



On gun laws, look before you legislate

By Doug Bandow February 27, 2013

Until the Newtown school shooting tragedy, the Obama administration ignored the issue of gun control. Despite pressure to act, Congress should look before it legislates, since gun rights generally correspond to the liberties fundamental in a free society.

Four years ago, Dave Kopel of the Independence Institute, William & Mary economist Carlisle Moody and author Howard Nemerov published an article assessing the relationship between guns and freedom, "Is There a Relationship Between Guns and Freedom? Comparative Results From Fifty-Nine Nations."

Article Tab: A man holds a sign during a Turn Albany Upside Down rally at the Capitol on Tuesday, Feb. 12, 2013, in Albany, N.Y. Hundreds of opponents of the state's new gun control law say it infringes on their right to bear arms, criticizing Gov. Andrew Cuomo and legislators, chanting for freedom and taking a collective oath to uphold the constitution.

A man holds a sign during a Turn Albany Upside Down rally at the Capitol on Tuesday, Feb. 12, 2013, in Albany, N.Y. Hundreds of opponents of the state's new gun control law say it infringes on their right to bear arms, criticizing Gov. Andrew Cuomo and legislators, chanting for freedom and taking a collective oath to uphold the constitution.

They found there was no simple conclusion.

The United Nations was on the case before President Obama. In 1999, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan contended widespread firearm ownership has "damaged development prospects and imperiled human society."

More recently the global organization has been pushing an international convention to regulate the international trade in small arms.

The three researchers found that data on gun ownership wasn't easy to collect. People often lie to government and even pollsters about the issue. There almost certainly are more guns in circulation in America than there are Americans. The bigger the undercount, the greater the practical obstacles facing any new gun restrictions.

In any case, Kopel, Moody and Nemerov do their best using indexes on political liberty, corruption and economic freedom. They find that countries with significantly higher gun ownership have greater political and civil liberties. Noted the researchers, "the average of the countries in the first quartile is 'free,' while the average for all other quartiles is 'partly free.'"

Gun-owning societies also are notably less corrupt. The top quartile, reported the three authors, is "mostly clean." The next three quartiles suffer from "moderate corruption."

Nations where people own more firearms also tend to have greater economic liberty.

When it came to political liberty, the authors found that the countries in every quartile averaged a rating of "moderately free." There was a certain self-selection bias to the data.

Still, the authors reported: "The first quartile had the highest average, but not quite 70, which is the threshold for 'mostly free.' For all three indices of liberty, the top firearms quartile rates higher than every other quartile."

Similar results were found when the three researchers ran the numbers per quintile.

The authors found: "When we looked at the countries with the most guns, we saw that they had the most freedom as measured by the liberty indices, but the relationship was only pronounced for high-gun countries."

The article then flipped the analysis around to look at gun ownership in the nations which enjoyed the greatest liberty.

The authors found that "the freest countries ... had the highest density of civilian firearms, and averaged the best" corruption scores.

"Partly free" countries had much lower ratings in all indices than all "free" countries. "Not free" countries had the poorest scores."

There's quite a mix of countries, of course. Correlations are imperfect while causations are difficult to demonstrate. Nevertheless, the three researchers found that the relationship between more guns and both economic liberty and corruption to be statistically significant.

The authors consider several possibilities. Freedom obviously can yield greater gun ownership. More important, gun possession can promote liberty, better enabling people to resist both foreign and domestic oppression.

The authors point to how firearms can help minorities within nations: Decades ago "American civil rights workers were able to protect themselves from the Ku Klux Klan because so many civil rights workers had guns." Kopel, Moody and Nemerov also theorize that "the exercise of one right may, for some persons, foster more positive attitudes about rights in general."

Of course, in some nations, particularly failed states, guns may exacerbate violent chaos. But for most Americans gun possession is a symbol of individual and social responsibility.

Kopel, Moody and Nemerov are serious researchers who do not offer a slam-dunk for the right to own firearms. They admitted: "There are many casual mechanisms by which guns and freedom can advance or inhibit each other."

However, there is strong evidence that gun ownership is related to freedom. That suggests taking "more sophisticated, carefully tailored approaches to gun policy, that attempt to address the negative effects, and that are careful not to reduce the apparently significant positive effect." The latter point deserves repeating.

Tragedies like the Newtown murders reflect human evil, not gun ownership. There are legitimate issues – how to better keep guns from the dangerously mentally ill, for instance.

But that effort must not become an excuse to disarm the responsible and law-abiding. No less than our basic liberties are at stake.