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Kristin A. Goss: Disarmed

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The Gun Control (Participation) Paradox

ON APRIL 20, 1999, two alienated teenagers armed with an arsenal of semiautomatic firearms calmly made their way into their suburban Denver high school and began shooting indiscriminately. The young gunmen shot fellow students as they ate lunch on the school lawn, as they ran for cover in the school cafeteria, and as they crouched in terror in the school library. When the shooting spree at Columbine High School was over, one teacher and fourteen students (including the shooters) lay dead, and another twenty-one were wounded. With satellite trucks and cameras stationed outside the besieged school, coverage of the massacre was beamed live to television stations across the nation.

Columbine, the Colorado state flower and the massacre's ironic shorthand term, may have been the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, but it was not the first. Between 1997 and 2000, there were three dozen mass shootings in schools, workplaces, and other seemingly safe spaces across the United States. But Columbine seemed "different," as one gun control leader noted at the time. "The focus on gun control seems to be more immediate and more lasting."¹

On April 20 and in the weeks that followed, the nation indeed was galvanized to confront gun violence. Newspapers and talk radio featured impassioned testimonials about the historically tragic role of guns in America. Amid a popular outcry, pro-gun legislators' efforts to ease access to firearms stalled in state legislatures, including Colorado's. President Bill Clinton renewed calls for congressional passage of modest gun control measures, and previously reluctant lawmakers made tentative moves in that direction. Donations poured in to national gun control organizations, and their memberships grew.² And thousands of people, including students from Columbine and other Denver-area high schools, gathered for an unprecedented protest against the nation's mighty champion of gun rights, the National Rifle Association (NRA), whose long-planned annual meeting was held in Denver two weeks after the Columbine shootings.

As it turned out, Columbine *was* different in some ways—but sadly routine in others. The aftermath of Columbine looked a lot like the aftermath of many other high-profile shootings in American history: collective outrage, followed by a momentary flurry of unorganized calls and letters and donations from thousands of individuals, and then a quick return to

the status quo.³ In the months after Columbine, Americans witnessed four particularly traumatic shootings: a white supremacist's racially motivated killing spree in Illinois and Indiana in July 1999 that killed two people and wounded nine; an indebted day trader's massacre at his home and two Atlanta brokerage houses later that month (thirteen dead, including the shooter's wife and children, and twelve injured); a white supremacist's attack in August 1999 on a Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, California (five injured), and on a Filipino postal worker (who died); and a six-year-old boy's fatal shooting of his classmate in February 2000 at an elementary school near Flint, Michigan. If ever the country had been primed to confront its gun violence problem, this was the time.

Within two years of Columbine and the traumatic shootings that followed, leading American newspapers decided to investigate the political fallout from these dramatic national events. What they found was not the stuff of banner headlines. Instead, headline after headline told a story of mass political quiescence. "New Gun Control Politics: A Whimper, Not a Bang," concluded the *New York Times*.⁴ "Hill Reaction Muted on Latest Shooting; Lawmakers Largely Silent on Gun Control," the *Washington Post* reported.⁵ "Rampages Elicit Little Outcry for Gun Control," sighed the *San Francisco Chronicle*.⁶ Even though Columbine had seemed different, like a watershed moment that would radically alter the history of gun politics in America, in fact very little had happened legislatively or electorally. The nation seemed to have returned to normal, with Columbine and the other shootings nothing but a terrible memory.

The headlines notwithstanding, Columbine and the other high-profile shootings that followed appear to have accomplished what countless other gun violence traumas failed to do. These shootings planted the seeds of a sustained, visible, grassroots, nation-spanning gun control effort. New leaders emerged, new tactics were pioneered, and new interest groups formed. Whether a full-fledged movement will arise remains to be seen; that question is best left to future scholars. But Columbine bequeathed the present generation of scholars an equally engaging question: If a gun control movement were to arise in America, why didn't it happen before Columbine? Where was this missing movement?

Columbine was a shock but not a surprise. The United States witnesses sensational shootings with numbing regularity. The nation also experiences an epidemic of gun violence about once a decade. In recent surveys, roughly one in three American adults reported that someone "close" to them "such as a friend or relative," had been shot.⁷ This means some 63 million American adults have been secondary victims of gun violence.⁸ More to the point, polls back to 1973 consistently have found that about 20% of Americans have been threatened by a gun or shot at. Thus, in any

given year, *between 25 million and 46 million people* report having had a close call with a gun at some point in their life.

Perhaps not surprisingly, public opinion polls routinely show crime and violence to be at or near the top of Americans' list of problems facing the nation. Polls also show crime and violence to be one of the issues citizens most want the government to address. For the seventy years that scientific surveys have been conducted, Americans have strongly and consistently favored at least one approach to the violence problem: stricter government regulation of firearms. And yet, decades of poll findings notwithstanding, each high-profile shooting or violence epidemic produces little more than a brief flurry of citizen outrage—a burst of emotion followed by a return to political normalcy. To be sure, millions of Americans bemoan the loss of life and the breakdown of moral order that these events reflect, and a small fraction of those citizens go so far as to write letters of protest to their local newspaper or their Congress member. In Congress and in state legislatures, a few elected officials invariably use the opportunity to advance gun control legislation. But most political leaders lie low, assuming that the public agitation will prove fleeting, just as it has so many times before. And prove fleeting it inevitably does.

Studying the gun control issue in the early 1970s, Hazel Erskine observed: “It is difficult to imagine any other issue on which Congress has been less responsive to public sentiment for a longer period of time.”⁹ That insight is at the heart of the well-known “gun control paradox”: Most people want strict gun laws, but they don't get them—why? This book argues that there is a deeper puzzle: Most people want them, but they don't mobilize to get them—why? I refer to this as the “gun control participation paradox.” This book seeks to explain that puzzle. To put the question in stark, if overly simplistic, terms, Why is there no *real* gun control movement in America?¹⁰

The answer, as it turns out, is multifaceted and far reaching, encompassing an array of structural constraints, historical developments, and organizational choices. But if there is one overarching explanation it is this: Gun control advocates were not nearly as successful as their opponents were in using American federalism to advance their cause. Sometimes this was the result of choices made by gun control proponents; sometimes it was the result of roadblocks that their opponents placed in the way; and sometimes it was the result of factors that systematically favor certain types of groups over others. In the end, the gun control case illustrates a stubborn lesson: The framers of the Constitution rigged the U.S. political system to frustrate the ambitions of bold policy reformers and to reward those who build consent from the ground up. Their plan succeeds to this day.

This introductory chapter serves several purposes. It outlines the scope and nature of gun violence in America, presents the core research question, and justifies the question in quantitative terms. The chapter then couches the question in theoretical terms and dispenses with some of the “obvious” explanations. Finally, the chapter presents a summary of the argument that unfolds in the chapters to come.

AN AMERICAN GUN CULTURE?

Between 1992 and 2001, more than 336,000 Americans died by gunfire,¹¹ and more than 5.4 million were threatened or injured by gun-wielding robbers or other assailants.¹² More than one-third of the deaths occurred on the tail end of what the press and public health officials dubbed an “epidemic” of firearms violence, which lasted from 1988 through 1994. During that time, the annual gun fatality rate reached 15 deaths per 100,000 people—only a small fraction of the deaths from heart disease, but more than the rate of death from common afflictions such as leukemia, liver disease, or AIDS.¹³ Even in “nonepidemic” years, the firearms death rate in the United States is considerably higher than that in any other advanced industrial nation. For example, the rate at which Americans were killed by guns in 1997 (a relatively peaceful year in the United States) was thirty-four times the rate of gunshot deaths in the United Kingdom, and more than three times the rate in Norway or Australia.¹⁴

On top of the hundreds of thousands of “everyday shootings” each year, the United States has regularly witnessed high-profile killings that have garnered significant public attention. One-third of the U.S. presidents since the Civil War (nine of twenty-seven) have been assassinated or threatened by assailants with guns, and many other high-profile Americans—politicians, civil rights leaders, entertainers—have been felled by bullets. In the late 1990s, even as the overall gun violence rate was declining, the United States witnessed a series of “rampage shootings” in schools, workplaces, and other “safe spaces.” Between 1997 and 2001, at least thirty-six such incidents attracted widespread media coverage.¹⁵ Together, these episodes resulted in the death of 139 people, including more than 30 schoolchildren, and the wounding of at least 188 students and adults.¹⁶

It is often argued that, relative to other advanced industrial nations, the United States has unrestrictive gun laws. For example, Canada passed a comprehensive scheme of gun registration after a man killed 14 women and wounded 13 others at a Montreal university in 1989. Australia outlawed semiautomatic and automatic assault weapons, and imposed strict registration and owner licensing for other firearms, after a man killed 35

TABLE 1.1
Media Adoption of “Movement” Mantle

# Mentions (per year)	<i>Gun Control MVT</i>		<i>Antiabortion MVT</i>	
	WP (1977–2002)	WP & NYT (1980–2002) ^a	WP (1977–2002)	WP & NYT (1980–2002)
Median	0	1	16	33
Mean	0.7	1.4	16	35
Mode	0	0	17	29
Range ^b	0–4	0–5	7–38	13–68
Total (all years)	19	33	412	797

^a *New York Times* (NYT) and *Washington Post* (WP) counts for 6/1/80–4/29/02 (NYT came online in June).

^b The year 2002 is not included, because counts are for less than half the year. The upper bound figures for gun control (4 and 5 mentions) appeared in 2001; the lower bound (0) was found in many years covering all four decades under study.

nation’s capital since the mid-1970s. And, at least since the 1930s, America has witnessed uncoordinated bursts of activism around gun control. But these bursts of popular outrage—and often the local and state voluntary groups they have nourished or given rise to—have quickly faded into quiescence. Even as gun control policies are debated regularly in the nation’s legislatures, popular involvement has been contained and fleeting. Whatever gun control “movement” might exist at any time, or in any given locality, it has never reached the size, scope, or duration of the Prohibition, civil rights, environmental, and women’s movements. Relative to its potential, the gun control “movement” has underperformed.³⁹ The gun control movement is a movement constrained, a movement that does not move very far very often. The constraints are captured by the following five measures.

Media (Non) Adoption

If there had been a gun control movement in America, surely it would have been acknowledged by reporters and editorialists. Yet the phrases “gun control movement” or “movement for gun control” have appeared infrequently in major U.S. newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.⁴⁰ Table 1.1 summarizes the findings. For comparison’s sake, I have included counts of references to “antiabortion movement,” “pro-life movement,” and “movement against abortion.”

As the table shows, the “movement” label was affixed to antiabortion advocacy approximately twenty-four times as often as it was affixed to gun control advocacy. Figure 1.1 shows the data in longitudinal terms. It

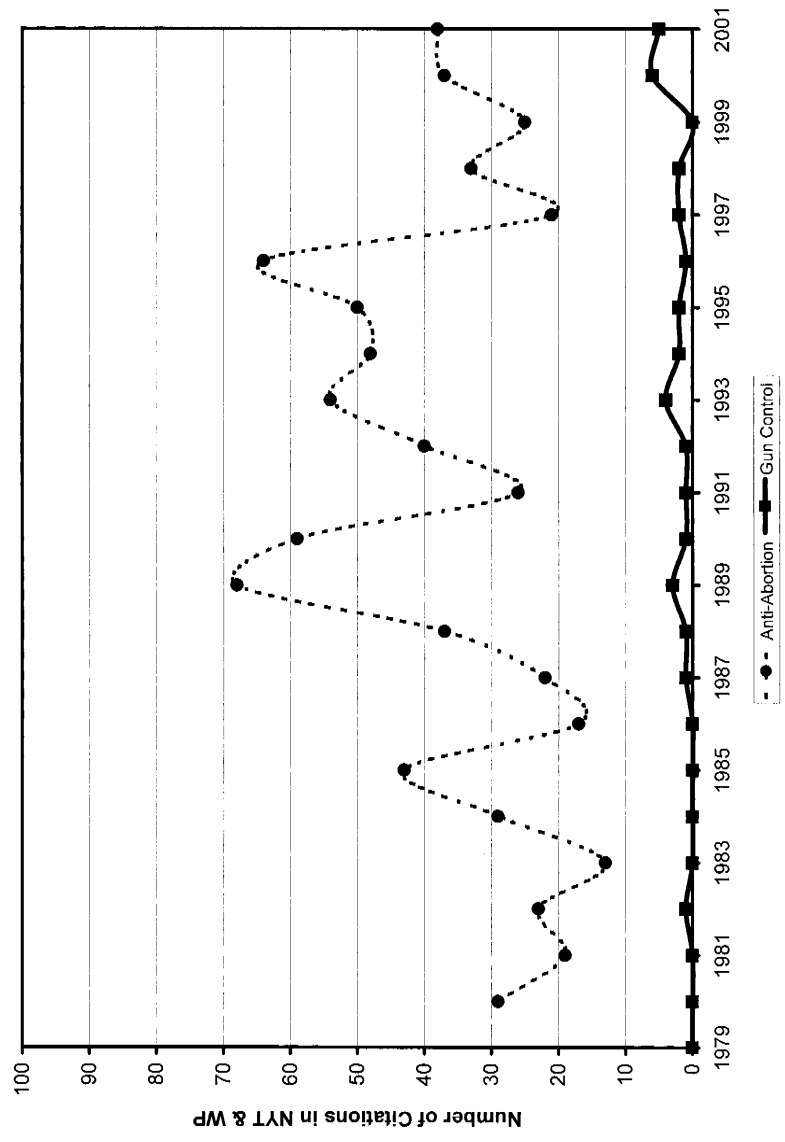


Figure 1.1. "Movement" Label in Major Newspapers: Gun Control vs. Antiabortion. Source: Nexis search.

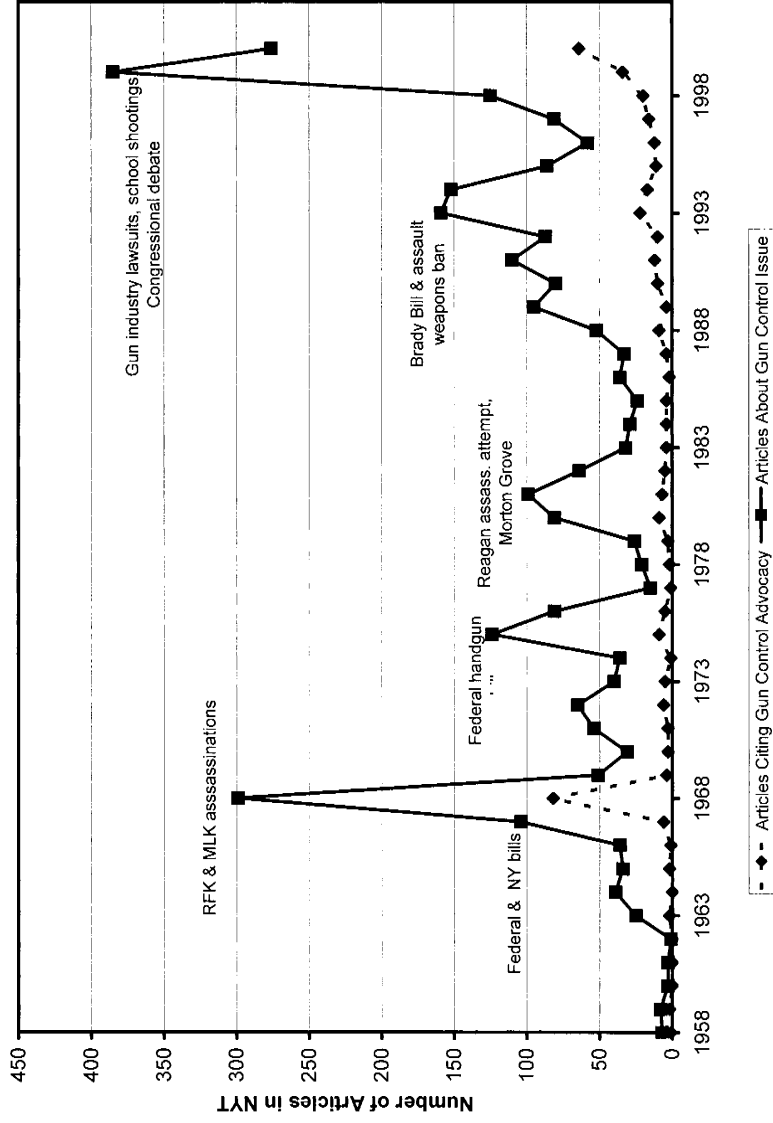


Figure 1.2. An Issue without a Movement. Source: *New York Times Index, 1958–2000*.

