Faith and Firearms: An Exploration of Religion's Entanglement with Guns in America

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Abstract

Numerous studies show that religion predicts an individual's likelihood of owning a gun, but the role of religious tradition in shaping attitudes and outcomes about guns and gun policy in the United States is undertheorized. This dissertation explores the entanglement between religion and guns in America and the political consequences of this relationship. First, I examine the impact of religious tradition on gun owner identity. I find that Protestantism broadly does not matter in the formation of a gun owner identity, but evangelicalism does significantly predict the strength of gun owner identity. Moreover, gun owner identity mediates the relationship between evangelicalism and gun policy attitudes in the United States. Second, I utilize two original experiments to test the Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming in effort to ascertain if religious elites can move the gun-related attitudes of members of their in-group. My findings suggest that religious elite messaging can indeed move gun attitudes, but only for a member of the elite's in-group and especially when those messages are unexpected. Lastly, I investigate if the number of evangelicals in a state matters for the adoption of gun related policy – specifically, Stand Your Ground legislation. Using an original dataset, I find that the number of evangelicals in a state significantly impacts the likelihood that the state adopts Stand Your Ground legislation. I conclude by addressing the significance of my findings for understanding American gun politics, the limitations of these chapters, and avenues for future research.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

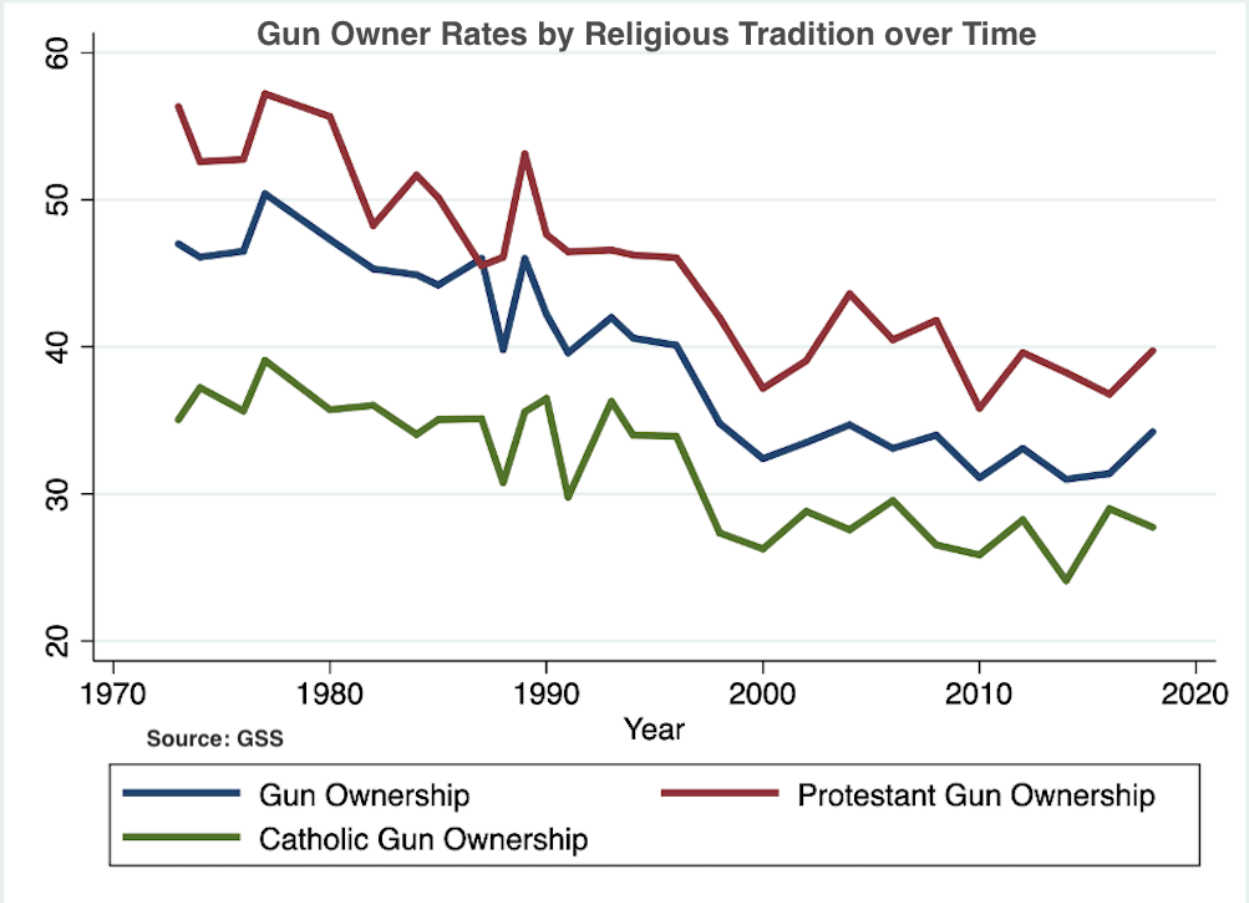
What's the Deal with God and Guns?

The bumper sticker on the back of a minivan in suburban Maryland read: "Pro God, Pro Gun, Pro Life" (Coley 2021). Meanwhile on the same day down in Texas, there sat a billboard that advertised a free firearm and a free Bible with the purchase of a Massey Ferguson Tractor (Johnson 2021). Out West in Arizona, a raffle was simultaneously being held to win a "God, Guns and Trump" rifle to support the Cochise County Republican Committee (Howard 2021). The people who witnessed these public displays of love for God and guns tweeted out what they saw within one hour of one another on March 20, 2021, seemingly asking: "What's the deal?" These stories represent what appears to be an increasing connection between religion and guns in the United States.

Protestant Christians have consistently been gun owners at higher rates than average Americans, even as gun owner rates are declining (Figure 1.1). Many ask how do gun-owning Christians reconcile their ownership with the nonviolent preaching of the Christian scriptures (L. Miller 2013). Is the Christian Bible not the book that so famously tells Christ-followers to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 4:38-40)? Justifications for gun ownership are myriad among Protestant Christians. Some say it is a continuation of the Biblical value of loving one's neighbor, for it allows one to protect oneself and one's community from the evil in the world (Vegter and Kelley 2020); others claim that like the First Amendment freedom of religion, the Second Amendment is approved by God (Miller 2013); and yet others say guns are not violent and are not the problem, rather it is a corrupt society that can only be healed through prayer (Wilder 2013). These justifications of gun ownership are even more intense for evangelicals, a distinct

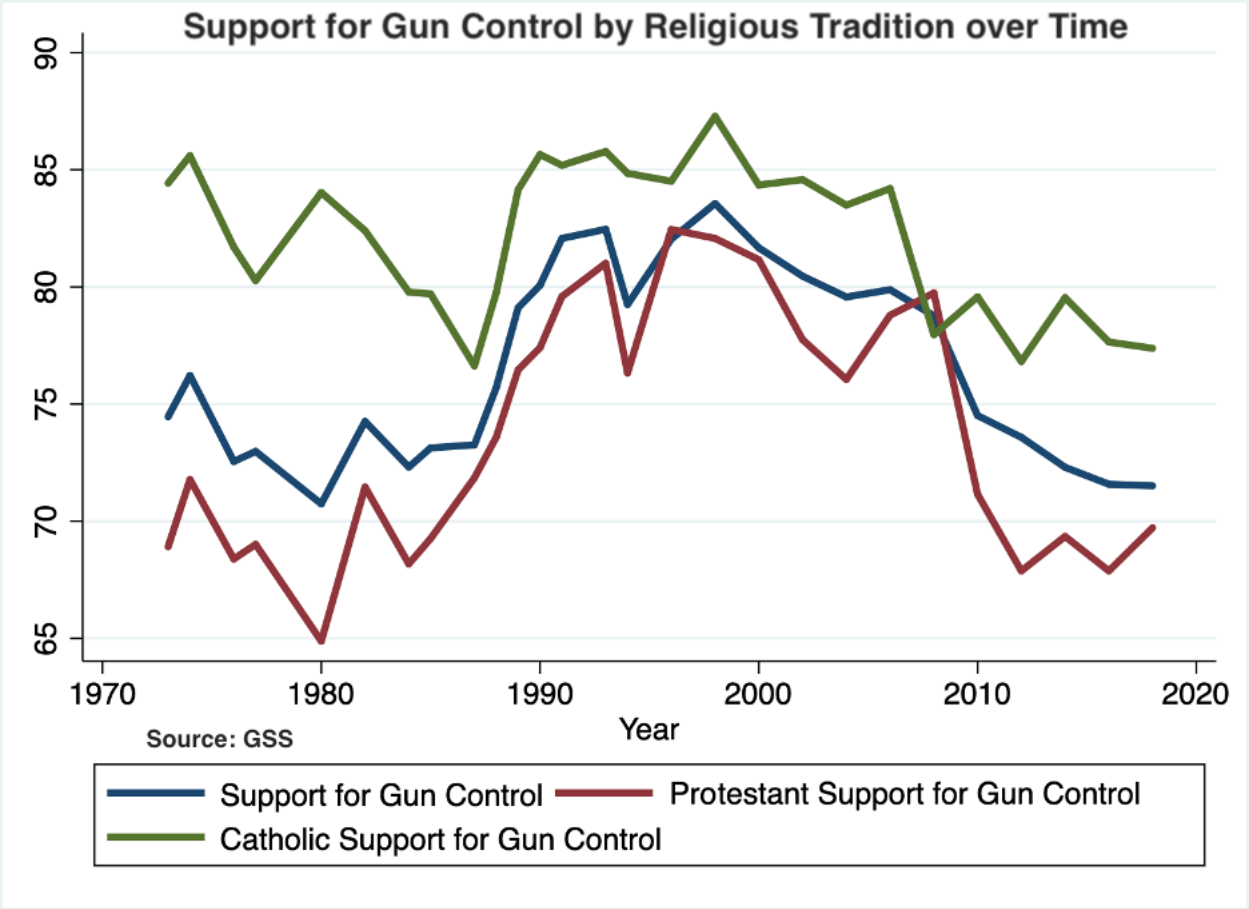
subset of Christians in the United States. Nearly 60% of evangelicals live in a home with a gun, significantly more than Protestants broadly (S. Merino 2018), with scholars suggesting that the relationship between God and guns is especially strong for evangelicals (Vegter and den Dulk 2020; Yamane 2016). This relationship, however, requires further investigation, especially considering that the relationship moves beyond religious tradition and simple ownership and into the realm of policy attitudes.

Figure 1.1



In addition to being more likely to own guns, Protestant Christians have also shown to be *less* supportive of gun regulation policy than average Americans over time (Figure 1.2). Like gun ownership, justifications for opposition to gun regulation have been diverse. Russell Moore, then the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, shared "if the government has too much power over guns, it will also have too much power over freedom of speech, freedom of religion" (L. Miller 2013). Once again, this is especially true for evangelicals, "the only religious group in which a plurality say that putting more emphasis on God and morality in school and society is the most important thing that could be done to prevent future mass shootings" (Shellnutt 2017).

Figure 1.2



Scholars, however, have rarely moved beyond these descriptive characteristics of the relationship between Christians and guns in the United States. Little is known about the attachments Christians have to their weapons and how malleable their attitudes may be. Additionally, the literature has failed to consider the implications of this relationship for the policy process. My dissertation seeks to fill this distinct gap.

Main Argument

The pages that follow argue that there is something distinct about the American evangelical experience that impacts how evangelicals think about guns and gun policy in the United States. This dissertation shows that evangelical identity can profoundly impact 1) the probability that

an individual adopts a gun owner identity, 2) the capability of in-group religious elites to move attitudes toward gun regulation, and 3) when shared by a large concentration of a state population, the likelihood that a state adopts Stand Your Ground legislation.

American evangelicals and gun owners share a deep-seeded commitment to individualism (Celinska 2007; Emerson and Smith 2001), which I argue helps explain the affinity between the two groups. Merino (2018) describes this commitment as not only an emphasis on individualism, but also on "anti-structuralism" (189). Celinska (2007) finds the same is true of gun owners, with individualistic values (as compared to collectivists values) serving as a consistent predictor of gun ownership in the United States. This commitment to individualism binds evangelicals not only to gun ownership, but also to attitudes toward gun regulation policy.

This relationship is far from inconsequential. Polls consistently show that the majority of Americans support limiting gun ownership is some way, yet Congress has not passed a major gun-control law in over 20 years (Phillips 2019). When one considers that both evangelicals and gun owners are among the most highly participatory groups in United States politics (Hertzke et al. 2018; Joslyn 2020), it becomes highly significant to understand the nature of their relationship. These groups attract significant attention from decisionmakers in the United States and therefore, can have an outsized influence on the policy process, especially in the realm of gun politics. It therefore becomes highly significant to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and implications of religions entanglement with guns in America, as well as the conditions under which this alliance may change. My dissertation serves to strengthen our understanding of this relationship.

Definitions

Since I focus broadly on consequences of religious identity on attitudes toward guns and the gun policy process, it is prudent to consider what religious identity means in this context and how I have conceptualized the measure in the chapters to follow.

Organized religion is made up "of many large institutions that hold unique philosophical and theological outlooks" (Margolis 2018, 9). Religion offers expectations and beliefs about the world and society (Leege and Kellstedt 1993) and creates an identity that is "a complex web of theology, beliefs, self-categorization, and behavior" (Margolis 2018, 12). Religious identity has been shown to matter for a wide range of political attitudes and behaviors (Hertzke et al. 2018) and to profoundly shape the American political landscape (Silk and Walsh 2008). There are many questions, however, on how to measure religious identity and specifically, evangelical religious identity.

Depending on how you measure evangelicalism, the religious tradition could encompass one-third of all Americans or less than one-tenth (Kurtzleben 2015), with Pew Research Center estimating that 35% of Americans are evangelical (Pew Research Center 2015) and the Barna Group estimating that 6% of Americans are evangelicals (Barna Group 2007). The difference is the former relies on self-reported rates of evangelicalism (i.e. how many Americans answer "yes" to the question "Do you consider yourself an evangelical or born-again Christian?") and the latter relies on answers to a series of theological questions that align with traditionally evangelical beliefs (Kurtzleben 2015). Religious historian George Marsden even once quipped that "an evangelical Christian was 'anyone who likes Billy Graham'" (Merritt 2015).

However, like all definitions, there is not one measurement of evangelicalism that is perfect. For social scientists, the detailed religious tradition approach ('RELTRAD') has been considered the most reliable and rigorous, as it "categorizes evangelicals based on the religious tradition of the denominations to which they belong" (Burge and Lewis 2018, 920). I choose to utilize an alternative approach. When I refer to evangelicals throughout this manuscript, I am referring to a group of individuals who self-identify as born-again or evangelical Christians. The self-identifying approach is not only simpler than the detailed religious tradition measure, but it has been shown that there is essentially no statistical difference between the two measurement strategies (Burge and Lewis 2018).

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 utilizes Social Identity Theory to establish the presence of a gun owner identity and explain how evangelical identity helps explain it. The chapter utilizes original survey data to explicitly test this relationship, finding that evangelical identity does predict a gun owner's likelihood of possessing a distinct gun owner identity. This relationship holds even when I investigate more robust components of social identity, including feelings of belonging, senses of linked fate, and perceptions of discrimination. Additionally, this relationship was not present for Protestants broadly, suggesting something distinct about evangelicals in America and their affinity for guns. Moreover, the data suggest that this gun owner identity mediates the relationship between evangelicalism and opposition to gun regulation. While evangelicalism predicts both gun owner identity and anti-gun regulation policy attitudes, the significance of the latter drops out when I include gun owner identity in my model. Mediation modeling confirms that evangelicalism has an indirect impact on gun regulation resistance. In other

words, there is not an innate connection between evangelical identification and a rejection of common gun regulation, but rather, the well-established relationship is better explained by evangelical gun owners' propensity to possess a distinct gun owner identity.

Chapter 3 describes the Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming and how it might matter for gun policy attitudes in the United States. The chapter tests this theory using two original experiments in which participants are exposed to a message from a religious elite. In one experiment, a randomized group of survey respondents read a brief op-ed from an evangelical pastor providing a religious case for *opposing* gun regulation policy. In the second experiment, fielded one year later, participants were exposed to a message from an evangelical pastor providing a religious case for *supporting* gun regulation policy. The data from these experiments offer several trends consistent with the Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming. First, only self-reported evangelicals were impacted by the messages of religious elites. In other words, the messages only mattered for members of the in-group. Second, the impact of the message was much larger for evangelicals who were exposed to the pro-gun regulation argument, confirming that when elite messaging is unexpected, it has an especially large effect on political attitudes. These findings suggest that despite the strong relationship between evangelicalism and opposition to gun regulation, when evangelical religious elites want to move the gun policy attitudes of their congregants, they can.

Chapter 4 explores how the number of evangelicals in a state may matter for gun policy adoption, specifically Stand Your Ground legislation. Using an original dataset, I find that the percent of a state population that identifies as evangelical is an important internal determinant of SYG adoption. I offer several explanations for this relationship, including the political

mobilization of evangelicals and the compatibility of evangelical theology and the tenets of Stand Your Ground. I additionally test and confirm two key explanations of the diffusion of Stand Your Ground Policy: the impact of the percentage of gun owners in a particular state and the ideology of states' governments.

Chapter 5 concludes this dissertation by discussing the implications of my main findings. In short, for political science, this dissertation highlights the value in considering religion when studying gun politics in the United States. Additionally, data limitations regarding measurement and sample sizes are addressed. Finally, I present several fruitful avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: God-Ordained Gun Owner

Evangelicalism and Gun Owner Identity

"God intended individuals to defend themselves," shared Larry Pratt, the executive director emeritus of Gun Owners of America. "Christ made [that] point to his disciples. The Founders considered that self-defense and the ownership and carrying of guns is a God-given right" (Withrow 2018). Pratt is not alone in this sentiment. John Correia, the founder of Active Self Protection and host of "Bullets and Bibles," points to Scripture to argue for gun ownership and self-protection, telling the Washington Post "I have the right to set my boundaries, and no one has the right to harm me physically or to threaten my life. I have the right to defend the boundary that says, 'I will not be forced and I will not be murdered'" (J. Jenkins 2020). Former president of Liberty University, a leading evangelical Christian college in Virginia, Jerry Falwell Jr. urged his students to become gun owners themselves, saying "I've always thought if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in and killed us" (Stack 2015). The sentiments expressed by these men highlight what appears to be an increasing connection between elements of the Christian community and an affinity for guns in the United States.

The literature has clearly established that religious tradition impacts an individual's propensity to own a gun (Yamane 2016) and resist gun regulation (S.M. Merino 2018), but scholarship has not gone further than establishing this basic demographic fact. Given the new vein of research establishing the social and political identity of gun owners (Joslyn et al. 2017; Lacombe 2019; Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild 2019), I argue that the role of religion in this identity ought to be explored. I theorize that gun ownership is a social identity that is reinforced

by religious identity, despite arguments that these identities ought to be crosscutting (J. Jenkins 2020). Moreover, I suggest that, unlike what the current literature suggests (S. M. Merino 2018), it is not evangelical identity itself that predicts resistance to gun regulation; but rather, it is the identity that evangelicals have constructed around their gun ownership that matters for policy attitudes.

I use data from an original representative national survey of American adults to test this theory. I find that evangelicals are far more likely to possess a distinct gun owner identity than their non-evangelical counterparts. Moreover, my analysis suggests that this gun owner identity helps account for associations between evangelicalism and increased opposition to common gun regulation policies. After reviewing the relevant literature, I explain my data and methodology before moving to a discussion of my results and the implications of my findings.

Theoretical Framework

Religion and Guns

Religion is an oft-cited, albeit not immediately obvious, source for attitudes about guns in the United States. As then-candidate Barack Obama stated, people often "cling to guns and to religion," an argument he doubled-down on to explain how Trump was gaining supporters in 2015 (Ross 2015). His understanding of the relationship between guns and religion in America has been empirically established for decades. Wright and Marston (1975) ,Young (1989), Little and Vogel (1992), and Cox, Navarro-Rivera and Jones (2013), among others, have noted that Protestants (as simply compared to non-protestants) are more likely than other religious traditions to own guns and less likely to support gun control. These findings have held over time, but few studies move beyond the broad religious category of "Protestant," despite the

extensive literature on the political relevance of specific religious traditions or intensity of religious commitment (Hertzke et al. 2018; Smidt 2013; Steensland et al. 2000; Wielhouwer 2009). As Yamane (2016) argues, the consequence is that religion has too often been little more than a narrowly defined control variable in studies of gun ownership and attitudes about policy rather than fully explored as its own theoretical puzzle.

Yamane's (2016) more sophisticated analysis suggests that "Protestant" as a stand-alone category is irrelevant to gun ownership. However, adherence to evangelicalism and theological conservatism increase the likelihood of personal gun ownership. On the other hand, Yamane (2016) finds that regular church attendance is *negatively* associated with ownership, controlling for other factors.

What are the causal mechanisms that would explain the effects of affiliation or religiosity on gun ownership or support for gun rights? Some studies have provided a primarily culture-based explanation of these effects. Young and Thompson (1995) examine "punitiveness" and argue that religious fundamentalism is associated with punitiveness, which is in turn associated with gun ownership and support for gun rights. Others suggest that the link between evangelical gun ownership and opposition to gun regulation results from an individualistic impulse that emphasizes personal responsibility and the role of civil society in addressing the root causes of gun violence (Hempel, Matthews, and Bartkowski 2012; S. Merino 2018). Young (1989) suggests this relationship results from the interaction of religion and the cultural factors of rural residence and hunting participation.

Others identify the roots of gun attitudes directly in theological commitments. Young (1989) and Hempel, Matthews and Bartkowski (2012) assert that theological conservatism

partially explains the relationship between Protestantism and gun ownership. Hempel and her co-authors (2012) state that theological conservatism acts "as a moral framework reflected in personal convictions about scripture (the authoritativeness of the Bible), sin (beliefs in human depravity and the existence of hell), and salvation (the need for a born-again experience to be saved)" (522). The scholars, however, do not clarify if it is the moral framework itself that increases the likelihood of gun ownership.

Yet another strand of literature looks at the nationalist and patriotic correlates of American Protestantism. Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry (2018), for example, suggest that a distinctive form of Christian nationalism is associated with decreased support for gun regulation. In her ethnographic work on religion and American gun culture, Day (2017, 226) illustrates the confluence of God, country, and guns:

> "At one event calling for reform of gun laws, speakers were met with angry counter-demonstrators, many of them legally carrying and displaying their guns, many of which were assault weapons. They carried signs and heckled loudly. One of the speakers was in a wheelchair, having been paralyzed by a stray bullet. He was trying to calm the protesters by going through a litany, "The God that I know loves you as much as he loves me. The God that I know wants your children to be as safe as my children. The God that I know…." At one point, a heckler finished the sentence, "inspired the constitution and the Bill of Rights!" Such a statement identified divine authority with the Second Amendment, a fusion of church and state authority expressed in different contexts of extreme nationalism."

Day's experience of a God-and-country disposition has some corroboration in broader survey data (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2013).

The arguments all hinge in some way on how religious identity influences attitudes about guns and the personal decision to own guns. However, less research has been conducted investigating if personal gun ownership itself can be considered an identity and if religion impacts the likelihood that an individual gun-owner holds a gun owner identity.

Gun Ownership as Identity

Scholars utilize theories of social identity to explain a variety of social and political phenomena. The diverse applications of this theory rely on Henri Tajfel's and John Turner's (1979) argument that an individual's system of self-reference is derived from his or her psychological attachment to and membership within a social group. Political scientists have long shown how these social identities shape political attitudes and mobilization (Huddy 2001; Kalin and Sambanis 2018; Monroe, Hankin, and Vechten 2000), policy-related beliefs (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Conover 1988; Cramer et al. 2017; Hurwitz, Peffley, and Mondak 2015; Kinder and Winter 2001; Schmermund et al. 2001), and even distinctive forms of political identity (Huddy 2001).

These social categorizations necessitate a process distinguishing in-groups and out-groups, or understandings of "us and them" (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Conflict defines the contours of group membership and aligns members along common causes (Ashforth and Mael 1989). The theory suggests that first, individuals derive their identity from the group in which they have an objective basis for membership. The individual then transitions from experiencing shared membership to shared identification. Individuals experience this identification to varying degrees. When the individual views her social group in a positive manner, she may experience a positive psychological attachment to the group. In such a case, her group membership enhances self-esteem and can inspire her to act in the group's interest. Strong attachment or sense of belonging to a group can drive members to maintain group status and further group power, in turn advancing one's own self-status and esteem (Huddy 2001).

The positive feedback to one's self-esteem can also lead to a sense of shared or linked-fate with group members, or rather a feeling that what happens to other members of the group will impact the individual's own life (Dawson 1994). Additionally, in climates of threat or perceived threat to one's group, identity salience is heightened (Doosje, Spears, and Ellemers 2002; P. R. Miller and Conover 2015; Stets and Burke 2000; Zhang and Reid 2013) and group members are often propelled into collective political response (Conover 1988; Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1995).

Given the prevalence and power of social identity as an analytical framework for understanding politics, one might expect that scholars would apply the concept to explain one of the greatest sources of political conflict of our time, guns in America. However, little is known about how social identity shapes attitudes about gun ownership or policies related to guns. In much of the literature, the primary reference to the notion of a gun owner identity is a description of gun culture in America (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Hofstadter 1970; Joslyn et al. 2017; Kahan and Braman 2003; Spitzer 2015), though recent scholarship has begun to establish the category of "gun owner" as a distinct social identity (Lacombe 2019; Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild 2019).

The participants in this culture tend to have certain characteristics in addition to being gun owners. They are often white, male and Republican (Parker et al. 2017) and tend to live in rural rather than urban areas (Dixon and Lizotte 1987; Ellison 1991; Felson and Pare 2010; Marciniak and Loftin 1991). They value individualism, independence and power (Kahan and Braman 2003). Gun owners often engage in shared activities, such as sport shooting or hunting, and some participate in an "unexpectedly inclusionary project of gun carry" on a regular basis

(Carlson 2015, 167). Gun owners differ as to why they own a gun (i.e. hunting v. protection), but many share an attachment to the machine itself, with many deriving a source of identity from it (Celinska 2007; Mencken and Froese 2017). They tend to coalesce around particular policy interests and hold self-interested attitudes about gun violence (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2017).

Gun owners view themselves as "freedom fighters" who are defending American individualism (Melzer 2009) and exercising an essential constitutional right that protects them from potential government intrusion (Halbrook 2013; Kohn 2004; Winkler 2013). This empowering effect extends beyond protection from the government. Guns have been shown to empower white men in economic distress, grounding them in both physical and moral safety (Carlson 2015; Mencken and Froese 2017). Women that own guns are also empowered, expressing an increased willingness to share their political views (Middlewood, Joslyn, and Haider-Markel 2019).

Gun ownership in the United States can be seen as emblematic of essential American values such as personal freedom and liberty, with guns symbolizing power, independence, and justice (Halbrook 2013). As a group, gun owners have successfully embedded their own values with those most widely accepted in America, creating a particularly powerful political identity (Carlson 2015; Celinska 2007). This political identity is enhanced by groups such as the National Rifle Association (Lacombe 2019) and motivates certain political behaviors, including voting decisions (Joslyn et al. 2017).

It is one thing to say that gun owners share social characteristics and political interests; it is another to claim that they share an identity. In this chapter I ask, does a gun owner identity

exist? If so, does it matter for public policy? And, what it the role of religion in the development and consequences of a gun owner identity?

Hypotheses

Guided by social identity theory and previous investigations of religion, identity, and attitudes toward guns, I formulate the following hypotheses:

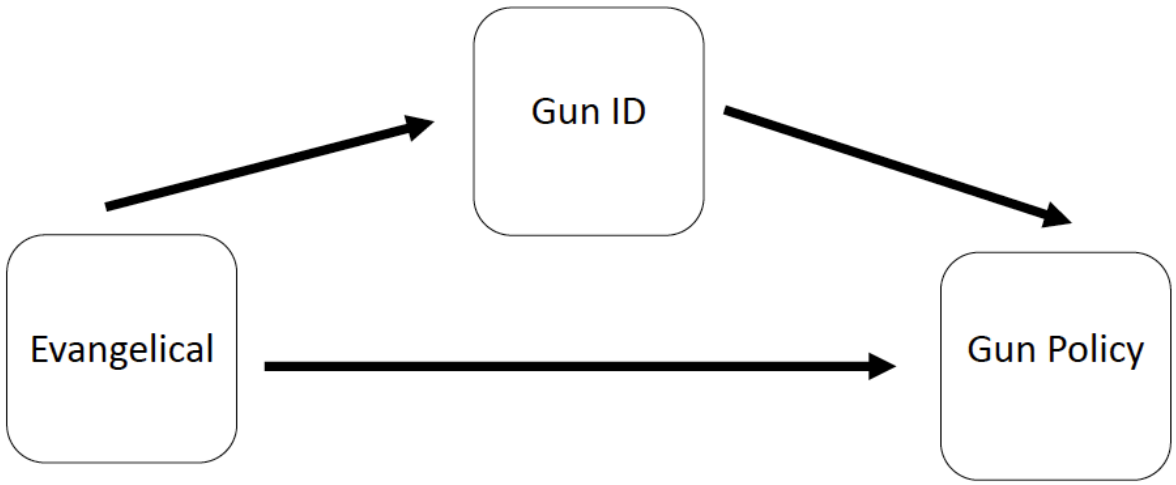
H1: Individuals who identify as evangelical will be more likely to report higher levels of gun owner identity, as measured by belongingness, linked fate, and perceptions of discrimination.

H2: Individuals who identify as evangelical will be more likely to report greater opposition to common gun regulation policies.

H3: Individuals who have stronger gun owner identities will be more likely to report higher opposition to common gun regulation policies.

H4: Gun owner social identity will mediate the relationship between evangelical and increased opposition to common gun regulation policies, as visually displayed in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1



Data and Methods

For my analysis, I utilize data from a 2019 survey with a representative sample of American adults. This survey sample was recruited by Dynata who invited participants to complete the survey via email in September 2019. The sample 3,465 participants. Of these participants, 1,705 were asked about their gun ownership and 443 identified as being gun owners themselves.

Measurement of Social Identities: Dependent Variable 1

Belongingness:

Measuring group identity begins with a method for objective assignment of individuals to a group category (Huddy 2001). For gun owners, objective membership can be measured by asking participants if they own a gun. Gun ownership is a choice and therefore members of the group self-select inclusion or exclusion.

However, group membership is not necessarily consistent with identity. Some scholars regard social identity in a "rather static and passive way – namely as a correlate of a particular group membership" (Doosje, Spears, and Ellemers 2002, 58). This approach would see social identity as a merely a reflection of group membership, conflating the effects of identity with the mere assignment to the group. Doosje and his co-authors (2002) represent a group of scholars that measure identity differently, distinguishing between the highly committed and less committed group members, focusing on their psychological attachment to the group to which they belong.

Objective membership in a group is therefore an inadequate measurement of identity. As Huddy states (2001, 142), "When group identities are acquired, the meaning of group

membership may have a powerful influence over the voluntary adoption of identity and its consequences once acquired." Focusing on identity meaning rather than just identity boundaries allows for a study of the impact of identity strength. Gun ownership may matter more to some gun owners than others. One way to capture the meaning of an identity for a person is by assessing their sense of belongingness to the group or how much group membership means to them; this also allows for variation among members of the group (Barth 1981; Huddy 2001; R. Jenkins 1996). Here I measure strength of identity, or belongingness, with the following questions. First, "How important is being a gun owner to your identity?" Over 50% of all gun owners say that owning a gun is either very or extremely important to their identity. Second, "How much do you agree with the following statement? Gun ownership is an important reflection of who I am." Third, "How much do you agree with the following statement? Gun ownership is an important part of my self-image." While I keep these three components separate, factor analysis suggests they are measuring the same concept. They load onto to a single factor with an Eigenvalue of 2.48 and a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.897.

Linked Fate:

Group identity also includes a notion of shared or linked fate with other group members. Individuals that believe what happens to other group members, be it in their neighborhood or on the other side of the country, matters to their own life, have developed their identity to a degree that suggests an identity strong enough to care about people and events that have no direct connection to their own life (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994). Here I measure linked fate with the following question: "Do you think that what happens generally to gun owners in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?"

Salience of Identities: Threat and Discrimination

The strength of gun owners' identity can increase when members within that group are situationally reminded of their identity. A variety of contextual factors can determine the amount of attention that identity receives, with one scenario being the perceived vulnerability of the in-group. In other words, social identities can become salient or activated in climates of threat or perceived threat (Doosje, Spears, and Ellemers 2002; Miller and Conover 2015; Stets and Burke 2000; Zhang and Reid 2013). This threat tends to elevate that identity in the hierarchy of group memberships. Heightened salience has the power to propel groups into political thinking (Conover 1988), trigger stronger reactions to political threat (Zhang and Reid 2013), and inspire collective responses (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1995).

Most Americans believe society has a negative view of gun owners (Parker et al. 2017). Moreover, gun policy, gun violence and gun owners are receiving increased attention in news media in the wake of mass shootings (Gun Control and the Media 2013). The coupling of these factors leads to a heightened concern over group status and corresponds with activating identity (Huddy 2001). This perceived status shift leads to the further intensification of group attachment and collective belief (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1999). Gun owners that perceive themselves as group threatened or discriminated against by outside forces then meet the third criteria of social identity. Here, I measure perceived discrimination against the group by observing how gun owners answer the following question: "Just your impression, in the United States today, is there a lot of discrimination against gun owners or not?" While this question was asked of all respondents, all non-gun owners were dropped from the analysis. Since I

consider it as a component of gun owner identity, non-gun owners are not relevant to my analysis.

Measurement of Gun Policy Attitudes: Dependent Variable 2

I use a variety of gun policy opinion questions to build a unique, additive gun attitudes scale. Respondents were asked if they favor or oppose the following seven proposals about gun regulation policy: A ban on high-capacity ammunition clips that hold more than 10 bullets, making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks, a ban on assault style weapons, laws to prevent people with mental illness from purchasing guns, raising the legal age at which people can purchase certain firearms from 18 to 21, allowing family members to ask a court to temporarily remove guns from a relative who they believe is at risk of harming himself or others, and authorizing law enforcement officers to temporarily remove guns from individuals who the officer determines pose an immediate threat of harm to self or others. Each response was given a code of 0 if the participant opposed the policy or 1 if they favored it. I added the responses together to create a scale ranging from 0-7, with 0 representing the most opposition to gun regulation policy and 7 representing the most support. The seven variables loaded onto a single factor with an Eigenvalue of 3.24 and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.805.

Independent Variables

I utilize religious identity as a key predictor in my analysis. I create a dummy variable to measure evangelicalism, with everyone who answered yes to the question "Would you describe yourself as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian, or not?" being coded as 1 and everyone else coded as 0; the question is asked of all respondents. The survey does not include a full battery

of denominational indicators, which precludes a full "reltrad" analysis (Steensland et. al 2000), but it does include the standard question, "Would you describe as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian, or not?" The "reltrad" measure would have allowed to me to more robustly classify evangelical Protestants based on their religious denomination. Burge and Lewis (2018), however, find almost no statistical difference between the full, detailed religious affiliation approach and the simpler scheme that I utilize here, providing confidence that my measure of evangelicalism is sufficient. I additionally create a dummy variable for Protestants generally, with respondents being coded as 1 if they responded "Protestant" to the question, "What is your present religion, if any?" and all other respondents coded as 0. This allows me to run different models to ascertain if it is Protestantism generally that matters for gun owner identity or evangelicalism specifically.

I include a variety of variables to control for the demographic considerations shown to be important in the literature on guns. I use church attendance as a proxy for religiosity ("Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services... more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never?"). I control for race and gender through a dummy variable in each model (nonwhite = 1; female = 1). I control for age (measured as continuous data), income (measured ordinally with a scale ranging from 1-9), and education (measured ordinally with a scale ranging from 1-7). I additionally consider the political leanings of respondents. First, I measure their partisan identification using a 7-point scale in which strong Republicans are indicated by the highest value (7), strong Democrats are indicated by the lowest value (1), and those who identify with neither party are

in the middle (4). Second, I measure their ideological persuasions using a 7-point scale ranging from extreme liberal (1) to extreme conservative (7), with moderates in the middle (4).

I use ordered logistic regression to estimate multivariate models, as all of my dependent variables are ordered response categories.

Results

At a first descriptive glance, evangelicals appear more likely than Protestants generally to claim a gun owner identity. Here, I am comparing the average gun identity score for both Protestants broadly and evangelicals Christians. Evangelicals are classified as such if they answered yes to "Would you describe yourself as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian, or not?" and the averages of their gun identity scores are being compared to those of all individuals who answered "Protestant" when asked their present religion. Figure 2.2 clearly show evangelicals with a higher gun owner identity score, as measured by the basic question "How important is being a gun owner to your identity?" with 5 representing the highest gun owner identity and 1 representing the lowest.

Figure 2.2

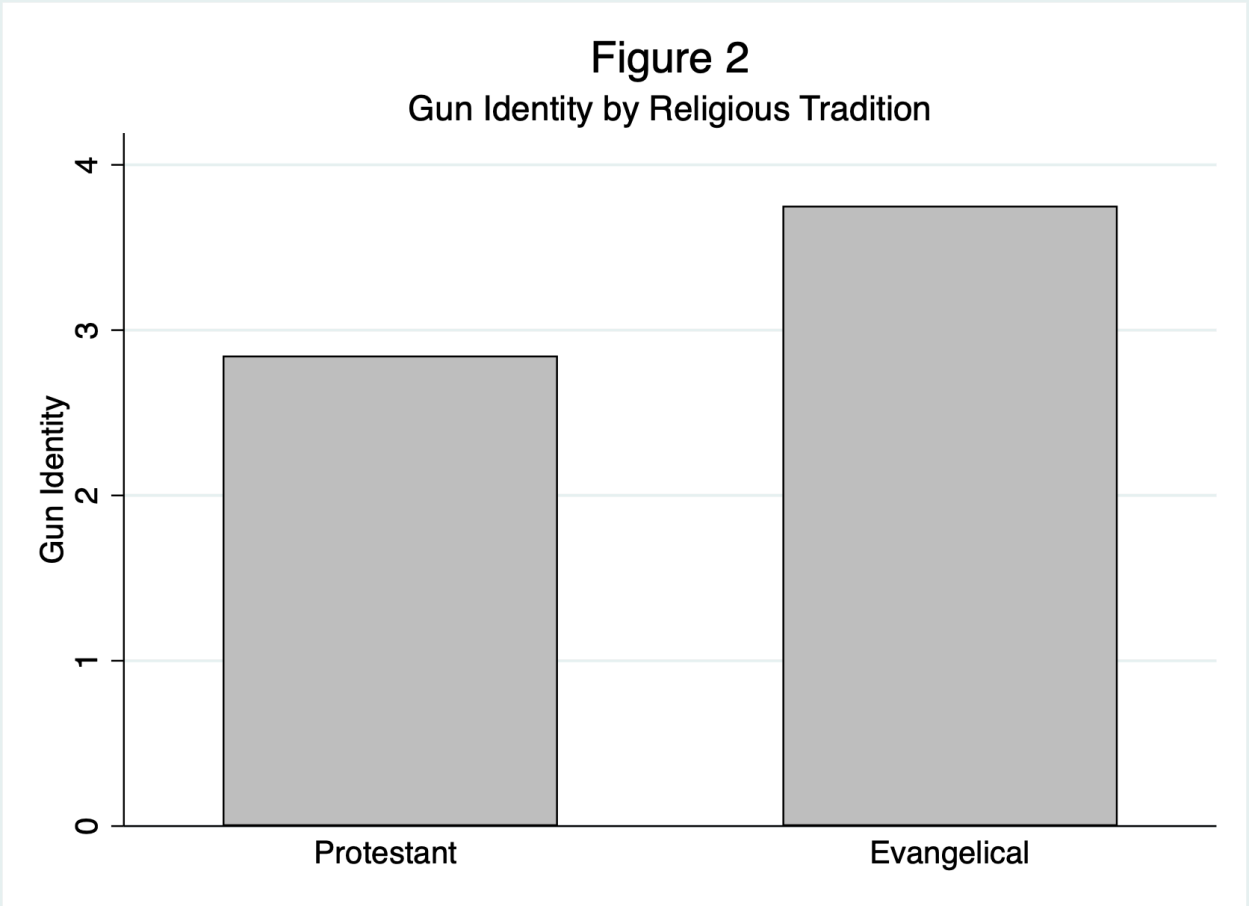


Table 2.1 tests this descriptive suggestion, analyzing gun identity ("How important is being a gun owner to your identity?") as a function of both Protestantism broadly in Model 1 and evangelicalism more specifically in Model 2, while controlling for various demographic characteristics. The results confirm the descriptive analysis. Evangelicals are more likely to score significantly higher on the gun identity score than those who do not identify as evangelicals (Model 2). However, when testing Protestantism generally, there is no significant relationship with this general religious tradition and gun owner identity (Model 1), suggesting that there is something distinct about the relationship between evangelicalism and guns. This pattern holds despite the inclusion of other variables, include church attendance, race, gender, age, income,

education, ideology, and partisanship. Those who more frequently attend church, are young, and identify as Republicans are more likely to score higher on the gun owner identity scale in both models, while women are more likely to score lower. Ideology is not significant in the models, but given its strong relationship with partisanship, this is not surprising. The more surprising finding comes when one considers race, with nonwhite gun owners being *more* likely to score higher on the gun owner identity scale. However, I cannot draw firm conclusions from this result, because there are only 106 nonwhite gun owners in the sample.

Table 2. 1

Table 1: Religious Identity and Gun Owner Identity

	(1) Gun Owner ID	(2) Gun Owner ID
Protestant	0.111	
	(0.48)	
Evangelical		0.797***
		(3.53)
Church Attendance	0.213***	0.123*
	(3.70)	(1.97)
Non-White	0.519*	0.547*
	(2.04)	(2.14)
Female	-0.472*	-0.490*
	(-2.26)	(-2.35)
Age	-0.0420***	-0.0397***
	(-5.88)	(-5.92)
Income	-0.00179	0.0100
	(-0.04)	(0.20)
Education	-0.107	-0.0942
	(-1.37)	(-1.21)
Party ID Scale	0.215***	0.209***
	(4.10)	(3.94)
Ideology	0.0360	0.0279
	(0.54)	(0.42)
cut1	-2.052***	-1.926***
	(-3.57)	(-3.42)
cut2	-1.574**	-1.447**
	(-2.76)	(-2.58)
cut3	-0.853	-0.713
	(-1.50)	(-1.28)
cut4	0.122	0.294
	(0.21)	(0.53)
N	379	379

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*M*odel: Ordered Logistic Regression

Table 2.2 explores additional components of gun owner identity. Models 1 and 2 look at other measures of belongingness, including "Gun ownership is an important reflection of who I am" and "Gun ownership is an important part of my self-image." Evangelicalism remains a significant predictor of both, even when controlling for other relevant factors. Notedly, church attendance and partisanship appear to play a role in this relationship as, with those who attend church more frequently and those who identify as Republican being significantly more likely to experience a sense of belongingness to the group of gun owner, or in other words, their gun ownership is an important part of how they want to be seen. Women and older gun owners are less likely to see their gun ownership as an important reflection of themselves.

Models 3 and 4 address the two other components of identity: linked fate ("Do you think that what happens generally to gun owners in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?") and perceptions of discrimination ("Just your impression, in the United States today, is there a lot of discrimination against gun owners or not?"). Evangelicalism significantly impacts both of these identity components, but the relationship appears to be less robust. Evangelicals who own guns are more likely to believe that gun owners face discrimination and to feel a sense of shared fate with other gun owners than non-evangelical gun owners. As was true in Models 1 and 2, church attendance and partisanship also increase the likelihood of adhering to these beliefs about gun ownership, while age decreases the likelihood. Race and gender remain significant in Model 3 only, with gun owners of color and female gun owners being significantly *less* likely to believe that gun owners in the United States face discrimination.

Table 2. 2

Table 2: Evangelicalism as a Predictor of Gun Owner Identity Measures

	(1) Reflects Who I Am	(2) Part of my Self-ImAge	(3) Face Discrimination	(4) Linked Fate
Evangelical	0.611**	0.480*	0.371+	0.366+
	(2.88)	(2.29)	(1.64)	(1.65)
Church Attendance	0.177**	0.271***	0.150*	0.191**
	(2.99)	(4.55)	(2.41)	(3.06)
Non-White	0.132	0.177	-0.505*	0.0650
	(0.55)	(0.74)	(-1.98)	(0.26)
Female	-0.578**	-0.367	-0.437*	-0.394
	(-2.86)	(-1.85)	(-2.09)	(-1.89)
Age	-0.0457***	-0.0390***	-0.0197**	-0.0293***
	(-7.00)	(-6.17)	(-3.08)	(-4.46)
Income	-0.0333	-0.0390	-0.00289	-0.00359
	(-0.72)	(-0.86)	(-0.06)	(-0.07)
Education	-0.0420	-0.000939	-0.101	-0.0340
	(-0.57)	(-0.01)	(-1.33)	(-0.46)
Party ID Scale	0.151**	0.134**	0.247***	0.222***
	(3.16)	(2.78)	(4.84)	(4.27)
Ideology	0.0563	-0.0319	0.159*	0.0471
	(0.91)	(-0.52)	(2.47)	(0.72)
cut1	-2.783***	-2.135***	-1.417*	-1.757**
	(-4.99)	(-3.94)	(-2.56)	(-3.12)
cut2	-1.947***	-1.434**	-0.0962	-0.273
	(-3.54)	(-2.68)	(-0.18)	(-0.49)
cut3	-1.527**	-0.923	1.672**	1.318*
	(-2.80)	(-1.73)	(3.02)	(2.34)
cut4	-0.592	0.0105		
	(-1.10)	(0.02)		
cut5	0.180	0.770		
	(0.33)	(1.44)		
cut6	0.949	1.421**		
	(1.74)	(2.63)		
N	379	379	377	379

t statistics in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*M*odel: Ordered Logistic Regression

Table 2.3 explores how these identities, religious and gun owning, matter for policy attitudes. Model 1 looks at evangelical attitudes toward gun regulation policy proposals. Here, we can see that evangelicals, those who attend church often, conservatives, and Republicans are significantly more likely to be *opposed* to gun regulation measures. Women, older individuals, and the highly educated, however, are more likely to be *supportive* of gun regulation. Model 2 removes the effect of evangelicalism, while still controlling for church attendance, to assess the impact of gun owner identity on its own. Gun owner identity is statistically significant and in the expected – i.e., those with a high gun owner identity are more likely to oppose gun regulation policy. Age, education, partisanship, and ideology all remain significant predictors of gun regulation attitudes, while church attendance is no longer significant.

Models 3 and 4 test my fourth hypothesis, that gun owner social identity helps account for the association between evangelicalism and gun policy attitudes. At first glance, it appears that gun owner identity does mediate the relationship between evangelical identity and opposition to gun regulation. Evangelicalism predicts gun control attitudes when gun owner identity is not included in the model. When both variables are included (Models 3 and 4), however, the effect of evangelicalism is no longer statistically significant, but gun owner identity remains a significant predictor of opposition to common gun regulation policy measures. The interaction between the two variables is similarly insignificant (Model 4), suggesting that it is not the interaction between the two identities that matter, but rather that gun owner identity is mediating the relationship between evangelical identity and gun policy attitudes among gun owners.

Table 2.3

Table 3: Evangelicalism, Gun Owner Identity, and Gun Policy Attitudes

	(1) Gun Policy	(2) Gun Policy	(3) Gun Policy	(4) Gun Policy
Evangelical	-0.239*		0.208	0.437
	(-1.94)		(0.94)	(0.82)
Gun Owner Identity		-0.173**	-0.186**	-0.165*
		(-2.62)	(-2.75)	(-2.02)
Gun Owner ID x Evangelical				-0.063
				(-0.48)
Church Attendance	-0.0717*	-0.0433	-0.0681	-0.071
	(-2.16)	(-0.80)	(-1.14)	(-1.17)
Non-White	-0.0375	-0.0259	-0.00676	-0.000588
	(-0.29)	(-0.11)	(-0.03)	(0.00)
Female	0.546***	0.321	0.310	0.304
	(4.98)	(1.58)	(1.53)	(1.49)
Age	0.0298***	0.0233***	0.0233***	0.0229**
	(8.78)	(3.49)	(3.49)	(3.40)
Income	0.00605	-0.0578	-0.0537	-0.0533
	(0.26)	(-1.21)	(-1.12)	(-1.11)
Education	0.133***	0.197**	0.200**	0.200**
	(3.39)	(2.64)	(2.67)	(2.68)
Party ID Scale	-0.140***	-0.101*	-0.101*	-0.101*
	(-4.85)	(-2.05)	(-2.05)	(-2.05)
Ideology	-0.167***	-0.159**	-0.159**	-0.162**
	(-4.52)	(-2.59)	(-2.60)	(-2.63)
cut1	-2.836***	-3.793***	-3.804***	-3.779***
	(-9.26)	(-5.68)	(-5.69)	(-5.64)
cut2	-2.226***	-2.734***	-2.747***	-2.722***
	(-7.68)	(-4.43)	(-4.44)	(-4.39)
cut3	-1.702***	-2.261***	-2.276***	-2.250***
	(-6.05)	(-3.73)	(-3.75)	(-3.69)
cut4	-1.009***	-1.481*	-1.494*	-1.469*
	(-3.66)	(-2.49)	(-2.51)	(-2.46)
cut5	-0.372	-0.661	-0.672	-0.647
	(-1.36)	(-1.12)	(-1.14)	(-1.09)
cut6	0.176	0.104	0.0951	0.121
	(0.64)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.20)
cut7	0.899**	0.899	0.892	0.918
	(3.26)	(1.51)	(1.50)	(1.54)
N	1429	379	379	379

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*M*odel: Ordered Logistic Regression

To more robustly test the indirect effect of evangelicalism on gun policy opinion, I run a separate mediation model. In other words, because I posit that gun owner identity serves as an intervening variable between evangelicalism and policy attitudes among gun owners, I can use a mediation model to investigate the indirect effect of religion as it passes through gun owner identity on gun policy attitudes. The modeling method I utilize provides the average causal mediation effect (ACME), when can be defined as the representation of "the expected difference in the potential outcome when the mediator took the value that would realize under the treatment condition, while the treatment status itself is held constant" (Imai et al. 2011). In this case, the "treatment condition" is the presence of a gun owner identity.

The direct effect of evangelical identity on gun regulation policy attitudes is -0.0557 and is not statistically significant for gun owners. However, the indirect effect of evangelical identity that passes through gun owner identity is -0.2448 and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) for gun owners. Moreover, the ACME in the mediation model is statistically distinct from zero, suggesting that gun owner identity does indeed mediate the relationship between evangelical identity and gun regulation resistance among gun owners.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is a well-documented and persistent relationship between religion and gun ownership in the United States (Yamane 2016). Moreover, a new vein of research suggests that some gun owners construct an identity around their ownership (Joslyn et al. 2017; Lacombe 2019; Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild 2019). Little is known, however, about the nuances and consequences of this increasing connection between these two identities: gun owning and religious. I consider both the role of religion and more specifically, evangelicalism, in the

formation of this gun owner identity, as well as the mechanisms by which these identities interact to predict gun regulation policy attitudes. My analysis of data from a representative sample of American adults allows me to draw several important conclusions.

First, I find that while Protestantism broadly is not an adequate predictor of gun owner identity, evangelicalism does indeed matter. This pattern holds despite a variety of political and demographic controls, including religiosity as measured by church attendance. This suggests that evangelicalism plays a role in gun ownership-as-identity and is not simply a corollary of partisanship, race, or religiosity. Moreover, this relationship holds even as I investigate more robust measures of identity that go beyond the direct question.

The individualistic beliefs of both evangelicals (Emerson and Smith 2001) and gun owners (Celinska 2007) provides a compelling explanation for this relationship. The distinct culture and commitments of evangelicals tend to be especially compatible with gun owners. This affinity between the groups does not appear generalizable to other types of Protestantism either, as shown in the insignificance of the relationship between Protestantism generally and gun owner identity. These results are not surprising, given that non-evangelical Protestants and Catholics tend to be more collectivist (Wuthnow 1999).

Evangelicals prescribe to a particular form of militancy that "requires enemies, actual or imagined" that "pits 'us against them,' and God is always on their side" (du Mez 2020). This particular belief system can motivate the decision to not only buy a gun, but also to have that gun mean something to your sense of self. Especially when one considers the mechanism by which a gun owner identity has been cultivated; mainly, through a positive characterization of the in-group and a negative characterization of the out-group (Lacombe 2019). A core

commitment to protecting oneself and one's group helps explain why evangelicals are more likely to hold a gun owner identity than their non-evangelical counterparts.

Second, my results suggest that gun owner identity acts as a mediator between evangelicalism and gun policy attitudes. While evangelicalism predicts both gun owner identity and anti-gun regulation policy attitudes, the significance of the latter drops out when I include gun owner identity in my model. Mediation modeling confirms that evangelicalism has an indirect impact on gun regulation resistance. In other words, there is not an innate connection between evangelical identification and a rejection of common gun regulation policy as the literature suggests (S. M. Merino 2018); but rather, the relationship is explained by evangelical gun owners' propensity to possess a distinct gun owner identity. Exercising a God-given right to purchase a firearm is a seemingly meaningful and effective way to protect the distinct culture that evangelicals prescribe to – one in which gun ownership and gun identity is a natural continuation of an emphasis on the individual (Celinska 2007). While evangelicals may see gun ownership as a method of protecting their religious identity and culture, they do not appear to see gun policy as a threat to that means of protection. Gun policy, however, does threaten the gun owner identity that many evangelical gun owners possess. In other words, it is the potential threat to gun owner identity, not evangelical identity, that matters for gun control policy attitudes.

Despite these important findings, my research does have limitations. The first being the relatively small sample size of gun owners in my survey. Only 443 individuals identified as gun owners and answered questions about gun owner identity. At just under 30% of the sample, the representation of gun owners in the sample is similar to what we observe in the U.S.

population. However, this sample size impacts the statistical power of my models. A larger overall survey sample would have allowed me to better assess the nuances of the relationship between evangelicalism and guns in the United States. In addition, it would be ideal to be able to account for more traditional religion measures and be able to assess respondent adherence to individualism and collectivism. One additional consideration concerns evangelicals. Although individuals in this sample were asked to self-identify as evangelical or not, the survey questions do not capture the strength of an individual's evangelical identity through belongingness, linked fate, or perceptions of threat or discrimination. Other researchers should consider including these measures in future research examining the role of religion in gun owner identity and gun control policy attitudes.

This project takes an important step in understanding the role of religion in the development of gun owner identity. Evangelicalism broadly matters for the construction of this identity, which is not true for non-evangelical Protestants. Moreover, this identity serves as a mediator between evangelicalism and gun policy attitudes. Social scientists should continue to consider how religion broadly and evangelicalism more specifically impacts attitudes toward gun ownership and gun policy in the United States.

Chapter 3: And He Baptized Them with Firepower

The Ability of Religious Elites to Shift Gun Attitudes

A Texas pastor recently told his followers to keep their guns "locked and loaded" as part of an executive order straight from God (L. Smith 2021). The pastor claimed the prophetic voices told him that former President Donald Trump was willed by God to remain in office and his parishioners needed to be prepared for some sort of crisis that would take place before President Biden's inauguration. While this rhetoric is extreme, it is certainly not the first time that clergy have delivered messaging concerning guns from the pulpit. Pastor Robert Jeffress, a former evangelical advisor to President Trump, noted that many of his members carry guns in his church, an understanding that he notes makes him feel much safer (Relman 2017). In fact, there are even concealed carry classes reserved solely for pastors. NRA certified firearm instructor Willie Greene believes that churches are more at-risk for violent attacks and while "pastors are praying for our souls, [he] may have to protect himself as well as his flock physically" (Simmons 2020). This story is not uncommon, as more and more examples are emerging of pastors and congregants arming themselves to protect against gun violence (Horning 2018).

Pastors, however, are not unanimous in their support for gun rights in America. Rob Schenck, an evangelical pastor in Washington D.C., has attempted to change the minds of his gun-loving conservative base, as shown in the documentary *The Armor of Light* (Chang 2015). As a long-time anti-abortion activist, Schenck began to "question whether his commitment to life and his commitment to guns were mutually exclusive," concluding that while the right to own guns is certainly constitutional, it does not mean it's scripturally supported (Luscombe

2018). Shane Claiborne, a pastor from Philadelphia, agrees with Schenck (Griswold 2019); in fact, he wrote a book providing a Christian case for fighting gun violence in the United States (Claiborne and Martin 2019). To promote the book, him and his co-author traveled the country collecting guns from those wanting to change their commitment to violence and turning those weapons into garden tools in real time, a demonstration of the Bible verse that claims the Christians will "beat swords into plowshares" (Isaiah 2:4).

There are certainly conflicting messages concerning guns coming from the religious elite in America today. The question remains, are these messages capable of moving the attitudes of these pastors' congregants? The literature is mixed concerning the ability of religious elite messaging to move political attitudes. There appears to be a growing connection between religious and guns in the United States (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2013), so one might expect pastors to have an outsized influence on their congregants concerning guns and gun policy attitudes. However, other research suggests that when religious individuals are exposed to unexpected elite messaging, their attitudes can change in significant ways (Harrison and Michelson 2017). Using two original experiments, I assess how religious messages can change attitudes about gun policy, both in expected and unexpected directions. I theorize about the conditions under which religious elites can influence attitudes toward guns.

Theoretical Framework

Religious Elite Messaging and the Role of Experiments

Experiments have long been used to assess the role of religion in shaping political attitudes. These experiments have ranged from assessing the role of religious value primes on U.S. intervention policy (Djupe and Calfano 2013) to evaluating social desirability bias in an

individual's support for Christian and Muslim immigration (Creighton and Jamal 2015). As experimental methodological approaches have become more sophisticated and simultaneously more feasible for researchers, scholars have increasingly employed them to investigate the relationship between religion and politics.

These studies range in both the population being studied and the experimental methodology employed. Elizabeth Oldmixon, Brian Calfano, and team utilize a series of survey experiments in the United States, Ireland, and Northern Ireland to study Catholic priests and their attitudes toward political engagement (Calfano, Michelson, and Oldmixon 2017; Calfano and Oldmixon 2016; Calfano, Oldmixon, and Gray 2014; Oldmixon, Suiter, and Calfano 2014). Broadly, the scholars find that when primed to think of their institutional obligations, priests were more likely to present conservative policy attitudes that aligned with the position of their institution. In another study of clergy and political activism, Amy Erica Smith (2016) uses an experiment to ascertain that Pentecostal and evangelical Protestant clergy are more likely to respond to political threat with political engagement than their Catholic counterparts.

Another subset of the literature looks to elite messaging and their impact on political attitudes. Using a variety of methodological approaches, including experiments, one vein of research suggests that clergy are ineffective at moving political opinion, regardless of the source of that cue (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Mckeown and Carlson 1987; Gregory Allen Smith 2008). Others, however, have found results in the opposite direction, with clergy speech impacting their parishioners' opinions (Gregory A. Smith 2005; Welch et al. 1993). These effects have been shown to be especially strong when considering a particular policy area.

Experimental research has recently been used to investigate the role of elite messaging on attitudes toward especially polarizing policy areas. Using a survey experiment, Wallsten and Nteta (2016) find that exposure to elite arguments may cause some individuals to shift their immigration attitudes, noting that these cues are especially effective if the individual shares denominational affiliation with the elite. This approach has been used to investigate other policy areas as well, such as environmental policy (Djupe and Hunt 2009), same-sex marriage (Harrison and Michelson 2017), and gay rights (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008).

Harrison and Michelson's (2017) Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming helps explain when religious messaging may be especially effective at moving attitudes. The scholars posit that when individuals hear that someone in their social group (in this case, their religious group) surprisingly support a particular policy, some of those individuals reconsider and even update their own position in order to better align with that of the elite (3). This is especially true when the message is unexpected, as it is then that people "engage in greater systematic message processing" (16). It is within this context that I analyze my experiment assessing the role of clergy messaging on attitudes toward gun policy.

Religion and Attitudes toward Gun Policy

The literature has well-established the role of religion in predicting gun ownership in the United States. For decades, scholars have noted that Protestants are more likely than those ascribing to alternative religious traditions to own guns (Ellison 1991; Little and Vogel 1992). Beyond the broad category of "Protestant," however, little work has been done exploring how religion impacts attitudes toward guns.

Some scholars choose to explain this relationship between religion and gun ownership by pointing to a distinctive evangelical culture. Scholars have defined this culture as both conservative and fundamentalist, with embeddedness in this culture acting as a strong influence over an individual's propensity to own a gun (Stroope and Tom 2017; Yamane 2016). Particular beliefs within this tradition have also been shown to predict gun ownership, including biblical inerrancy, the punitiveness of God, and moral convictions of sin (Hempel, Matthews, and Bartkowski 2012; Young 1989; Young and Thompson 1995).

Protestants, and especially evangelicals, tend to hold a host of other nonreligious views that may increase their likelihood of gun ownership. They tend to hold more punitive attitudes toward crime (Grasmick and McGill 1994); they are more likely to align with the Republican party (Schwadel 2017); they may appear less trusting of other individuals and of government itself (Bivins 2008; Hempel, Matthews, and Bartkowski 2012); and, they often express highly individualistic attitudes (Emerson and Smith 2001). How these religious attitudes influence gun policy opinion, however, remains vastly understudied.

Few studies have considered how religious tradition and beliefs influence attitudes toward guns. Those that have explored this question have found that Protestants are not only more likely to own guns, but they are also less likely to support gun regulation (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2013). Merino (2018) finds that White evangelical Protestants are more inclined to address gun violence with policy interventions such as expanded concealed carry laws, better mental health screenings, and a greater emphasis on God in public schools and society. Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry (2018) suggest that a distinctive form of Christian nationalism – i.e. the belief that America was founded as a Christian nation and enjoys a special

covenantal relationship with God – is associated with decreased support for gun regulation. While these studies have added to our understanding of the relationship between religion and attitudes toward guns, few have considered how religious messaging can intensify or even change this narrative.

Hypotheses

Scholarship has suggested that exposure to religious arguments are especially effective when the individual shares denominational affiliation with the elite (Wallsten and Nteta 2016) and sees the elite as a member of their in-group (Harrison and Michelson 2017). My hypotheses reflect this expectation, suggesting that those who do not identify as evangelical will not be moved by the experiment. Moreover, building on the findings of Harrison and Michelson (2017) in their experiments concerning same-sex marriage, I suggest that the second treatment in which respondents are exposed to a religious pro-gun regulation argument will have a greater impact on respondents than the first treatment, given the latter message violates expectations.

H_1: Those exposed to a Biblical argument for gun rights from an evangelical pastor will express more pro-gun rights attitudes, relative to those in the control group.

H_{1a}: This relationship will be impacted by denomination, in which evangelicals will be more affected by the experiment than those who do not identify as evangelicals.

H_2: Those exposed to a Biblical argument for gun regulation from an evangelical pastor will express more pro-gun regulation attitudes, relative to those in the control group.

H_{2a}: This relationship will be impacted by denomination, in which evangelicals will be less affected by the experiment than those who do not identify as evangelical.

H_{2b}: This relationship will stronger than the relationship between the pro-gun rights message and pro-gun attitude change given that the pro-gun control message violates expectations, causing greater systematic processing (Harrison and Michelson 2017).

Data and Methods

I utilize two original experimental treatments and a control treatment to test my hypotheses. These experimental treatments appeared on different representative surveys of national adults, one in 2019 and one in 2020. For both experimental treatments, the following control treatment was utilized:

> "*Christians as Peacekeepers: Loving Your Neighbor as Christ Would"*
> By Reverend Michael Everett
> Published: June 2019
>
> Jesus' emphasis on love is evident from the onset of his ministry. In Mark 12: 29-31, he reminds his followers of the two great commandments: "The first," he said, "is 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love you neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (12:29-31).
>
> Brothers and Sisters in Christ we are called to love our neighbor. Gone are the days when we respond to the hate of the world with more hate. Hate was conquered when Christ overcame death in his Resurrection. The risen Christ preached love and peace, especially toward our enemies. Do not be seduced by the ways of the world, which return hate with more hate. As Jesus himself said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew 5:38-42).
>
> We are called to be instruments of God's love and peace. God has called out a people - His Church - to protect the weak, to defend those who cannot defend themselves, to love our neighbors. Friends be vigilant in doing all things, big and small, with great love. Today and every day, I urge you to go out into the world and live a life characterized by the love of your Father in Heaven.
> *Reverend Michael Everett is the senior Pastor at Delta Hills Evangelical Church.*

The first treatment, Treatment 1, is an opinion piece published in a local newspaper in which a pastor expresses a Biblically rooted argument for defending the right to bear arms. The text read:

> *"Loving Our Neighbor, Protecting the Weak: A Biblical argument defending the right to bear arms"*
> By Reverend Michael Everett
> Published: June 2019

> The United States Congress is currently debating a law that could potentially overhaul the system of purchasing firearms in this country. A major component of the legislation broadens the federal background check system for firearms purchases, making it much more difficult to obtain a gun.
>
> Our country is at a crossroads. The biblical right of self-defense as guaranteed by our Founding Fathers is under attack. In light of the tragic loss of lives resulting from gun violence, Congressmen and citizens alike are calling for increased restrictions on gun ownership. But is gun control the answer? I do not believe so. Passivity does not lead to protection.
>
> God has called out a people - his Church - to protect the weak, to defend those who cannot defend themselves, to love our neighbors. I ask, is there any greater love than a man who is willing to lose his life defending a friend? Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we must be prepared at all times to defend those who cannot defend themselves. God calls us to do so.
>
> In Exodus 22:2, the Bible sanctions the act of self-defense, even when that defense is lethal. The text reads, “If a thief is caught in the act of breaking into a house and is struck and killed in the process, the person who killed the thief is not guilty of murder." This sentiment is reinforced in the New Testament, with Jesus himself telling his followers that “the one who has no sword [should] sell his cloak and buy one” (Luke 22: 35-38). God does not call his followers to be passive bystanders but urges them to be prepared to protect the innocent.
>
> As Congress wrestles with this piece of legislation, I urge you to contact your representative and make sure he or she knows that this piece of legislation threatens your right to bear arms and defend yourself and your neighbor. Any effort to revoke this right goes against our character as a people of God and our values as a nation.
> *Reverend Michael Everett is the senior pastor at Delta Hills Evangelical Church.*

Treatment 1 appeared on a 2019 representative survey of American adults. This survey was recruited and fielded by Dynata who invited participants to complete the survey via email in August of 2019. The sample is nationally representative and included 3,125 adults, though not all participants were exposed to the treatment. Both the control treatment group and the Treatment 1 group were randomly assigned 524 individuals each who then participated in the experiment.

The second treatment, Treatment 2, is an opinion piece arguing for gun regulation, formatted the same as the first. The control treatment is exactly the same for this treatment as it was for Treatment 1. Treatment 2 read:

"*Instruments of Peace*: *A Biblical argument for gun control legislation"*
By Reverend Michael Everett
Published: June 2019

The United States Congress is currently debating a law that could potentially overhaul the system of purchasing firearms in this country. A major component of the legislation broadens the federal background check system for firearms purchases, making it much more difficult to obtain a gun.

Now is the time to make changes to our gun laws. Innocent lives are being taken by gun violence every day, yet we as a community of faith have been silent for too long. Brothers and Sisters in Christ we are called to love our neighbor by being instruments of peace. Gone are the days when we respond to the violence of the world with more violence. Violence was conquered when Christ overcame death in his Resurrection. The risen Christ preached love and peace to all people, especially toward our enemies. Do not be seduced by the ways of the world, which return hate and violence with more hate and violence. As Jesus himself said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew 5: 38-42).

We are called to be instruments of God's love and peace, protecting life and human dignity. The ease with which individuals can obtain firearms goes against this calling, with current gun laws only fostering the violence that Jesus came to earth to eliminate. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "All things are lawful, but not all things build up" (1 Corinthians 10:23). Our current laws do not build up the Kingdom of God and the peace he seeks to bring to the world.

As Congress wrestles with this piece of legislation, I urge you to contact your representative and make sure he or she knows that this piece of legislation has the potential to curb violence and bring about small steps toward peace. Any effort to stop this end goal goes against our character as a people of God and our values as a nation.
Reverend Michael Everett is the senior pastor at Delta Hills Evangelical Church.

Treatment 2 appeared on a 2020 survey of American adults. This survey was recruited and fielded by Dynata who invited participants to complete the survey via email in October of 2020. The sample is nationally representative and included 3,749 adults, though not all participants were exposed to the treatment. The control treatment group was randomly assigned 882 participants and the Treatment 2 group was randomly assigned 889 participants, who all went on to participate in the experiment.

My dependent variable concerns the impact of religious elite messaging on gun attitudes. To capture these attitudes, I employed the following gun policy questions that were asked of all respondents subsequent to the embedded experiment on both experiments:

> *Please tell me if you favor or oppose the following proposals about gun policy:*
> *a: A ban on high-capacity ammunition clips that hold more than 10 bullets*
> *b: Making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks*
> *c: A ban on assault-style weapons*
> *d: Laws to prevent people with mental illness from purchasing guns*
> *e: Raising the legal age at which people can purchase certain firearms from 18 to 21*
> *f: Allowing family members to ask the court to temporarily remove guns from a relative who they believe is at risk of harming himself or others*
> *g: Authorizing law enforcement officers to temporarily remove guns from individuals who the officer determines pose an immediate threat of harm to self or others*

All participants respond to each statement with either favor or oppose. I use these responses to build a scale ranging from 0-7, with seven representing the most pro-gun rights position and zero representing the most pro-gun regulation position. These seven questions load onto a single factor on both surveys, with an Eigenvalue of 3.23 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.805 for the survey including Treatment 1 and an Eigenvalue of 2.51 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.751 for the survey including Treatment 2.

I utilize religious identity as a key predictor in my analysis. Respondents were classified as "Protestant" if that is how they self-identified when asked their current religion. The survey does not include a full battery of denominational indicators, which precludes a full "reltrad" analysis (Steensland et. al 2000), but it does include the standard question, "Would you describe as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian, or not?" The "reltrad" measure would have allowed to me to more robustly classify evangelical Protestants based on their religious denomination. Burge and Lewis (2018), however, find almost no statistical difference between the full, detailed religious affiliation approach and the simpler scheme that I utilize here

("Would you describe as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian, or not?"), providing confidence that my measure of evangelicalism is sufficient. I create a dummy variable for evangelical identification, with all other respondents, whether self-identified Christians or not, as the reference category.

I include a variety of variables to control for the demographic considerations shown to be important in the literature on guns. These variables are measured the same in both surveys. I control for race and gender through a dummy variable in each model (white coded as 1 and all others 0; female coded as 1 and men as 0). I control for age (measured in years), income (measured in an ordinal scale ranging from 1-11), and education (measured ordinally with a scale ranging from 1-7). I additionally consider the partisan identification of respondents using a 7-point scale in which strong Republicans are indicated by the highest value (7), strong Democrats are indicated by the lowest value (1), and those who identify with neither party are in the middle.

Methodologically, I use analysis of variance and covariance and ordered logistic regression to test the impact of my treatment conditions on my gun attitudes, controlling for other explanations set forth in the literature.

Results

I begin my analysis with an independent group t-test. The results presented in Table 3.1 indicate that there is no significant difference between Treatment 1 (the pro-gun rights sermon) and the control group nor between Treatment 2 (the pro-gun regulation sermon) and the control group. In other words, there appears to be no significant difference in gun policy attitudes between the control groups and either of their respective treatment groups.

Table 3. 1

Table 1: Two-Sample T-Test with Equal Variance

	Combined Observations	t	p-value
Treatment 1	1,044	-0.3266	0.7441
Treatment 2	1,763	-0.9095	0.3632

*D*ependent Variable: Gun Policy Attitudes

*E*ach Treatment Compared to its Appropriate Control Group

The literature suggests, however, that evangelicals have a distinct relationship with guns (Yamane 2016). Moreover, given that the elite cue was delivered by an evangelical pastor, we ought to expect that evangelicals respond differently to the experiment than those who do not identify as evangelical (Wallsten and Nteta 2016). I therefore perform a two-way Anova test for both experiments to assess if the treatments are interacting uniquely with evangelicals in my sample. The results of the regression models underlying my Anova tests are displayed in Table 3.2. In both models, the treatment does not have a broad effect on participants. It appears, however, that the treatments interact meaningfully with evangelical identification. In Model 1, there was a marginally statistically significant interaction between the effects of evangelicalism and Treatment 1 (the pro-gun rights sermon) on attitudes toward gun regulation policy, $p < 0.10$.

Table 3.2

Table 2: Two-Way Anova

	(Treatment 1) Pro Gun Rights	(Treatment 2) Pro Gun Regulation
Evangelical	-0.194***	-0.505***
	(-1.07)	(-4.63)
Treatment	0.188	-0.069
	(1.34)	(-0.86)
Evangelical x Treatment	-0.456^{+}	0.489***
	(-1.80)	(3.20)
N	1,044	1,763

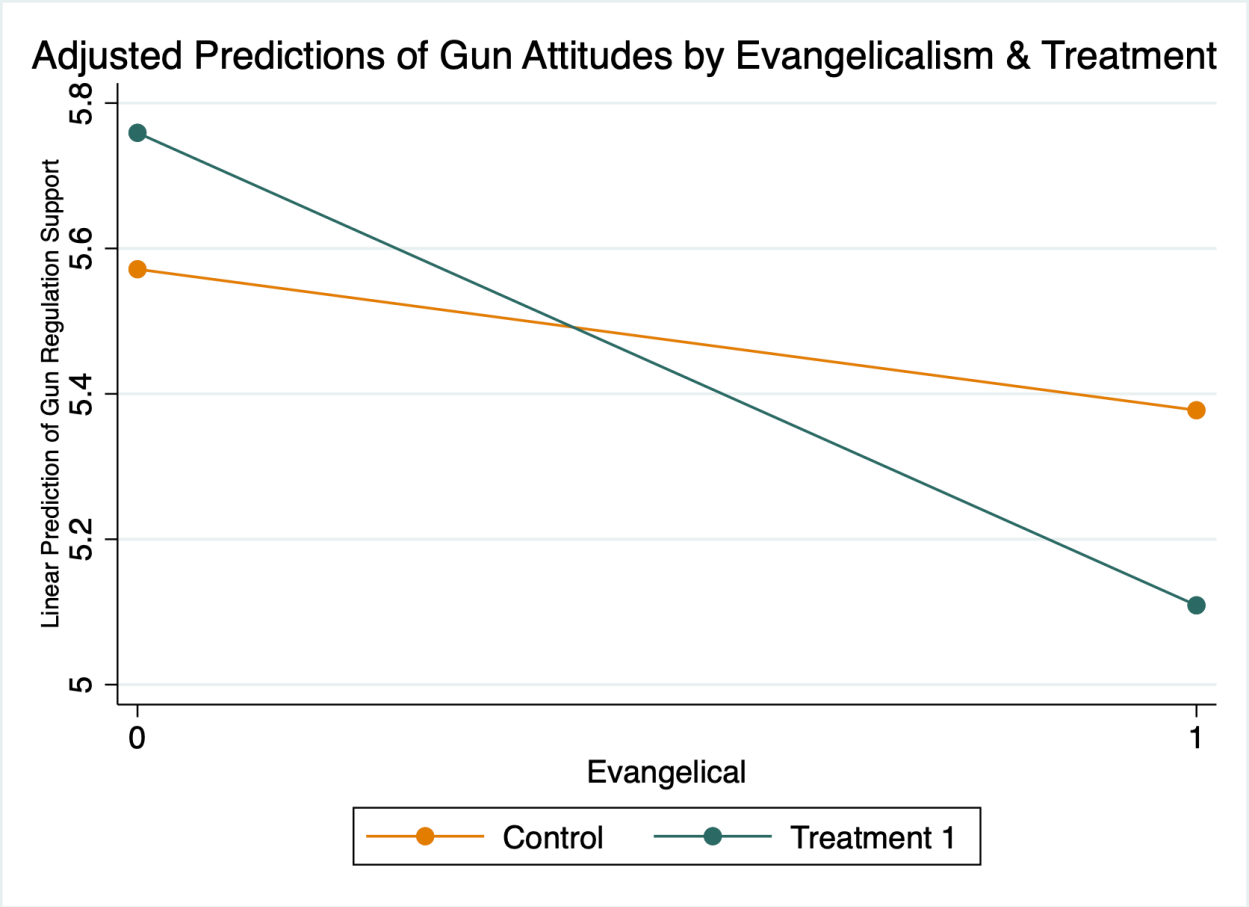
*D*ependent Variable: Gun Policy Attitudes

t statistics in parentheses

$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The adjusted predictions of Model 1 are displayed in Figure 3.1, showing that evangelicals who were exposed to the pro-gun rights sermon were *more* opposed to gun regulation policies than their evangelical counterparts who were not exposed to the treatment. Notedly, the difference between the two groups is not large, suggesting that evangelicals are generally more likely to oppose gun regulation policies and therefore do not have much room to strengthen their already intensely held objections to gun regulation. The experiment does not appear to have any impact on those who do not identify as evangelical, with non-evangelicals being relatively supportive of gun control policies regardless of the treatments to which they were exposed.

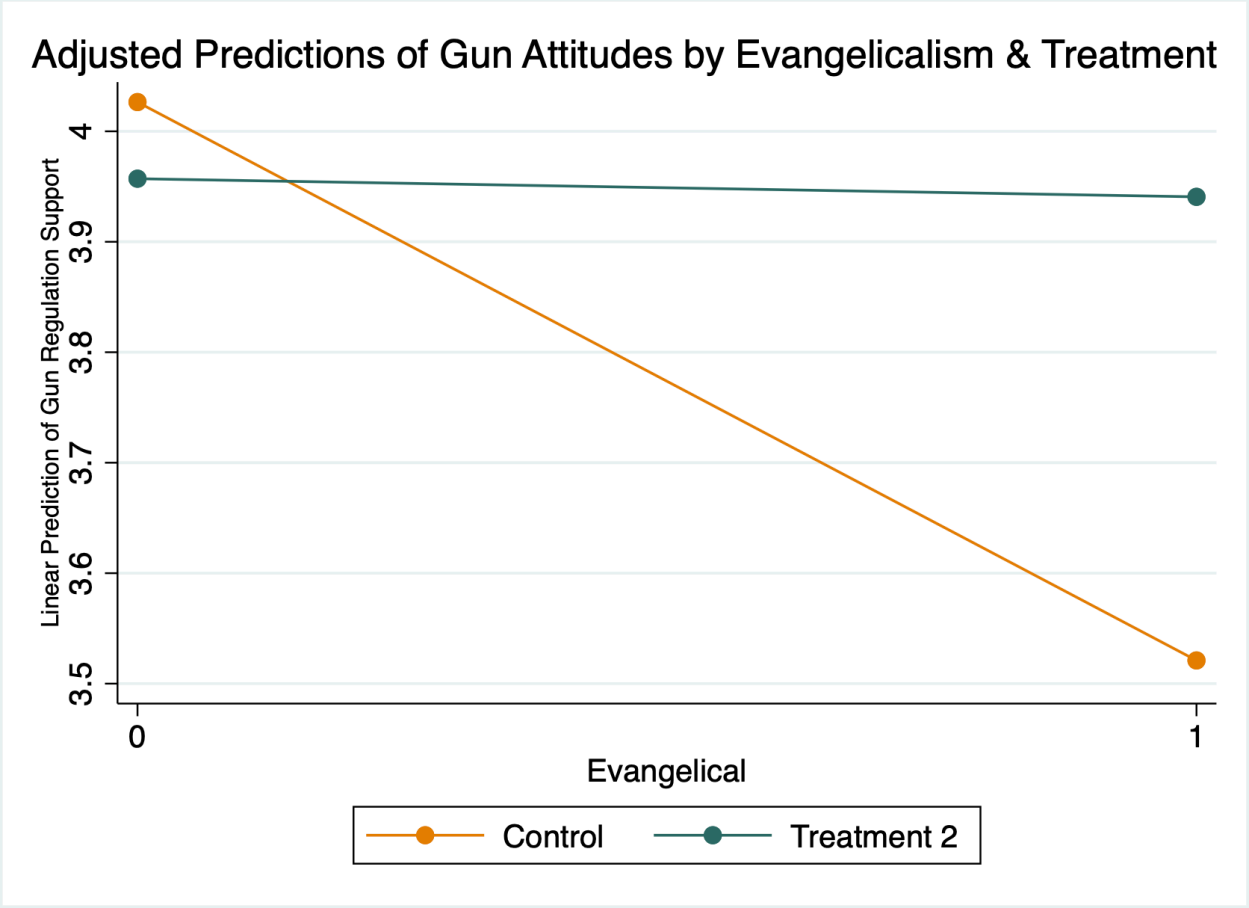
Figure 3.3



Model 2 reports the effect of Treatment 2 on gun policy attitudes. Evangelical identification significantly correlates with decreased support for common gun regulation policies. When evangelicals are exposed to Treatment 2 (the pro-gun regulation sermon) however, they become significantly more supportive of those policies than evangelicals in the control group. The adjusted predictions for Model 2 are shown in Figure 3.2. Similar to Treatment 1, the experiment does not appear to have any impact on those who do not identify as evangelical, with non-evangelicals being relatively supportive of gun regulation policies regardless of the treatments to which they were exposed. Evangelicals who were exposed to

the treatment, however, express attitudes that are remarkably similar to those of non-evangelicals.

Figure 3.4



The initial results suggest that the experiment had a significant effect on evangelicals and that clergy are indeed capable of moving attitudes toward gun regulation. These results, however, do not account for other explanations in the literature. Table 3.3, therefore, explores the impact of the experiment on both evangelicals and non-evangelicals, controlling for other potential explanations. The results confirm what my initial analysis suggested. While the

experiment does not have a significant impact on the participants as a whole, it does influence the gun policy attitudes of evangelicals compared to non-evangelicals.

Table 3.3

Table 3: Experimental Effects on Gun Policy Attitudes

	Model 1 Treatment 1	Model 2 Treatment 2
Treatment	0.061	-0.53
	(0.39)	(-1.38)
Evangelical	-0.186	-0.526***
	(-1.01)	(-3.56)
Treatment x Evangelical	-0.408^{+}	0.680***
	(-1.74)	(3.38)
White	0.000863	0.242*
	(0.01)	(2.08)
Female	0.496***	0.568***
	(3.78)	(5.78)
Age	0.0309***	0.0307***
	(7.77)	(9.13)
Income	-0.0154	0.0207
	(-0.53)	(1.03)
Education	0.108*	0.0488
	(2.29)	(1.32)
Partisanship	-0.204***	-0.221***
	(-6.95)	(-10.05)
N	954	1749

t statistics in parentheses

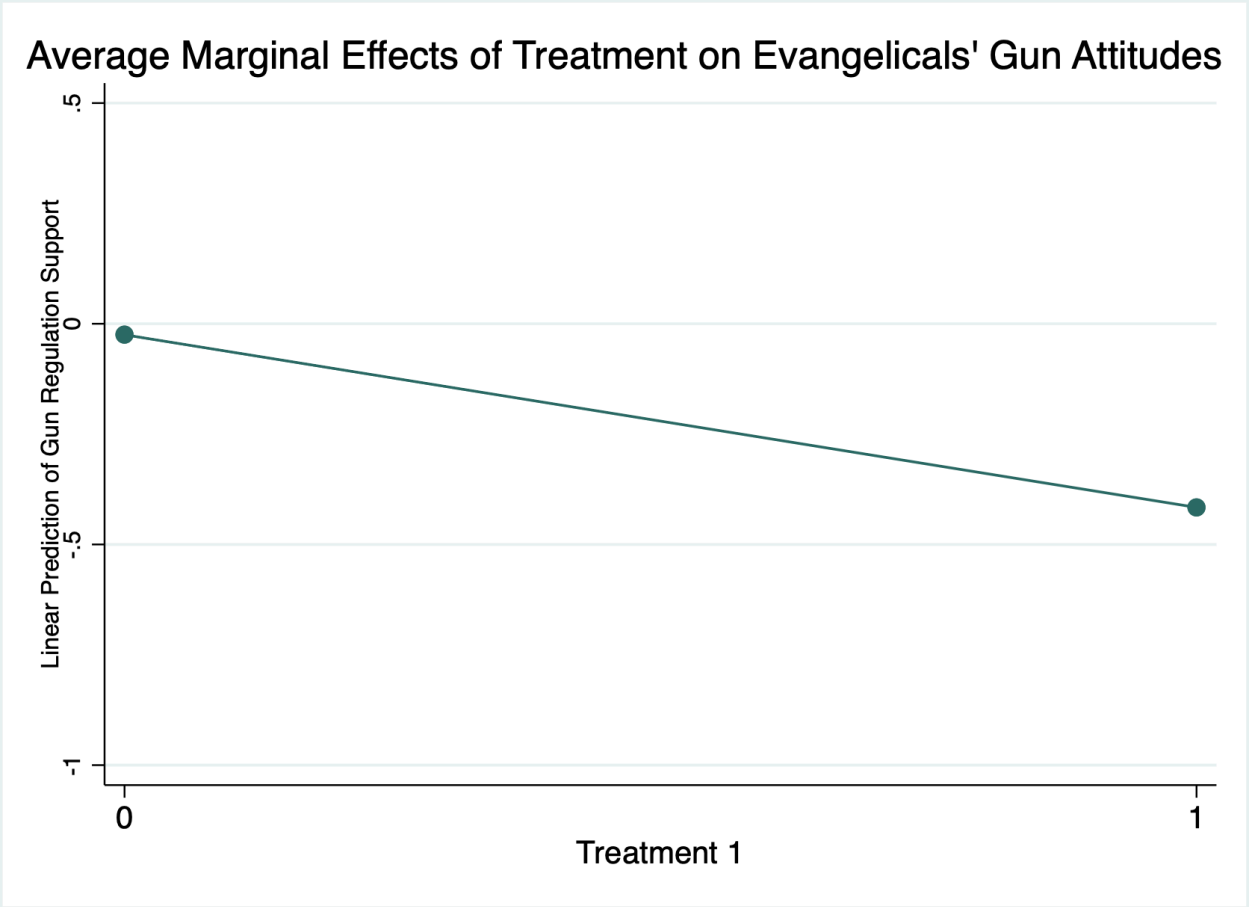
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Model 1 assesses the impact of Treatment 1 on attitudes toward gun regulation policy. Unsurprisingly, the treatment on its own has no significant impact on attitudes toward

regulation policy, but when interacted with evangelical identification, Treatment 1 pushes further opposition to gun regulation policy ($p < 0.10$). Strong Republicans are also more likely to oppose gun regulation, while women, older individuals, and the highly educated are more likely to support such measures.

Figure 3.3 shows the marginal effects of Treatment 1 on evangelicals. The results suggest that evangelicals exposed to Treatment 1 scored nearly half a point lower on the support for gun regulation policy scale than evangelicals who were not exposed to the treatment. In light of these data, I can confirm Hypothesis 1: evangelicals exposed to a Biblical argument for gun rights from an evangelical pastor will express more pro-gun attitudes, as measured by opposition to gun regulation, relative to the control group. As hypothesized, the experiment has no impact on non-evangelicals.

Figure 3.5

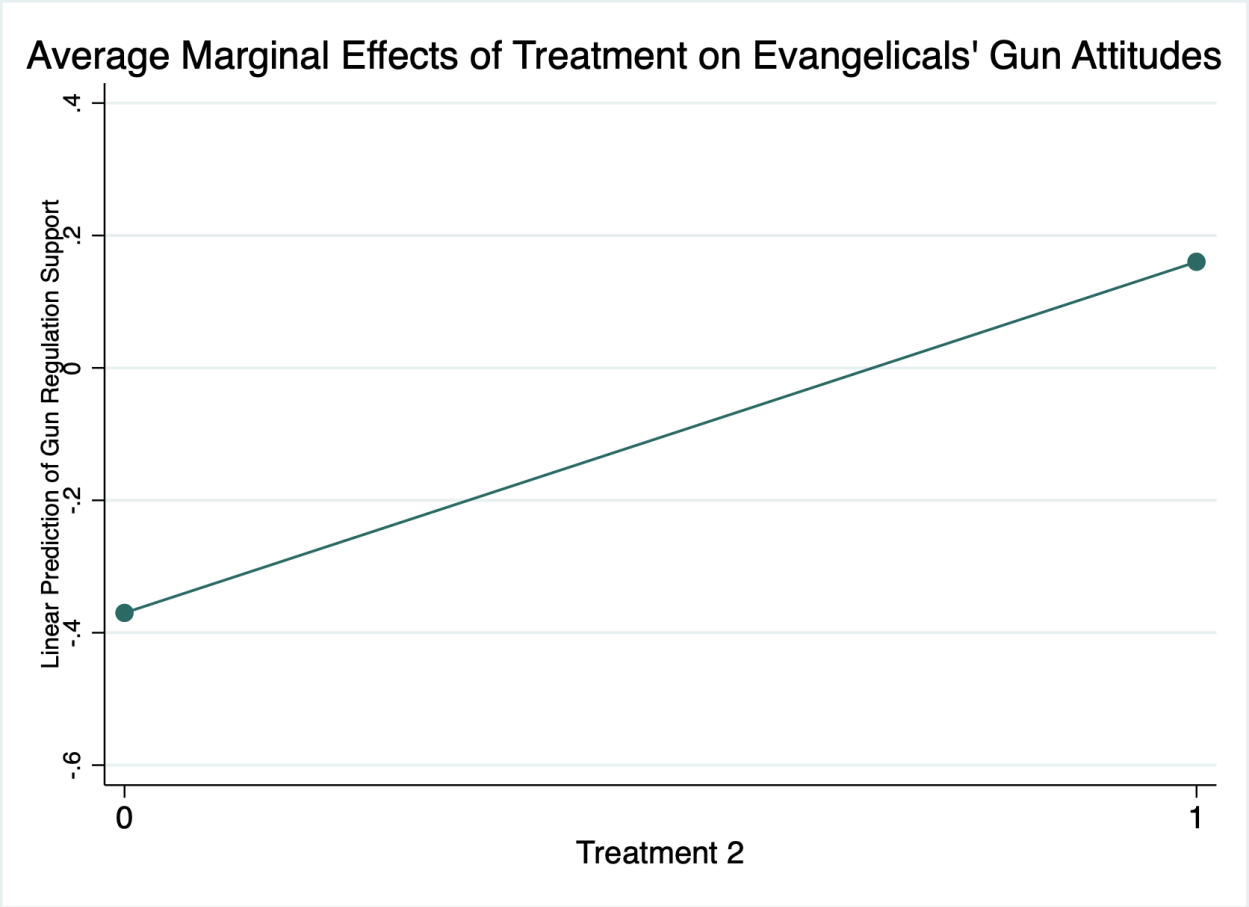


Model 2 assesses the impact of Treatment 2 on attitudes toward gun regulation policy. Once again, the treatment has no significant impact on attitudes toward policy among the participants broadly. When interacted with evangelical identification, however, the treatment that exposed participants to a Biblically-based pro-gun regulation argument *reversed* the attitudes we would expect evangelicals to hold; Evangelicals exposed to Treatment 2 became significantly more supportive of gun regulation policy. Strong Republicans and evangelicals broadly remain opposed to gun regulation, while women and older individuals express more support for such policies. Model 2 presents an unusual finding not seen in Model 1, in which

whites are more supportive of gun regulation policy. This may be due to the large effects of evangelicalism and Republicanism in the model.

Figure 3.4 shows the marginal effects of Treatment 2 on evangelical. The results suggest that evangelicals exposed to Treatment 2 scored nearly three-fourths of a point higher on the scale measuring support for gun regulation policy than evangelicals who were not exposed to the treatment. In light of these data, I can confirm Hypothesis 2: evangelicals exposed to a Biblical argument for gun regulation treatment will express more support for gun regulation, relative to the control group. Moreover, the effect of Treatment 2 is larger than that of Treatment 1 given that the pro-gun regulation messaging violates expectations (Harrison and Michelson 2017). As hypothesized, the treatment did not have a significant impact on non-evangelicals.

Figure 3.6



Discussion and Conclusion

There have been many instances of religious elites in America speaking out about gun policy. For some, opposing gun regulation is an extension of Christian duty, carrying out a particular mandate sent by God (L. Smith 2021). For others, expanded gun rights are incompatible with a Biblical call for peace and nonviolence (Claiborne and Martin 2019). Despite the presence of these divergent messages about guns, scholarship has yet to assess the impact of religious messaging on individuals' attitudes toward gun, and particularly, the attitudes of the members of these pastors' denominations. I experimentally test how religious

messages can change attitudes about gun policy. My analysis allows me to draw several important conclusions.

First, the messages of religious elites matter, but only for members who share their religious identification. In this case, evangelical pastors are capable of moving evangelical attitudes towards guns. Evangelicals who were exposed to a Biblical argument for gun rights expressed increased opposition to gun regulation policies compared to evangelicals who were not exposed to an evangelical pro-gun argument. However, the effect is relatively small. I suggest the effect size is impacted by the fact that evangelicals are already predisposed to oppose gun control and therefore do not have as much space to for their attitudes to shift in a more pro-gun direction. The pro-gun message is both stereotypical and unsurprising, which I suggest limits its effect.

The impact of a Biblical argument for gun regulation has a larger and more surprising effect. When evangelicals were exposed to an evangelical pastor making a Biblical argument for expanded gun regulation, their attitudes changed and did so significantly so. The size of the effect is substantial, with evangelicals exposed to the treatment expressing support for gun regulation on levels similar to that of non-evangelicals and significantly more so than evangelicals in the control group. The Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming (Harrison and Michelson 2017) helps explain this substantial effect. Given the longstanding relationship between evangelicalism and pro-gun attitudes (Yamane 2016), one would expect evangelical pastors to deliver pro-gun rights messaging. When they give a pro-gun regulation message, a "cognitive speed bump" occurs, in which the hearer of the message is forced to reconsider their stereotypical position because it comes "from a trusted in-group source," like a pastor (Harrison

and Michelson 2017, 7). The pro-gun regulation cue, in this case, was especially effective *because* it was unexpected.

Second, as aforementioned, neither treatment was effective at moving the opinions of those who do not identify as evangelical. This is expected, especially given the tenets of Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming. Priming a shared group identity, like evangelical identification, reduces the distance between the message and the receiver, which as the theory posits, motivates a "willingness to process the information and openness to attitude change," especially when that messenger is considered credible (Harrison and Michelson 2017, 21). Religious elite messaging does not appear capable of moving the attitudes of those who do not share the religious tradition of the messenger.

Despite these important findings, this study does have limitations. A more systematic analysis could include more traditional religion measures that account for a fuller breadth of religious denominations. Additional frames could be also explored to test if it is simply a clear message that matters or if it is the content of that message that moves attitudes. Moreover, do the other identities of the message deliverer matter, such as their race, gender, or age? Other scholars could consider the impact of different messages and messengers in the future research exploring the capability of religious elites to move public attitudes – especially attitudes relating to contentious policy areas, like gun policy.

This project takes an important step in understanding the role of religious elite messaging in the development of gun policy opinion. When evangelical religious elites want to move the gun policy attitudes of their congregants, they can. Given the political power of evangelicals in American politics (Haberman 2018), this finding is especially consequential. This

evidence suggests that elites are capable of not only intensifying predispositions, but also of generating an openness to attitudinal change. If religious leaders choose to speak on gun regulation politics in the United States, they can play an important role in changing the landscape of one of the most important policy issues of our time.

Chapter 4: The Great (Protection) Commission

Evangelical Population and the Spread of Stand Your Ground

On February 26, 2012, black teenager Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by self-appointed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. Martin was unarmed, but Zimmerman claimed self-defense and a right to protect himself under Florida's Stand Your Ground law. Martin's untimely death led to national outrage, with citizens questioning where the boundaries of self-defense and lethal force fell. The tragedy propelled Stand Your Ground policy to the national debate stage. In light of the shooting and subsequent controversary, advocates of Stand Your Ground became more vocal of the need for such a policy, arguing it protects a fundamental right to defend oneself, one's family, and one's property. However, critics suggest the law prevents the occurrence of due process, instead empowering individuals to shoot first and ask questions later (Everytown for Gun Safety 2021).

Since being adopted first in Florida, Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws have spread to thirty states. Florida's 2005 law formalized the "Castle Doctrine," an old English common law detailing a person's right to protect themselves in their home. In her book detailing the history of America's SYG laws, Light (2017) explains how this original doctrine overruled the common law of preserving life and resisting violence. This doctrine has since been expanded, she explains, to include protecting oneself outside the home and to relieve the state of prosecuting the user of force. This expansion culminates in the passing of Florida statute 776.013, America's first "Stand Your Ground" law. The policy states:

> "A person who is not engaged in an unlawful activity and who is attacked in any other place where he or she has a right to be has no duty to retreat and has the right to stand

> his or her ground and meet force with force, including deadly force, if he or she reasonably believes it is necessary to do so to prevent death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony" (Self Defense and "Stand Your Ground" 2019).

The "castle" was therein transformed to encompass any place in which an individual had "no duty to retreat" (Catalfamo 2006).

The language in Florida's trailblazing law has been copied in state legislation throughout the country. As of 2019, thirty states have adopted legislation allowing citizens not to retreat from an attacker. At least ten of those states explicitly grant individuals the right to "stand their ground" (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and South Carolina) (Self Defense and "Stand Your Ground" 2019). The laws have received widespread support from conservative organization such as the National Rifle Association and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), who have influenced the expansion of these laws despite the growing public support for stricter gun laws (Butz, Fix, and Mitchell 2015; Ferraro and Ghatak 2019; Gramlich and Schaeffer 2015; Light 2015).

Research on these policies, however, has focused more on the effects of SYG laws rather than on explanations for their diffusion across the states. Scholars across disciplines have found that states who have enacted a SYG law experience more gun violence than before the policy was adopted (Cheng and Hoekstra 2013; Humphreys, Gasparrini, and Wiebe 2017; Ukert, Wiebe, and Humphreys 2018). Often, these laws do not extend protections to the women who claim protection under them (Franks 2013), with convictions for a male defendant claiming SYG averaging around 40 percent, but "for a female defendant in an otherwise objectively

equivalent case, the probability of conviction was found to be around 80 percent" (Murphy 2018, 451). The laws also disproportionately negatively affect people of color, who do not experience the same protection under SYG laws as white people (Ackermann et al. 2015; Light 2015; Mack and Roberts-Lewis 2016; Murphy 2018). Despite this attention on the negative consequences of SYG, it remains the law in over half of the American states. The reason for the spread and persistence of these policies is understudied and the few existing studies investigating the diffusion of SYG legislation (Butz, Fix, and Mitchell 2015; Ferraro and Ghatak 2019), fail to fully account for theoretically relevant variables.

I contribute to the existing literature by arguing that the religious makeup of a state impacts the adoption and diffusion of SYG laws. In particular, I argue that the effect of evangelicalism in the United States is well-suited to explain the spread of SYG laws. Of course, how scholars model policy learning ought to depend on the type of policy being investigated (Butz et al. 2015). When considering gun policy, I suggest that internal factors to a state will be more important than external factors given the nontechnical and noneconomic nature of SYG laws (Butz et al. 2015). Specifically, I argue that the internal factors of religious makeup, gun ownership rates, and the ideological composition of a state are the most important factors for explaining the spread of SYG laws.

Based on my analysis of data from all 50 states over twelve years, my results suggest that SYG policy diffusion can in fact be partly explained by the state's evangelical population, suggesting religious context may exhibit influence in the diffusion of gun rights policies in the United States. Additionally, the percent of residents within a state who own a firearm and the ideology of the state government influence the likelihood of SYG adoption.

Theoretical Framework

The classic policy diffusion model suggests that factors internal and external to a jurisdiction can influence the likelihood that the jurisdiction considers and adopts a given policy (F. S. Berry and Berry 2014). External forces can certainly matter, with factors such as ideological similarity to an adopting state (Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty, and Peterson 2004), population distribution near state borders (W. D. Berry and Baybeck 2005), and various social learning processes (W. D. Berry and Baybeck 2005; Mooney 2001) all influencing the likelihood of policy adoption. Internal determinants of a state can help explain policy adoption in the American States as well (F. S. Berry and Berry 2014). Internal determinants refer to characteristics--political, economic, and social-- that exist within a state-year context. Factors such as ideology, race, wealth levels, and urbanization have been shown to influence policy adoption, with internal predictors being especially impactful in policy areas that are nontechnical and noneconomic, such as SYG legislation (Butz et al. 2015).

SYG laws are explicitly tied to the core American values of individualism and justice. Throughout American history, justice has not solely been a function of formal authority, but of individuals as well, with Americans holding a long history of vigilante-style justice (Culberson 1990). Vigilantism -- "the private, violent enforcement of public moral or legal standards" – demonstrates the messy relationship between violence and justice in America (Obert 2020). Political scientist Jonathan Obert (2020) notes that SYG laws "border on vigilantism, giving private citizens lots of freedom about how to use force to protect themselves." The laws put "more judgment in an individual's hand" and "are part of the rugged individualism of Americans" (Jonsson 2006). In some ways, the spread of SYG laws represents the enshrinement

of the American individualism and, maybe, vigilantism. However, the question remains, what factors best explain the spread of SYG legislation across the American states?

Butz, Fix, and Mitchell (2015) find that the diffusion patterns of SYG policy do not follow typical patterns of policy learning, with proximity to states that have adopted SYG legislation having a diminishing effect on the likelihood that a given state adopts the policy. The study suggests that the reason for this distinctive finding may be that SYG "resembles morality policy dynamics in the policy simplicity and the salient focus on 'first principles' of citizenship has presumably led to rapid adoption" (369). The authors attribute the presence of racial minorities in states to be the primary motivator of policy adoption, suggesting that especially in the South, racial politics may cause a more intense response to an increased minority population in a state and a greater likelihood of that state passing SYG as a means to "protect themselves" from this population. Ferraro and Ghatak (2019) explore the adoption of SYG policies using event-history analysis, comparing three potential explanations: group threat, political partisanship, and crime. The authors conclude the increasing conservative partisanship of political elites serves as the strongest predictor of policy adoption. Neither work, however, considers the role of religion in the spread of SYG policy.

Religious tradition as a set of values has been shown to lead to a particular set of political and policy preferences (Guth et al. 1997). The particular religious affiliation of individuals can be a powerful explanation of political thinking and behavior (Hertzke et al. 2018); however, few studies look at the role that religious populations play in the policy process itself. There is work analyzing the role that faith-based groups play in welfare policy enactment (Green, Barton, and Johns 2012) and the impact of statewide religiosity levels on political

mobilization concerning abortion policy (Schecter 2001), but few scholars have investigated the role of religious populations in policy diffusion.

Of the research investigating the role of religion in the policy process, evangelicalism has been a central focus. Evangelicals are the largest Christian tradition in the United States (Masci and Smith 2018). They are overwhelming white (Masci and Smith 2018), Republican (Lipka 2016), and Southern (Masci and Smith 2018). They tend to be consistently individualistic (Emerson and Smith 2001), which has been shown to impact their policy views (N. Smith and Leiserowitz 2013). Scholars have found that the proportion of evangelicals in a state impacts the spread of particular policies. States with larger proportions of evangelicals are less likely to adopt pro-LGBT policies (Taylor et al. 2012), more likely to pass faith-based legislation (Sager and Bentele 2016), and at times, evangelical organizations have influenced environmental policy diffusion (Djupe and Olson 2010). The size of the evangelical population could influence the policy process by shaping public opinion, through the mobilization of adherents for citizen lobbying, or as a potential membership base for interest groups in a state. Nevertheless, the literature has yet to consider religion's impact on passage of gun-related policy. I suggest this is a mistake, especially given the well-documented relationship that religion has with guns in the United States (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2013; Vegter and den Dulk 2020; Vegter and Kelley 2020; Yamane 2016).

Wright and Marston (1975), Young (1989), Little and Vogel (1992), and Cox, Navarro-Rivera and Jones (2013), among others, have noted that Protestants are more likely than other religious traditions to own guns and less likely to support gun regulation. These findings have held over time, but scholars have yet to systematically explore the influence of religion on a

state's gun policy legislation. Moreover, few studies move beyond the broad religious category of "Protestant" into other measures of religion. Yamane (2016) serves as an exception, concluding that "Protestant" as a coherent category of affiliation is irrelevant to gun ownership, controlling for other factors. He does find, however, that *evangelicals* and theological conservatives exhibit relatively high levels of personal handgun ownership. Vegter and Kelley (2020) find that religious Americans often justify that personal handgun ownership by seeing it as a core function of their Christian duty – especially their duty to protect. Given this relationship, one can imagine how the evangelical population in a state would influence policy in a variety of areas, but especially in the area of gun legislation.

I hypothesize that given evangelicalism's strong, documented relationship with gun rights policy attitudes in America (Little and Vogel 1992; Wright and Marston 1975; Yamane 2016; Young 1989), SYG laws will be more likely to be adopted in states with larger populations of evangelicals. Evangelicals express Biblically-based arguments for Stand Your Ground legislation, further justifying my expectation that their presence in a state will matter for SYG adoption (Vegter and Kelley 2020). Moreover, given the relationship between evangelicals and both individualism (Emerson and Smith 2001) and a commitment to protect oneself and one's family using guns (Vegter and Kelley 2020), I expect the population of evangelicals in a state to help explain the diffusion of Stand Your Ground laws. This is especially likely given the individualistic priorities of the policy itself (Cavazos 2016).

H_1: The larger the percent of evangelicals in a state, the more likely the state will be to adopt SYG legislation.

The literature has just begun to establish gun owners as a distinct and partisan social group (Joslyn et al. 2017; Lacombe 2019; Lacombe, Howat, and Rothschild 2019) and therefore I argue that they will have an outsized influence on policy. Butz et al. (2015) find that states with higher annual rates of gun purchases are significantly more likely to adopt a SYG policy in a given year, suggesting that the gun owner population in a particular state matters for SYG policy. Additionally, as is true for evangelicals in the United States, gun owners tend to be highly individualistic (Celinska 2007) and thus, given the nature of SYG policy, I hypothesize that a larger gun owner population will increase a state's likelihood of Stand Your Group policy adoption.

H_2: The larger the percent of gun owners in a state, the more likely the state will be to adopt SYG legislation.

Ferraro and Ghatak (2019) find a significant ideological effect on SYG policy adoption. I suspect that this result will hold in my analysis and therefore include ideology in my hypotheses, considering the ideology of both political elites and the general electorate.

H_{3a}: The more conservative a state's political elites are, the more likely the state will be to adopt SYG legislation.

H_{3b}: The more conservative a state's citizens are, the more likely the state will be to adopt SYG legislation.

Butz et al. (2015) note that the nontechnical and noneconomic nature of SYG policies will mute "competitive marketplace pressures from neighbors" and "the decision to adopt to be driven largely by a unique set of internal predictors" (351). Therefore, my hypotheses are

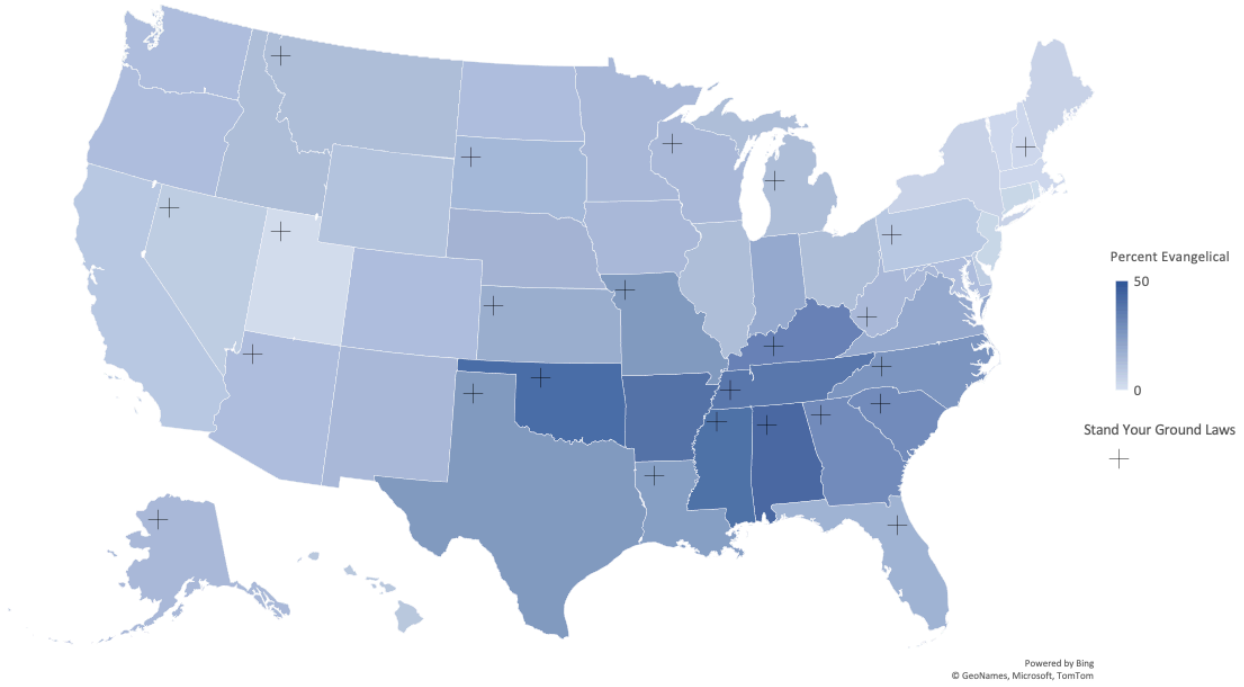
focused on the internal factors that may predict SYG adoption, while still controlling for potential external factors.

Data and Methods

As is typical for survival analysis, my variables are organized by state-year. My data set begins in 2005, with the passage of Florida statute 776.013 (the first SYG law) and continues until 2016. Measurements of my relevant internal factors have not been released since the year of 2016 and therefore, my dataset ends that year. My dependent variable is dichotomous to represent the passage of SYG legislation or not. The variable is coded zero for each year that a state does not enact this form of legislation. Once a particular state adopts a SYG policy, it drops out of the analysis; there are no additional state-year observations for that state because the event has occurred and is not repeatable.

Figure 4.1 shows the state of SYG legislation in the year of 2016 – the last year in my dataset. Since the first adoption of SYG in 2005, the policy has spread rapidly throughout the United States, as indicated on Figure 4.1. The map in Figure 4.1 additionally displays the levels of religious identification for each state, with a darker shade representing a higher percent of evangelicals within a state. Descriptively, these data show that states with a higher percentage of evangelicals tend to have adopted SYG laws.

Figure 4.7: Evangelical Population and Adoption of Stand Your Ground Laws



My independent variables include the following: the percent of evangelicals in a state, the percent of gun owners in a state, and the ideological makeup of the state. To measure the first of my independent variables, I will use the States Policy Project data (Jordan and Grossmann 2020), which includes data on religious tradition by state. The measure is the percentage of evangelicals within the state as measured by the Religion Congregations and Membership surveys.

The second, gun ownership by state, can be measured over time utilizing data from the RAND Corporation. As part of the Gun Policy in America initiative, researchers with the RAND Corporation developed annual, state-level estimates of gun ownership. They combined several data sources to build a reliable measure of household firearm ownership.

> "First, they used a small-area estimation technique to create state-level ownership estimates for each of 51 nationally representative surveys assessing household firearm

> ownership rates. They then used structural equation modeling to combine these survey-based estimates with administrative data on firearm suicides, hunting licenses, subscriptions to Guns & Ammo magazine, and background checks into the final measure of household firearm ownership" (Schell et al. 2020).

The resulting measure that I utilize here represents the estimated proportion of adults living in a household with a firearm for each state in each year between 2005 and 2016.

Finally, I make use of Ferraro's and Ghatak's (2019, 8) method of measuring statewide political ideology at both the elite and electorate level. The scholars employ the Nominate Measure of State Government Ideology (W. D. Berry et al. 1998), "which rates the ideology of political elites within the states on a continuum ranging from 0 to 100, where lower values represent great conservatism among elected officials," including both representatives and governors. Then, they utilize the Citizen Ideology Score (W. D. Berry et al. 2007), also ranging from 0 to 100, where lower values represent conservatism. The scale is developed using ideological ratings of congressional districts calculated from averages of interest group ratings of members of congress and the distribution of votes for these candidates (W. D. Berry et al. 2007).

I include a number of control variables, including the racial makeup of the state and the violent crime rate. I measure the racial makeup of the state using the percentage of the state's residents who identify as white, not Hispanic or Latino. The data are from the States Policy Project (Jordan and Grossmann 2020), which uses the U.S. Census Bureau to gather these data.

I additionally use the States Policy Project (Jordan and Grossmann 2020) to include violent crime data for each year and state in my dataset. They understand violent crime to include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

The scholars involved with the project collected the data from Uniform Crime Reporting unit with the U.S. Department of Justice.

External determinants may also matter in the diffusion of Stand Your Ground legislation. Here I account for region that a state is located in and the percentage of neighboring states that have adopted SYG legislation in my analysis. Region is measured using four dummy variables for the South, West, Midwest, and Northeast. These categorizations come from Carl Klarner's (2013) "State Economic Data" as found in the Harvard Dataverse. For my analysis, the South serves as the reference category against which each of the remaining three regions is compared to.

I control for the impact of neighboring states that have adopted SYG legislation. Following the method of Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty, and Peterson (2004), I include the proportion of neighboring states that have passed SYG policy. I collected these data for every state and every year from 2005-2016.

I utilize logistic regression to test my hypotheses. This method is suitable given the dichotomous outcome of the dependent variable.

Results

Table 4.1 displays the bivariate relationship between evangelicalism and SYG passage, with evangelicalism being positively and significantly associated with the passage of SYG laws. The Pearson's correlation coefficient for evangelicalism is stronger than the Pearson's correlation for every other variable I consider, including gun owner population, the South, violent crime rates, citizen ideology, and the ideology of the state government. Notably, these variables are all significantly correlated with SYG adoption. States that are located in the South, have a high

gun owner population, more conservative citizenries and governments, and more violent crime are significantly correlated with the adoption of SYG, but not as strongly as evangelical population.

Table 4.1

Table 1: Stand Your Ground: Bivariate Correlations

	(1) SYG
Evangelical Population	0.3087***
Gun Owner Population	0.1264**
White Population	-0.0857
Neighbor SYG Adoption	-0.0084
West	-0.0241
Midwest	-0.0771
Northeast	-0.0802
South	0.2025***
Violent Crime Rate	0.1250*
Citizen Ideology	-0.1634***
Government Ideology	-0.1544***

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Reported
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

I present the results of my multivariate analysis in Table 4.2. Model 1 serves as my base model without my chief variables of interest. In it, regional dummies are the only variables that are statistically significant, with Western ($p < 0.01$) and Midwestern ($p < 0.05$) states being less likely to adopt SYG legislation than Southern states. The pseudo R^2 of Model 1 is 0.2048.

I introduce my chief variables of interest in Model 2. Evangelical population acts as a significant predictor of SYG passage ($p < 0.05$), along with gun owner population ($p < 0.05$) and the ideology of the state government ($p < 0.05$). States in the Western region ($p < 0.01$) are also significantly less likely than states in the south to adopt SYG laws. Surprisingly, there is no statistically significant relationship between citizen ideology and SYG adoption. Like Ferraro and Ghatak (2019), I also find no evidence that violent crime impacts SYG passage. This particular model has a pseudo R^2 of 0.2703, suggesting that it accounts for more than a quarter of the variance in the dependent variable.

My hypothesis that SYG laws will be more likely to be adopted in states with larger populations of evangelicals is supported. The results suggest higher evangelical populations increase the likelihood of SYG adoption. My second hypothesis is also supported: the larger a gun owner population is in a particular state, the more likely that state is to adopt SYG legislation. Finally, I find mixed results concerning ideology's impact on policy adoption. H_{3a} is supported, as the more liberal a state's government is, the less likely that state is to adopt SYG legislation. I fail to reject the null hypothesis concerning the latter part of hypothesis three, as I find no statistically significant relationship between the ideology of the citizenry and the adoption of SYG legislation.

Table 4.2

Table 2: Stand Your Ground Adoption

	Model 1	Model 2
Evangelical Population		0.0594*
		(1.97)
Gun Owner Population		5.793*
		(2.05)
White Population	-0.00313	-0.00592
	(-0.31)	(-0.34)
Neighbor SYG Adoption	-0.972	-1.209
	(-1.02)	(-1.25)
South: Regional Reference		
West	-1.634**	-2.241**
	(-2.61)	(-2.78)
Midwest	-1.983*	-1.358
	(-2.41)	(-1.53)
Northeast	-0.441	0.752
	(-0.36)	(0.57)
Violent Crime Rate	0.00223	0.00179
	(1.07)	(0.91)
Citizen Ideology	-0.0444	0.0000521
	(-1.65)	(0.00)
Government Ideology	-0.0554	-0.0775*
	(-1.88)	(-2.34)
N	373	343

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*D*ependent Variable: Stand Your Ground Adoption

*M*odel: Logistic Regression

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter represents an examination of the diffusion of SYG policies in the American states. I argued that the existing literature on SYG adoption has failed to consider the potential influence of a politically mobilized evangelical population in the consideration and adoption of SYG policies. I argue that given evangelicalism's distinct relationship with guns in the United States, the percent of evangelicals in a state ought to help explain the diffusion of Stand Your Ground. In my analysis I sought to test three distinct hypotheses to explain the adoption of SYG legislation from 2005 to 2016. Several preliminary conclusions can be made from the evidence presented here.

First, the percent of a state population that identifies as evangelical is an important internal determinant of SYG adoption. My study is the first to test the impact of religion on gun policy diffusion, making this finding an important contribution to the research on policy diffusion generally, and gun-related policy specifically. I had argued that this relationship exists for two key reasons. The first being the well-documented relationship between Protestantism – especially evangelical Protestantism – and gun ownership (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2013; Little and Vogel 1992; Wright and Marston 1975; Yamane 2016; Young 1989) as well as support for gun rights (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones 2013; Vegter and den Dulk 2020; Vegter and Kelley 2020). SYG policy extends the rights of gun owners and past scholarship suggests evangelicals are likely to support gun rights legislation. Moreover, evangelicals are a powerful political coalition (Hertzke et al. 2018) and therefore I expected their presence in a state to impact the likelihood of SYG adoption. The second explanation for this finding is the individualism embedded in evangelical culture (Emerson and Smith 2001) and in the SYG policy

itself (Cavazos 2016). Evangelicals are prone to support policies that emphasize individual freedoms and personal responsibility, which are two core tenets of the Stand Your Ground policy.

A second important conclusion from my study is the confirmation and expansion of two key explanations of SYG diffusion already put forward in the literature: the impact of the percentage of gun owners in a particular state and the ideology of states' governments. The former confirms Butz, Fix, and Mitchell's (2015) findings that gun purchase rates within a state predict SYG adoption. The latter confirms Ferraro and Ghatak's (2019) finding that elite ideology matters, though I find no support for their conclusion that citizen ideology matters when evangelicalism and gun ownership are accounted for. Both of these results, as well as those suggesting the impact of evangelicalism, indicate the SYG adoption is chiefly the function of internal determinants. This is not to say that external determinants do not matter at all, for I did find that Western states are significantly less likely than Southern states to adopt SYG legislation, but I would suggest they are far less relevant than internal determinants. Given the nontechnical and noneconomic nature of SYG policies, this is not unexpected (Butz et al. 2015), but may require additional consideration in future scholarship.

Although my project makes important contributions to the literature, my research is not without limitations. First, my analysis is limited to logistic regression, which does not account for some of the statistical problems associated with pooled data over time and space, as some methodological techniques are able to. Second, while I consider violent crime generally, I do not account for gun specific crime given the lack of publicly available data, which may have a different impact on the adoption of SYG laws. It is impossible to ascertain how crimes rates are

understood and interpreted in particular states. Third, the analysis is limited to the years 2005-2016. Several states have adopted SYG legislation since 2016, but they are not included in my analysis and therefore the dynamics associated with their adoption cannot be measured. Given data limitations, many of my statewide variables of interest are not yet available for years after 2016.

Gun policy is a source of political division in the United States and SYG legislation is one of the most controversial issues in the debate (Lopez 2019). The political environment that has developed since the first SYG policy was adopted in 2005 suggests that SYG laws will remain an important consideration. Therefore, the dynamics of gun policy diffusion – and especially SYG diffusion -- are essential in understanding the political undercurrents of today. This study helps explain a key gun rights policy and when we might expect that policy to spread. Future scholarship ought to address the limitations of this study but continue the recognize the importance of religion in explaining the diffusion of gun policy in America.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Clinging to Guns and Religion

In 2008, then-candidate Barack Obama stated aloud that some citizens in the United States "cling to guns or religion" as a prescription for the uncertainties in life (Pilkington 2008). The comment caused controversary nationwide, but his quip hinted at a relationship that my analysis confirms exists. This dissertation finds that religious identity significantly impacts attitudes and outcomes about guns and gun policy in the United States. Moreover, it explains that this relationship is especially strong for evangelicals in America.

Chapter One finds that religious tradition is a significant predictor of gun owner identity in the United States. Protestantism broadly does not matter in the formation of a gun owner identity, but evangelicalism does significantly predict said identity. Moreover, gun owner identity mediates the relationship between evangelicalism and gun policy attitudes in the United States. In Chapter Two, I utilize two original experiments to test the Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming within the context of religious identity and gun policy. I find that religious elite messaging can indeed move gun attitudes, but only for members of the elite's in-group and especially when those messages are unexpected. Chapter Three explores how this relationship between evangelicalism and guns impacts the policy process. Using an original dataset, I find that the evangelical population in a state significantly impacts the likelihood that the state adopts Stand Your Ground legislation. These studies establish that religion is an important factor in understanding gun politics in the United States. In all three substantive chapters, religious identity significantly influences attitudes and policy outcomes concerning guns.

I offer one potential explanation for this relationship: a commitment to individualism that characterizes American evangelicals and gun politics alike (Celinska 2007; Emerson and Smith 2001). This overlapping commitment is consequential for gun attitudes and related policy preferences, though this connection can be disrupted by in-group elites. The individualistic priorities associated with both evangelical Christians and gun politics in the United States are not easily extended to other groups. As Celinska (2007) notes, "gun ownership and the values of individualism have been bound tightly together throughout American history" (230). Moreover, other Christian religious traditions, such as mainline Protestants and Catholics tend to place the collective needs of a community over those of the individual (Wuthnow 1999), suggesting it is evangelicalism that has a distinctive relationship with guns in the United States, rather than the Christian tradition generally; a suggestion my analysis confirms.

Political science has yet to substantively account for the role of religion, and especially religious tradition, in gun politics. The literature could benefit from a widespread quantitative approach that accounts for religion in both the formation of gun policy attitudes and the gun policy process itself. My dissertation is noteworthy as it fulfills this need using more precise methods that permits more generalizable results than current scholarship allows for.

The distinctiveness of these findings holds important implications for politics as well. Gun policy is a source of political division in the United States (Lopez 2019). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of gun attitudes is an essential task when observing the political landscape today. Polls consistently show that the majority of Americans support limiting gun ownership in some way, yet Congress has not passed a major gun-control law in over 20 years (Phillips 2019). Consider that both evangelicals and gun owners are among the most highly

participatory and political relevant groups in United States politics (Hertzke et al. 2018; Joslyn 2020). These groups attract significant attention from decisionmakers in the United States and therefore, can have an outsized influence on the policy process, especially in the realm of gun politics. It therefore becomes highly significant to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and implications of religions entanglement with guns in America, as well as the conditions under which this alliance may change. My dissertation serves to strengthen our understanding of this relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, there are limitations to the studies I present here. Chief among them is the measurement of evangelicalism throughout the dissertation. A more systematic analysis could include more traditional and robust religion measures that account for a fuller breadth of religious denominations. Additionally, while religiosity variables were available to me, I could not measure that varying strengths of a distinct evangelical identity through such measures as belongingness, linked fate, or perceptions of threat or discrimination. Other researchers should consider including these measures in future research examining the role of religion in gun politics.

In my investigation of gun owner identity, I am limited by sample size. Only 443 individuals identified as gun owners and answered questions about gun owner identity. At just under 30% of the sample, the representation of gun owners in the sample is similar to what we observe in the U.S. population. However, this sample size impacts the statistical power of my models. A larger overall survey sample would have allowed me to better assess the nuances of

the relationship between evangelicalism, gun owner identity, and gun attitudes in the United States.

Moreover, in my discussion of the impact of religious elite messaging on gun regulation attitudes, I was not able to test additional components that may matter when assessing the ability to change the opinions of evangelicals. For example, do certain characterizations of the message deliverer matter, such as their race, gender, or age? Could out-group members successfully move opinion if the message was still religious in nature? Other scholars could consider the impact of different messages and messengers in the future research exploring the capability of religious elites to move public attitudes – especially attitudes relating to contentious policy areas, like gun policy.

My study of policy diffusion included limitations that ought to be considered as well. First, my analysis is limited to logistic regression, which does not account for some of the statistical problems associated with pooled data over time and space, as some methodological techniques are able to. Second, and importantly, my analysis is limited to the years 2005-2016 due to data restrictions. The State Policy Project has not released the state-level data necessary for a significant piece of my analysis since 2016; specifically, I am not able to fully account for the various internal determinants that may matter for Stand Your Ground adoption. Several states have adopted SYG legislation since 2016, but they are not included in my analysis and therefore the dynamics associated with their adoption cannot be measured. Future scholarship ought to account for more recent years.

My dissertation investigates the increasing connection between guns and religion and argues that there is something distinct about the American evangelical experience that impacts

how evangelicals think about guns and gun policy in the United States. I believe this project takes an important step in understanding the role of religion in the development of gun attitudes and the passage of gun policy. Evangelicals especially play an important role in understanding American gun politics and the literature ought to consider them more substantially in this subfield.

Appendix

Figure 8.1

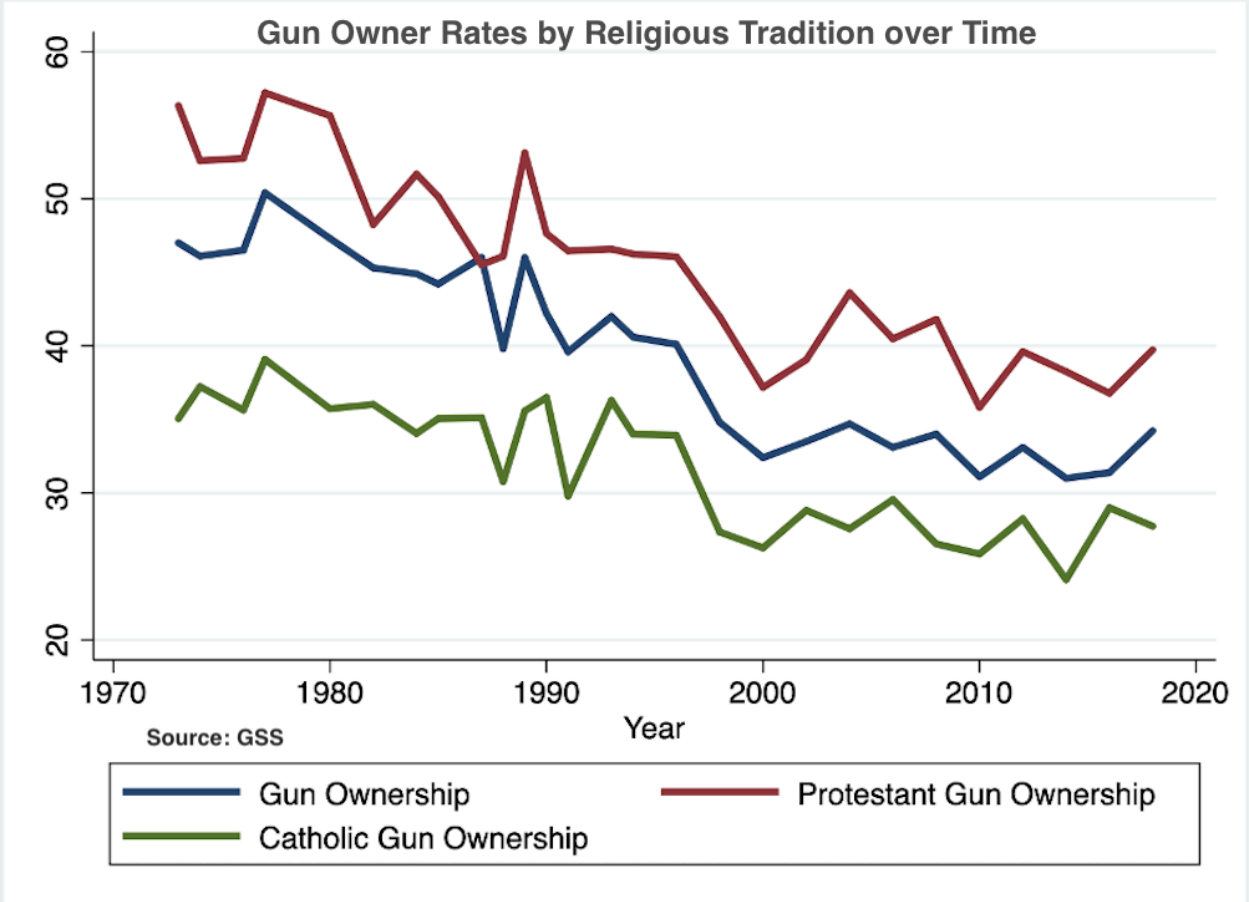


Figure 1.9

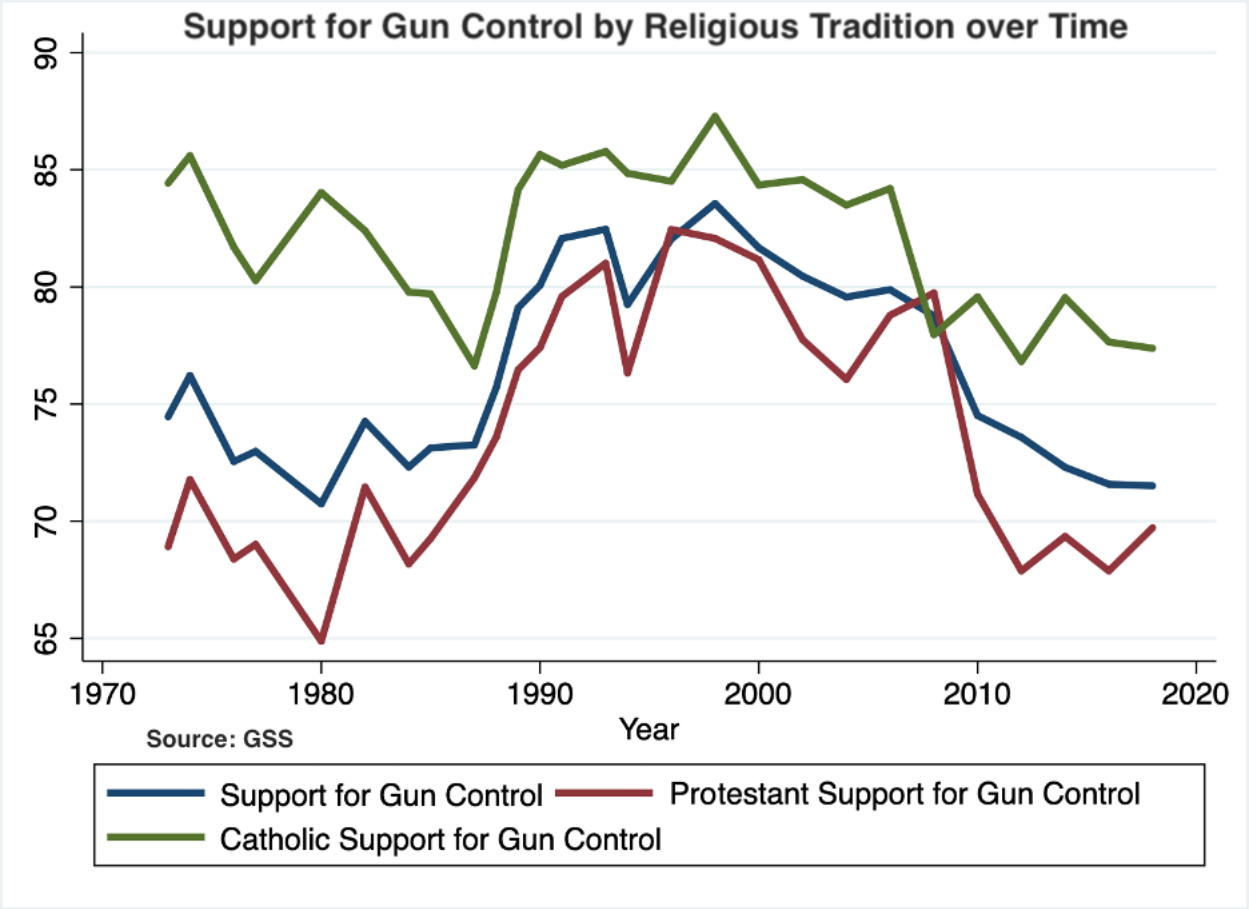

Support for Gun Control by Religious Tradition over Time
90
85
80
75
70
65
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010
2020
Year
Source: GSS
Support for Gun Control
Protestant Support for Gun Control
Catholic Support for Gun Control

Figure 2.1

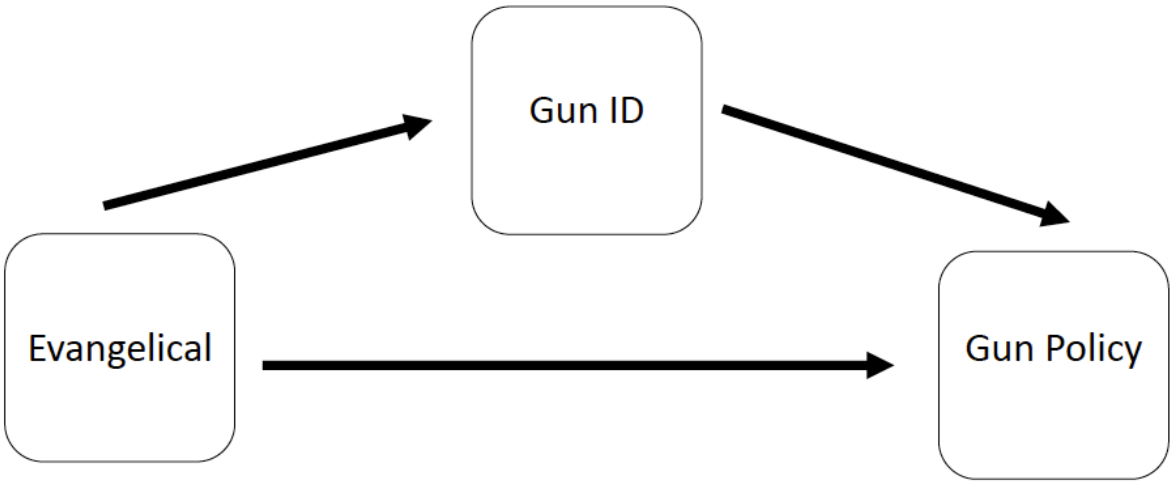


Figure 2.2

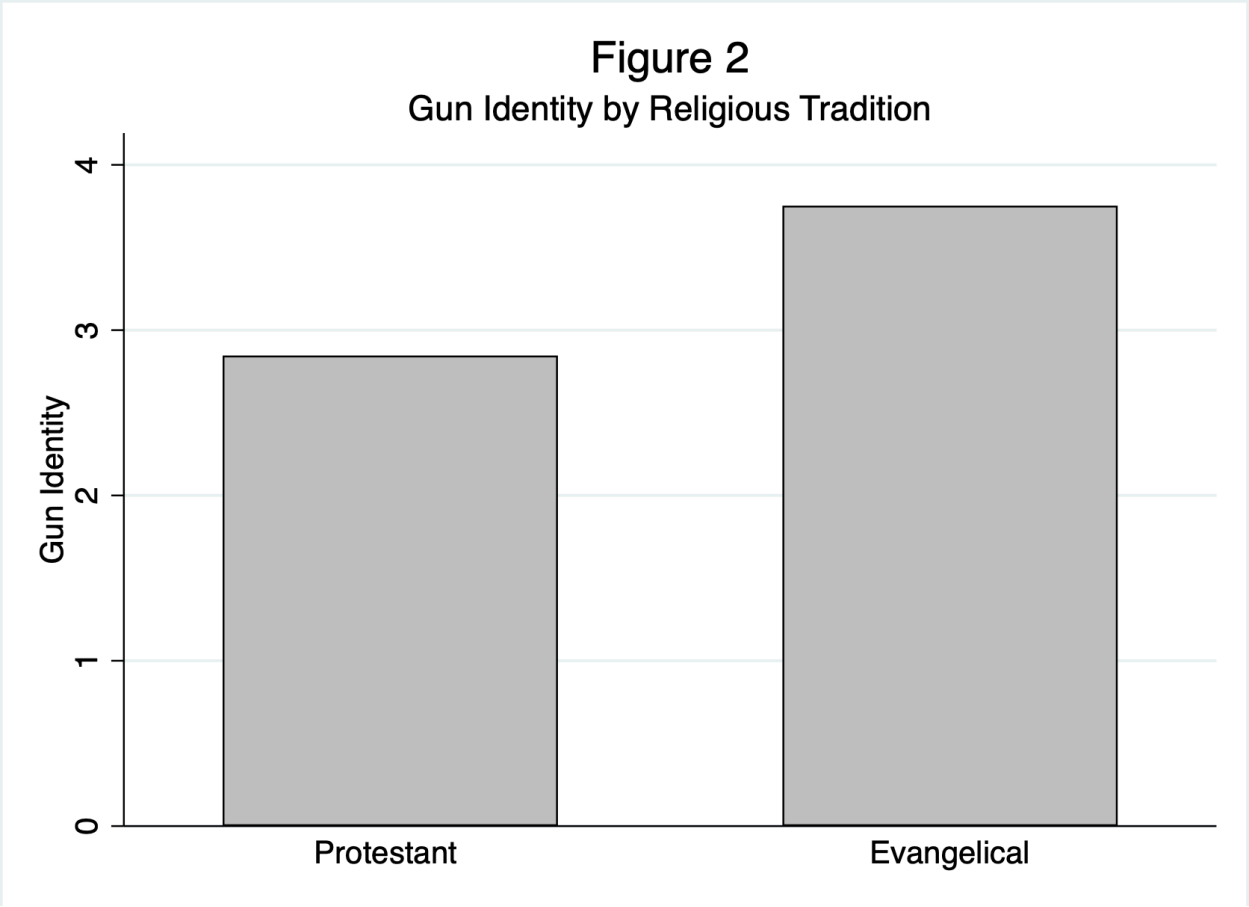


Figure 2
Gun Identity by Religious Tradition
Gun Identity
0
1
2
3
4
Protestant
Evangelical

Table 2. 4

Table 1: Religious Identity and Gun Owner Identity

	(1) Gun Owner ID	(2) Gun Owner ID
Protestant	0.111	
	(0.48)	
Evangelical		0.797***
		(3.53)
Church Attendance	0.213***	0.123*
	(3.70)	(1.97)
Non-White	0.519*	0.547*
	(2.04)	(2.14)
Female	-0.472*	-0.490*
	(-2.26)	(-2.35)
Age	-0.0420***	-0.0397***
	(-5.88)	(-5.92)
Income	-0.00179	0.0100
	(-0.04)	(0.20)
Education	-0.107	-0.0942
	(-1.37)	(-1.21)
Party ID Scale	0.215***	0.209***
	(4.10)	(3.94)
Ideology	0.0360	0.0279
	(0.54)	(0.42)
cut1	-2.052***	-1.926***
	(-3.57)	(-3.42)
cut2	-1.574**	-1.447**
	(-2.76)	(-2.58)
cut3	-0.853	-0.713
	(-1.50)	(-1.28)
cut4	0.122	0.294
	(0.21)	(0.53)
N	379	379

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*M*odel: Ordered Logistic Regression

Table 2. 5

Table 2: Evangelicalism as a Predictor of Gun Owner Identity Measures

	(1) Reflects Who I Am	(2) Part of my Self-ImAge	(3) Face Discrimination	(4) Linked Fate
Evangelical	0.611**	0.480*	0.371^{+}	0.366^{+}
	(2.88)	(2.29)	(1.64)	(1.65)
Church Attendance	0.177**	0.271***	0.150*	0.191**
	(2.99)	(4.55)	(2.41)	(3.06)
Non-White	0.132	0.177	-0.505*	0.0650
	(0.55)	(0.74)	(-1.98)	(0.26)
Female	-0.578**	-0.367	-0.437*	-0.394
	(-2.86)	(-1.85)	(-2.09)	(-1.89)
Age	-0.0457***	-0.0390***	-0.0197**	-0.0293***
	(-7.00)	(-6.17)	(-3.08)	(-4.46)
Income	-0.0333	-0.0390	-0.00289	-0.00359
	(-0.72)	(-0.86)	(-0.06)	(-0.07)
Education	-0.0420	-0.000939	-0.101	-0.0340
	(-0.57)	(-0.01)	(-1.33)	(-0.46)
Party ID Scale	0.151**	0.134**	0.247***	0.222***
	(3.16)	(2.78)	(4.84)	(4.27)
Ideology	0.0563	-0.0319	0.159*	0.0471
	(0.91)	(-0.52)	(2.47)	(0.72)
cut1	-2.783***	-2.135***	-1.417*	-1.757**
	(-4.99)	(-3.94)	(-2.56)	(-3.12)
cut2	-1.947***	-1.434**	-0.0962	-0.273
	(-3.54)	(-2.68)	(-0.18)	(-0.49)
cut3	-1.527**	-0.923	1.672**	1.318*
	(-2.80)	(-1.73)	(3.02)	(2.34)
cut4	-0.592	0.0105		
	(-1.10)	(0.02)		
cut5	0.180	0.770		
	(0.33)	(1.44)		
cut6	0.949	1.421**		
	(1.74)	(2.63)		
N	379	379	377	379

t statistics in parentheses

$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Model: Ordered Logistic Regression

Table 2.6

Table 3: Evangelicalism, Gun Owner Identity, and Gun Policy Attitudes

	(1) Gun Policy	(2) Gun Policy	(3) Gun Policy	(4) Gun Policy
Evangelical	-0.239*		0.208	0.437
	(-1.94)		(0.94)	(0.82)
Gun Owner Identity		-0.173**	-0.186**	-0.165*
		(-2.62)	(-2.75)	(-2.02)
Gun Owner ID x Evangelical				-0.063
				(-0.48)
Church Attendance	-0.0717*	-0.0433	-0.0681	-0.071
	(-2.16)	(-0.80)	(-1.14)	(-1.17)
Non-White	-0.0375	-0.0259	-0.00676	-0.000588
	(-0.29)	(-0.11)	(-0.03)	(0.00)
Female	0.546***	0.321	0.310	0.304
	(4.98)	(1.58)	(1.53)	(1.49)
Age	0.0298***	0.0233***	0.0233***	0.0229**
	(8.78)	(3.49)	(3.49)	(3.40)
Income	0.00605	-0.0578	-0.0537	-0.0533
	(0.26)	(-1.21)	(-1.12)	(-1.11)
Education	0.133***	0.197**	0.200**	0.200**
	(3.39)	(2.64)	(2.67)	(2.68)
Party ID Scale	-0.140***	-0.101*	-0.101*	-0.101*
	(-4.85)	(-2.05)	(-2.05)	(-2.05)
Ideology	-0.167***	-0.159**	-0.159**	-0.162**
	(-4.52)	(-2.59)	(-2.60)	(-2.63)
cut1	-2.836***	-3.793***	-3.804***	-3.779***
	(-9.26)	(-5.68)	(-5.69)	(-5.64)
cut2	-2.226***	-2.734***	-2.747***	-2.722***
	(-7.68)	(-4.43)	(-4.44)	(-4.39)
cut3	-1.702***	-2.261***	-2.276***	-2.250***
	(-6.05)	(-3.73)	(-3.75)	(-3.69)
cut4	-1.009***	-1.481*	-1.494*	-1.469*
	(-3.66)	(-2.49)	(-2.51)	(-2.46)
cut5	-0.372	-0.661	-0.672	-0.647
	(-1.36)	(-1.12)	(-1.14)	(-1.09)
cut6	0.176	0.104	0.0951	0.121
	(0.64)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.20)
cut7	0.899**	0.899	0.892	0.918
	(3.26)	(1.51)	(1.50)	(1.54)
N	1429	379	379	379

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*M*odel: Ordered Logistic Regression

Table 3. 4

Table 1: Two-Sample T-Test with Equal Variance

	Combined Observations	t	p-value
Treatment 1	1,044	-0.3266	0.7441
Treatment 2	1,763	-0.9095	0.3632

*D*ependent Variable: Gun Policy Attitudes

*E*ach Treatment Compared to its Appropriate Control Group

Table 3.5

Table 2: Two-Way Anova

	(Treatment 1) Pro Gun Rights	(Treatment 2) Pro Gun Regulation
Evangelical	-0.194***	-0.505***
	(-1.07)	(-4.63)
Treatment	0.188	-0.069
	(1.34)	(-0.86)
Evangelical x Treatment	-0.456^{+}	0.489***
	(-1.80)	(3.20)
N	1,044	1,763

*D*ependent Variable: Gun Policy Attitudes

t statistics in parentheses

$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 3.10

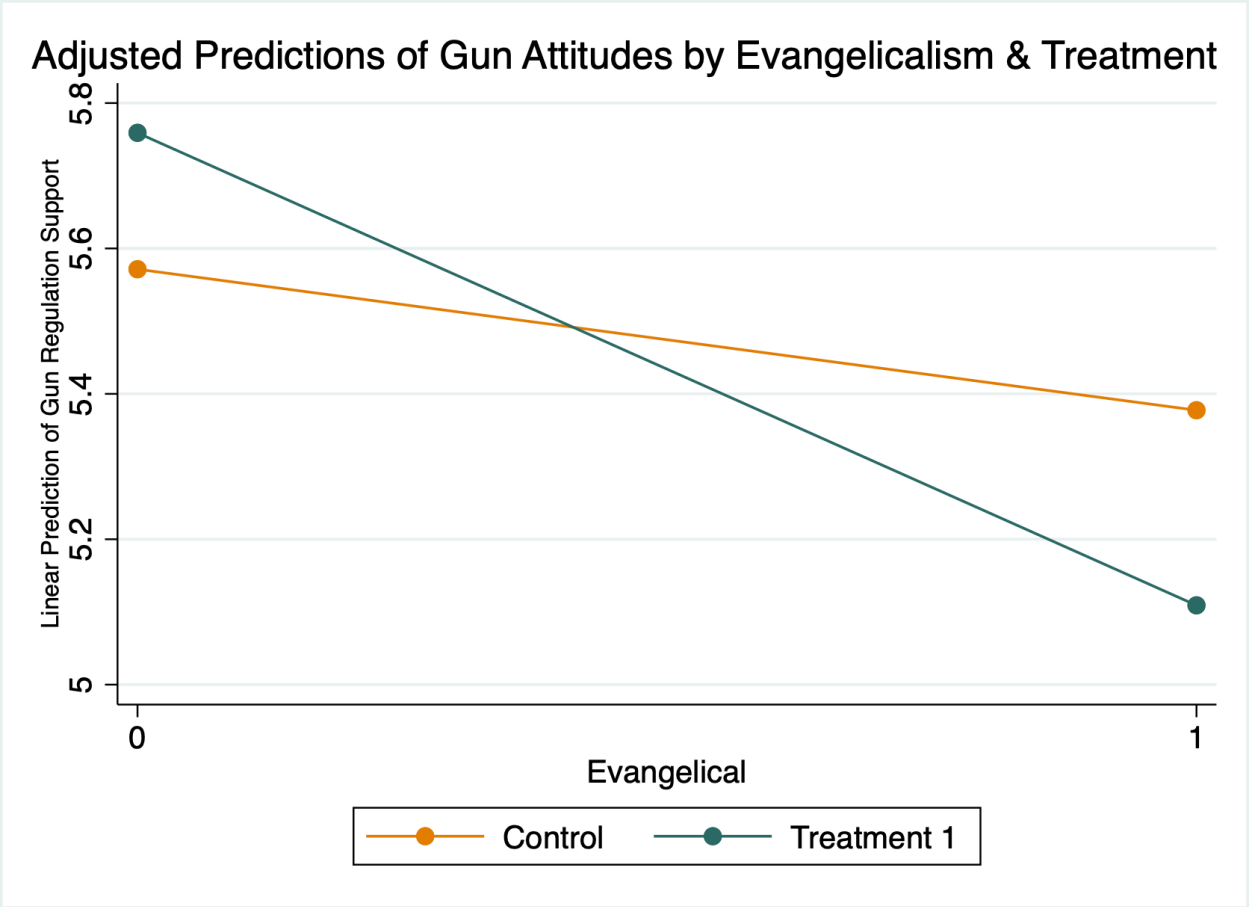

Adjusted Predictions of Gun Attitudes by Evangelicalism & Treatment
Linear Prediction of Gun Regulation Support
5
5.2
5.4
5.6
5.8
0
1
Evangelical
Control
Treatment 1

Figure 3.11

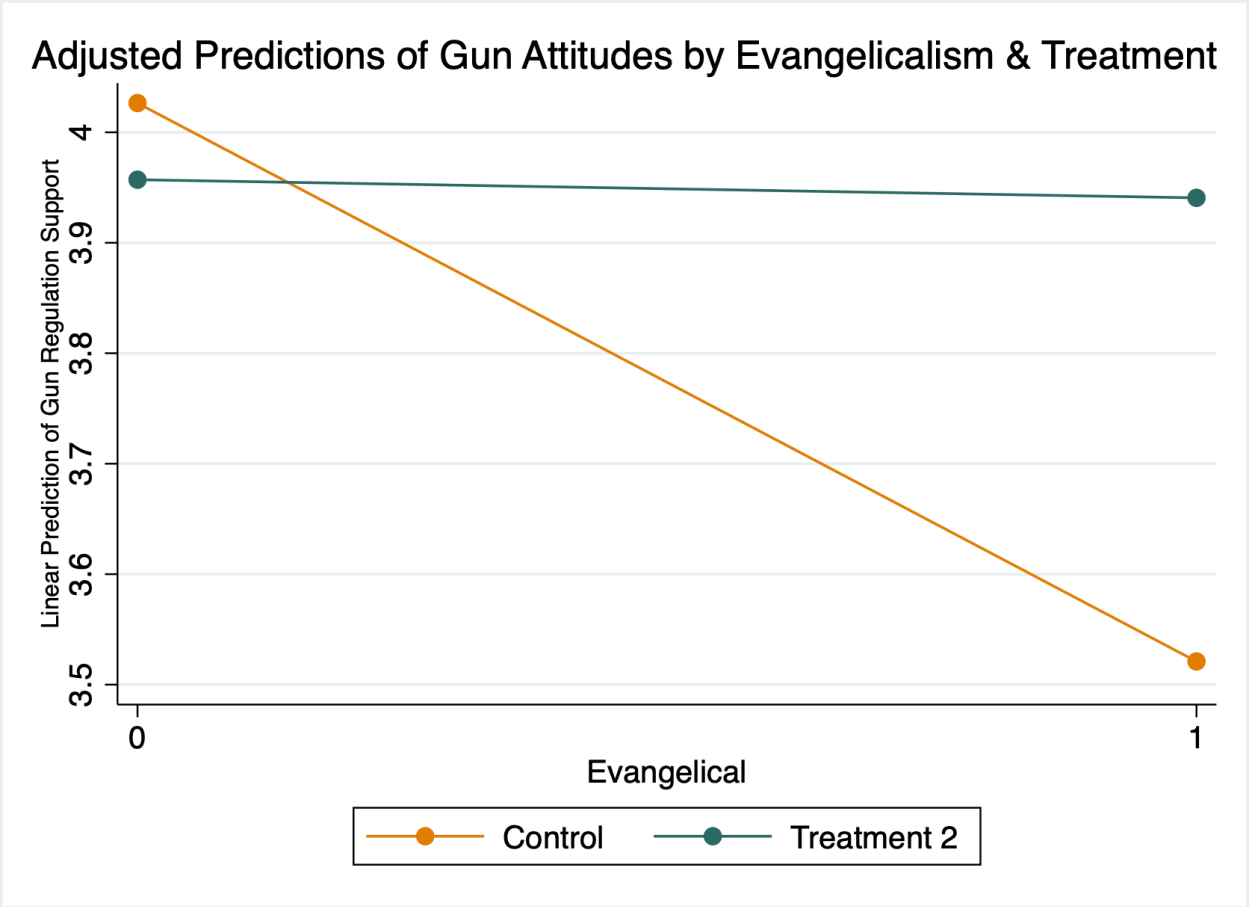

Adjusted Predictions of Gun Attitudes by Evangelicalism & Treatment
Linear Prediction of Gun Regulation Support
3.5
3.6
3.7
3.8
3.9
4
0
1
Evangelical
Control
Treatment 2

Table 3.6

Table 3: Experimental Effects on Gun Policy Attitudes

	Model 1 Treatment 1	Model 2 Treatment 2
Treatment	0.061	-0.53
	(0.39)	(-1.38)
Evangelical	-0.186	-0.526***
	(-1.01)	(-3.56)
Treatment x Evangelical	-0.408^{+}	0.680***
	(-1.74)	(3.38)
White	0.000863	0.242*
	(0.01)	(2.08)
Female	0.496***	0.568***
	(3.78)	(5.78)
Age	0.0309***	0.0307***
	(7.77)	(9.13)
Income	-0.0154	0.0207
	(-0.53)	(1.03)
Education	0.108*	0.0488
	(2.29)	(1.32)
Partisanship	-0.204***	-0.221***
	(-6.95)	(-10.05)
N	954	1749

t statistics in parentheses

$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 3.12

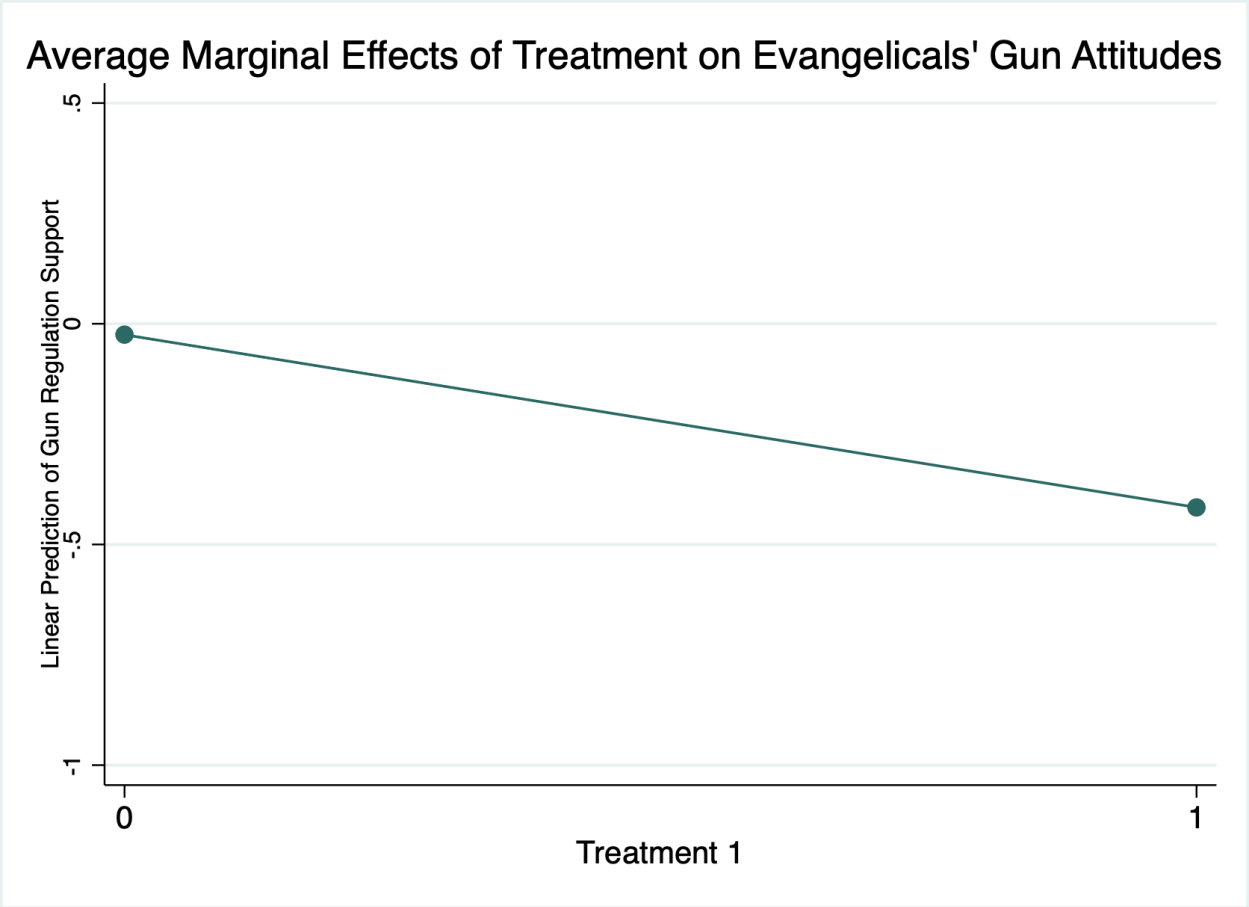

Average Marginal Effects of Treatment on Evangelicals' Gun Attitudes
Linear Prediction of Gun Regulation Support
.5
0
-.5
-1
0
1
Treatment 1

Figure 3.13

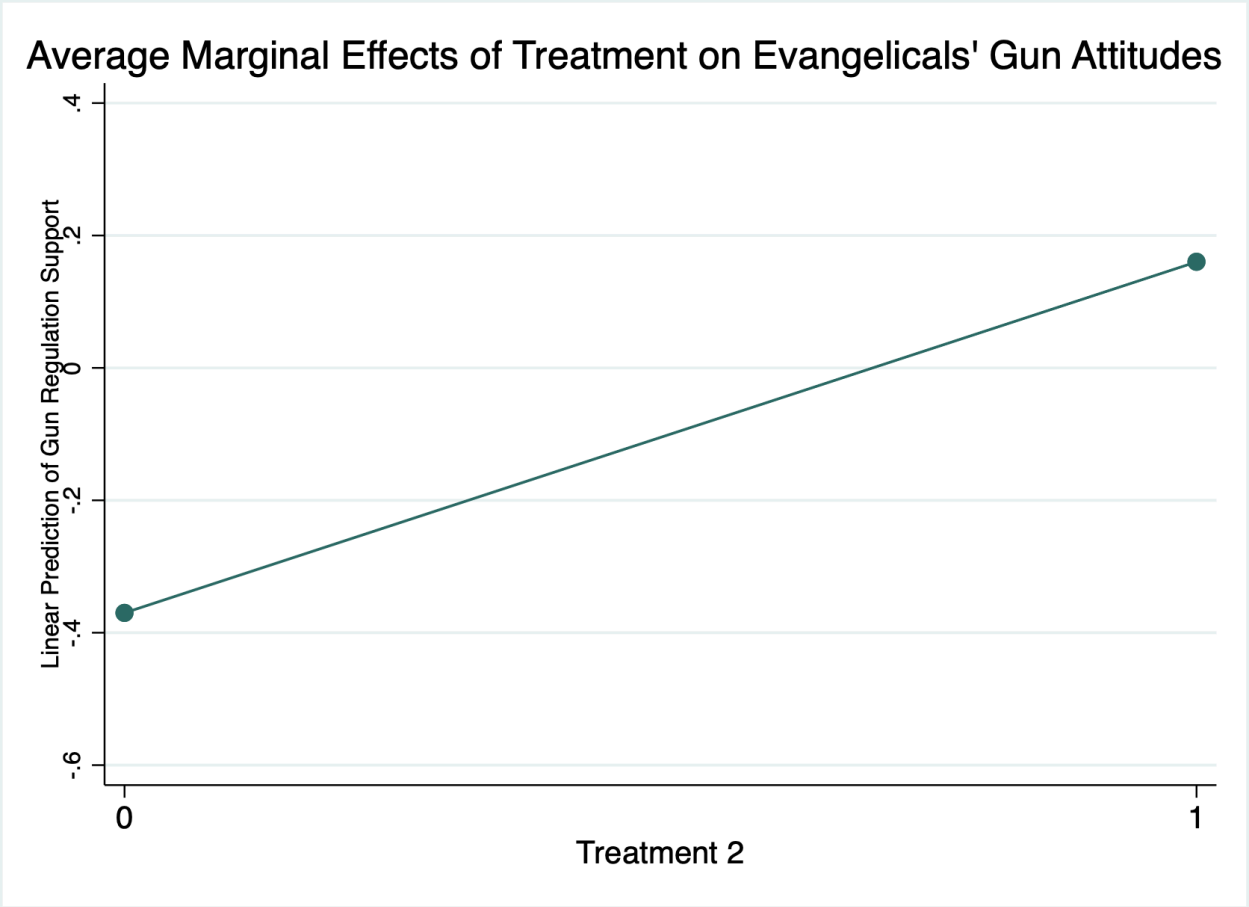

Average Marginal Effects of Treatment on Evangelicals' Gun Attitudes
Linear Prediction of Gun Regulation Support
-.6
-.4
-.2
0
.2
.4
0
1
Treatment 2

Figure 4.14: Evangelical Population and Adoption of Stand Your Ground Laws

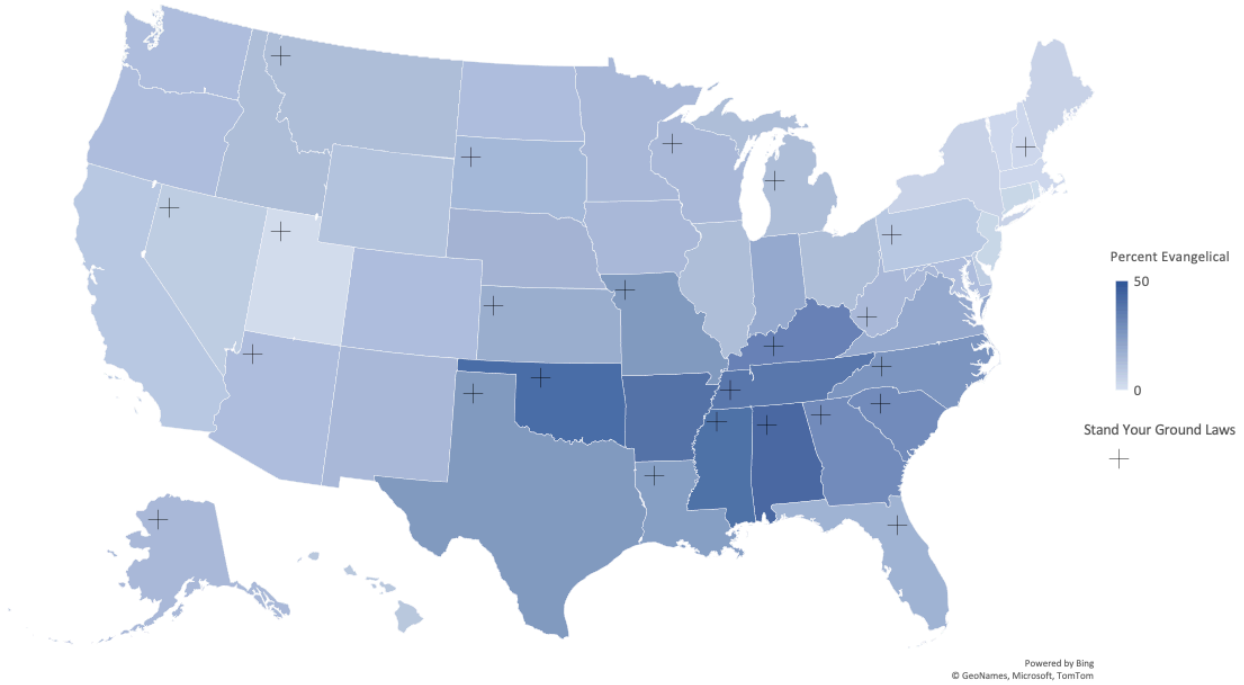


Table 4.3

Table 1: Stand Your Ground: Bivariate Correlations

	(1) SYG
Evangelical Population	0.3087***
Gun Owner Population	0.1264**
White Population	-0.0857
Neighbor SYG Adoption	-0.0084
West	-0.0241
Midwest	-0.0771
Northeast	-0.0802
South	0.2025***
Violent Crime Rate	0.1250*
Citizen Ideology	-0.1634***
Government Ideology	-0.1544***

*P*earson Correlation Coefficients Reported

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4.4

Table 2: Stand Your Ground Adoption

	Model 1	Model 2
Evangelical Population		0.0594*
		(1.97)
Gun Owner Population		5.793*
		(2.05)
White Population	-0.00313	-0.00592
	(-0.31)	(-0.34)
Neighbor SYG Adoption	-0.972	-1.209
	(-1.02)	(-1.25)
South: Regional Reference		
West	-1.634**	-2.241**
	(-2.61)	(-2.78)
Midwest	-1.983*	-1.358
	(-2.41)	(-1.53)
Northeast	-0.441	0.752
	(-0.36)	(0.57)
Violent Crime Rate	0.00223	0.00179
	(1.07)	(0.91)
Citizen Ideology	-0.0444	0.0000521
	(-1.65)	(0.00)
Government Ideology	-0.0554	-0.0775*
	(-1.88)	(-2.34)
N	373	343

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

*D*ependent Variable: Stand Your Ground Adoption

*M*odel: Logistic Regression

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