gender-related and economic factors. But it is my contention that these explanations, despite illuminating certain aspects of the gun debate, largely ignore the moral psychology that drives its partisan nature. Third, the partisan disagreement over gun control is a puzzle that, if solved, might shed light on the causes of other partisan battles that are congesting the political process in the United States. The United States is in the midst of a period of political polarization, the likes of which have not been seen in nearly a century.<sup>12</sup> In turn, partisan polarization seems to have infected nearly every political issue, including the gun debate. In this sense, the gun control debate is part of a larger narrative of polarization, and

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6 Ibid.

7 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2014. "Fatal Injury Data." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* April 7. Retrieved May 12, 2014.

8 Diaz, Tom. *The Last Gun: How Changes in the Gun Industry Are Killing Americans and What It Will Take to Stop It*. New York, New York: New Press, 2013.

9 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2014. "Fatal Injury Data." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* April 7. Retrieved May 12, 2014.

10 Bangalore, Srilap, Franz Messerli. 2013. "Gun Ownership and Firearm-Related Deaths." *American Journal of Medicine* 126: 873-876.

11 Ibid.

12 Brooks, Clem, Jeff Manza. 2013. "A Broken Public? Americans' Response to the Great Recession." *American Sociological Review*, 78: 727-748.

its causes could share common characteristics with other political divides. An analysis of the causes of the gun control debate could illuminate the causes of (and potential solutions for) other partisan issues, if not the trend towards polarization more generally.

## II. Literature Review

Journalists and social scientists have offered a number of explanations for the apparent lack of political consensus on gun control. Many point to ignorance in explaining this discrepancy in opinion, focusing on the dearth of funding for research on gun violence, or the media's drastic under-reporting of the number of shootings that occur annually in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Others point to the cultural production of misinformation, blaming the gun industry and its lobbyists in the NRA and NSSF for buying politicians and misleading voters about the efficacy of gun laws.<sup>14</sup> Some sociologists blame the stalwartness of the NRA and its followers on their adherence to a nostalgic vision of "frontier masculinity," which causes them to idealize and defend gun ownership as a fundamental component of their identity.<sup>15</sup> However, such theories read more like ideological narratives. They typically tell a story about good guys and bad guys, and offer a narrow account of the motives behind one side's beliefs and actions. They often depict gun-rights advocates as ignorant, sexist, racist, malevolent, and scared (all claims lacking nuance—not to mention the perspective of pro-gun rights advocates themselves). Moreover, they fail to tie the partisan battle over gun control into the larger narrative of the culture war that has increasingly infiltrated every major social and political debate. Furthermore, all of the aforementioned theories do a poor job of explaining the moral motivations behind pro-gun rights and pro-gun control advocates. They fail to explain why liberals and conservatives see the world so differently and are drawn to using different forms of logic. In this sense, such explanations are simply the one-dimensional product of social scientists who cannot understand the motivations of people who hold different political opinions than they do.

I argue that the partisan nature of the gun control debate is driven by the fact that liberals and conservatives hold different moral intuitions and respond to different forms of moral rhetoric. The two sides of the gun control debate employ different moral claims in their arguments, and thus talk past each other by using rhetoric that does not resonate with the opposition's moral intuitions. I will use Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) as a framework for understanding the national gun debate.

According to MFT, there are six different intuitive and discursive dimensions to morality that compose all political and religious ideologies.<sup>16</sup> The six different dimensions, or foundations, encompass both the intuitions that people hold about morality as well as the values, ideological narratives, and institutions that societies build on top of these intuitions when constructing moral belief systems.<sup>17</sup> The extent to which different moralities draw on the six foundations varies between cultures and ideologies. Some cultures and ideologies draw on all six moral foundations,

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13 Diaz, Tom. *The Last Gun: How Changes in the Gun Industry Are Killing Americans and What It Will Take to Stop It*. New York, New York: New Press, 2013.

14 Hennigan, Dennis. 2009. *Lethal Logic: Exploding the Myths that Paralyze American Gun Policy*. Washington D.C.: Potomac Books.

15 Melzer, Scott. *Gun crusaders: the NRA's culture war*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. Print.

16 Haidt, Jonathon. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.

17 Ibid.

and others draw on only a few. Likewise, some individuals hold intuitions that correspond to all six foundations, whereas others hold intuitions that correspond to only a few.

The intuitions at the base of each foundation cause individuals to experience “gut-reactions of like and dislike” in response to certain observed behaviors and social patterns. In this sense, moral judgments are the product of intuitions rather than reasoning, as people generally decide whether an act is right or wrong based on their intuitions, and then invoke post-hoc justifications that merely confirm their initial intuitions. Haidt calls this model of moral reasoning the “social intuitionist” model.<sup>18</sup>

Haidt makes the analogy that the moral intuitions associated with each foundation function like moral taste receptors.<sup>19</sup> This illustrates that people have different moral tastes depending on their moral constitution. Different moralities offer different combinations of the various moral foundations, and thus offer up an array of moral cuisines. This causes individuals to be predisposed to those ideological claims and moral frameworks that satisfy their moral tastes (i.e. intuitions), and to stray away from those that do not.<sup>20</sup>

The six moral foundations are harm/care, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.<sup>21</sup> The harm/care foundation causes people to disapprove of individuals and groups who cause pain and suffering and to approve of those who prevent harm.<sup>22</sup> The fairness/cheating foundation motivates people to care about issues of equality and reciprocity, and to condemn those who violate basic principles related to these concerns. The liberty/oppression foundation leads people to value individual autonomy and human dignity, and to disapprove attempts by individuals and groups to dominate and control themselves or others.<sup>23</sup> The in-group/loyalty foundation results from our attachment to social groups, causing people to approve of those who “contribute to the groups’ well-being and cohesion,” and disapprove of those who undermine, betray or outright attack the group.<sup>24</sup> The authority/respect foundation stems from our long history of living in “hierarchically structured societies, reliant on dominance and submission,” as well as our respect for law and order.<sup>25</sup> It predisposes people to approve of those who respect traditions and “fulfill the duties associated with their position in the social hierarchy,” and to disapprove of those who undermine legitimate authority and the rule of law.<sup>26</sup> The purity/sanctity foundation is said to have formed out of humans’ evolved feelings of disgust towards biological contaminants, but now has grown to cause people to feel disgust towards religious impurities such as “spiritual corruption, or the inability to control one’s base impulses.”<sup>27</sup>

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Iyer, R., Koleva, S., Graham, J., Ditto, P., Haidt J. “Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians.” Retrieved March 13, 2014,

22 Koleva, Spassena P., Jesse Graham, Ravi Iyer, Peter H. Ditto, Jonathon Haidt. 2012. “Tracing the Threads: How Five Moral Foundations (Especially Purity) Help Explain Culture War Attitudes.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 46:184-194

23 Iyer, R., Koleva, S., Graham, J., Ditto, P., Haidt J. 2012. “Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians.” Retrieved March 13, 2014.

24 Koleva, Spassena P., Jesse Graham, Ravi Iyer, Peter H. Ditto, Jonathon Haidt. 2012. “Tracing the Threads: How Five Moral Foundations (Especially Purity) Help Explain Culture War Attitudes.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 46:184-194.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

In the United States, the six foundations are distributed differently across the political spectrum. Haidt and his colleagues have found that liberals and conservatives tend to “differ in the weight they place on each foundation.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, the two groups have very different understandings of what constitutes morality—as if they live in alternate “moral matrices.”<sup>29</sup> Liberals tend to draw predominantly on the harm/care, fairness/cheating, and liberty/oppression foundations, whereas conservatives draw on all six foundations, but rely most heavily on the in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations.<sup>30</sup>

The three foundations that liberals draw on—harm/care, fairness/cheating, and liberty/oppression—are “individualizing” foundations. Conversely, the three foundations that conservatives predominantly draw on—the in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations—are distinguished as distinctly “groupish” foundations.<sup>31</sup> Liberals and conservatives also differ in their conceptions of fairness. Liberals define fairness in terms of equality of outcomes and equality of opportunity. Conservatives, on the other hand, typically understand fairness in terms of karma or proportionality, as reflected in their belief that individuals should be justly rewarded or punished based on their own actions.<sup>32, 33</sup>

Liberals and conservatives’ distinct moral intuitions lead them to react differently to various social and political issues. A growing body of research has found that individuals’ endorsements of the various foundations are strong predictors of their levels of support for issues such as abortion, gun control,<sup>34</sup> flag burning, gay marriage, and immigration, among others.<sup>35, 36</sup> Whereas political ideology is still the strongest predictor of an individual’s position on any issue, the moral foundations people draw on explain and predict the variation within and between liberal and conservative political ideologies with a high degree of accuracy.<sup>37</sup>

As MFT suggests, political actors use morally charged language to justify their moral convictions to others.<sup>38</sup> Many studies have found distinct differences in the kinds of moral rhetoric that liberals and conservatives employ in their arguments. Furthermore, coding of op-eds, sermons and speeches has revealed that the rhetoric that religious and political leaders invoke in their arguments correspond to the moral foundations inherent in their ideological

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28 Ibid.

29 Haidt, Jonathon. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 The biblical expression that “you reap what you sow” is another formulation of the conservative notion of fairness, as is the protestant work ethic.

34 High scores on the in-group/loyalty foundation predict opposition to gun control.

35 Koleva, Spassena P., Jesse Graham, Ravi Iyer, Peter H. Ditto, Jonathon Haidt. 2012. “Tracing the Threads: How Five Moral Foundations (Especially Purity) Help Explain Culture War Attitudes.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 46:184-194.

36 Iyer, R., Koleva, S., Graham, J., Ditto, P., Haidt J. 2012. “Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians.” Retrieved March 13, 2014.

37 Koleva, Spassena P., Jesse Graham, Ravi Iyer, Peter H. Ditto, Jonathon Haidt. 2012. “Tracing the Threads: How Five Moral Foundations (Especially Purity) Help Explain Culture War Attitudes.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 46:184-194.

38 Haidt, Jonathon, Jesse Graham, Craig Joseph. 2009. “Above and Below Left–Right: Ideological Narratives and Moral Foundations.” *Psychological Inquiry*, 20: 110-119. Retrieved January 12, 2014. Available at: doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10478400903028573

positions.<sup>39, 40, 41</sup> For instance, after coding sermons given by Universalist and Southern Baptist preachers, Graham et al. found that the traditionally liberal-leaning Universalist preachers invoked the harm/care and fairness/cheating foundations in their sermons, whereas conservative-leaning Southern Baptist preachers tended to draw predominantly on the in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity foundations in their sermons.<sup>42</sup>

In another study, Feinberg and Willer coded pro-environmental op-eds and commercials for moral foundations and found that pro-environmental messages draw almost exclusively on the harm/care foundation in their arguments.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, Feinberg and Willer proposed that liberals are persuaded by pro-environmental messages, and conservatives are not, largely because such messages employ moral rhetoric that only triggers liberals' moral intuitions.<sup>44</sup> As an extension of their study, Feinberg and Willer exposed participants to a new message that used the purity/sanctity foundation—which is a foundation that “resonates more with conservatives”<sup>45</sup>—to argue for greater environmental regulations. Feinberg and Willer found that conservatives became just as likely as liberals to support environmental regulations upon reading the new message.<sup>46</sup> Their study demonstrates not only the prevalence of differential uses of moral rhetoric in policy debates, but also the role that moral rhetoric plays in determining whether different ideological groups are persuaded to support an issue or not.

Clifford and Jerit<sup>47</sup> coded articles in the New York Times about stem cell research and found that proponents and opponents of stem cell research use distinct forms of moral rhetoric and place different amounts of emphasis on the moral foundations.<sup>48</sup> They discovered that the intensity and quantity of moral appeals increased during times of legislative activity. Both sides of the debate tended to ramp up their use of moral rhetoric in response to increases in their opponents' moral rhetoric, in a kind of “tit for tat” moral exchange.<sup>49</sup> Upon merging their content analysis with public opinion data, the authors also discovered that surges in public opinion followed surges in the amount of moral rhetoric used in the op-eds. Clifford and Jerit thus demonstrated the role that moral invocations can play in driving the intensity of policy disputes such as the stem cell debate.

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39 Graham, Jesse, Jonathon Haidt, Brian Nozick. 2009. “Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 96:1029-1046.

40 Feinberg, Matthew, Robb Willer. 2012. “The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes.” *Psychological Science*. Retrieved September 10, 2013. Available: SAGE Journals

41 Clifford, Scott, Jennifer Jerit. 2013. “How Words Do the Work of Politics: Moral Foundations Theory and the Debate Over Stem Cell Research.” *The Journal of Politics* 3: 659-673.

42 Graham, Jesse, Jonathon Haidt, Brian Nozick. 2009. “Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 96:1029-1046.

43 Feinberg, Matthew, Robb Willer. 2012. “The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes.” *Psychological Science*. Retrieved September 10, 2013. Available: SAGE Journals

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Clifford, Scott, Jennifer Jerit. 2013. “How Words Do the Work of Politics: Moral Foundations Theory and the Debate Over Stem Cell Research.” *The Journal of Politics* 3: 659-673.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

### III. Hypotheses

In line with MFT and previous research, I suspect that pro-gun control and pro-gun rights advocates are drawing on different moral foundations in their arguments. Given that the majority of gun-rights supporters are conservative, and that the majority of gun-control advocates are liberal, I speculate that the pro-gun rights side of the debate is using conservative moral foundations in their arguments, and pro-gun control advocates are using liberal foundations in theirs. Furthermore, I propose that both sides are exasperating the partisan nature of the gun-control debate by employing divergent moral rhetoric in their arguments and essentially talking past each other. Finally, I suspect that the pro-gun rights side of the debate is drawing on a greater number of moral foundations in their arguments, thereby triggering a greater number of moral intuitions and appealing to a wider swath of the electorate.

For this study, I coded political speeches and op-eds to determine the extent to which moral foundations are being invoked in pro-gun rights and pro-gun-control arguments. In the process, I tested two main hypotheses: 1) that gun control advocates will draw primarily on the harm/care foundation in their rhetoric and will do so to a greater extent than gun rights advocates; and 2) gun rights advocates will draw on all of the foundations, but primarily on the liberty/oppression, in-group/loyalty, and authority/respect foundations, and will do so to a greater extent than pro-gun control advocates.

### IV. Methods

My method is largely inspired by the coding techniques used by Graham, Haidt and Nosek in their study of Unitarian and Baptist sermons.<sup>50</sup> The scholars created a list of words and word-stems associated with each foundation, which they called the Moral Foundations Dictionary. They used the Moral Foundations Dictionary and the program LIWC to code the texts of 69 Unitarian and 34 Southern Baptist sermons for invocations of the various moral foundations. They then had research assistants check each word in the context of how it was being used in order to ensure that it was indeed invoking a moral foundation, and counted the total number of foundation-related words that were used in each sermon. Based on the number of foundation-related words used in each sermon, they estimated the extent to which each foundation was drawn on by preachers from the two different denominations.<sup>51</sup>

Building off of Graham et al.'s methods, I used the Moral Foundations dictionary to code pro-gun control and pro-gun rights op-eds and speeches to determine the extent to which both sides of the gun-control debate draw on the different foundations. Unlike other studies that have employed a similar coding approach, I decided not to rely solely on the Moral Foundations Dictionary to determine when a foundation was being invoked. I made this decision because in the process of transcribing and coding speeches and op-eds I realized that foundations were often being drawn on without any use of the words listed in the Moral Foundations Dictionary. Authors of the speeches and op-eds often made implicit moral declarations. Therefore, relying on the words listed in the Dictionary would have caused me to miss all of the "implicit" moral claims

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50 Graham, Jesse, Jonathon Haidt, Brian Nosek. 2009. "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 96:1029-1046.

51 Ibid

actors were making, while only allowing me to capture their more explicit moral statements. Take for example a statement made by Chris Cox at the 2013 NRA-ILA Leadership Forum in Texas: “You know, freedom may not be real evident in some parts of the country these days, but it sure is clear right here in Texas.”<sup>52</sup> Cox does not use any of the words included in the MFT Dictionary, but he is clearly drawing on the in-group/loyalty foundation in his statement. He is implying that Texans (who happen to make up the majority of the audience he is speaking to) are more loyal to the cause of freedom than are other segments of the country (i.e. California and New York). Cox bolsters the audience’s collective identity as freedom-loving Americans, while simultaneously emphasizing that other segments of America who are not fighting for freedom are traitors or, even worse, enemies.

In making the decision not to rely solely on the moral foundations dictionary as a guide, I further decided against using any software to help me code my materials. Given that many of the moral appeals in the op-eds and speeches I analyzed did not use words listed in the Moral Foundations Dictionary, I felt it would be best to carefully read each speech and op-ed in order to “catch” every moral invocation. As a result, I was challenged to develop a new method of coding for moral foundations. I ultimately decided to use Haidt’s definition of each foundation as a general heuristic for deciding when a statement was conjuring one of the moral foundations. I then used Haidt’s Moral Foundations Dictionary as a guide for checking op-eds and transcribed speeches for any moral invocations that I might have missed, and for double-checking statements in which I thought a moral foundation was being invoked.

I decided to use sentences rather than words as my main unit of analysis. This approach deviates from previous studies, which have all relied on counting the number of foundation-related *words* that speakers and writers use, rather than the number of times a foundation is actually being invoked. Coding by sentences allowed me to code for complete statements in which actors invoked one or multiple foundations. Furthermore, this allowed me to detect foundational appeals that did not explicitly use any of the words listed in the moral foundations dictionary.

I also decided to code for the liberty/oppression foundation, which is a relatively new addition to Moral Foundations Theory and has never been coded for in any previous studies. The liberty/oppression foundation is not included in the Moral Foundations Dictionary, so I had to rely on Haidt’s definition of the liberty/oppression foundation in order to determine what constituted an invocation of the foundation. In general, it seems self-evident that appeals to freedom, the right to bear arms, personal liberty, the second amendment, etc., are all invoking the liberty/oppression foundation. [See Table 1 for examples of how each foundation was used by pro-gun control and pro-gun rights supporters.]

TABLE 1

	Pro-gun rights	Pro-gun control
Harm/care	“We’ve made our country safer and more free by protecting the fundamental rights of law-abiding Americans to defend their homes and their families.”	“The price of our gun policy can be seen in this breathtaking statistic: More Americans have died from guns here in the United States since 1970 (nearly 1.4 million) than American soldiers have died in all the wars in our country’s history over more than 200 years (about 1.2 million).”

52 “2013 NRA Annual Meetings: Chris W. Cox.” *NRA News*. Retrieved March 12, 2014,

Fairness/cheating	“This industry strongly supports severe penalties for those who misuse their right to own firearms and can’t understand why we are blamed when those who use illegally owned guns harm others.”	“A BASIC function of law in a civilized society is to allocate the costs of harm to those who caused it. In the case of a gang shooting or terrorist attack, penalties are imposed on the gang member or terrorist. But what of the person who sold them their weapons?”
Liberty/oppression	“Our individual liberty is the very essence of America. It is what makes America unique. If you aren’t free to protect yourself—when government puts its thumb on that freedom—then you aren’t free at all.”	“We can’t allow ourselves to be pawns in the gun industry’s profiteering; we are real people, and people have power.”
In-group/loyalty	“We are freedom’s greatest hope, its biggest army, and its brightest future, and we will not stand idly by while politicians, billionaires, or the media try to destroy the rights that countless brave American heroes have died defending.”	“We must all stress this point, and fight and not get weary. We must stop thinking of politics as sport and spectacle and remember that it bends in response to pressure. These laws must be reviewed and adjusted. On this issue we, as Americans of good conscience, must stand our ground.”
Authority/respect	“These are landmark rulings, defining the Second Amendment with more specificity as the Court has done for other parts of the Bill of Rights. Yet judging by the laws now being debated and in some cases passed, you’d think those rulings didn’t exist. Liberal majorities are rolling over them as if they were op-eds from a third-rate think tank.”	“Even justice Scalia, in the opinion that he gave after upholding gun ownership in Washington DC, said that nothing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on long standing prohibitions on gun ownership by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of fire-arms in sensitive places like schools—and here’s the key phrase—or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”

Table 1

I chose to code two different sources of material. The first source was political speeches. Political speeches rely heavily on morally-charged rhetoric and histrionics. Therefore, I reasoned that political speech-givers would be more likely to draw on moral foundations in their arguments. In the case of gun control, I decided to code speeches given by prominent leaders of both the gun-rights and gun-control movements. On the gun rights side, I coded speeches given by Wayne LaPierre, the CEO of the NRA, Chris W. Cox, the Executive Director of the NRA-ILA, Ted Cruz, a Republican Senator from Texas, and Steve Sanetti, the President of the National Shooting Sports Foundation. On the gun control side of the debate, I coded speeches given by President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Dan Gross, President of the Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence, and Darrell Steinberg, a Senator from California. I also coded

a video advertisement made by the organization Mayors Against Gun Violence, which included appeals from a number of mayors associated with the organization (See Appendix for citations).

Along with speeches, I coded op-eds in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* that argued either for or against gun control. To keep track of my results, I maintained a spreadsheet in which I tallied the number of times each foundation was invoked in the speeches and op-eds I coded. To obtain my final results, I added up the total number of times each foundation was invoked in the pro-gun rights speeches, the pro-gun control speeches, the pro-gun rights op-eds, and the pro-gun control op-eds.

## V. Results

### A. Speeches

In general, all of the foundations except for purity/sanctity were present in the arguments used on both sides of the debate. The “pro-gun rights” speeches yielded results that were very much in line with my second hypothesis. As Table 1 depicts, five of the six moral foundations were present in the speeches in significant amounts: harm/care (22.9%); fairness/cheating (10.6%); liberty/oppression (20.6%); in-group/loyalty (20.6%); authority/respect (24.7%). Also, the liberty/oppression, in-group/loyalty, and authority/respect foundations were all present in the speeches, and were drawn on frequently. The liberty/oppression, in-group/loyalty, and harm/care foundations were all drawn on in approximately equivalent amounts, and therefore my hypothesis that the in-group/loyalty, liberty/oppression, and authority/respect foundations would be used more than the other foundations was only partially substantiated.

The pro-gun control speeches drew predominantly on the harm/care foundation but also drew in small amounts on the in-group/loyalty and authority/respect foundations: harm/care (61.2%); fairness/cheating (3.4%); liberty/oppression (3.4%); in-group/loyalty (19.8%); authority/respect (12%). Interestingly, the pro-gun control and pro-gun rights speakers drew on the in-group/loyalty foundation in nearly equal amounts. Still, the results corroborated my first hypothesis, which predicted that pro-gun control speeches would draw predominantly on the harm/care foundation and to a greater extent than the pro-gun rights speeches.

CHART 1

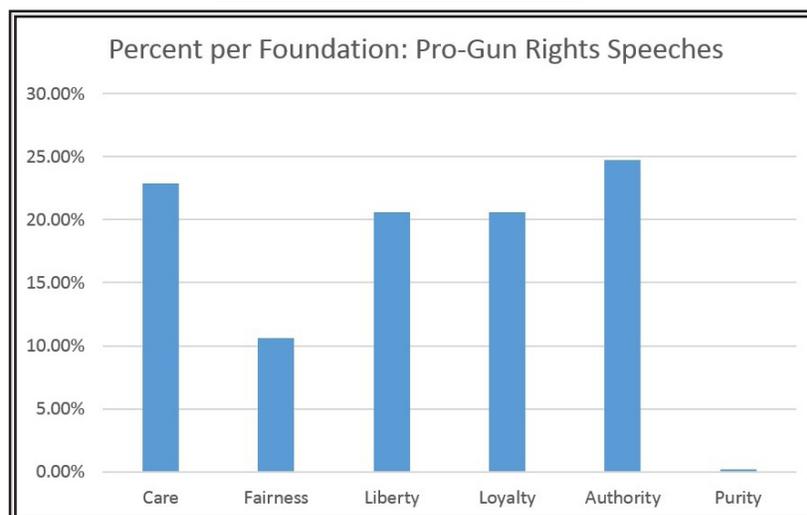
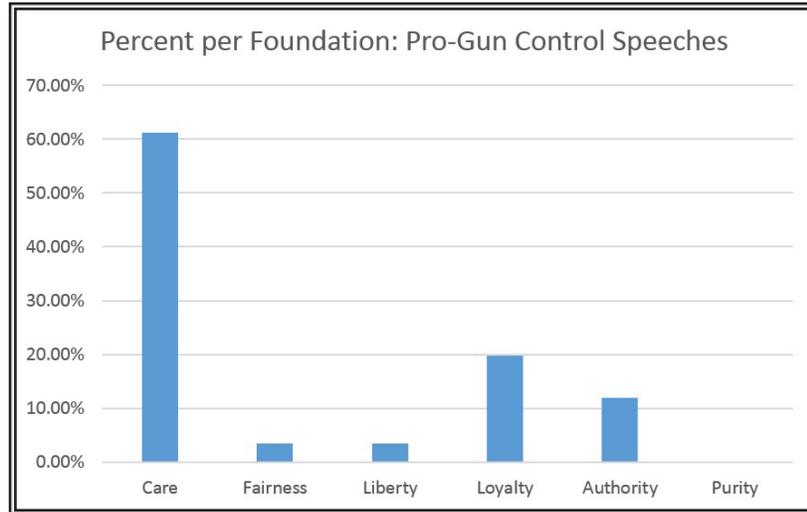


CHART 2



### B. *Op-eds*

The pro-gun rights op-eds further substantiated my hypothesis that gun rights advocates would draw on all of the foundations, and that they would draw on the liberty/oppression, in-group/loyalty, and authority/respect foundations to a greater extent than the rest of the foundations. The results read as follows: harm/care (7.9%); fairness/cheating (7.9%); liberty/oppression (32.67%); in-group/loyalty (13.9%); and authority/respect (37.6%). Likewise, the pro-gun control op-eds confirmed my hypothesis that pro-gun control advocates would draw mostly on the harm/care foundation and to a greater extent than pro-gun rights advocates: harm/care (75.5%); fairness/cheating (12.76%); liberty/oppression (1%); in-group/loyalty (8.5%); and authority/respect (2.1%).

Interestingly, the pro-gun rights op-eds did not draw on the harm/care foundation or the in-group/loyalty foundation to the same degree that the pro-gun rights speeches did. This may have been due to the differences in length and message format between speeches and op-eds. For instance, op-eds are typically limited to only a few short paragraphs, which ultimately limits the number of claims a writer can make and forces them to focus their argument. Perhaps there was not enough room for pro-gun rights authors to incorporate every moral foundation in their arguments, forcing them to include only the foundations they felt were most compelling. Most of the pro-gun rights op-eds focused on the constitution and individuals rights, both of which are linked to the liberty/oppression and authority/respect foundations. Therefore it is likely that the authors believed that these arguments would resonate the best with readers. Sen. Cruz, Wayne LaPierre, Chris W. Cox, and Steve Sanetti may be using the harm/care and in-group/loyalty foundations more frequently in their arguments because they are making more of a strategic effort than pro-gun rights editorialists to incorporate a wider range of foundations in their arguments. This could be the result of Sen. Cruz and the heads of the NRA and NSSF getting advice from speechwriters and political analysts under their employment.

Furthermore, upon viewing the foundational distributions of pro-gun control speeches, it is also apparent that Pres. Obama and Vice President Biden are incorporating (or sprinkling) more moral foundations in their appeals than are Dan Gross, Sen. Steinberg, Mayors Against

Gun Violence, and pro-gun control editorialists. This finding might also result from the President and Vice President having a staff of speechwriters and advisers, who may be more aware of the strategic need to incorporate moral appeals that entice a wider audience.

CHART 3

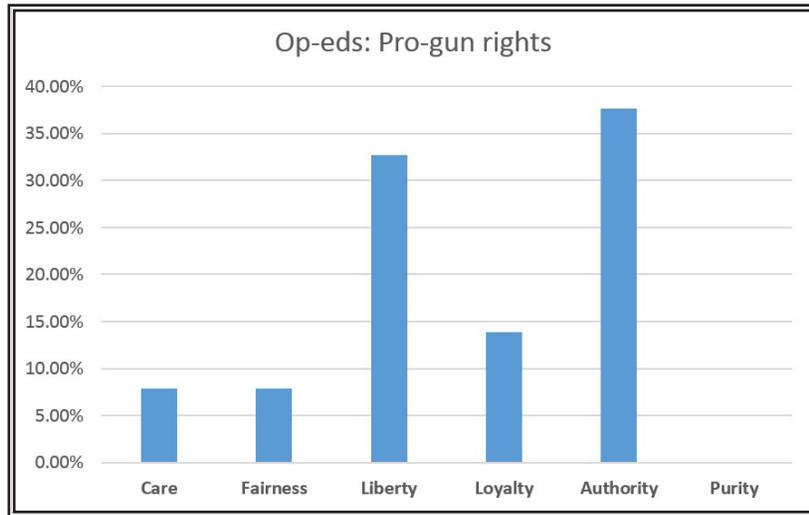
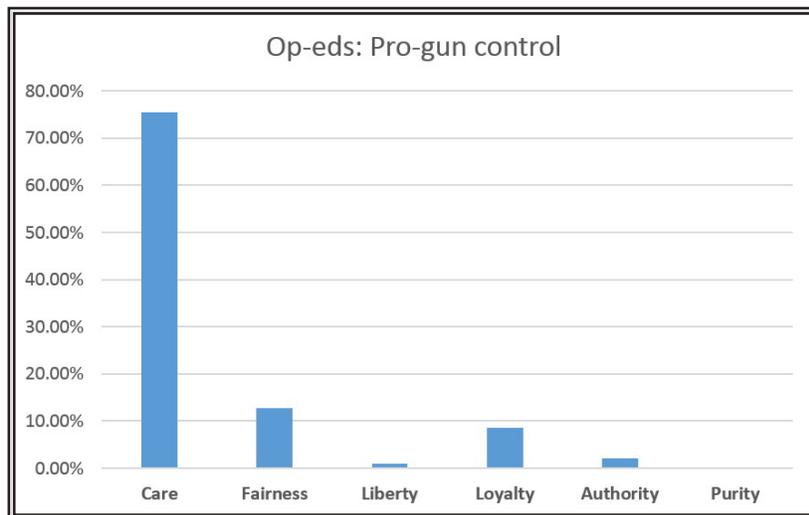


CHART 4



C. *Styles of Argumentation*

Pro-gun control and pro-gun rights arguments employed the foundations differently, as depicted in Table 1. Liberals generally used the harm/care foundation to argue that the U.S. needs to pass stricter gun laws in order to prevent future harm to innocent victims. Conservatives used the harm/care foundation to argue against stricter gun laws, on the grounds that law-abiding citizens need their guns in order to protect their families from harm. Both liberals and conservatives drew on the fairness/cheating foundation in terms of proportionality. Conservatives argued that liberals were wrongfully punishing law-abiding citizens for the crimes of deranged and deviant individuals. Liberals on the other hand argued that gun manufacturers and retailers were not being properly punished for their carelessness in regards to whom they sold their weapons. In

both cases, the two sides were essentially arguing that current gun policies are not meting out justice to those who are responsible for causing the problem of gun violence.

Conservatives invoked the liberty/oppression foundation in defense of gun rights, in order to argue against gun regulations. In contrast, liberals used the liberty/oppression foundation to either recognize the moral legitimacy of Americans' right to own some kinds of guns, or to argue that legislators in the electorate should not be bullied by the gun industry. The in-group/loyalty foundation was used by conservatives to argue against forcing "law-abiding citizens" (i.e. honest to goodness Americans) to register their guns or undergo background checks. However, liberals used the loyalty foundation to promise that they would not betray the interests of "law-abiding citizens" as well as to rally morally concerned citizens to do something about gun violence.

Conservatives predominantly used the authority foundation for their argument that the authority of the Second Amendment and the Supreme Court should not be undermined by unconstitutional infringements on gun rights. Furthermore, conservatives often invoked the authority/respect foundation by appealing to Americans' shared reverence for the right of self-protection and our long-standing tradition of using guns for hunting and sport. In contrast, liberals invoked the authority/respect foundation by praising the Constitution and promising that none of the gun laws they wished to pass would contradict the language of the Constitution or the rulings of the Supreme Court. Liberals further cited opinions given by Supreme Court Justices, such as Antonin Scalia, who stipulated that the Second Amendment does not guarantee the right to own every type of weapon or to use them however one wants. Finally, the purity/sanctity foundation was almost entirely missing from all of the pro-gun control and pro-gun rights rhetoric. The foundation was only invoked once when Wayne LaPierre argued that the right to bear arms is a "sacred right enshrined in the Second Amendment."

## VI. Discussion

Based on these findings, it would appear that the pro-gun rights side of the gun-control debate is employing a wider range of moral foundations in their arguments than the pro-gun control side of debate. There are several implications that one might draw from this finding. One implication is that the NRA and NSSF have been able to rally more people to their cause by using a greater number of moral foundations in their messaging. If we return to Jonathon Haidt's original analogy likening peoples' moral intuitions to taste receptors,<sup>53</sup> then we can see that pro-gun rights organizations are offering up a wider variety of moral dishes, and are appealing to a more eclectic array of moral tastes. Such a finding potentially fills the explanatory gap left by other theories as to why the pro-gun rights movement has been so successful at growing its membership, and why the gun debate is so divided.

There's no doubt that the gun industry and NRA's political contributions significantly influence the outcome of policy debates at the state and federal levels, but their financial strength is not enough to explain their grassroots success. The NRA super PAC called NRA Victory Fund amassed about \$14.1 million in 2013, making it the fourth largest Super PAC in the country, behind the Democratic National Campaign Committee, the National Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Service Employees International Union.<sup>54</sup> It also spent \$11.1

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53 Haidt, Jonathon. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.

54 Opensecrets.org: The Center for Responsive Politics. n.d. "Heavy Hitters: Top All-Time Donors, 1989-

million on independent expenditures in 2012, and \$7.1 million in 2010. Of the \$11.1 million it spent in 2012, roughly \$8.6 million of its independent expenditures were used to attack Democrats, and only \$2.3 million was spent supporting Republican candidates.<sup>55</sup> These numbers are significant, but in comparison to other “heavy-hitters” in the independent expenditures category, the NRA still only ranks 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>56</sup> However, the NRA’s campaign contributions are minor compared to many other Super PACs. The NRA’s total campaign contributions between 1984 and 2014 were \$19,892,152, making it only the 56<sup>th</sup> largest campaign contributor in the last 25 years. This figure pales in comparison to the amounts contributed by other organizations, such as the \$61,819,629 given by American Federation of State, County and Municipal employees over the same 25 year period.<sup>57</sup> The NRA’s lobbying expenditures are also mediocre. The organization spent \$3.4 million on lobbying in 2013, but this amount is still small compared to the amount spent by other lobbying groups, such as the National Association of Realtors or the US Chamber of Commerce, which spent \$7.14 million and \$25.4 million in 2013, respectively.<sup>58</sup>

The NRA’s true strength lies in its loyal membership base. The organization is capable of rallying enough voters to kick a politician out of office, as demonstrated by the recent recall in Colorado of two state senators who voted in support of stricter gun laws. This alone makes them one of the most feared political forces in capitals around the country.<sup>59</sup> The NRA has over 3.5 million active members<sup>60</sup> and spends well over \$3 million every year on pamphlets, newsletters, and magazines that it circulates to its members.<sup>61</sup> The organization even goes so far as to rate politicians on their voting history, and sends out voting guides that note which politicians to vote for based on their gun control record. All of this is part of a “state-of-the-art lobbying machine with its own national [online] newscast, one-million precinct-level political organizers, and an in-house telemarketing department.”<sup>62</sup> And as a recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013 shows, there is a significant gap in the amount of political advocacy that gun-rights supporters engage in compared to gun-control supporters: 25% of gun-rights supporters and only 6% of gun control supporters say they have “contributed money to an organization that takes a position on gun policy;” 16% of gun-rights supporters and only 11% of gun-control supporters “have contacted a public official to express opinion on gun policy;” and 18% of gun-rights supporters and only 12% of gun-control supporters have “signed a petition on gun control”—leaving in total 45% of gun rights supporters and only 26% of gun control supporters who have done one or more of these activities.<sup>63</sup> The NRA could not have amassed such a loyal grassroots base without stoking the fires of moral indignation—fires that they very likely fueled by carpet-bombing the gun-owning electorate with moral foundations.

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2014.” *Opensecrets* RSS. Retrieved May 12, 2014, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/list.php>

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Yourish, K., Andrews, W., Buchanan, L., & McLean, A. 2013. “State Gun Laws Enacted in the Year Since Newtown.” *The New York Times* December 9. Retrieved May 12, 2014,

60 The *Washington Post* and *Mother Jones* magazine have argued that the only reliable way to count the NRA’s membership is to tally the number of subscriptions to the NRA’s magazines, which are provided free as a part of their membership fee. In total, there are 3,111,169 subscriptions, but the NRA reportedly claims that as many as 15% of their members turn down the free magazine, so the number of members could be higher.

61 Melzer, Scott. *Gun crusaders: the NRA’s culture war*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. Print.

62 Ibid.

63 Pew Research Center. 2013. “Gun Control: Key Data Points from Pew Research.” *Pew Research Center* RSS, July 23. Retrieved May 12, 2014,

In contrast to the pro-gun rights movement, the pro-gun control movement clearly does not take advantage of the full range of moral foundations—a decision that ultimately puts them at a disadvantage. The stark differences in dedication and enthusiasm between pro-gun rights advocates and pro-gun control advocates exhibit what might be called a “passion gap.” The pro-gun rights movement benefits from a loyal base of voters who will vote for politicians simply based on their gun control record, and who will show up to annual meetings and remain constantly vigilant against any potential threats to the Second Amendment. The pro-gun control movement can hardly be called a movement, in that its supporters have only rallied behind the cause a handful of times over the last 30 years. Unlike pro-gun rights advocates, most pro-gun control advocates do not regularly attend any kind of annual meeting, and never vote for politicians simply based on their gun control record.<sup>64</sup>

The passion gap between gun rights and gun control supporters ultimately determines which side influences the nature of gun policy in the United States. As Gail Collins’ article writing in the *New York Times* states:

Gun control is the classic example of an intensity-of-preference issue. Most people support it, but not enough to hinge their vote on it. Suppose you are a member of Congress and you knew that 60 percent of the people in your district favored improved background checks on gun purchases, but not in an obsessive way. Forty percent opposed them and—most important—20 percent will hate you forever if you thwart their will. They won’t care if you vote to open a prison camp for puppies as long as you go their way on guns. You could leave your wife, beat your children and starve the family hamster to death, and they will still vote for you as long as you’re O.K. on the Second Amendment. The political path is obvious.<sup>65</sup>

According to MFT, such a “passion gap” is likely due to the asymmetrical application of moral framing by the two sides of the debate. Jonathon Haidt, in his book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Religion and Politics*, argues that because conservatives have co-opted a greater number of moral dimensions in their arguments, they have gained a political advantage over liberals, especially over the last 30 years. This advantage is in part due to conservatives’ better use of moral psychology, in that they understand that intuition, rather than reason, is in charge of political behavior.<sup>66</sup> As Haidt asserts, conservatives’ “slogans, political commercials, and speeches go straight for the gut. . . . Democrats have often aimed their appeals more squarely at [people’s reason], emphasizing specific policies and the benefits they’ll bring to you, the voter.”<sup>67</sup> But even more importantly, Republicans draw on a greater number of moral foundations in their arguments and thus trigger a greater number of moral intuitions. Such an opportune cooptation of moral foundations further explains the success of the Republican Party over the last 30 years, as well as the general shift towards conservative politics over the same period of time. In this sense, the increasingly partisan nature of almost every major political and social debate can be explained in part by conservatives’ embracement of all six moral foundations. As Haidt insightfully explains,

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64 Diaz, Tom. *The Last Gun: How Changes in the Gun Industry Are Killing Americans and What It Will Take to Stop It*. New York, New York: New Press, 2013.

65 Collins, G. 2013. “The Revenge of Magic Mike.” *The New York Times* June 12. Retrieved March 12, 2014

66 Haidt, Jonathon. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.

67 Ibid.

Republicans don't just aim to cause fear, as some Democrats charge. They trigger the full range of intuitions described by Moral Foundations Theory. Like Democrats, they can talk about innocent victims (of harmful Democratic policies) and about fairness (particularly the unfairness of taking tax money from hardworking and prudent people to support cheaters, slackers, and irresponsible fools). But Republicans since Nixon have had a near monopoly on appeals to loyalty (particularly patriotism and military virtues) and authority (including respect for parents, teachers, elders, and the police, as well as for traditions). And after they embraced Christian conservatives during Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign and became the party of "family values," Republicans inherited a powerful network of Christian ideas about sanctity and sexuality that allowed them to portray Democrats as the party of Sodom and Gomorrah. Set against the rising crime and chaos of the 1960s and 1970s, this five-foundation morality had wide appeal, even to many Democrats (the so-called Reagan Democrats). The moral vision offered by Democrats since the 1960s, in contrast, seemed narrow, too focused on helping victims and fighting for the rights of the oppressed. Democrats offered just sugar (Care) and salt (Fairness as equality), whereas Republican morality appealed to all five taste receptors.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, the biggest problem for the pro-gun control movement is its failure to incorporate the moral concerns of people on the right. Furthermore, it could be argued that the pro-gun control movement has largely alienated gun owners and conservative Americans as well. *The Wall Street Journal* made this point in an editorial it published in 2013 after gun legislation failed to pass in the Senate:

People who cling to their guns, or merely to the Constitution, aren't part of the coalition that Mr. Obama believes re-elected him, and his mistake was thinking they would simply dissolve into history's rearview mirror in his new progressive era. Mr. Obama was routed this week because he tried to govern from the left and thus played into the hands of the NRA. If the Newtown families want someone to blame, they can start with the President.<sup>69</sup>

By ignoring the perspective of the other side, and treating them as ignorant, sexist, racist, or scared, pro-gun control advocates are only alienating gun owners and exasperating the tensions underlying the disagreement. They are also vastly diminishing their chances of bringing the pro-gun rights side to the bargaining table. Instead, a better approach to dealing with the gun control disagreement is to focus on understanding the other side's concerns, rather than berating them with quasi-scientific arguments that reduce them to peons and bigots.

In line with the differential application of moral foundations in pro-gun control and pro-gun rights arguments, there were also distinct types of reasoning that both sides deployed in their argumentation. Pro-gun rights supporters' heavy reliance on the liberty/oppression and authority/respect foundations reflected their use of the Second Amendment as a means of arguing for gun rights. The pro-gun control supporters' over-reliance on the harm/care foundation was reflected in their tendency to cite statistics about the social costs of weak gun laws. Although both sides

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<sup>68</sup> Haidt, Jonathon. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.

<sup>69</sup> "The Gun Rights Consensus: The Real Reasons the Senate Trounced the Obama Agenda." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2013. Accessed April 15, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324493704578430672176449846>.

drew on the harm/care foundation, they employed two distinct forms of reasoning; the liberal pro-gun control advocates argued for the need to tighten gun restrictions in order to protect innocent victims, and the conservative pro-gun rights advocates argued for the need to *ensure* access to guns in order to allow families to protect themselves and to guarantee the right of self-protection. This reflects the tension between liberals' universalistic tendencies and conservatives' more parochial concerns. Liberals are more concerned with protecting all members of society from gun violence, whereas conservatives are more concerned with protecting members of their in-group from danger.

## VII. Future Research

The current study was limited in its scope, and was therefore unable to answer many questions that need further inquiry. Because this study only coded op-eds and speeches from December 2012 to March 2014 it cannot shed light on the extent to which the pro-gun rights movements' use of moral foundations may have helped them attract their large membership base and sway public opinion in their favor. Future research should track the development of both the pro-gun rights and pro-gun control movements' use of moral framing over the last 30 years. It would also be worthwhile to analyze whether the partisan trend in public attitudes towards gun control grew in tandem with the increased use of moral foundations by pro-gun control and pro-gun rights organizations. In the case of the NRA, it would be interesting to determine whether its membership grew in tandem with its increasing use of moral rhetoric.

Another potentially fruitful line of research might apply insights from agnotology to the gun control debate. Agnotology is "the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, particularly the publication of inaccurate or misleading scientific data."<sup>70</sup> If it is indeed true that gun control laws *are* effective at stemming gun violence, then future research could study the ways in which the gun industry and NRA have used moral framing to induce cultural ignorance and distract the public from research about gun violence (or in some cases obstruct research). Furthermore, if it is the case that gun laws are ineffective, it might be worthwhile to study the factors that led liberals to endorse gun control. Perhaps liberals are blinded by their hypersensitivity to violence against innocent victims and are thus driven to banish guns regardless of the efficacy of gun control laws.

It is also important to study other ideological mechanisms that may be sorting people into one side of the gun control debate or the other, and that may be contributing to both sides' inability to agree on the facts. For instance, one trend that appeared in the speeches and op-eds was that pro-gun rights supporters tended to make dispositional attributions for the causes of gun violence (e.g. the motivations of deranged individuals) whereas pro-gun control supporters tended to make situational attributions for the causes of gun violence (the availability of guns). This difference in perception could potentially be another factor that drives liberals and conservatives apart in their understanding of the causes of gun violence. Past research has found attributional differences between liberals and conservatives,<sup>71</sup> and future research might explore

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70 Proctor, Robert. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford, Calif., California: Stanford University Press, 2008.

71 Morgan, Scott, Elizabeth Mullen, Linda Skitka. 2010. "When Values and Attributions Collide: Liberals' and Conservatives' Values Motivate Attributions." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Retrieved April, 26 2014, <http://psp.sagepub.com/content/36/9/1241>

how ideo-attributional differences shape liberals and conservatives' understandings of the gun control debate.

The study of social movements could benefit from an analysis of the success of pro-gun rights organizations in comparison to the failure of pro-gun control organizations. For instance, Gramsci's conceptualization of war of position versus war of movement could be applied to the gun control debate, by arguing that organizations such as the NRA have fought a successful war of position, whereas pro-gun control organizations have led an unsuccessful war of movement. A war of position, according to Gramsci, is a long ideological and cultural battle that builds a network of beliefs and social arrangements in civil society and gradually shifts the status quo.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, a war of movement, is an outright attack on the state, which seeks to quickly change the existing legal, political, and economic system in favor of a new social order.<sup>73</sup> The NRA appears to have utilized a brilliant combination of sophisticated lobbying, outreach techniques, and moral framing to enlist a large and dedicated grassroots base. Thus they have fought a war of position that enabled them to gradually undermine the state's regulation of gun ownership. Gun control supporters, by relying on the legislature to push gun control, have fought an unsuccessful war of movement and have failed to build the successful grassroots base that would allow them to fight a more drawn out war of position. They have not established the underlying social, political, and economic fortifications that could support an all-out change in policy. Such an analysis would be worth pursuing in future research, and could shed light on the ways that moral foundations are employed in wars of position versus wars of movement.

Finally, future research should test methods for overcoming the ideological biases inherent in both sides of the gun control debate. For instance, future research might try experimentally alternating the moral foundations applied in pro-gun control and pro-gun rights arguments to see if liberals might be persuaded to adopt pro-gun rights attitudes and conservatives might be persuaded to support gun control. In this way, both sides might be able to see each other's concerns more clearly. Furthermore, if the pro-gun rights side of the debate truly benefits from its use of multiple moral foundations in its arguments, then applying typically conservative foundations to pro-gun control arguments might be an effective way of persuading more people to endorse gun regulations. Previous research has effectively used moral framing to convince conservatives to endorse traditionally liberal policies. For instance, Feinberg and Willer successfully persuaded conservatives to endorse environmental regulations by employing the purity/sanctity foundation in pro-environmental appeals.<sup>74</sup> Considering that the pro-gun control side of the debate mainly relies on the harm/care foundation in its arguments, it might be worthwhile to test whether pro-gun control arguments can be made more persuasive by incorporating conservative foundations.

## VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study found that gun rights supporters are relying upon a wider range of moral foundations than gun control supporters in their arguments over gun control. Gun rights supporters draw heavily on the liberty/oppression and authority/respect foundation, and in some cases the in-group-loyalty and harm/care foundations, and to a lesser degree the fairness

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<sup>72</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Feinberg, Matthew, Robb Willer. 2012. "The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes." *Psychological Science*. Retrieved September 10, 2013. Available: SAGE Journals

foundation. Pro-gun control advocates, on the other hand, draw almost exclusively on the harm/care foundation, and occasionally, though in negligible amounts, draw on the fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, in-group/loyalty and authority/respect foundations. The disparate use of moral foundations across this contentious debate potentially gives the pro-gun rights movement an advantage with voters, and could explain the grassroots success of the NRA and NSSF.

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