The Debate on Gun-Control: Is It Reconcilable?

There has been considerable debate in the media (Lott, 2018) and government (Enten, 2018) regarding the issue of whether guns should be allowed in America (Ballard, 2018; Karabell, 2018). Some believe this issue has been deliberated in America since 1837, the year that the state of Georgia passed a law that banned handguns (Longley, 2018). Others say that President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 was what increased public awareness of gun laws (Longley, 2018). Nevertheless, the gun-control debate is one that is deeply entrenched. For despite the 1,091 Americans killed since 1966 via mass shootings (Berkowitz, Lu, & Alcantara, 2018) and the 1,624 mass shootings in 1,870 days (Morris, 2018), gun advocates and anti-gun groups have yet to come to an agreement. With both parties being aware of the same events and information, the topic of gun-control has the potential to fall under the category of ‘deep disagreements’. Deep disagreements occur when people disagree because they do not share the same underlying assumptions. The difference between a deep disagreement and a normal disagreement is that normal disagreements contain overlapping underlying assumptions and/or can be rationally reconcilable. For example, if you and a friend disagreed on what time your yoga class is every week, the disagreement could be rationally resolved by checking the class schedule online. Deep disagreements, on the other hand, are not as easily resolved. Both parties involved in the deep disagreement may have access to the exact same information, but would still not rationally come to a conclusion. And so, Fogelin (1985) believes that deep disagreements are rationally irreconcilable. Although debatable whether gun-control is an issue of deep disagreement, I will instead be attempting to exemplify that the gun-control debate is reconcilable. This will be done through an examination of two main pro-gun arguments: safety and rights, followed by the anti-gun side’s opposing reply as well as lastly offering independent arguments by the anti-gun lobby.

Let us start with one of the more prevalent arguments: pro-gun groups argue that guns make America a safer place (Ewing, 2017). This entails that pro-gun groups would need to provide a definition or criteria for safety. By ‘safe’, pro-gun lobbyists assure that guns help protect people, protect against violence, as well as save lives (Frum, 2012). In this case, anti-gun groups can retaliate with two objections. Firstly, owning more guns lead to more deaths rather than protect against deaths. Under the first objection, Anglemyer et al. (2014) found that “access to firearms is associated with risk for complete suicide and being the victim of homicide” (Anglemyer, Horvath, & Rutherford, 2014). Furthermore, Siegel et al. (2013) “observed a robust correlation between higher levels of gun ownership and higher firearm homicide rates. [...] States with higher rates of gun ownership had disproportionately large numbers of deaths from firearm-related homicides” (Siegel, Ross, & King, 2013). Finally, a Harvard review web page also published findings stating more guns equal more homicide (Hepburn & Hemenway, 2004.). The abundance of research proves that guns do not make America a safer place. Secondly, according to Follman (2012), armed civilians don’t save many people in actuality: “We identified and analyzed 62 of them [mass shootings], and one striking pattern in the data is this: In not a single
case was the killing stopped by a civilian using a gun” (Follman, 2012). Consequently, it is evident that owning guns result in more deaths than lives saved.

Granted, guns may not make us safer in actuality, but it can surely make us feel safe. And shouldn’t feeling safe be equally as important as actually being safe? Approximately 79% of male gun owners and 80% of female gun owners reported that owning a gun made them feel safer, and 64% of people living in a home with someone else who owns a gun felt safer according to a Pew Research study (2013). Shouldn’t the government and anti-gun lobbyists take into consideration the large amount of individuals who derive a feeling of safety through gun-ownership?

However, anti-gun supporters may reply with the reason why 79% of gun owners report owning a gun makes them feel safer, is precisely because they are aware of the fact that other people own guns as well. Due to this fear of other people owning guns, which implicitly suggests that they themselves feel guns are dangerous, gun-owners would require a gun themselves for protection. The Pew Research Center also states that “the number of gun owners who say that protection is their top reason for having [a gun] has risen 22 percentage points since 1999” (“Why Own a Gun? Protection Is Now Top Reason,” 2013). In 1999, the main reason to own a gun is to hunt (49%), compared to protection being the main reason in 2013 (48%) (“Why Own a Gun? Protection Is Now Top Reason,” 2013). In current society, because people are aware of the mass shootings, gun-owners feel the need to own a gun in order to protect themselves and their families; this is evidence by the fact that 58% of Americans worry that taking guns away will make it more difficult to protect their homes and families, while also being aware that stricter laws would reduce the number of deaths by mass shooting (54%) (“Why Own a Gun? Protection Is Now Top Reason,” 2013). By being aware that stricter laws would reduce death counts, this proves that gun-owners are aware of the deaths that have been occurring. Yet 58% of Americans also fear not being able to protect themselves and their families from mass shooters if guns were controlled. This illustrates that due to the knowledge of others possessing guns, a need for safety is developed which is then solved through possessing a gun oneself. However, safety is also a major concern for Americans without guns. 58% of households without guns report that they are uncomfortable having a gun in their homes, with safety and gun accidents being the major factor (“Why Own a Gun? Protection Is Now Top Reason,” 2013). Therefore, guns do not make everyone feel safe in actuality.

Even if guns did make everyone feel safe, is one’s feeling of safety truly that important? If feeling safe came with drawbacks, at what cost would it still be permissible to prioritize feeling safe? Consequently, people may feel safer in the short-term, but the harmful and deadly outcomes of gun-ownership in the long-run demonstrate that the costs outweigh the benefits (Anglemyer et al., 2014).

Moreover, should governments truly base policies around the peculiarities of people’s psychology? What someone may perceive as safe may not actually be safe, and what one may perceive not to be safe, may instead turn out to be perfectly safe. Take for example how most people think women should be more scared of strangers than people they already know. However, statistics show that most women are killed by their current or former partner in the U.K. (Bulman, 2017) and more than half of all murdered women were killed by their partners in
the U.S. (Khazan, 2017). This example proves that although feeling safe is an important consideration, government policies should not solely depend on one’s psychological feeling of safety.

So far we have looked at gun-ownership in terms of physical safety as well as psychological safety. We have concluded however, that these arguments are flawed. But perhaps the safety of certain socially salient groups is enough to legalize guns. This would include perceived vulnerable groups such as women and African American individuals. First off, gun-rights groups protest that females require guns for self-protection from both sexual violence and other attacks (Mahdawi, 2018); to carry a gun is empowering, to ban guns is sexist (Mahdawi, 2018). Kaitlin Marie, a 22-year-old Kent State University graduate posted graduation photos in which she was holding a semi-automatic rifle with the tagline: “As a woman, I refuse to be a victim & the second amendment ensures that I don’t have to be.” Some women are garnering a sense of empowerment from gun-ownership, evidenced in quotes such as “owning a gun has made me feel more comfortable. I really do think it’s an equalizer” by Dion, a 35-year-old woman in California (Mahdawi, 2018). As a result, it should not come as a surprise that 27% of women disclose protection to be the sole reason they own a gun compared to the 8% of men (Parker, Horowtiz, Igielnik, Oliphant, & Brown, 2017).

On the other hand, although women do appear to gain a sense of empowerment through gun-ownership, research shows that women are more often harmed by guns than saved by them. “Five women a day are killed by guns in America. A woman’s risk of being murdered increases 500% if a gun is present during a domestic dispute” (Gerney & Parsons, 2014). Hence, a woman possessing a gun in fact increases the likelihood of death rather than decrease it.

If gun-control is not sexist, perhaps it is rather, racist. Pro-gun groups have argued that ‘Black Guns Matter’ (Malooley, 2018); guns make African Americans feel safe. A black man by the name of Maj Toure claims that “All gun control is racist. To attempt to not allow someone to protect himself and his family in a high-crime area of a city is racism” (Malooley, 2018). However, is it true that gun-ownership for black individuals are safer? The anti-gun response to this claim is twofold. Firstly, since one should not shoot the police, holding a gun would not help in self-protection. In fact, possessing a gun not only indicates that one is a threat, but would give the police an excuse to fire with more certainty. Secondly, research shows that the police will shoot faster at African Americans than Whites when both are holding a gun, as well as mistake harmless objects as guns more often for African Americans than Whites, which result in more mislead black shootings (Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2002). Therefore, it seems that it is precisely the presence of guns which adds fuel to the fire rather than serving its anticipated function of self-protection.

And so it seems that gun-ownership does not help in the case of protecting women and African American individuals. But perhaps gun-ownership is not about protecting one individual from another individual, but rather, to help individuals protect themselves against the state. Quotes by gun-owners such as David Kulp and Vasilios Christogiannis show that this may be the case: "I fear the government, and I think when they start getting background checks, they’re going to — just like in Germany years ago, they used that to confiscate weapons later on,”
Yet what is the likelihood that a tyrannical government will dominate? It seems instead, that preparing for a tyrannical government involves high risk and low reward. The likelihood of the government actually invading is small. Yet the risk accidentally firing at someone or being fired at is far higher in the presence of a gun. According to studies done by Kellerman et al. (1993), “keeping a gun in the home is independently associated with an increase in the risk of homicide in the home” (Kellermann et al., 1993). And so, would it be worth losing a family member for the sake of safeguarding against an event that is unlikely to happen anyway? Furthermore, even in the unlikely event that a tyrannical government does arise, it would still be futile to fight as the government has more firearms than citizens could ever possess. For instance, “it would seem likely that any government so evil as to justify resistance and revolt would not hesitate to crush the resistance of privately armed civilians. The Second Amendment would not provide much of a shield in this situation” (Dowd, 1997, p.94). And lastly, why waste time preparing for something that would not be lead to fruitful outcomes even in the unlikely worst-case scenario? Why not take purposeful and useful actions instead? The best way to counteract a tyrannical government in a democracy, is not through guns, but voting. To quote Barack Obama, “You hear some of these quotes — 'I need a gun to protect myself from the government.' 'We can't do background checks because the government's going to come take my guns away.' The government's us. These officials are elected by you” (Welna, 2013). Furthermore, in Dowd’s paper in 1997, he writes, “But Massachusetts was the people's state where citizens could vote and petition. The right to take arms against a tyranny is not the right to take arms against a democracy” (Dowd, 1997, p. 92). Thus, it seems like the tyrannical government argument is not only preparing for an unlikely catastrophe at a high price, and the reality of winning in the event that it does come true is improbable, as well as in our current democracy, voting is a better preventative measure than firearms.

Although there have been disagreements from all angles of the safety and self-protection argument, both sides of the gun debate may still agree that one’s feeling of personal safety is still an important issue. If it is not sound for other pro-gun groups to utilize guns as a means for feeling safe, then at the very least, gun-owners could claim that ‘guns make me feel safe.’

Even though something may make one person feel safe, should that something still be permissible if it endangers the safety of others? Why should your feeling of safety be prioritized above other people’s? Similarly, as guns are associated with a high risk of homicide, gun-ownership may make you feel safe, but it does not necessarily make everyone else feel safe. One person’s feeling of safety would not be sufficient reason to legalize guns, and even less so if it takes away other people’s safety. In a similar case, take for example, you only felt safe carrying around a time bomb. Then surely you would feel safe, but no one else in your vicinity would. Would it still be permissible for you to carry the time bomb?

Now that we have looked at the first argument of safety and uncovered its deficiencies arising from the pro-gun side, we will examine the second argument put forth by the pro-gun party, which is that of the Second Amendment, under which includes associative sub-arguments such as national pride, legal documentation and natural rights. Firstly, pro-gun groups have
argued that gun rights capture national pride. They claim that thanks to the American Revolution, guns have become a part of America’s culture, tradition, and history. Thus, to take away guns would be to take away part of America’s cultural past.

However, the anti-gun lobbyists could easily combat this argument with the example of slavery. Why is it that America should only take one part of their history and make that into a present-day example national pride? If history equates to national pride which then equates to its modern enactment, then this would mean slavery should also be included. This example shows that purely because an event has occurred in a country’s past does not automatically make it acceptable by today’s standards, nor should the excuse of ‘national pride’ be used as a way of ensuring its place in today’s society.

Even though an appeal to tradition is not enough to persuade anti-gun groups, a legal documentation of one’s rights may. The Second Amendment argument used by the pro-gun party declares that one has the right to bear arms. It reads: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” (U.S. Const. am. 2).

Anti-gun advocates may question the use of the term ‘Militia’ for it seems that ‘Militia’ would not refer to everyday citizens, but a military force instead. If this was the case, then the Second Amendment would not be enough reason to give rise to civilian gun-ownership. On the contrary, gun-activists argue that the term is used differently than in modern day. “In the eighteenth century, the term "militia" was rarely used to refer to organized military units, and, indeed, eighteenth century legal usage seems never to have adopted that meaning. Rather, the "militia" included all citizens who qualified for military service (i.e., most adult males)” as recorded by Lund (1987) (Lund, 1987, p. 104). In other words, ‘Militia’ was used for citizens. Anti-gun groups, however, do not agree. “In the body of the Constitution there are also several references to the term “militia.” [...] These provisions provide a basis for the Court to conclude that the type of service protected by one's right to keep and bear arms is prescribed to an organized state militia, not simply an amorphous body of men and certainly not groups simply using the name “militia”” (p. 85) explained by Dowd (1997). This information would suggest that the US. Constitution was intending for an organized military group to bear arms, rather than everyday civilians themselves. And even if we were to assume that the Constitution did permit civilians to bear arms, does it mean it should never be changed?

For example, in the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and 1850 in Article IV, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution, it required that all escaped slaves be returned to their masters upon capture (“Fugitive Slave Acts,” n.d.). Even though slavery is prohibited today, if the U.S. government were to endorse the logic of the pro-gun groups, slavery would still be present. Moreover, this act was repealed in 1864 (“Fugitive Slave Acts,” n.d.) which further demonstrates that laws in the past can be amended as time progress. Likewise, the 18th amendment which imposed the prohibition of alcohol has also been nullified in the present day (U.S. Const. am. 21). This concludes that legal acts are not static and are expected to advance alongside society.

Nevertheless, gun-owners continue to campaign for gun rights. At the very least, gun-owners believe that they have a consumer right to purchase guns (Mohr, 2018). However, anti-
gun lobbyists may wonder if consumer rights should be taken away given that certain products harm others. Take for example, torture devices and Golliwogs (racist dolls imitating African individuals). Torture devices would cause physical harm to others while Golliwogs create psychological harm to African individuals. Therefore, it is not within one’s right as a consumer to purchase these products.

Additionally, as Kupfer (2017) writes in The National Review, “Most conservatives don’t like hip-hop. The typical conservative case against the genre amounts not to music criticism, but to the charge that it promotes dangerous behaviors in the culture” (Kupfer, 2017). Yet, why is it that conservatives can shun one type of consumer product (rap) while fighting for consumer rights of another (guns)? Moreover, why condemn a supposed promoter of violence when advocating for a violence executing weapon? The hypocrisy and inconsistency on the pro-gun side would thus rescind the consumer argument.

Lastly, the pro-gun groups defend that they hold an individual and natural right to possess guns (McCaskey, 2016). Although not directly said, it can be interpreted that pro-gun groups draw the belief that gun-ownership is a natural right in itself, independent of the Constitution. The anti-gun lobbyists can reply in one of two ways: a) the right to possess a gun does not count as a natural right, and b) there are other rights that trump the right to possess guns. Since the definition of a natural right has long been debated by philosophers, legal workers, and politicians alike (McCaskey, 2016) without agreeing upon a conclusive answer, it would be in our best interest in this paper to disregard the first route, and instead, examine the second route. That is to say, anti-gun lobbyists admit that one would have a natural right to possess guns, but that right is negated by other rights of higher importance. For example, by prioritizing one’s right to own a gun, it infringes upon one’s right to life as well as right to liberty and security (Human Rights Act, 2000). If one’s life is being compromised, one would not have the ability to own a gun in the first place. Secondly, if one’s right to liberty and security is being compromised by the right to own the very thing that takes away liberty and security, it would be natural to dispose of the object and choose liberty and security. For example, given the choice of liberty and security and a torture device which hinders one’s liberty and security, one’s choice would most likely be to prioritize liberty and security over the device.

Overall, all arguments presented by the pro-gun side have been combated. This demonstrates that the pro-gun arguments don’t hold. Instead, it seems that the arguments provided by the pro-gun side actually lean towards the anti-gun party. This suggests that the gun-control debate is potentially reconcilable. However, what are some independent anti-gun arguments to persuade readers? Anti-gun arguments actually overlap considerably with pro-gun arguments. Anti-gun groups mainly argue that eliminating guns will lower the rate of homicide and suicide. Studies show that guns are the leading cause of homicide (66.6%) and suicide (52.2%) in America (“WISQARS", 2018). According to the National Safety Council, gun violence is one of the leading causes of death in America, surpassing death by riding inside a car, van, or truck (Center for Health Statistics, 2015). Furthermore, according to the American Journal of Medicine, America’s gun homicide rates are 25.2% higher than other high-income countries (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016). This should not come as a surprise as Americans are estimated to own about half of the estimated 650 million civilian-owned guns worldwide with its citizens own more guns per capita than residents of any other country (Fox, 2018). To the anti-
gun party, these statistics give sufficient reason for the discontinuation of civilian gun-ownership in America.

What we have looked at here are the two main pro-gun arguments of safety and rights, both of which are flawed, as well as offer an independent anti-gun argument of more homicide and suicide as a result of gun ownership. In addition to that, it is precisely the two pro-gun arguments of safety and rights that actually endorse the anti-gun perspective. Firstly, it is actually safer when guns are prohibited rather than permitted (Anglemyer et al., 2014). As mentioned in the above paragraphs, this is the case for both women and African Americans. Moreover, guns do not protect the rights of others. Rather, it takes away our rights such as right to life, liberty and security. Therefore, the very arguments that gun-owners use to argue against gun-control are ones that empirically fall in favour of anti-gun groups.

In conclusion, although the debate surrounding gun-control is extensive, the arguments from the pro-gun party can be rationally resolved. Therefore, through the examination and retaliation of the pro-gun party’s arguments, the issue of gun-control would not classify as a deep disagreement as defined by Fogelin (1985).
Works Cited


