

MINN POST

Freedom's not just another word for being able to buy a gun

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It has become little more than a sad dead end in the U.S. debate about gun violence to show how other countries regulate firearms, and to question whether America should follow suit.

Should we look to Australia, which tightened laws after a gunman killed 35 people? It hasn't had a mass killing in the 22 years since. Or is a better example Switzerland, with its history of relying for defense on a well-armed militia?

But it is another dead end — seemingly in some parallel universe — to follow National Rifle Association chief Wayne LaPierre as he fulminates about “European-style socialists” plotting to take away Americans’ gun rights, and then other rights, as well.

“Their goal is to eliminate the Second Amendment and our firearms freedoms, so they can eradicate all individual freedoms,” he declared in a [speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee](#) following the killing of 17 students at a Florida high school.

Neither approach to America’s gun problem has led anywhere. That doesn’t mean they’re equally valid – just that neither solves the political problem that put us in this fix. But there are ways of looking at the issue that might at least clear away a bit of smoke.

To start, how do some other countries regulate guns?

After that mass killing by a 28-year-old man armed with a semi-automatic rifle, Australia quickly banned some semi-automatic, self-loading rifles and shotguns, and imposed stricter licensing and registration, according to a [report by FactCheck.org](#). It also launched a mandatory buyback program for the newly banned weapons.

Six years later, it restricted the caliber, barrel length and capacity of sport-shooting handguns. While homicides have fallen, and homicides with guns have fallen even more steeply, there appears to be no consensus regarding how much of that is due to stricter gun laws.

Next to the United States, Switzerland has the highest gun-ownership rate of any developed country. There is a strong tradition of hunting and sport shooting – plus that history of depending on a militia for defense (does that sound like the starting point for the Second Amendment?).

But according to [Erin Zimmerman](#), a former police officer in the United States who now lives in Switzerland, automatic weapons are banned for civilians; there are restrictions on sale and possession of ammunition; and guns and ammunition must be stored separately. Gun death rates are low.

How about the Brits? Like Australia, the U.K. reacted strongly to a mass killing in 1996. A man armed with four legal handguns and 700 rounds of ammunition killed 16 children and a teacher in a Scottish school. The government banned large-caliber handguns, a move that was extended several years later to include 22-caliber handguns. [Peter Squires](#), a University of Brighton professor, says officials were surprised by a subsequent increase in handgun crimes — until they realized that the market had been flooded with imitation and other non-functioning guns. Gun crimes were being committed with guns that didn't actually work. The country still battles to shut down gun smugglers, but gun deaths are very low.

These are only capsule descriptions, but what's clear is that each country, for whatever reason, heavily regulate guns.

If you follow LaPierre's logic, they also should be less free than the United States. After all, LaPierre draws a direct line from gun ownership to other personal freedoms. Take away freedom to own a gun, and the others follow. You might argue that other countries' experience is not relevant in the U.S., but then why go out of your way to make bogeymen out of European socialists?

There is another problem with that line of thinking. Overall, according to a couple of studies, each of those countries is actually more free than the United States. Question that? Check out [this assessment](#) from Freedom House. Or maybe you're more inclined to believe the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, co-founded by Charles Koch.

Cato and a pair of partners publishes a yearly [Human Freedom Index](#), which scores each country for both personal and economic freedom. It defines freedom as “the absence of coercive constraint,” the 2017 report says. “Freedom thus implies that individuals have the right to lead their lives as they wish as long as they respect the equal rights of others.”

Who has the most freedom? The Swiss, it turns out. Australians are fifth. Brits are tied for ninth with the Dutch. Americans rank 17th. Lest you think that including economic freedom skews the results, they hold true with some slight variations if you focus only on personal freedom.

Yemen — thought to have the second-highest rate of gun ownership in the world after the United States — ranks 156th, fourth from the bottom. So no, Mr. LaPierre, there is no real correlation

between my ability to buy a firearm and my overall personal freedom. Freedom to buy a gun means pretty much just that. Nothing more.

One last thing, about those horrid “European-style socialists.” Cato ranks Norway, Denmark – even Sweden – ahead of the United States in overall freedom.

The national debate over guns is difficult enough. The experience of other countries is only partly relevant. The Second Amendment, regardless of how you interpret it, is a fact of life. The U.S. will need to find its own way. But you have to believe that no one — including the NRA — wants to see more children die.

If that’s true, please spare us your cheap demagoguery.