

# POLITICO

## Are Millennials Moving Right on Guns?

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Are younger Americans more progressive? One would be hard pressed to disagree. The under-30 crowd has led a fight on transgender rights and new forms of racism. In the culture wars, conservatives have met defeat at the hands of much younger activists for gay marriage, drug legalization and Barack Obama—a politician whose rock-star nimbus was then, improbably, taken up by a senescent Vermonter and card-carrying socialist. According to surveys last year, 43 percent of 18-29-year-olds now hold a favorable view of socialism. These are the millennials. Alex P. Keaton they are not.

But gun politics is where the easy caricature of America's radicalized youth marching toward socialism ends. It remains one of the few arenas in which a younger generation's views are not emphatically moving leftward in any obvious way. And for those who would expect or hope otherwise, the data can disappoint.

Polling in gun politics is notoriously murky—much lies in the crafting of the question—but demographers have consistently reported a conservative streak in millennial attitudes on guns. Respondents aged 18-29 are the least likely in the country to support a renewed ban on assault weapons, at 49 percent, a fact that has helped drive nationwide support down to a record low. Pew's data suggest that those falling in the youngest age range have dropped the furthest in support for “gun control” since 2000 (when the alternative is presented as “gun rights”). And when the question concerns the National Rifle Association's top legislative priority, concealed carry, millennials appear to lead the country. According to Gallup's version of the question in 2004, the notion that concealed guns made for safer spaces polled at 25 percent; 11 years later, it registered at 55 percent nationally. The greatest support came from those ages 18-29, at 66 percent, a full 10 points greater than the next highest scoring demographic.

Does this make millennials more conservative on guns? Some think so. Observing the trends of his own poll, in 2014, Frank Newport, the director of Gallup, wrote, “At the same time that the country's views of same-sex marriage and marijuana have undergone significant short-term changes,” America's proliferating gun massacres “have not produced the change in attitudes toward guns that gun-control advocates have predicted.” Newport later told NBC News, “[I]t's unlike a number of other attitudes, say, like gay marriage, where young people are much more liberal.” Writing this month in New York Magazine, Benjamin Hart agreed, suggesting that the gun data may seem like “a head-scratcher” given millennials' liberal attitudes on gay marriage, legalization and other issues. “But guns aren't like that,” Hart writes.

It's true that the young people in these surveys do support some efforts to loosen gun laws. But it turns out that their views are more complicated, even seemingly contradictory. The same poll that found millennials skeptical about an assault weapons ban? It also finds they lead the country in support for a mental health-related ban. They are the least likely demographic in America to own a gun, and they give the country's lowest favorability ratings to the NRA, at 19 percent. And in the most striking case of ideological whipsaw, the same demographic of young people who reported unequaled openness to concealed carry, which the NRA has long dreamed of making a nationwide reality, also registered the highest levels of support for a national gun registry—the NRA's most nightmarish hallucination. (Another 2015 poll bears out the same dichotomy.)

What is going on here? Is this two-faced millennial merely a demographic chimera—their views cherry-picked to buttress whatever argument the author wants to make? Over the past year, I've interviewed upwards of 60 young people about their opinions on the gun issue, mostly in Austin, Texas. And most of them were strikingly open to holding both ideas at once. Nor did they believe these apparent contradictions were even contradictions at all. In recent years, prominent liberal writers have begun imagining the next chapter of the American gun debate, suggesting that we might soon lurch toward a Frankenstein policy that weds two disparate worldviews on guns—one that accepts guns in many sectors of American life, and another that embraces the staunchest possible regulation. Speaking to millennial-aged students left me convinced this is where we could be headed.

“It does appear that there is that increase in support for concealed carry, and also some of the highest support for other forms of gun control,” says Adam Winkler, an expert on the Second Amendment and gun politics at UCLA whose book bestselling book *Gunfight* has won acclaim from many readers on various sides of the gun debate. “It kind of reflects that sort of divided identity on guns—that guns can make you safer, and thus they support concealed carry. At the same time, they recognize there's a serious gun problem in America, and ... they think that more should be done to keep guns out of the hands of people who can't be trusted.”

The apparent contradiction takes some getting used to. “I've been pondering this. It is strange,” Trevor Burrus, a fellow at the libertarian-leaning CATO Institute who studies guns, told me after he finished looking over the findings. “I do a lot of lecturing on campuses with millennials,” he said, and based on what he saw, the polling data “does comport with that.” Burrus said it was not uncommon for him to encounter young people who will defend the political sanctity of the American gun owner yet go on to express revulsion at the influence of the NRA.

This seeming contradiction, Burrus believes, might foretell some avenue out of America's agonizing stalemate over guns. “The NRA was the group that basically decided that all attempts at small gun control are ultimately big attempts to ban guns. And therefore, we're going to resist every single one of those,” he said. “They just don't believe that gun control advocates are really OK with guns.”

He added, “If these millennial attitudes persist, it could help change the gun debate.”

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**At its most elemental**, gun politics has always felt like a binary battle between those who favor greater and fewer numbers of guns in American society. Your victory comes at my expense:

Concealed carry is a victory for looser gun laws, and thus more guns; mental health background checks or bans on assault weapons mean fewer guns get sold, dealing a defeat to pro-gun forces.

In *Gun Fight*, Winkler illustrates how deep this dichotomy runs in recent history. In the 1970s, what is today called the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence was then known as the National Coalition to Ban Handguns—a relatively moderate position at a time when, just 10 years before, virtually half the country supported such a ban. In the same decade, the NRA's leadership revolution in 1977 didn't simply aim to protect gun rights, but proliferate them: The more guns, the better.

Winkler identifies a few events that transformed the American gun debate, focal points that seem particularly salient to those born after 1980. The first was the birth of the concealed carry movement, in Florida, in 1987—a process whereby citizens, typically after a training course and background check, are permitted to carry weapons in public. Another was the Los Angeles riots in 1992, at the peak of the millennial birth rate, an event that reconstructed the gun industry around personal defense, thus putting a gun in the homes of millions of young people. Then the era of mass shootings arrived. In 1999, the shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School consummated two things at once: The new era of high-body count shootings, and the NRA's steadfast resistance to doing anything about it.

I asked Winkler whether the support for personal gun liberalization might be a generational artifact of mass shootings. "It's not surprising that their understanding of gun violence comes from a world of mass shootings and forceful NRA advocacy," he told me. It seemed an unlikely coincidence that the triptych of massacres Americans use to denote each phase of the modern gun debate—Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook—all occurred in schools. "Definitely, millennials today are growing up in an era of mass shootings and very strong NRA rhetoric, that only guns can protect you. Whether they'll believe that NRA rhetoric over the course of their lifetimes remains to be seen," Winkler added. Even in a world in which young people claim to despise the NRA, they seem to be buying into one of the group's narratives: that the only way protect yourself from "bad guys" is to empower "good guys" with yet more guns.

But the Virginia Tech shooting, in 2007, brought another, quieter legacy: The birth of the millennial pro-gun movement. On the night of the shooting, three college students in Ohio formed a group called Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, and with the help of some early attention from Glenn Beck, launched a campaign to allow guns across college campuses. Almost at once, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence suggested that the students were a well-funded conduit for the NRA. Yet for traditional gun control groups, the reality was far worse—a small but growing band of dedicated millennials who could spread the gun-rights gospel to a new generation. With the help of a few obscure court cases, a few right-leaning legislatures, and, eventually, the NRA's inevitable support, campus carry has since become a legal fact at hundreds of public campuses in more than a dozen states—including, just this year, Georgia and Arkansas, and in 2016, Texas.

During the week campus carry was unfurled at UT Austin, I met dozens of students caught in the teeth of this culture war—a kinetic, real-life sample of the future of gun politics. It was there that I met Zach Stone, 22, a square-jawed, first-year law student. A member of the student government—and a Democrat staunchly opposed to the campus carry measure—Stone had moderated a formal debate on campus between the pro-gun and anti-conceal students (this was after the law had passed). Like most students, Stone still thinks allowing guns on campus is an

absurd idea, and he harbored grave doubts about concealed carry's training requirements—he wrote a much-discussed *New York Times* op-ed on the topic. But beyond the campus carry issue, Stone also told me he has since become used to students seeking a way to reconcile gun ownership with strict regulations, even while they claim no fellowship with the NRA.

“I’m not certain that they think there’s a contradiction there,” Stone said. “To them, there’s nothing naïve in saying, we should just be neutral on the idea of how many guns are going to be sold, and we should have very strict gun regulation.”

Stone placed special emphasis on the Supreme Court’s *Heller* decision in 2008, which defined the Second Amendment as a personal right to own guns. “It’s been understood as an individual right to gun ownership. You’d be arguing against that norm with millennials,” he said. In the mass shooting era, too, students may be particularly given over to a divided mind: The youngest Americans are largely unchurched in the traditional NRA fixation on out-of-control crime—perhaps because most millennials, with no memory of the L.A. riots, have experienced so little of it. “If the problem you were trying to solve is inner-city gun violence, then you would be in favor of restrictions across the board,” Stone told me. “But there would be room for a split if you were trying to stop something else—if your primary concern was mass shootings.”

Others I met at UT last year echoed these sentiments. “What we’re seeing is, concealed carry isn’t necessarily viewed as a threat to gun control,” said Vance Roper, a graduate student who sat on UT’s concealed carry implementation committee, which sought input from thousands of students. An Army veteran, Roper told me that he had recently quit his membership with the NRA out of disagreement with its hardline stance, and the way that it punished moderates. “This is what the pollsters are missing,” he continued. “You can be for gun rights and still for reasonable restrictions. I think that’s the problem—it’s hard to double around that question, and really hit it, but what they missed in the survey is asking millennials a specific question: Is concealed carry a part of gun regulation?” Roper is a self-described gun guy—he owns a few—and thus disposed to be favorable to concealed carry. But he speculated that because concealed carriers are, in theory, themselves subject to the kinds of background checks and training requirements millennials might want for other gun transactions, it could explain their support: “What we don’t know is, if somebody has concealed weapons, do you care—do you feel more secure *because* that person has had a background check and training?”

Plenty of people, of course, do *not* feel more secure around guns—such as the vast majority of the protesters who turned out at UT Austin, which included students and faculty alike. Last year, Jennifer Glass, a tenured professor of sociology, sued the university with two colleagues for allowing the concealed guns into classrooms. Glass has been advocating tighter gun control for many years, and few experts I’ve met in the country have sported such a rapid-fire mastery of facts and data: Sitting in her glass office, she built a meticulous case for mitigating the total number of guns in society under the auspices of public health, a political approach that has gained traction in recent years. In this strategy, generational change would play a central role. Glass compared guns to cigarettes. “People felt the peer pressure to stop smoking a long time before we had these smoke-free zones,” she told me. And, Glass suggested, “As more people live in cities, [and] more people get higher education, then we’ll see the same peer pressure to stop carrying, stop showing, stop holding, and limit the places where the general population feels comfortable encountering weapons.”

Glass's argument enjoys widespread currency on the left, particularly among those who remember the success of the campaign against cigarettes. But what struck me most about her case was how little it seemed to prevail among the young people I met on campus—even among skeptics of concealed weapons. Aside from the protesters—who managed to get the Daily Show to feature their cause—the majority of students I met were leery of speaking definitively at all on the issue, especially when they thought it entailed criticism of gun owners. “Please don’t quote me by name,” one recently graduated student told me, practically whispering. “I’m still making up my mind on this.”

One student, a graduating senior named Andrea Fuentes, had told me she rejected her acceptance offer to a prestigious graduate program at UT because of the handguns. She had also joined some of the protests. I steeled for a fierce viewpoint. Instead, Fuentes displayed striking equanimity. The debate at UT Austin, she said, “led me to be able to have a certain level of respect for some gun advocates. I definitely still don’t think that it’s necessary on a college campus. I think there’s a line that needs to be drawn somewhere.” She was clear in her adamancy that campus carry had gone too far. But her attitude toward gun culture was largely quizzical, not contemptuous. “I don’t know. I see both sides of it,” she told me. “I feel like every single person that I’ve talked to about it has kind of had something different to say.”

If all this is indicative of anything, it is that the generation of students who have made it fashionable on campus to call out even marginally racist behavior with ease, suddenly seemed stricken at the thought of doing the same for their peers who embrace gun culture. Roper thinks this is because we live in an era in which peer pressure itself is often anathema—such as the new norms against fat shaming, slut shaming or gender shaming. “That’s not how we were raised. You can change your sexuality. You can change your sex even,” said Roper, who told me he is gay and was recently married. “They’re growing up in a generation where it’s OK to not be this or that, no matter the category. It’s a cafeteria menu of options, no matter what the issue is.”

Roper compared young people’s attitude toward guns to their views of gay marriage: “If someone isn’t violating my rights, why do I care?”

Roper’s theory sounds a lot like America’s evolving debate over drug legalization. There, younger Americans have mostly rejected Reagan-era arguments about marijuana as an ambient pathogen that must be eradicated at all costs, in favor of transferring power and capital away from dangerous drug dealers and relocating it into the sunshine of a strictly regulated market (one whose seed-to-sale monitoring requirements don’t appear so dissimilar from a national gun registry).

When Newport and Hart argue that millennial support for gay marriage and drug legalization contravene their attitude on guns, their reasoning is that this must be because their gun politics are conservative. But maybe the political through-line is something else entirely—a kind of “technocratic libertarianism,” as Stone put it. That might explain the openness toward a national gun registry. “To the extent that that’s not oxymoronic, it’s: Government shouldn’t be telling people what to do. They shouldn’t be interfering with their lives,” Stone said. “And, of course, you don’t want convicted felons to have guns. Of course you don’t want people with poor mental health to have guns.”

Perhaps this is how the Facebook generation sees guns: Scant concern about pushing troves of our most sensitive personal data into the laps of governments and corporations—and the

assumption that they should intervene when things go wrong—twinned with the abiding faith that everyone is entitled to live in their own reality.

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**Is there a coherent principle here**, one that could organize a different way of conceptualizing gun politics in the coming decades? Here, the mirror becomes cloudy. Most of the young people I spoke with lacked even a conscious recognition of holding two seemingly contradictory positions at once, let alone specific policy ideas. But if anything unified them, it was a rejection of being forced to choose between two social projects of gun proliferation and gun eradication.

We also need more data, and better questions from pollsters, whose survey language has helped cement Americans' binary thinking about guns. Gallup for years has framed its questions as options between "more strict" or "less strict." So, too, has Pew, which asks its respondents to choose between "protecting gun rights" and "controlling gun ownership." These seem like unsatisfying choices to most, and to young people especially. What of allowing concealed handguns, but requiring serial numbers on the bullets they fire as part of a national registry of firearms; is such a law "more strict" or "less"? These sorts of questions help explain why young people, when asked if they prefer more gun control and more gun rights, are apt to answer, maddeningly, "Yes, please."

This idea is hardly new: *Atlantic* editor [Jeffrey Goldberg](#) and [Dan Baum](#), a contributing editor at *Harper's*—both liberal Democrats—are a few of the prominent writers who have gestured toward what might be called a grand bargain of guns: A political equilibrium that acknowledges the dangerous nature of guns, but somehow recognizes the sanctity of the gun owner. Could enough people, or gun groups on both sides, get behind that kind of political program?

On this, Winkler remains skeptical. "You're expecting moderation from political interest groups that are organized to fight for the extremes," he said. "Organizations don't do very well doing in the middle. Compromise is not a source of funding for these interest groups." He added, "It's hard to sell the middle of the road mushiness. Even if that's where most Americans are."

For traditional gun control advocates, the notion of being lectured on "compromise" likely seems like a canard when, as Winkler puts it, "they've been losing battle after battle to the NRA in state after state." Winkler's comment made the point clearer: It's hard to imagine things going worse for the gun control movement than the way things have been going already.

On my last day in Austin, I met a young law student, who we'll call Michael Malden. That he asked to withhold his real name was the reason for intrigue: Sitting at a dining room table with his girlfriend, Malden explained that he took the more-guns-more-regulation viewpoint, and he hated the NRA. But he also owned a few rifles in his off-campus housing, which he showed me—all family hand-me-downs—and he felt terrified about what might happen to his reputation if he ever articulated his support for concealed carry. He said he was still making up his mind on campus carry.

His girlfriend spoke up. "A guy like [Michael]—these sorts of people in the middle who aren't some radical gun nut, the people who are sort of in a more moderate position, are very disincentivized from speaking out."

Michael raised a palm to explain himself. “So if you’re for concealed carry, you must be for X, Y and Z. All of this—it’s such a loaded position to hold,” he said. “I feel like the people who hold opposing viewpoints—or either side—will look down on me, or think badly.” He aimed his gaze to the floor. “That might be why the more moderate advocates remain unknown. We don’t want to identify ourselves.”

After a moment, he added, “I just keep my mouth shut.”

Speaking with Malden, I was struck by the sense that I was staring into the eyes of the gun control movement’s best opportunity: White, gun-owning males disillusioned by the NRA. This was the next wave of undecided citizens, still making up their minds about guns. Roper told me he thinks the tens of millions of gun owners who lie beyond the NRA’s reach—like him—are the fulcrum in the gun debate. Where will they go? The NRA? Or someplace else?

“A lot of people are waiting,” Roper said, speaking of young gun owners. “A whole lot.”