



# Did Gun Control Ruin Hillary Clinton's Best Shot at the Presidency?

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In January 2018 the federal government briefly shut down after a year-long congressional battle over immigration.<sup>1</sup> Although important issues were at stake, political commentary focused on the electoral consequences of the proposals as much as, if not more than, the policy consequences. Donald Trump had placed heavy emphasis on illegal immigration while dispatching sixteen Republican rivals in the primaries, and several analysts noted that immigration attitudes measured in surveys were closely associated with vote changes between 2012 and 2016. Looking at data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Philip Klinkner observed that Trump improved on Romney's showing among people with negative views on immigration.<sup>2</sup> John Sides's analysis of White voter shifts in Democracy Fund's Voter Study Group Panel found that attitudes toward immigration were more salient and more closely related to the vote in 2016 than in 2012, controlling for a host of other issues.<sup>3</sup>

After examining aggregate-level data, however, other analysts noted an apparent puzzle: support for Trump was strongest in rural areas where few immigrants resided. Relatedly, Trump carried twenty-six of the thirty states with the lowest percentage of foreign-born residents—areas where Republican representatives and senators dominate. As Melissa Cruz noted, US Census data highlights that “the areas most resistant to immigration are the ones with the fewest number of immigrants—and they tend to be in red states.”<sup>4</sup>

Conventional thinking may lead some to believe that those communities that fight the hardest against immigration are the ones receiving the greatest influx of foreign newcomers. If people are wary of the changes immigrants are bringing to their communities, they would naturally seem to be the most vocal in their opposition.

Yet new data from the US Census highlights a particular paradox regarding America's view on immigration—the areas most resistant to immigration are the ones with the fewest number of immigrants—and they tend to be in red states. (emphasis in original)

Similarly, in a finer-grained precinct-level study, Hill, Hopkins, and Huber report that high levels of or increases in Hispanic and noncitizen populations were associated with *greater* support for Hillary Clinton.<sup>5</sup>

To explain the apparent puzzle some analysts resorted to psychological theories: “The contradiction, immigration advocates believe, is rooted in suspicion and lack of exposure to the foreign born. Communities with little contact with immigrants will generally possess more intense negative view of immigrants, a position that then gets translated into their voting patterns.”<sup>6</sup> The logic of this argument is not entirely clear to me; more importantly, it directly contradicts other academic analyses of the relationship between immigration and political behavior that report higher levels of White identity and anti-immigrant attitudes where Whites and immigrants live in close proximity.<sup>7</sup>

## A CONFOUNDING VARIABLE?

Perhaps there is a simpler, nonpsychological answer to the puzzle of support for Trump in areas with few immigrants; namely, another issue—correlated with immigration—is of particular concern to people in rural issues. Looking at the voting maps, gun control is an obvious candidate: in immigrant-lite rural counties and states that supported Trump, people have lots of guns (figure 1).

**FIGURE 1** Sign in a small Pennsylvania town a few months after the mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida



**Source:** Photo by author

Academic accounts of the 2016 elections did not pay much attention to gun issues. The magisterial study of the campaign by Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, for example, has only one index entry for gun control compared to dozens for immigration.<sup>8</sup> But the Pew Research Center reported that gun control and immigration had virtually the same salience in the summer of 2016: 72 percent of registered voters said gun policy was “very important to their vote in 2016,” and 70 percent of registered voters said the same about immigration.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, since the early 1990s the political parties have increasingly separated on gun issues.<sup>10</sup> Of particular significance, gun owners are concentrated in rural areas where significant numbers of White Obama voters defected in 2016. According to a 2017 PEW Research Center report, 46 percent of respondents who live in rural areas report owning guns, a number that falls to 28 percent among suburbanites and only 19 percent among urban dwellers.<sup>11</sup>

## THE 2016 CLINTON CAMPAIGN

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Hillary Clinton’s position on gun issues evolved over her two campaigns. In 2008 she positioned herself as progun. Recall that after campaigning in Pennsylvania and various Midwestern states Barack Obama commented, “They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”<sup>12</sup> Seeing an opportunity, Clinton “described herself as ‘a progun churchgoer,’ recalling that her father taught her how to shoot a gun when she was a young girl.”<sup>13</sup> An irritated Obama retorted that Clinton talked like Annie Oakley and wanted people to believe she spent every Sunday in a duck blind.<sup>14</sup>

In 2016, however, Clinton was challenged by Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, who in his initial election in the distant past had been endorsed by the National Rifle Association (NRA).<sup>15</sup> Now Clinton positioned herself to Sanders’s left on the gun issue. A month before the election, an NRA blast charged that Wikileaks’ releases of John Podesta’s leaked emails showed that Clinton intended to impose gun control by executive order if the Democrats did not win control of Congress.<sup>16</sup> Guns are a peripheral issue for most members of the mainstream media, nearly all of whom are urban denizens, and probably few of them then followed the NRA, especially given the overwhelming distraction of Trump’s myriad intemperate remarks and numerous reports of offensive behavior. All in all, it is easy to understand how a niche issue like guns was overlooked amid all the campaign hoopla.<sup>17</sup>

## DATA

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In a panel study conducted for the *Economist*, the internet polling firm YouGov reported that two-thirds of Whites who claimed to have voted for Obama in 2012 reported voting for Clinton in 2016, with the other third mostly defecting to Trump or reporting not voting at all. The face-to-face ANES survey reported similar figures, except for the usual overreporting of turnout (table 1).

**TABLE 1** OBAMA-CLINTON LOYALTY RATES: 2016 VOTES OF 2012 OBAMA VOTERS

|               | 2016 vote<br>(as % of 2012 Obama voters) |       |       |              |
|---------------|--|-------|-------|--------------|
|               | Clinton                                  | Trump | Other | Did not vote |
| YouGov survey | 68                                       | 10    | 3     | 19           |
| ANES survey   | 67                                       | 16    | 6     | 12           |

In what follows, I refer to these numbers as Obama–Clinton loyalty rates. Both surveys include immigration and gun control items, although the wording and response formats differ significantly. The YouGov immigration item reads, “Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants living in the US?” Responses are quite polarized, with nearly nine of ten respondents favoring the two more extreme options. As shown in table 2A, the difference in Democratic loyalty over the three response options is 44 percent. Three-quarters of the plurality that favored a path to citizenship voted Democratic in both 2012 and 2016, contrasted to only one-third of those who favored deportation.

The YouGov gun control item reads, “Do you think gun control laws should be made more or less strict than they are now?” and offers a more graduated set of response options. As shown in table 2B, the difference in Obama–Clinton loyalty rates over the five response categories is 61 percentage points. Even omitting the two extreme categories that contain few people, the difference is 50 percentage points. The major break occurs between those who favor additional restrictions and those who would retain the status quo or even loosen existing restrictions. Three-quarters of those favoring stronger gun control voted Democratic across the two elections, contrasted to only one-third who were content with the status quo or who believed existing requirements were too restrictive.

In sum, in the YouGov survey, attitudes toward gun control are at least as strongly associated with the White defection rates as attitudes toward illegal immigration.

**TABLE 2A** IMMIGRATION POSITION AND DEMOCRATIC LOYALTY

| Immigration position        | Obama 2012–<br>Clinton 2016 (%) | Issue difference in<br>loyalty rates (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Stay, become citizens (48%) | 77                              |  |
| Stay, no citizenship (12%)  | 52                              | 44                                       |
| Deport (40%)                | 33                              |  |

**Source:** YouGov

**TABLE 2B** GUN CONTROL POSITION AND DEMOCRATIC LOYALTY

| Gun control position | Obama 2012-Clinton 2016 (%) | Issue difference in loyalty rates (%) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Ban all guns (7%)    | 75                          |                                       |
| More strict (49%)    | 74                          |                                       |
| Keep same (27%)      | 38                          | 61                                    |
| Less strict (9%)     | 23                          |                                       |
| No restrictions (7%) | 14                          |                                       |

Source: YouGov

The ANES survey contains two immigration items: “Immigrants are generally good for America’s economy,” and “America’s culture is generally harmed by immigrants.” Note that the ANES items refers just to immigrants, not *illegal* immigrants. Consequently, responses are skewed much more favorably toward immigration than are responses to the preceding YouGov item. The economic and cultural items are very closely related, but consistent with other analyses, the cultural item performs stronger statistically.<sup>18</sup> Hence, I rely on the cultural item in what follows. Across the five response categories, the Obama–Clinton loyalty rates vary by 60 percentage points. Only one-quarter of the small minority who believed the country is harmed by immigrants voted Democratic in both years, contrasted with 82 percent of the plurality who strongly disagreed (table 3A).

The ANES gun item reads, “Should the federal government make it more difficult to buy a gun?” For whatever reason the proportion in favor of making individual *buying* more difficult is significantly higher than in favor of *making laws stricter* in the YouGov survey (table 3B), but across the three response categories the White loyalty rate varies by 53 percentage points; the major break again occurs between those who favor making it more difficult to buy a gun and those who favor the status quo.

So, in two surveys containing different survey items on immigration and gun control, responses to both issues are strongly associated with White voter changes between 2012 and 2016. Of course, the two issues are correlated, so there is a possibility that the relationship between defection rates and gun control is spurious—that the relationship reflects attitudes toward immigration, not gun control. But the opposite relationship is also a possibility: a spurious relationship could reflect the correlation of immigration attitudes with more important gun control attitudes, which would account for Trump’s support in low-immigrant areas, as noted earlier in this essay. Given the high intercorrelations and the small cell sizes in several response categories, it is somewhat surprising then to find that *both* variables have independent and highly significant associations with Obama–Clinton defection rates.

**TABLE 3A** IMMIGRATION POSITION AND DEMOCRATIC LOYALTY

| <b>Immigrants harm culture</b>   | <b>Obama 2012-Clinton 2016 (%)</b> | <b>Issue difference in loyalty rates (%)</b> |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Strongly agree (2%)              | 22                                 |  |
| Agree somewhat (7%)              | 24                                 |  |
| Neither agree nor disagree (13%) | 48                                 | 60   |
| Disagree somewhat (29%)          | 67                                 |  |
| Disagree strongly (48%)          | 82                                 |  |

**Source:** ANES**TABLE 3B** GUN CONTROL POSITION AND DEMOCRATIC LOYALTY

| <b>Make gun buying more difficult</b> | <b>Obama 2012-Clinton 2016 (%)</b> | <b>Issue difference in loyalty rates (%)</b> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| More difficult (76%)                  | 77                                 |  |
| Keep the same (21%)                   | 39                                 | 53   |
| Make it easier (2%)                   | 24                                 |  |

**Source:** ANES

## ANALYSIS

Considering first the YouGov data, defection rates among immigration supporters vary by 46 percentage points depending on their gun control views, although the lion's share are in favor of stricter gun control, of course (table 4A). Among immigration hardliners, defection rates vary by 37 points across gun control views. Similarly, comparing lines 1 and 4, gun control proponents vary by about 30 points depending on their immigration views, whereas comparing lines 2 and 5 and lines 3 and 6, those opposing additional controls vary by 20–25 points, depending on their immigration views.

The ANES data present a similar picture (table 4B). Defection rates among those who deny that immigrants harm American culture vary by 26 percentage points depending on gun control views; those who agree that immigrants harm the culture vary by 33 points, and those who refuse to take a position vary by 46 points. Alternatively, conditioning on gun control views (comparing lines 1, 4, 7; lines 2, 5, 8; and lines 3, 6, 9), defection rates vary by 30–50 percentage points, albeit with some very small cell sizes. Again, the implication is clear: both

**TABLE 4A** COMBINED IMMIGRATION AND GUN CONTROL POSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIC LOYALTY

| <b>Immigration + gun control</b>                        | <b>Obama 2008-Clinton 2016 (%)</b> | <b>Issue difference in loyalty rates (%)</b> |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Stay and become citizens + gun control response:</i> |                                    |  |
| More strict control (31%)                               | 82                                 |  |
| Same control (7%)                                       | 63                                 | 46   |
| Less strict (2%)  | 36                                 |  |
| <i>Deport + gun control response:</i>                   |                                    |  |
| More strict control (10%)                               | 53                                 |  |
| Same control (13%)                                      | 38                                 | 37   |
| Less strict (10%)                                       | 16                                 |  |

**Source:** YouGov

**TABLE 4B** COMBINED IMMIGRATION AND GUN CONTROL POSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIC LOYALTY

| <b>Immigration + gun control</b>   | <b>Obama 2012-Clinton 2016 (%)</b> | <b>Issue difference in loyalty rates (%)</b> |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Disagree that immigrants harm culture + gun control response:</i>                   |                                    |  |
| More strict control (63%)  | 83                                 |  |
| Same control (14%)   | 45                                 | 26   |
| Less strict (1%)   | 57                                 |  |
| <i>Neither agree nor disagree that immigrants harm culture + gun control response:</i> |                                    |  |
| More strict control (8%)   | 56                                 |  |
| Same control (4%)  | 44                                 | 46   |
| Less strict (1%)   | 10                                 |  |
| <i>Agree that immigrants harm culture + gun control response:</i>                      |                                    |  |
| More strict control (5%)   | 33                                 |  |
| Same control (4%)  | 14                                 | 33   |
| Less strict (1%)   | 0                                  |  |

**Source:** ANES



attitudes toward gun control and immigration are strongly associated with the propensity of White 2012 Obama voters to defect to Trump in 2016.

For the more statistically inclined, in a regression model that includes party identification, as well as immigration and gun control variables, both sets of variables are significant at the .001 level, even with the noted high levels of collinearity and small sample sizes.<sup>19</sup> In sum, two national surveys (one face-to-face, the other on the internet) that posed different questions about immigration and gun control show comparable importance of both immigration and gun control in the 2016 presidential voting.

## DISCUSSION

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In a very close election, numerous factors can determine the outcome. Did her stance on gun control cost Hillary Clinton 39,000 votes in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin that—properly distributed—could have flipped those states and given her an Electoral College majority? An answer to that question requires data more granular than that analyzed here. But the preceding analysis is consistent with the argument that Clinton’s position exacted a significant cost in rural areas. Political commentators have different beliefs about which party generally benefits from the gun issue, but the preceding analysis shows how the issue poses problems for both parties.

The Democrats today have two paths to winning majorities. One path runs through suburban areas where a strong stance on gun control may attract upscale Republicans, especially women. That path appears to have been a good one in the 2018 and 2022 midterm elections, although for reasons other than guns, such as abortion in 2022. The other path runs through blue-collar rural and small-town districts where economic concerns are prominent. There, a stronger stance on guns may drive potential Democratic voters away. Given the distribution of public opinion on gun control, probably more votes are to be gained along the first path than along the second, but as the 2016 elections show, maximizing the popular vote does not always determine the outcome of elections. The overrepresentation of more rural states in senate elections and in the Electoral College gives strategic importance to people who oppose stricter control: gun owners are overrepresented in these states relative to more populous urban states. It does the Democrats no good to win more votes in New York and California where they already win by overwhelming margins if they lose votes in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and other more rural battleground states. But the Democrats now appear to be locked into a strong gun control position, regardless of such electoral calculations.

Republicans seemingly have more flexibility. The kinds of gun control measures that are on the table such as background checks, age restrictions, red-flag laws, and waiting periods are supported by large majorities, even among gun owners.<sup>20</sup> So moving away from a strict oppositional position would allow the party to present a more reasonable image at a cost of relatively few votes.<sup>21</sup> One complication may lie in the proverbial slippery slope, however. If the kinds of modest proposals now on the table were adopted, they would be unlikely to



make much difference for the prevalence of gun violence. So, when the next major episode of gun violence occurs, the demand for more and stronger controls likely would arise, putting Republicans once again in the position of opposing popular opinion. At any rate, the issue shows no signs of going away in the 2024 campaign. I may return to this subject in a post-election essay.

## NOTES

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17. The Voter Study Group, supported by the Democracy Fund, did not include any gun control items in its major survey of the 2016 electorate.
18. That is, the culture item is more powerful than the economic item when both are included in a regression. Readers should not interpret this finding as showing that cultural considerations dominate economic considerations in voting for Trump—a previous essay discussed the difficulties of separating the two. I only wish to give immigration the strongest possible case here in comparing its importance to the gun issue.
19. Although it was not its focus, a multivariate analysis of the White Trump vote in 2016 using the same *Economist*/YouGov data analyzed earlier found that respondent views on gun restrictions were more important than their views on what to do with illegal immigrants, as well as their view on abortion and Black Lives Matter. See Peter Enns, “Clarifying the Role of Racism in the 2016 US Presidential Election: Opinion Change, Anti-Immigrant Sentiment, and Vote Choice,” 2019, [https://peterenns.org/sites/peterenns.org/files/pdf/Enns\\_TrumpRace\\_APSA2018.pdf](https://peterenns.org/sites/peterenns.org/files/pdf/Enns_TrumpRace_APSA2018.pdf).
20. See <https://www.pollingreport.com/guns.htm>.
21. Even before its much-publicized recent travails, the NRA was not nearly as powerful as most people in the media thought or as Democratic politicians claimed. David Callahan, “The NRA Is a Paper Tiger,” *The American Prospect*, 2012, <https://prospect.org/power/nra-paper-tiger/>.



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