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1

Introduction

In April 2015, the annual meeting of the National Rifle Association brought nearly eighty thousand gun rights supporters to Nashville, Tennessee. The three-day conference offered seminars on topics ranging from home defense to doomsday survivalism planning to cooking with wild game, and a massive exhibit hall featured the latest firearms and firearms accessories (customized holsters, specialized apparel, and so on), along with live product demonstrations and a chance to meet celebrities like controversial rock star—and NRA board member—Ted Nugent. There was a prayer breakfast, a family-friendly indoor shooting range, and free country music concerts every afternoon.¹

Yet the most prominent event of all was the Leadership Forum hosted by the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action (NRA-ILA), which since 1975 has served as the organization's primary political advocacy and lobbying branch. The forum featured speeches by more than ten Republican presidential hopefuls, including Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, and, of course, Donald Trump. Taking place long before the 2016 primaries began, the event was clearly an important part of the GOP's so-called invisible primary—the very early, informal jockeying that occurs among each

party's presidential aspirants as they attempt to court elites, donors, activists, and the party faithful.²

Accordingly, the speakers not only touted their pro-gun credentials, but also spoke to their broader conservative beliefs across a range of issues, harshly criticized the Obama Administration, and warned of the specter of a Hillary Clinton presidency. Many took hawkish stances on terrorism and mocked President Obama's reluctance to use the term "radical Islam";³ Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, for example, said that he wanted "a Commander-in-Chief who will look the American people in the eye and say that radical Islamic terrorism is a threat and we're going to do something about it."⁴ Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, speaking in support of businesses that refused service to same-sex couples on religious grounds, warned that if "Hollywood liberals and editorial columnists" could "conspire to crush the First Amendment, it won't be long before they join forces again to come after the Second Amendment."⁵ Criticisms of Obamacare were also common, as was support for restrictive immigration policies. Texas Senator Ted Cruz, touting his legislative record, challenged voters to ask other Republican candidates, "When have you stood up and fought to stop Obamacare? . . . When have you stood up and fought to stop the president's illegal and unconstitutional executive amnesty?"⁶

For future President Donald Trump, the appearance previewed not just the themes but the rhetorical style that would characterize his campaign. He made populist appeals against free trade while criticizing the negotiation skills of Obama Administration officials. He opined that Vladimir Putin and ISIS had no respect for President Obama, and went on to say that Obama was "just not a good person."⁷ Trump also emphasized the threat posed by illegal immigration, calling the United States' border with Mexico "a sieve" and saying that "it's not what the country's all about. . . . Millions of people coming in illegally. We've gotta stop it at the border and we have to stop it fast."

The 2015 meeting stood in stark contrast to the organization's first annual membership convention. Held in 1948—seventy-seven years after the association was founded—the inaugural event brought

around seven hundred NRA members to the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC, for what it described as a “4-day gunner’s get-together.” General Jacob L. Devers from the US Army kicked things off with a welcome address in which he emphasized the importance of rifle training for national defense and thanked the NRA for its assistance during World War II. In keeping with the association’s focus on marksmanship, subsequent sessions covered competitive shooting, management of local gun clubs, and recruitment of “junior riflemen.” Politics were not absent from the event—NRA Executive Director C. B. Lister led a session on “The Legislative Picture” to explain what the organization was doing to combat gun control laws and to encourage attendees to write personalized pro-gun letters to politicians and newspaper editors—but politicians were. No presidential aspirants made an appearance, and there was no mention of political parties.⁸

Barry Goldwater famously said that politicians should “go hunting where the ducks are” while seeking votes.⁹ For Republican candidates in the twenty-first century, the NRA—which reports having five million members—is unquestionably important hunting grounds. But, as the scene from its 1948 meeting suggests, this was not always the case. As we will see, NRA supporters have participated in politics at unusually high rates for a long time, consistently—and typically successfully—opposing gun regulations since as early as the 1930s. Yet, despite this durable political engagement, it has taken the NRA a long time to cultivate the powerful conservative constituency that supports its agenda today and that helped carry Donald Trump into the White House in 2016. Why are gun rights supporters so politically active—and when and how did they come to occupy such an important place in the Republican Party? How has their behavior shaped gun policy, and, crucially, what role has the NRA played in all this?

These are the questions this book seeks to answer. I contend that the NRA has played a central role in driving the political outlooks and political activity of its supporters—activity that has had both direct and indirect influence on federal gun policy in the United States.¹⁰ Even from its earliest days as a relatively small organization

dedicated to marksmanship, competitive shooting, and military preparedness, the NRA cultivated a distinct worldview around guns—framing gun ownership as an *identity* that was tied to a broader, gun-centric political *ideology*—and mobilized its members into political action on behalf of its agenda. When the time was right, it joined forces with the Republican Party and eventually became the right-wing political juggernaut that it is today. How a group can construct an identity and an ideology, and what happens when it aligns these behind a single party: that’s the story of the NRA, and the story this book aims to tell.

The Power of the NRA

The focus of this book is on the political power of the NRA: What is the source of its power? How does it operate? How has it shaped gun policy and the broader political system?

Central as it is to politics, power can be difficult to pinpoint. We may have a general sense that certain groups are powerful because the observed political or economic environment seems to reflect their preferences and interests; weak gun regulations, for instance, suggest that the NRA is powerful, just as high levels of economic inequality suggest that big businesses and wealthy individuals have power. However, even when we have good reason to suspect that particular groups are powerful, the ultimate *source* of a group’s power isn’t always easy to determine. From where, exactly, does a group like the NRA derive influence? Similarly, it can be challenging to identify the *forms* a group’s power takes. How, exactly, do business groups translate their resources into preferred political outcomes (such as the election of industry-friendly politicians and the adoption of industry-friendly regulations)? This difficulty is reflected in a lacuna in the field of political science, which acknowledges the importance of power but has struggled to explain how groups can build and use it over time.¹¹

The power of the NRA—although widely acknowledged by scholars and observers alike—is no exception to this challenge. Some politicians and commentators assert that financial resources—taking

the form of outsized campaign contributions and expensive lobbying efforts—are the primary source of its influence. Others—focusing on financial resources in a different way—argue that the NRA’s true purpose is to serve as a front for firearms manufacturers who are interested in weakening gun laws in order to boost sales; these arguments typically don’t specify how, exactly, the money of gun manufacturers is translated into policy change, but they imply that financial resources play a central role. In short, the NRA—which operates in a political system that many Americans believe is dominated by large corporations and wealthy elites¹²—is seen by some as another example of the power of money.

Yet these financially focused arguments cannot fully—or even mostly—explain the NRA’s influence within American politics.¹³ NRA members are mostly working-class individuals, not financial elites.¹⁴ And although the NRA does have an ongoing relationship with manufacturers, this relationship is neither a defining characteristic of the group nor a sufficient explanation of its political power. For one thing, the NRA’s incentives are not always aligned with those of gun manufacturers. Given their interest in selling *new* firearms, manufacturers have no reason to oppose—and actually have good reason to support—laws that make it more difficult for individuals to sell existing guns to one another. These sorts of laws, however, are strongly opposed by the NRA. Moreover, there is evidence that the NRA can actually overpower manufacturers when disagreement exists. For example, when Smith & Wesson made an agreement with the Clinton Administration in 2000 to alter its products and sales processes to improve safety, the NRA initiated a crippling boycott against the company: its production declined by over 40 percent in just two years.¹⁵ So while manufacturers may (and do) still contribute to the NRA, this suggests that the NRA controls the relationship and is not a tool of the industry.

Moreover, the NRA’s spending does not stand out: groups that make comparable campaign contributions (e.g., environmental groups like the League of Conservation Voters and labor unions like the Service Employees International Union) do not appear to have influence comparable to the NRA’s, while groups that do appear to

have comparable influence (e.g., business groups like the Chamber of Commerce) spend much more money than the NRA on lobbying. Further, despite periods when gun regulation advocates have outspent the NRA—including in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre, when billionaire Michael Bloomberg put his full financial weight behind gun control—there have been no major shifts in federal gun policy (which remains, as we will see below, far more lax than in any other similarly developed nation).¹⁶ And finally, there is compelling evidence that the NRA successfully persuaded policymakers on gun policy long before it began spending substantial sums on politics. Taken together, all this suggests that other factors besides money are in play.¹⁷

In this book, I will look beyond the NRA's use of financial resources and turn instead to what I describe as *ideational* resources: the identity and ideology it cultivates among its members, which have enabled it to build an active, engaged, and powerful constituency. From existing accounts of important gun control policy battles, we know that a crucial aspect of the NRA's influence is its ability to translate the political intensity of its supporters into influence over policy. Gun rights supporters—especially NRA members and those whose status as gun owners is an important part of their personal identity—are very politically active,¹⁸ both generally and relative to individuals who support gun control: they're more likely to write letters or donate money on behalf of their cause,¹⁹ more likely to participate in electoral campaigns,²⁰ and more likely to join advocacy organizations like the NRA.²¹ Further, a remarkable 71 percent of individuals who favor less restrictive gun laws reported in 2014 that they are unwilling to ever vote for political candidates who support gun control; among those who favor stricter laws, only 34 percent said that they are unwilling to vote for candidates who do not share their gun preferences.²²

As the following chapters will demonstrate, there is compelling evidence that this engagement gap has had major effects on gun control policy. As early as the 1930s, the NRA helped thwart some of the first federal attempts at gun control by leading a letter writing campaign against proposed gun regulations.²³ This became a favored

strategy, and an effective one; another campaign in the mid-1960s against strong gun control proposals being debated in Congress generated such a flood of mail that numerous policymakers credited the letters with the bill's defeat.²⁴ Privately, politicians have acknowledged that pressure from gun owning constituents has altered their behavior as policymakers (with one senator, for example, saying that he'd "rather be a deer in hunting season than a politician who has run afoul of the NRA crowd"²⁵); these accounts are supported by quantitative analyses demonstrating how an "intense minority" on gun control has caused elected officials to vote against the will of an "apathetic majority."²⁶

Indeed, part of what makes the NRA's success so striking is the extent to which the American public favors new gun regulations. Americans have voiced support for gun control—both in the abstract and in terms of specific policy measures—since the advent of public opinion polling.²⁷ In what appears to be the earliest polling data on guns, Gallup found in 1938 that 79 percent of Americans favored gun control. Between that year and 1972, many polls were conducted by Gallup and Harris; not one found that less than 66 percent of Americans favored gun control, with support peaking in 1969 at 84 percent.²⁸ More recent polling has continued to demonstrate strong support for gun control policies: a 2017 Pew poll found that 84 percent of Americans support mandatory background checks for all gun sales, 89 percent support laws to prevent the mentally ill from purchasing guns, 71 percent support a federal database to track gun sales, and 68 percent support a ban on "assault" weapons.²⁹

These high levels of support for gun control are perhaps unsurprising given the state of gun violence in the United States. Horrific, high-profile mass shootings are unfortunately neither new nor rare phenomena. The Labor Day 1949 murder of thirteen people in Camden, New Jersey, is considered the first mass shooting in US history,³⁰ and a shooting at the University of Texas at Austin in 1966 took the lives of sixteen individuals. Although not new, mass shootings have become even more deadly in recent years; the 2016 shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando—in which forty-nine people were murdered and fifty-three injured—was the deadliest

in US history until the fall 2017 Las Vegas concert shooting, which claimed the lives of fifty-eight victims and caused injuries to hundreds of others.

Moreover, while mass shootings command the greatest media attention, they are actually only a small part of the US gun violence story. Between the beginning of 2001—the year of the infamous September 11th terrorist attacks—and the end of 2016, guns were used to kill over 500,000 Americans.³¹ In that same timespan, terrorist attacks—which, unlike episodes of gun violence, almost always lead to swift government action—resulted in the deaths of around 3,200.³² Guns are involved in the deaths of more than 30,000 Americans annually—a number that rose to nearly 40,000 in 2017.³³ As Nicholas Kristof pointed out in 2015, more Americans have died from guns since 1970 than in all US wars combined.³⁴

Put in comparative perspective, the United States is an anomaly. It was the site of 31 percent of the world's mass shootings between 1966 and 2012, despite comprising only 5 percent of the world's population.³⁵ Moreover, the US rate of gun-related deaths—at over 10 per 100,000 people as of 2016—is exceptional among advanced countries; nearby Canada, for example, had only 2.1 gun deaths per 100,000 in 2016, Japan had just 0.2, the United Kingdom had 0.3, Switzerland (which has a high rate of gun ownership) had 2.8, and France 2.7. Along with Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela, the United States is among six countries that accounted for slightly more than half of the world's gun-related deaths in 2016.³⁶

One factor that separates the United States from most other industrialized countries is the lack of strong legal restrictions on the ownership and use of guns. Mandatory, universal background checks—which the United States does not require—are very common throughout the world. Some countries outright ban the private ownership of handguns. Federal licensing is also common, with many countries requiring individuals to take a safety course to obtain a license. Although the purpose of this book is not to determine the effectiveness of gun regulations, the nearly inverse relationship that

exists between a country's level of gun ownership and its rate of gun violence suggests that gun control works.³⁷

And not only does the United States lack restrictions on firearms that are popular around the world, it has also witnessed the proliferation of laws that have in various ways weakened prior regulations. In fact, contrary to the claims of gun rights advocates, the United States had strong state level gun regulations for most of its history—regulations that have been eroded in recent decades by laws explicitly protecting and expanding gun rights. Some form of stand-your-ground laws—which, with slight differences across jurisdictions, allow individuals to use deadly force to defend themselves with no duty to retreat—now exist in thirty-four states as of early 2020. Similarly, individuals are increasingly allowed to carry concealed firearms; in sixteen states (as of early 2020), gun owners are not even required to obtain a permit to do so, and in most other states, it is easy for anyone who legally owns a handgun to get a permit.³⁸

These factors—broad public support for gun control, high rates of gun-related deaths, and the relative weakness of existing US laws—underscore the high stakes of the gun debate, make the NRA's long-term political success all the more notable, and suggest that the US policy landscape would be substantially different in a world without the NRA. Understanding how the NRA has evolved over time is essential to understanding the success of its political strategies; I offer a brief sketch below, and many more details in the chapters to come.

A Very Brief History of the NRA

The NRA was founded in 1871 by military officials who hoped to promote rifle shooting and marksmanship as a form of war preparedness. Chartered in New York—the home of one of its cofounders, Captain George Wingate—the NRA enjoyed some initial success. The popularity of shooting matches enabled the organization to gain members, and its founders' connections with public officials helped it earn a subsidy from the state government. This popularity, however, eventually faded, as did political support in New York for

marksmanship training.³⁹ By the turn of the twentieth century, the NRA was very small and, after losing its subsidy, nearly defunct.⁴⁰

The organization was reinvigorated, however, during the first two decades of the 1900s—a period in which it became, in its own words, a “quasi-governmental” organization.⁴¹ A group of military officials who were displeased with the shooting skills of American troops in the Spanish-American War sought to create an organization that could offer marksmanship training to civilians; in lieu of a new organization, the NRA—at Wingate’s suggestion—became the vehicle for this renewed effort. President Theodore Roosevelt, himself a gun enthusiast and NRA member, soon urged Congress to establish the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and the Civilian Marksmanship Program. These programs would be closely associated with the NRA and would provide it with federal funds for decades to come.⁴²

Around this same time, the government also established a program that allowed NRA members, exclusively, to purchase surplus military firearms at low prices.⁴³ Another program provided funds for NRA shooting competitions.⁴⁴ These developments—a product of good timing and close relationships with powerful public officials—cemented the NRA’s shooting programs and competitions as “the law of the land.”⁴⁵ The group grew rapidly, benefitting not just from its relationship with the federal government but from the military buildups associated with both world wars. The NRA surpassed ten thousand members by 1924 and fifty thousand by 1940.⁴⁶

Throughout this early period, the NRA and its supporters staunchly opposed gun control laws and actively worked to prevent their passage. Later in the book, I explore both the nature of these efforts and their effects on gun policy during the NRA’s “quasi-governmental phase” (as I’ve termed the organization’s first hundred or so years) through case studies of two periods when new gun laws were debated and, eventually, passed.

The first case focuses on the federal government’s initial attempts at gun control—the National Firearms Act of 1934 and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938—which were spurred by increased crime rates

and the rise of organized criminal syndicates. The case shows that the NRA's development and use of ideational resources—consisting of the identity and ideology discussed earlier—enabled it to substantially weaken both laws prior to their passage, mostly through mass-mobilization campaigns (and the desire of politicians to *avoid* such campaigns by writing bills that aligned with the NRA's views).

After these 1930s battles, gun control mostly left the national agenda for the next two decades. Violent crime rates were down and the country's attention was turned to world affairs. The NRA, meanwhile, continued to expand, maintaining its robust relationship with the federal government and consistently adding additional programs to attract new members. Following World War II, for example, as soldiers returned home with a newfound interest in firearms, many veterans took up hunting as a hobby. Sensing an opportunity—and also hoping to preempt new controls on guns—the NRA developed hunter safety programs. Since their inception in the 1950s, these have been the primary outlets through which outdoorsmen receive training, drawing in millions of participants.⁴⁷ These and similar offerings enabled the organization to surpass one million members by the end of the 1960s.⁴⁸

The 1960s also witnessed the return of gun control to the national agenda in response to surging crime rates and a string of high-profile political assassinations, including those of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. The NRA and its supporters, as they had in the past, fiercely opposed the numerous gun control proposals that were developed in the mid-1960s.

This period of debate—which eventually culminated in the Gun Control Act of 1968—is the second of the two case studies mentioned above. The NRA's efforts to cultivate an identity and ideology among its supporters had continued to build on each other over time, and enabled it to fend off numerous gun control proposals over the course of the 1960s and to then—as it had in the 1930s—substantially weaken the legislation that eventually did pass. In general, the NRA's influence in this early period relied on its ability to mobilize its

members and on the reputation it gained as a result; this reputation caused policymakers—in the hope of avoiding the NRA’s wrath—to give the organization a role in crafting new bills and to develop weaker legislation than they would have otherwise preferred.

Despite the NRA’s political activity throughout its quasi-governmental phase, the organization remained nonpartisan; it did not endorse candidates, rarely mentioned parties when discussing politics, and mostly invited military officials to speak at its events. Gun control was not a cleavage issue dividing Democrats and Republicans at this time, so the NRA lacked a clear home in the party system.

All of this would change, however, starting in the 1970s—a decade of organizational turmoil that ultimately led to a major turning point for the group, ushering it into a new, politically partisan role. This “partisan phase,” as I have termed it, is the one it remains in today.

The shift into this new phase started with fracturing in the NRA’s relationship with the government. Although the NRA had stayed out of partisan politics in the 1960s, its political activism nonetheless made it an increasingly controversial group. As the controversy surrounding it grew, its relationship with the government (and the status of its federal funding) began to deteriorate. As federal funding dried up, the organization had to decide how to move forward.

The conversation about the NRA’s future direction pitted its “old guard”—a group of leaders who favored a nonpartisan approach to politics and resisted additional investments in the organization’s political infrastructure—against its “new guard”—a group of activist members and lower-level leaders who sought to ally with the insurgent New Right conservative movement and take the organization in a more partisan direction. This conflict came to a head at the now-infamous 1977 annual meeting in Cincinnati (discussed further in subsequent chapters) when the new guard staged a dramatic organizational coup and seized control in what has come to be known as the “Revolt at Cincinnati.”

The new guard sent the NRA down a dramatically different path—developing new ways to recruit members, substantially expanding political operations, and, perhaps most importantly, aligning the group with the Republican Party. These changes marked a new chapter in the

NRA's history and eventually resulted in the organization becoming the political force that we observe today. The NRA could still mobilize its members to shape gun policy outcomes, but this mobilizational power was now joined by partisan influence. This has deepened the NRA's power and expanded the forms this power takes.

Later on, I explore the nature of the NRA's influence in this new phase over four additional case studies. The first case—focused on the passage of the Firearm Owners' Protection Act of 1986—demonstrates that the NRA's partisan influence now gave it much more power over the legislative agenda. The law substantially *weakened* existing gun regulations, and that it was on the legislative agenda at all was in part a reward for the electoral support NRA members provided Republicans in the early 1980s. As subsequent chapters show, the bill would not have made it to the floors of Congress without Republican leadership prioritizing it.

The second case considers the debates that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s over what became the Brady Act and Assault Weapons Ban. While the Brady Act of 1993 and the inclusion of a ban on assault weapons in a 1994 crime bill were no doubt legislative losses for the NRA, they were much weaker than gun control advocates had hoped. They could only be passed during a brief window of unified Democratic control of government—and were immediately followed by Democratic losses in the 1994 midterm, which discouraged Democrats from pursuing gun control laws for years afterward. The episode demonstrated how the NRA's position in the Republican Party worked in conjunction with its mobilizational power to hinder the passage of strong gun control laws.

The final two cases pertaining to the NRA's partisan phase examine gun regulation efforts following the Columbine tragedy of 1999 and several prominent gun violence episodes in the 2010s. They document the NRA at the height of its power. Even in the wake of national tragedies, gun control efforts went nowhere. Whereas the 1986 law demonstrated *positive* agenda setting power (i.e., the ability to get something on the legislative agenda), these instances demonstrate strong *negative* agenda setting power. The NRA's Republican allies in Congress have frequently been able to kill gun control before

it's voted on, even when there is tremendous pressure to pursue it. This has enabled the NRA to prevent new gun regulations without even having to launch mass-mobilization campaigns; in these most recent cases, the mere threat of such a campaign has been sufficient to discourage meaningful legislation from being proposed.

Outside of politics, the NRA's partisan phase has seen it balance its newer position as a hardline, partisan political group with its long-standing position as the central player in the US firearms community. This latter status continues to provide the organization ways to recruit new members, raise funds, and—as a result—expand its political base. The NRA continues to oversee shooting sports in the United States, holding over eleven thousand tournaments and fifty national championships per year.⁴⁹ Membership in the NRA is, as one writer involved in the hobby put it, “virtually inevitable for anyone desiring to participate in the target shooting sports.”⁵⁰ Moreover, as state laws legalizing concealed carry have spread across the country, for example, the NRA has positioned itself as the primary—and in many cases the *only*—source for training. More than 75 percent of states with “shall-issue”⁵¹ concealed carry laws require training to obtain a license, and more than 50 percent require training that, in practice, only the NRA can provide.⁵² As a result of its roles in politics and American gun culture, the contemporary NRA⁵³ maintains a robust membership, which it reports at approximately five million people,⁵⁴ and has active affiliate chapters in all fifty states.⁵⁵

The NRA, around the time of this writing, faced several legal challenges and dealt with some heated internal conflict among its leaders. Short of the organization being forced to shut down as a result of the lawsuits it faces, however, there is little reason to believe that its devoted pro-gun following is going anywhere. As the following chapters demonstrate, their ties to the group and its cause are deep and durable. These ties do not depend on the presence of a single NRA leader. They remain strong even when the organization faces financial difficulties. And, if anything, they only become deeper when gun owners believe that they are under attack.

Previewing the Rest of the Book

Two of this book's central concerns are explaining why gun rights supporters are so dedicated to their cause and why the NRA and its members have such an important place in the Republican Party. Chapter 2 lays out a framework for answering these questions that guides the rest of the book. It discusses how the NRA has crafted a worldview around guns consisting of both a gun owner social identity and a broader political ideology. When its supporters adopted this worldview, the NRA reaped substantial political benefits—including, ultimately, its alignment with the Republican Party.

With this framework in place, subsequent chapters look more closely at each piece and, in so doing, address questions that lie at the heart of gun politics. How has gun ownership become such a central part of how NRA members view and participate in politics? How does the NRA mobilize them into politics at unusually high rates? Why do many gun owners see gun rights as central to a broader set of political beliefs? When and why did support for gun rights become a conservative issue stance?

Chapters 3 and 4 answer these questions by closely examining nearly eighty years (1930–2008) of editorials from the NRA's *American Rifleman* magazine, along with gun-related letters to the editor of four major newspapers covering that same period. I use the *American Rifleman* as a measure of the organization's views and priorities and treat pro-gun letters to newspaper editors as a measure of the attitudes and views of NRA supporters; because no historical surveys exist that are well equipped to answer the questions posed above, I instead use the letters from gun owners to measure their feelings about guns over time. (Chapters 3 and 4—along with the appendix—provide more details about these data sources.)

Chapter 3 analyzes these materials to document how the NRA created a distinct social identity built around gun ownership, charting the NRA's assiduous, long-term efforts—through not just its membership communications but also its popular firearms programs—to cultivate such an identity and to connect it to politics. This identity took hold among many gun owners and shapes how they view the

world. The chapter demonstrates how the NRA has used this identity to mobilize its supporters into politics by portraying gun owners' way of life as under threat from gun control proposals and imploring its members to take action in defense of it.

Chapter 4 uses the same data and analytical approach to explain how the NRA has created a gun-centric political ideology, in which gun rights are central to a broader set of issue positions, and thus how gun rights became so closely related to contemporary conservatism in the United States. As with the gun owner identity, this gun-centric ideology originated with the NRA and subsequently took hold among gun owners. These two aspects of the NRA worldview work in tandem; the ideological connections made by the NRA reinforce the identity it has created.

Chapter 5—consisting of the first two case studies discussed above—explores how the NRA used this worldview to influence gun policy outcomes during its quasi-governmental phase. It digs into a wide range of archival materials to identify how the NRA mobilized gun owners to defeat or weaken gun control legislation in the 1930s through the 1960s.

The book then shifts to a slightly different set of puzzles: When, why, and how did the NRA become a central pillar of the Republican Party, and how has this alliance altered both the NRA and the GOP? Using a rich collection of archival documents, chapter 6 documents the party-group alignment of the NRA and the GOP, detailing the constellation of factors that collectively facilitated this alignment, which began in the 1960s, culminated during the 1980 election, and has deepened in the decades since. It shows how the NRA's cultivation of a group social identity and gun-centric political ideology made its supporters an attractive demographic group to conservative politicians, and laid the foundation for the group's eventual incorporation into the Republican coalition. Chapter 6 also digs into the NRA's motivations for entering the realm of partisan politics, showing how funding challenges and internal conflicts led to the 1977 "Revolt at Cincinnati," after which the NRA quickly became an active player in GOP politics. Finally, the chapter analyzes public opinion polls to document gun owners' increasingly

close relationship with the Republican Party—especially following the election of President Donald Trump.

Chapter 7—consisting of the four additional case studies mentioned earlier—then explores the NRA’s influence on gun policy outcomes in its new, partisan phase. Picking up where chapter 5 left off, it examines the gun debate from the 1980s to the 2010s, showing how the NRA’s position in the GOP coalition has enhanced its political power, most notably by providing it with more leverage over the contents and timing of the legislative agenda.

Finally, the conclusion looks toward the future of both the NRA and the gun debate more broadly. It discusses potential threats to the NRA’s political influence, including its own internal struggles, the rise of more effective gun control advocacy organizations, and the potential downsides of its close relationship with the Republican Party. Finally, it discusses the potential generalizability of the book’s findings to other groups and policy areas, notes its implications for our understanding of interest groups and political parties, and reflects on the NRA’s place in American democracy.

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