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Introduction: Democracy Disarmed

In late May 2020, I placed a call to Robert (a pseudonym),¹ a thirty-something white Florida gun store owner still reeling from the surge in gun sales amid the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The surge had started some time in March, and it started suddenly. One day it was business as usual, and the next day sales were on fire, lines were out the door, shelves were cleared, and phone lines were ringing with people desperately looking for any gun—any *handgun or shotgun*—that they could get their hands on. As Robert saw it, the surge was different from previous panic buys: more first-time gun owners, more women, more couples, more elderly people, more people of color, more LGBTQ-identified people. Enthusiastic about ever-more gun buyers, Robert was also apprehensive about the “liberal” gun buyers now in his store: “We’ve had a lot of people openly expressing the fact that they are in disbelief that they’d ever be purchasing a firearm, and here they are! . . . I’ve had people say ‘I’ve been voting against these things [guns] for my entire life’ . . . [Or they’ll say] ‘What do you mean a three-day wait?’ I tell them [sarcastically], ‘this is common sense gun control, isn’t it?’”

Coronavirus—and the social, economic, and political precarity that followed in 2020—opened up the floodgates of American firearm demand. Many found that they suddenly needed a gun, but few—at least when I talked to Robert—really knew how to make sense of it all. For his part, Robert fit coronavirus into his broader skepticism surrounding American politics. He blithely moved from questioning whether 9/11 was an “inside job” to wondering whether coronavirus came from a “Wuhan lab” with “an American scientist, American backers, American funding.” In a show of profound skepticism, his statements were phrased as questions (“Did the virus come from the Wuhan lab? Did they release

the virus intentionally in China? Did they let it spread and keep misinformation, and keep this quiet, and that way they could use it as an opportunity to quash the protests in their country?”). And his answers were equally equivocating (“That’s something that you will never know the answer to 100 percent . . . Who the hell knows?”). Robert seemed sure about only one thing: “The possibility for a conspiracy is extremely large. The thing is, people who were conspiracy theorists five, ten years ago are now right.”

Perhaps Robert wasn’t all that interested in the answers, though. While he waxed on about the media’s misreporting of not just COVID-19 deaths but also crime and civil unrest, not once did he mention wanting to know the concrete numbers or express a desire to firm up the facts. He didn’t grope and grasp for truth. Instead, he saw that distinguishing truth from fiction was a fool’s errand. Coronavirus had turned truth-seekers into dupes: Robert ridiculed the people following mask ordinances or relying on contactless delivery to keep them safe because no one really knew whether any of it mattered: “you are [just] putting a trash bag on a nuclear reactor . . . it’s all pointless.” Though I interviewed him before Black Lives Matter protests seized the nation to demand accountability for police violence and racial injustice, the skepticism he voiced about coronavirus echoed how other gun sellers talked about the uprisings for racial justice in the summer of 2020. They wagered that the Black Lives Matter protests might be a political hoax, they could be a terrorist element, but they most definitely were an opening for power-hungry elites—after all, they wondered, what else could explain their sudden spread? To Robert and other gun sellers, clinging to facts was political infantilism; in contrast to what they saw as obsequious deference to elites in the media, government, or science, skepticism amid uncertainty was a politically mature stance, an act of courage.

Throughout our conversation, Robert moved nimbly between armed individualism (particularly the eminence of guns in everyday life as instruments of safety and security), conspiracism (in its most skeptical form), and partisanship (not just regarding disagreements about policy or ideology but also regarding basic faith in the integrity and capacities

of one's political opponents). But as I listened to him, I realized that these pillars of conservative thinking were more than mere ideologies, worldviews, or frameworks. At this moment of social uncertainty, these themes served as *tools* for Robert and other gun sellers I met during 2020, who *used* them to build conservative culture from the ground up. Armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship allowed Robert and others to locate a sense of control amid chaos, tame the cacophony of divergent opinions and divisive rhetoric, and ultimately provide them with a sense of their own standing as good citizens amid a country they believed had gone astray. As Robert told me, "I've been using the words 'fake news' for a while now, for both sides of the aisle. And I think that [fake news] has caused the uncertainty, and when you have uncertainty, you have to have a guarantee, and the only guarantee in this country is the right to protect yourself." In a world of hidden agendas, of abridged rights, of chaos, panic, and uncertainty, no one—in Robert's view, at least—could argue with the barrel of a gun.

The Spirit of January 6th

A half-year later, I couldn't help but think back to my conversation with Robert. It was January 6, 2021, the day that a violent right-wing mob rushed the Capitol Building as the US Congress met to certify the election results that confirmed Joe Biden as 46th president of the United States and Donald Trump the loser. Throughout his 2016 election campaign and subsequent term as president, Trump had relentlessly pushed the envelope on democratic norms: rampant attacks on free speech, the endorsement of violence as legitimate political expression, interference with the judiciary, and open praise for anti-democratic leaders like Vladimir Putin—to name just a few examples. And then came January 6th. In the weeks before that day, Trump and his supporters had orchestrated a multipronged, desperate, and largely failed attempt to overturn the election results. They filed countless lawsuits. They pressured state officials to fraudulently change election results. They engaged in a disinformation campaign that sowed distrust

not just in the electoral results but also in the electoral process itself.² Various organized factions of the Right—from the Republican Party to the Oath Keepers—undertook proactive roles in spreading the lie that not only had Trump won the election, but that the election had been stolen through the coordinated efforts of election officials working in cahoots with the Democratic Party.

As many as 2,500³ people entered the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in opposition to the election results that would be certified that day. In all likelihood, many of those gathered that day may well have believed that they were not democracy’s detractors but rather its last line of defense—and that their patriotic actions were necessary to save America. Unable to fathom the more than 81 million people⁴ who cast their vote for Joe Biden, they were convinced that the election had been stolen from them and that it was their patriotic duty to “stop the steal.” To wit, a rioter, facing federal charges in the aftermath of January 6th, tearfully explained his decision to come to Washington, DC: “He [Trump] was the commander-in-chief and the leader of our country . . . And he was calling for help! I thought he was calling for help! . . . I thought I was doing the right thing.”⁵ They were die-hard Trump supporters; many were taken in by QAnon, Pizzagate, and other loosely coherent “big tent conspiracy” theories that encouraged skepticism at all costs. Others were confederate flag-carrying white supremacists who saw in Trump an ally who was in the top office of American political power, and they were committed by any means necessary to keep him there. And then there were those who wanted—perhaps as part of the “Boogaloo movement”—to cause chaos and undermine law and order on principle. One participant, who eventually pled guilty to two federal crimes, posted that morning on social media: “What [do] patriots do? We f—n’ disarm them and then we storm the f—n’ Capitol.”⁶

Outside the US Capitol that day, the rioters espoused slogans like “Come and Take It” and “Don’t Tread on Me.” They taunted members of the Democratic Party with a noose. They called for an end to the impending communist state that they believed Joe Biden would enact. They yelled racial epithets at law enforcement officers of color, revealing

the limits of the strong support among conservatives for Blue Lives Matter. But some police and rioters posed for selfies together; in one video, one officer appeared to open the gate that would allow a flood of rioters into the Capitol Building; and one officer on the scene of the invaded Capitol Building explained the seemingly relaxed approach of law enforcement by saying, “We just got to let them do their thing for now.”⁷

But violent expression soon begat physical violence. The rioters joined a long, if too often forgotten, history of white Americans justifying violence in the name of patriotism and democracy. They smashed windows and broke in doors as politicians fled from harm’s way. While the quick thinking of Capitol police officer Eugene Goodman, who directed the mob away from the Senate Chamber, likely prevented untold casualties, others were not so fortunate. Protesters beat Officer Brian D. Sicknick, who died as a result;⁸ roughly 140 officers were injured in what the *New York Times* called “one of the worst days of injuries for law enforcement in the United States since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.”⁹ Ransacking, defacing, and destroying the Capitol Building, more than 800 rioters were charged with federal crimes by May 2022.¹⁰

As I watched the insurrection unfold through the live YouTube broadcasts posted by the rioters themselves, and as I listened to the frightened voices of reporters on the major broadcast networks, I wondered whether Robert or the other gun sellers I had talked to during 2020 were there. They had certainly raised the specter of a stolen election. They had been open with their conspiracist views (even as they predicated them with the disclaimer that “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but . . .”). They talked about the possibility of another civil war—or knew people who did. They could have been there, even if they weren’t; indeed, many more millions of Americans—judging from the 74 million votes Trump received—shared some sympathies with the rioters.¹¹ And in a sense the gun sellers already *were* there; as merchants of guns, gun culture, and gun politics, they helped build conservative culture from the ground up, reinforcing and at times reworking the top-down rhetoric promulgated by conservative pundits and politicians.

Within days of the insurrection, public debate across the political spectrum converged on a few explanations of what had happened: many (largely on the Left) saw the work of a dedicated cadre of right-wing and white supremacist extremists; some (largely on the Right) saw the machinations of an infiltrating cell of left-wing and Black Lives Matter extremists; and still many others (across the political spectrum, though less so on the Right) saw the expected outcome of Trump's conspiracist lies and distortions that had emboldened people over the last four years to engage in anti-democratic action. But as the dust settled over the course of 2021 and into 2022, the Republican Party and conservative Americans at large have generally agreed that the event represented legitimate, even patriotic, political expression.¹² Chalking up the riot as a one-off instance of extremism, or believing that it was entirely Trump's fault (and addressed by simply removing Trump from the office of the presidency), misreads the message of the January 6th insurrection and the underlying politics it reflects. The rioters represented not an isolated, tiny fringe, but a broader political spirit—an embittered remixing of the Spirit of '76, a term that captures the nostalgic romanticizing of patriotism and self-determination in the wake of the American Revolutionary War. Watching January 6th and its aftermath unfold, I found it was too easy to dismiss it as a reflection of the brazen lawlessness of fringe individuals instigated by Trump. The Spirit of January 6th reflected deep attachments to gun rights, conspiracist thinking, and extreme partisanship, and listening to gun sellers navigate 2020, I knew that the insurrection was a culmination of an everyday politics, shared by many conservatives, that would persist with or without Trump in office.

The Great Run on Guns

Amid a once-in-a-century pandemic, civil unrest, and a teetering democracy, American life felt on the brink of breakdown. This feeling was very evident in the surging appeal of guns—and their seeming capacity to serve, as Robert said, as a “guarantee.” In 2020, millions of people in the United States—including up to 8.4 million new gun owners¹³—bought nearly 23 million guns.¹⁴ Strikingly, these purchasers didn't fit the mold

of the “typical” gun owner: a conservative, white, straight male who already owned guns. In their shops, gun sellers noticed different clientele breaking this mold in one way or another. Some saw an increase in new African American and Asian American gun owners. Others remarked on the women and families. Some gun sellers noted members of the LGBTQ community coming to buy guns. And then there were the liberals, who never thought they “really needed” a gun—until 2020. They, collectively, appeared to adjudicate a long-standing mantra of radical equality, premised on the firearm, within American gun culture: “God created people, but Samuel Colt [the gun manufacturer] made them equal.” But just as sales data were demonstrating the mass appeal of guns well beyond the NRA-stylized gun owner, sectors of American gun culture—and American conservative politics more generally—became more acrimonious and insular, and more divisive and defensive, than ever. As a precarious moment for US democracy, did the surge in gun sales represent a new, democratizing moment for gun rights—or a retrenchment of a decades-long campaign to position gun rights as a key element of American conservative politics? What might the politics of gun rights in 2020 tell us—about conservative politics and about American democracy more generally?

In *Firepower*, political scientist Matthew Lacombe argues that the forging of a “social identity built around gun ownership” and a “political ideology that connects gun rights with a range of other issue stances and beliefs”¹⁵ on the Right has been one of the most consequential achievements of the National Rifle Association. In large part because of the NRA’s efforts in shaping American gun culture as a conservative phenomenon, to be a gun owner has come to mean something above and beyond simply owning a gun.¹⁶ Gun ownership has come to represent the embrace of a particular ethic of security (i.e., guns as a bulwark against victimization), a particular understanding of freedom (i.e., guns as a vehicle of individual rights), and a particular stance against the state (i.e., guns as a defense against government control and liberal indoctrination).¹⁷ The millions of new gun owners threatened that gun owner identity and the gun-centric worldview it fostered—as did the very uncertainties that overtook 2020. This book examines how American gun culture was

defended as conservative terrain in that tumultuous context—and how novel, and at times illiberal, understandings of democracy were forged in the process.

Rather than looking to the NRA, the Republican Party, or other macro-level actors, I take a bottom-up perspective by centering people positioned on the front lines of one key arena of conservative politics: gun sellers. Gun sellers are merchants not just of guns but also of conservative gun culture. They are uniquely positioned to understand shifts in who is buying guns and why; they are acutely attuned to how gun rights are articulated on the ground through their conservative politics—and vice versa; and they are themselves invested in promoting gun rights as both a personal and professional matter. And, in my sample of interviewees, they are overwhelmingly and committedly conservative. Reflecting and reproducing gun rights as an economic enterprise, a political agenda, and a cultural practice, gun sellers are ideal interlocutors to make better sense of conservative politics during 2020.

In what follows, I listen closely to gun sellers to understand, at the level of everyday politics, how gun rights have been mobilized as conservative firepower (to borrow Lacombe's phrasing) and with what consequences for American democracy. I focus on three civic tools to illuminate how the foundations of conservative politics are built through everyday politics and practices. *Armed individualism* tames the messiness of American democracy (and all that it entails) into individualized problems of safety and security, and it situates the gun not just as a primary means of personal protection but also as a key vehicle of political empowerment. *Conspiracism* cultivates an ethic of skepticism to speak to the gulf—always wide, even in democratic societies—between the rulers and the ruled, but in the process, it pulverizes the possibilities for shared truths necessary for democratic consensus. *Partisanship* sequesters the potential for political disagreement to generate a more engaged citizenry and a more responsive government; instead, partisanship justifies the denigration and even dehumanization of political opponents, casting doubt on their worthiness to engage in politics at all. This civic toolkit—armed individualism, conspiracism, and

partisanship—carves out a distinctive brand of conservative political culture, deepening the fault lines that run through American democracy. The result is not just a retrenchment of one of the gun lobby’s most valuable resources—gun owners—as champions of conservative politics, but also a hollowing out of liberal democracy as a consensus-based, justice-oriented, and equality-driven mode of politics. By exploring the puzzle of not *why* but rather *how* many gun rights proponents remained deeply wedded to a conservative agenda, it helps illuminate the underlying processes by which many conservative Americans have retreated from liberal democracy, and with what consequences.

How Guns Turned Right

Gun rights are not inherently a cause célèbre of the conservative Right.¹⁸ Up until the mid-twentieth century, gun policy positions were not intrinsically divided by party lines or between liberal and conservative ideologies, and there was no such thing as “the gun lobby” as we understand it today. Guns were not a broad-based political issue in themselves, nor a potent political “dog whistle” that could signal, for example, a political candidate’s broader agenda regarding race.¹⁹ But since the 1960s, gun politics has become a more and more divisive issue in American politics, as people—particularly on the gun rights side—have increasingly centered their political identities on gun politics.²⁰ Today gun rights are overwhelmingly associated with conservative politics and the Republican Party, and pro-gun rights Americans are disproportionately likely to be white men living in rural and suburban America, and they are also disproportionately likely to embrace conservative ideologies, such as Christian nationalism.²¹ No matter a person’s views on women’s rights, civil rights, the economy, welfare, crime policy, or any other issue, their stance on gun regulations has increasingly defined party allegiance, sorting strident gun rights advocates—politicians and voters—into the Republican Party.²² To understand this shift, we must first understand how the NRA transformed itself into a partisan organization—and gun rights into a conservative issue—in the second half of the twentieth century.

We can start the story in the 1960s. In that decade, crime spikes, high-profile assassinations, mass protests, riots, and surges in armed groups across the political spectrum galvanized a profound turn in the racial politics of the United States. Americans broadly responded to the social unrest of the 1960s with calls for law and order that would pathologize urban African Americans as the progenitors of subversive politics and criminal activity.²³ Jim Crow might have been crumbling in the South under the pressure of the Civil Rights movement, but what would replace it—the system of mass incarceration that legal scholar Michelle Alexander²⁴ would call the “New Jim Crow”—was already beginning to take shape. Whether explicitly aimed at disarming Black Power groups (such as California’s Mulford Act of 1967) or galvanized by the problem of urban crime that framed Black boys and men as violent criminals (such as the 1968 Gun Control Act), the embrace of gun regulation in the 1960s was intertwined with the broader criminalization of Blackness. But so was the turn to guns as objects of self-defense in that decade.²⁵ In the mid-1960s, the percentage of Americans who thought that handguns—the weapons of choice for both gun crime and self-defense *against* that gun crime—should be banned dropped below 50 percent for the first time and only dropped further in the decades to come.²⁶ While marginalized peoples—most famously, the Black Panthers—turned to guns as a means of self-defense and community protection from white supremacy, guns became an appealing solution to the problem of crime,²⁷ a problem that was increasingly imagined through the threat of what legal scholar Katheryn Russell-Brown²⁸ captures with the term “criminalblackman.” The NRA colluded with these racial politics from both sides: not only did it infamously use, for example, images of rioting African Americans in its print materials to galvanize support for gun rights in the 1960s,²⁹ but it also supported gun laws—specifically, California’s Mulford Act of 1967—clearly aimed at disarming politically organized African Americans while leaving well-armed their white counterparts in the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist and nativist groups.³⁰

However, in contrast to its bombastic and self-assured rhetoric today, the NRA also wavered as it navigated the changing gun politics of the 1960s. Consider the 1968 Gun Control Act, which would restrict mail-order guns, ban felons from gun possession, and further empower the

federal government to regulate firearms. The so-called sportsmen faction of the NRA, which included those gun owners who loved hunting and saw gun rights as compatible with some gun restrictions, had small but underwhelming grievances with the law. The law eventually passed without much opposition by the NRA³¹—much to the chagrin of the “hard-line” faction within the organization who viewed the law as a dangerous first step down a road to total gun confiscation.

In contrast to the sportsmen faction, this hard-line faction saw guns not merely as an all-American pastime but also as integral to the social, political, and moral well-being of the United States. Gun control was not an inconvenience but an anti-American, even conspiratorial, threat to undermine the United States from within. As longtime gun rights activist and former NRA lobbyist Neal Knox later reflected on the violent turmoil of the 1960s, “Is it possible that some of those incidents could have been created for the purpose of disarming the people of the free world? With drugs and evil intent, it’s possible. Rampant paranoia on my part? Maybe. But there have been far too many coincidences to ignore.”³² Rather than negotiate “disarmament,” Harlon Carter, another hard-line gun rights proponent, forged the stance that would characterize the NRA’s platform for decades to come: “a simple concept—*no compromise. No gun legislation.*”³³

By the late 1970s, the hard-line faction had ascended to NRA leadership. Carter was elected in 1977 to the NRA’s Executive Vice Presidency, transforming the organization into the formidable leader of the gun lobby. Carter’s NRA popularized the notion of the “slippery slope”—the argument that one small concession to gun regulations could lead, like the trickle that becomes a river, to a torrent of gun control that would eventually culminate in gun confiscation. Hard-line gun rights advocates saw conspiracy where others might have just seen compromise: the tyranny of gun control could be lurking around the corner of any gun-restrictive policy. Rather than compromise with gun control, the NRA rallied gun rights advocates to resist it by buying guns, voting for pro-gun politicians, supporting pro-gun judges and justices, and voicing their opposition to gun restrictions through petition and protest.

By the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the rhetoric continued to escalate. For its part, the NRA’s leaders called federal

agents “jack-booted thugs,”³⁴ and they argued that gun control advocacy represented “[a] hateful and bigoted war” and even a “cultural cleansing.”³⁵ In doing so, the organization repeatedly emphasized the threats that everyday American gun owners (themselves disproportionately white men) faced from below (in the form of criminals) and from above (in the form of government control)—two threats that, as Angela Stroud notes in *Good Guys with Guns*, articulate white masculinity as precious, precarious, and persecuted. Reminding gun rights advocates that the Second Amendment was about securing gun rights but also about laying claim to American freedom more generally (after all, the NRA’s magazine dedicated to the Second Amendment is titled *America’s 1st Freedom*), NRA spokespeople decried the “violence of lies” promulgated by the Left as an existential threat to American freedom.³⁶ With liberal, leftist, and progressive politics framed as unwarranted attacks, vicious lies, and manipulative distortions, this divisive rhetoric undermined any chance of genuine engagement with one’s political opponents or even with inconvenient facts. As political scientist Matthew Lacombe notes, “the NRA’s identity-based appeals tend to rely on fear in a way that encourages polarization, discourages compromise, and—in some cases—advances conspiratorial views that are misleading and offensive.”³⁷ Armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship animated the NRA’s political reasoning, and as it turned out, this style of politics would inflect not just conservative gun rights politics but contemporary conservative politics more broadly.

Headed Right

Rather than being alone at sea, the National Rifle Association gained momentum from the rising tide of conservative politics in the second half of the twentieth century. The NRA’s “no compromise” stance on gun rights resonated with the broad smattering of right-leaning Americans who would make up the various strands of contemporary conservative politics: evangelical Christians,³⁸ John Birch Society adherents, anti-communists, segregationists, free market libertarians, states rights activists, culture warriors with an aversion to feminism and gay rights, tax

revolters, and so forth. Policy stances aside, these various factions were united by a shared “bunker mentality” that many mid-twentieth-century Americans adopted as they experienced the efforts to expand the rights and freedoms of racial minorities, sexual minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups within American society as a curtailment on their own rights and freedoms. Evangelicals rallied against the threat of communism by promoting “family values”;³⁹ anti-integrationists shrouded their racism in a language of “rights, freedoms, and individualism”;⁴⁰ free market libertarians advocated for union busting by celebrating free enterprise; gun rights advocates opposed the liberal establishment by railing against gun confiscation.

The histories of these different flanks of contemporary conservative politics reveal uncanny commonalities in how they understood the social threats they confronted and how they improvised responses. But perhaps this was not so uncanny: despite their apparent differences, each of these factions was galvanized by similar fears of displacement and drew upon widespread and deep-seated American tropes such as populism and producerism, which often validated traditional social arrangements, in response to those fears. Starting as early as the 1950s, conservative media activists and right-wing politicians reinforced⁴¹ these sensibilities across different⁴² segments of conservative politics by converging on a common enemy: the liberal elites who “coddle nonwhites, women, gay, criminals, and atheists.”⁴³ The conviction that the liberal establishment had destroyed a once-great country injected contemporary conservative politics with a nostalgic “vision of the country’s founding as a moment of perfection that they must attempt to restore,” as sociologist Ruth Braunstein⁴⁴ describes the group of conservatives she studied. This conviction made it easy to reject bipartisanship⁴⁵ in favor of an all-or-nothing politics that celebrated conservatives as the only “real Americans”—an illiberal⁴⁶ move that broke with the pluralistic vision of the public sphere that had dominated politics in the post-World War II era.⁴⁷

By the time Ronald Reagan was elected president in a landslide victory in 1980, the conservative movement had cohered into a national phenomenon united by disdain for liberal elites and their policies.

Government—and the liberal establishment that presumably controlled it—was framed as the primary problem facing middle-class Americans,⁴⁸ and whites (white women and especially white men) flocked to the Republican Party.⁴⁹ By the time Barack Obama was elected for his first presidential term in 2008, the Republican Party had largely abandoned attempts to grow the party's appeal beyond its base of white men. Instead, movements like the Tea Party and its supporters within the Republican Party attacked social welfare and entitlements for the “undeserving”—a pejorative category largely comprised of immigrants, racial minorities, and young people—in favor of political, social, and economic supports for the “hardworking” Americans who had earned their place in society and were being unduly harmed by liberal policies.⁵⁰ As religion scholar Anthea Butler⁵¹ notes, the backlash to Obama's two-term presidency galvanized elements that had already long defined conservative politics: “a higher tolerance for conspiracy theories, hucksterism (Trump), and out-and-out grievances.” By the time Trump became a successful candidate for the US presidency, the Republican Party had become the party of, by, and for white Americans.⁵²

And yet, that story—while illuminating—is also too simplistic. At the level of everyday politics, the significance of race and racism in politics is often as slippery as it seems straightforward.⁵³ As legal scholar Ian Haney-Lopez⁵⁴ notes of conservative voters, “The overwhelming majority are decent folks quick to condemn naked racism. But this is a far cry from saying that racial fears do not motivate them.” While Trump's bigotry was not a deal-breaker for Americans voting for him in 2016, neither is it clear that it was the primary driver for most voters—at least as they saw it. Rather, decades after the Civil Rights movement, white Americans too often remained “confused and conflicted”⁵⁵ regarding the politics of race. Further, while Trump himself welcomed his popularity among white supremacist groups and also supported policies that have targeted racial minorities, curtailed reproductive rights, and criminalized immigrants,⁵⁶ his failed 2020 bid for the presidency revealed not losses but small gains among racial minorities as compared to four years earlier. Trump's 2020 share fell short of several Republican candidates who preceded him, but his platform nevertheless appealed to just under

a third of Asian and Asian American as well as Latinx voters.⁵⁷ This is a sizable minority that likely reflects a mix of many factors: the appeal of populism, the rejection of liberalism, growing dissatisfaction with socioeconomic decline, a widespread investment in nostalgia for a bygone era of America, and perhaps also the fungibility of whiteness—or, at least, honorary whiteness.⁵⁸

Regardless of its Asian and Latinx supporters, the Republican Party has largely bet on demobilizing the vote *outside* of their core base of white Americans⁵⁹ while also galvanizing the vote *within* that base. In concert with other arms of the contemporary conservative movement, the NRA has been crucial in mobilizing what has become one of the Republican Party's most precious assets: American gun owners, who have historically been disproportionately white conservative men.⁶⁰ And over the years, the NRA and the Republican Party have grown closer not just in substance but also in style—anticipating a populist conservative leader like Donald Trump. Trump's elite-but-outsider status to the Washington establishment, his brash bigotry, and his conspiracist thinking made him an appealing conduit for the rage, frustration, and entitlement of those beleaguered Americans who felt the country had been led astray by liberal chicanery. Thus, while Trump's record on gun rights might have been mixed (he, after all, supported a ban on assault weapons as recently as 2000⁶¹), his political style aligned deeply with conservative politics in general and conservative gun politics in particular. As Lacombe observes, "Trump's attacks on the media closely echoed decades of NRA appeals in which the organization has derided the so-called mainstream media for being phony, biased, and dishonest."⁶²

Contemporary conservative politics should not be reduced to the conservatives who support gun rights. But conservative gun politics are an illuminating place to start if we want to understand contemporary conservative politics and how these politics come to matter for the people who embrace them. Accordingly, this book draws on in-depth interviews with a particularly revealing group of conservative Americans: gun sellers, who experienced 2020 as a year of record gun sales amid a global pandemic, anti-racist uprisings and civil unrest, and democratic instability. Listening to gun sellers helps illuminate the broader conservative

movement that has shaped their political sensibilities by providing the civic tools they used to navigate their political realities. And in doing so, we can understand just how, and with what consequences, defending gun rights has become a means of doing democracy.

Defending Gun Rights, Doing Democracy

In the middle of 2021, I received a distressed email from Everytown for Gun Safety, an advocacy group for gun regulation, stating that the “NRA’s cynical, divisive, and frightening vision for guns in America is making our country more dangerous.” I read on: “they’re spending millions to block *any* progress on gun safety in Congress.” As with much academic scholarship and popular commentary about gun rights, the focus of this call to action was on the tip-top of the gun rights pyramid: the NRA. To many advocates for greater gun restrictions, the NRA’s “danger” was in its capacity to mobilize the American political system to block, or pass, laws that would increase gun access within the United States. As political scientist Kristin Goss⁶³ shows, the relative power of gun control groups versus the gun rights lobby can be traced in part to how the latter has managed to harness American political institutions to its benefit. From the US Constitution to the system of federalism, the odds are stacked in favor of the NRA and other gun lobby groups in expanding gun access and stalling gun regulations.

By and large, political scientists, political psychologists, and sociologists have focused on explaining how and why the politics of gun rights have become ascendant, but less attention has been focused on the consequences of this ascendance on the threads of American democracy. For example, political scientists such as Kristin Goss and Matthew Lacombe have traced how the political environment has favored expanded gun rights, focusing on formal political processes (like electoral politics and congressional proceedings), as well as the organizations (such as the NRA) and legal apparatuses (including the US Constitution) that shape political possibilities, political behavior, and political identity. Political psychologists have located the appeal of conservative politics, including gun politics, into particular personality structures that

predispose them to embrace a “strict father” metaphor—to use George Lakoff’s terminology—to make sense of the world around them. Finally, sociologists of guns, including my own work, have unearthed how concerns surrounding safety and security, socioeconomic shifts, anxieties surrounding the declining power of white masculinity, and major shifts in governmentality, such as the War on Crime and the dismantling of the social safety net, continue to press the appeal of guns for their largely, though far from exclusively, white, male owners. Gun scholars across disciplines have revealed much about why so many Americans own guns, and why the policy apparatus continues to support them in doing so.

But for the many conservatives who embrace gun rights, gun politics is about far more than influencing political institutions; gun politics offer to right-leaning Americans one way of “doing” conservative politics in everyday life—a social practice aimed at navigating the tensions that are inherent to any democratic society but take particular shape in the US context. Understanding the *how* of gun politics is at least as important as *why*—especially if we wager that understanding conservative gun politics might help illuminate the politics of democracy among US conservatives. With these stakes, this book flips the question usually asked of gun politics and democracy.⁶⁴ Instead of focusing on how democratic institutions and social arrangements within the United States have shaped—and largely facilitated—a vibrant, robust, and unapologetically conservative gun politics, this book focuses on how conservative gun politics in turn shapes the culture of democracy within the United States.

Before beginning my analysis, I must call the reader’s attention to an unavoidable frustration in terminology. Throughout this book, I will use the word “liberal” in a variety of ways: to discuss a particular form of democracy; to examine partisanship; to label the political boogymen that gun sellers saw in their political opponents; to recognize the self-labeling of people opposed to conservative politics. Unfortunately, creating new terms for each of these usages doesn’t quite work. It matters that even as political philosophers define liberal democracy as an idealized political project, everyday conservatives have transformed “liberal” into the ultimate political insult. Meanwhile, even though “liberal” describes an end

of the political spectrum that has increasingly ossified into a set of sensibilities that “spill over”⁶⁵ beyond politics proper, it is also useful to remember that this ossification contradicts the dictionary definition of “liberal” as eclectic, open, and unencumbered by ideological rigidity.

For clarity, this book uses “liberal” in the following contexts:

- *Liberal Democracy*: I use “liberal” here to refer to a system of government legitimated by appeals to popular sovereignty, or “rule by the people,” that is characterized by due process, electoral representation, consensus-based decision-making, civic inclusion (particularly with regard to the definition of “the people”), and political values of equality, freedom, and justice—especially vis-à-vis one’s political rivals.⁶⁶
- *Liberal as Conservative Insult*: I use “liberal” here to capture how conservatives understood “liberals” and “liberalism” as a political insult to capture what they saw as a loathsome blend of entitlement, dependency, and victimization that prevents independent thought and self-reliant action—a political insult that effectively effeminized, dehumanized, and/or pathologized their political opponents. Though race-neutral on its face, this “liberal” insult can be used as a racial code word⁶⁷ to discount the political voices advocating for racial justice and to resist advancements in racial equality, particularly with respect to political power.
- *Liberal as Political Identification*: I use “liberal” here to capture people’s own partisan self-identification as liberal, progressive, or left-leaning; this labeling typically captures affiliation with the Democratic Party as well as allegiance to state- or collective-orchestrated solutions to social problems.
- *Illiberal*: For the sake of parsimony, let me also define what I mean by the term “illiberal,” which I use throughout this book to describe political desires, sensibilities, and imaginations. “Illiberal” refers to an impulse that (1) centers on a narrow understanding of “the people”; (2) draws on an exclusionary understanding of rights as privileges accrued to those deemed politically worthy; and (3) often endorses non-representative and/or

non-consensus-based styles of decision-making, including the endorsement of strongmen political leaders like Donald Trump and the appreciation—if not outright approval—of political violence.

- *The Contemporary Conservative Movement*: Finally, while this term does not explicitly include the word “liberal,” it would not exist without its implicit orientation against liberals, the liberal establishment, and liberal ideology. Throughout this book, I will refer to the “contemporary conservative movement” as well as “contemporary conservative politics” and “conservatives.” As already noted in the brief historical review above and as unraveled throughout this book, there is no monolithic or coherent “conservative movement” (or even a coherent “conservative gun rights movement,” as chapter 4 shows) but rather a resonant set of orientations and organizations—from evangelical Christians to free market libertarians—that converge on their disdain for liberal ideology.⁶⁸ I use the term “contemporary conservative movement” as shorthand for capturing this political junction among right-leaning Americans.

Attending to how liberals, liberal ideology, and liberalism animate conservative gun politics is crucial for understanding how, in turn, the politics of gun rights shapes American democracy. But to do so, we must look beyond the power center of the gun lobby (as Everytown’s missive emphasized). Instead, I focus attention on the everyday politics of conservatives who find in gun politics an appealing set of tools—armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship—for navigating their political realities and reimagining democracy in the process.

Civic Toolkits and Democratic Imaginations

To understand how gun sellers build conservative culture from the ground up, I draw on insights from political sociology and the sociology of culture. Within sociology, there is a long tradition of understanding politics as experienced by Americans as political *culture*: a set of narratives,

practices, and norms used to make sense of political life. As sociologists of culture remind us, culture is not merely a set of values or meanings; culture shapes people's actions. This approach, developed by the sociologist Ann Swidler, is known as "toolkit theory" because it assumes that people don't just *have* culture, they *use* it—like a tool—to solve problems. Those problems may be concrete and task-oriented (how do I cast a ballot in the upcoming election?), or they may be abstract and oriented toward meaning-making (how do I make sense of others with whom I deeply disagree?). Culture gives us tools—from the formal regulations set by institutions (e.g., voter qualifications) to the informal rules that govern social interaction (e.g., political civility)—that allow us to navigate those problems, but in doing so, culture fundamentally shapes the terrain of imaginable actions as well as puts limits on what's possible. Culture is always at work—we use it all the time—but usually, it hides behind the scenes, unremarkably greasing the wheels of social initiative and social institutions. But that's not the case when tensions are high, when people are faced with problems they experience as novel and urgent, and when hitherto effective initiatives and institutions break down or prove futile. In these "unsettled" times (as Swidler calls it), people rely more explicitly on culture to help them solve the problems they face in their daily lives.

American politics represents one terrain where tensions beckon us to more explicitly think through the toolkits—in this case, the *civic* toolkits—that people take up to navigate their everyday political realities. Taking up the concerns of Alexis de Tocqueville⁶⁹ flagged a century and a half earlier, the sociologists Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton remind us in *Habits of the Heart* that in their everyday lives, Americans confront a contradictory politics—one that emphasizes the cult of the individual while simultaneously embracing ideals of equality, justice, and freedom that challenge the eminence of personal choice and individual prerogative. Political tensions, we should remember, are core to *any* democratic regime, and they take many forms: between government underreach and government overreach, between the ideal of popular sovereignty and the reality of representation (and the expertise that representation

necessarily entails), between the tolerance for conflict and the embrace of universal commonalities among citizens. These tensions, however, take specific shape amid US democracy's historical—and continued—significance as a battleground for racial equality, inclusion, and power. As Bellah and his co-authors note, “our society has tried to establish a floor below which no one will be allowed to fall, but we have not thought effectively about how to include the deprived more actively in occupational and civil life.”⁷⁰ Indeed, as the events of 2020 instruct us, the questions of civic inclusion, substantive equality, and democratic participation remain open terrains of political struggle.

From the Left to the Right, Americans engage in this struggle not just as they engage in formal practices of democratic engagement—such as voting—but also as they struggle to make sense of, and make decisions within, their everyday lives. In other words, thinking, talking, and doing—the stuff of everyday life—are citizenship acts in and of themselves.⁷¹ These acts can be understood as the practical pillars of what political sociologist Andrew Perrin calls a “democratic imagination.” A broad concept that transcends specific political parties and ideologies, democratic imagination describes the cultural repertoires that everyday people draw upon to make sense of “what is possible, important, right, and feasible”⁷² within democratic political systems.⁷³ Democratic imaginations vary because, as political sociologist Ruth Braunstein notes, “American democracy . . . means profoundly different things to different people.”⁷⁴ Democratic imaginations may be creative and capacious, or they may be apathetic and anemic. They may entitle some with dreams of action and efficacy, but may rebuff those same inclinations in others by shrinking the sphere of imaginable action, discounting certain perspectives as personal rather than political, and defining the public entitled to fully participate in governance in narrow, exclusionary terms. They may encourage people to see certain places and spaces as appropriate, urgent venues for politics⁷⁵ or to avoid politics in public altogether.⁷⁶ There is no single democratic imagination, but many imaginations forged as everyday people harness the culture at their disposal—ideas, narratives, stories, rituals—to make sense of, navigate, and ultimately enact their personal preferences, civic experiences, and political observations.

Democratic imaginations thus depend on civic initiative; they don't come about in any automatic or straightforward way from the mere fact of living in a democracy. They require work. And that work, it turns out, is crucial for maintaining democracy as a robust and responsive political apparatus. This is because democracy is a system fundamentally animated by irresolvable (but, in the ideal configuration, deeply productive) tensions—between the obligations to the collective and the rights of the individual; between the ideal of popular sovereignty and the reality of representation; between the singularity of policy and the multiplicity of publics.

In the American context, these tensions are inextricably bound up with the violent founding of the United States as a political order by and for white, property-owning men despite an expressed allegiance to liberal democracy as defined by due process, electoral representation, consensus-based decision-making, civic inclusion, and political values of equality, freedom, and justice. The United States' founding documents celebrated the inherent equality of individuals, while rendering enslaved peoples just three-fifths of a person and indigenous people outside the purview of the public sphere altogether. They promised prosperity to all through the pursuit of private property, obliterating the collective entitlement to land by indigenous peoples while also denigrating racialized peoples *as* private property. They set up an enviable system of justice centered on due process—for white, property-owning men. For everyone else, parallel systems of slave law, mob rule, and vigilante justice rendered law and order not an exemplar of democratic process but a manservant to white supremacy. And that was just the beginning. American history is a history of the narrow breadth of American democracy: the Trail of Tears, lynch mobs, racial cleansings, internment camps, the exoneration of murderers—police and civilian—under the mantra of self-defense; the systematic exclusion of people of color from government benefits; racist redlining; the Chinese Exclusion Act; the Dred Scott Decision; *de jure* and *de facto* segregation; McCarthyism; bloody strike-busting and white rioting; wanton police killings of people of color, especially African Americans and indigenous peoples . . . the list not only goes on, but is still being written. Alongside the violent

repression of dissenting voices, a powerful source of US democracy's continued legitimacy lies in the capacity of those Americans invested in the white, middle-class status quo to justify the systematic anti-liberal features of the American political structure while still holding onto the belief that they live in a free, equal, and just society notwithstanding overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Despite the violence that mars American past and present, the work required to keep democracy running is often unremarkable, if not invisible, whether taking the form of apathy⁷⁷ or ideology.⁷⁸ Perhaps people in the United States make small talk about politics⁷⁹ with their friends, neighbors, and colleagues without much of a fuss about differences of opinion, instead building civic ties through voluntary associations—political scientist Robert Putnam's bowling leagues of yesteryear,⁸⁰ perhaps—that transcend political differences. Or maybe they recognize that while they can't be sure that everything heard on the news is true, they can still try to stay informed, trusting that experts, journalists and politicians are at least trying to get the facts right. They might even vote assuming that their ballots will be counted and counted fairly, and that whoever wins office will work on behalf of Americans at large rather than on behalf of one political party. The wheels of civic engagement, in short, are oiled by this mutual understanding (some would say, illusion) that at least to a minimal degree, people in the US can trust one another, their leaders, and their political system to function.

But in times of crisis, this trust breaks down, and the everyday work that undergirds democracy suddenly becomes visible and contentious. The populist turn in US politics during the 2016 presidential election cycle intimated such a crisis in political authority.⁸¹ Americans across the political spectrum turned to two anti-establishment figures—Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump—who railed against global capitalism and political elites, while championing—albeit in strikingly different ways—everyday working people. Advocating a populist brand of law and order, a protectionist foreign policy, a return to America's manufacturing heydays, and a disdain for inconvenient facts, Trump and his adherents retooled core conservative sentiments into an America First doctrine that gave voice to surging resentment, growing alienation, and

sheer rage that was directed up at journalists, politicians, and academics, as well as down toward immigrants, racial minorities, and women. The crisis, of course, didn't stop with Trump's election in 2016; as president, Trump pursued little of the economic populism he promised. Failing to address the structural problems that helped make possible his rise, he encouraged millions of Americans to join in a rage-fueled, resentful, and reactionary identity politics invested in American whiteness. On the eve of 2020, American politics was embattled over the terms of the racial contract that, as Charles Mills⁸² reminds us, shapes civic membership in Western democracies: will the United States be a multiracial and inclusive democracy in substance or in name only?

And then 2020 happened, spinning the country deeper into political crisis. The coronavirus pandemic revealed a government incapable of concerted effort, exposed the shallowness of Americans' collective obligations to one another, and challenged confidence in scientific analysis and advice. The Black Lives Matter protests turned up the volume on the broken record of white supremacy in the United States for all to hear, exposed the shameful lack of accountability for police who kill, and showcased the frailty of political protest as a sacred act of democracy as police harassed, threatened, and assaulted⁸³ protesters gathered to raise public awareness and demand accountability over the issue of police violence. Meanwhile, the political instability surrounding the 2020 US presidential election demonstrated that despite high rates of voter turnout, many people no longer imagined the United States as a place where they could live alongside, debate with, or—in the case of those who claimed election fraud—concede to their political opponents. For anyone not yet awake, the January 6th riot—triggered by what should have been the mundane certification of Joe Biden's presidential electoral win—was a blaring alarm bell. Democracy in America is now far from unremarkable.

As I learned in my conversations with gun sellers, though, 2020 did not just challenge American democracy. It also challenged the democratic imaginations of Americans. Gun sellers, for their part, turned to the civic tools at their disposal—armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship—to navigate the political impasses around them.

Armed individualism simplified complex dilemmas of collective insecurity and social vulnerability into problems of personal security, reframing intractable social problems into more straightforward problems that people can more readily imagine solving with guns. *Conspiracism* promoted a stance of skepticism toward elites—whether political or scientific elites—and encouraged adherents to impute dark motivations even to seemingly benign policy maneuvers or scientific questions. And finally, *partisanship* justified outright hostility, instead of deliberative engagement or consensus-driven decision-making, as an appropriate response to political opponents and denigrated compromise with one’s political opponents as a dangerous show of weakness. Together, these tools formed a civic toolkit that “provide[d] individual social actors with solutions to various problems they encounter in everyday life,”⁸⁴ as sociologists Andrew Perrin, J. Micah Roos, and Gordon Gauchat describe with regard to the diverse political orientations within conservative politics. As recent history reveals, this civic toolkit did not suddenly emerge in 2020; for quite some time now, armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship have animated conservative politics in general and conservative gun politics in particular. But by tracing the everyday utility of these civic tools for gun sellers who navigated the chaos, insecurity, and uncertainty of 2020, we can better understand not just the challenges facing American democracy but also the factors shaping the democratic imaginations of Americans. By examining conservative gun politics, this book examines how people’s political imaginations narrow the linchpin of governance to the individual and their firearm (armed individualism), cultivate an ethic of skepticism that vastly restricts the terrain of shared knowledge (conspiracism), and ultimately render one’s political opponents as unworthy of political engagement (partisanship).

Beyond Liberal Democracy

Many readers might pause here and ask whether the term “democratic imagination” is appropriate for describing the inner political lives of people who have, for example, insisted that coronavirus is an elaborate

hoax, embraced QAnon as a voice of resistance against the so-called Deep State, and supported the January 6th insurrection to interrupt the certification of Democrat Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States. After all, popular banter and academic discourse—including voices from the Right like David French⁸⁵ and David Frum⁸⁶—have increasingly framed the Trump administration and its supporters as a threat to American democracy in terms such as “authoritarian,” “autocratic,” or even “fascist.” To seriously consider such “democratic imagination,” amid continued support for Trump and Trumpist politics, may seem deeply misguided at a moment that appears to demand the strength of principled action rather than the meekness of conciliation. “Democracy” is, many would wager, not simply an analytical term; it is a moral ground that should not be ceded without due consideration.

Despite this urge, this book attempts to suspend—at least temporarily—this moral politics of democracy because doing so opens the door for a more analytically honest approach to the contemporary political moment. It also makes possible a more robust defense of democracy beyond merely “defending existing institutions”⁸⁷ that have been antithetical, in the past and present, to the values of equality, freedom, and justice often conflated with US democracy. That is, American democracy has often been equated with *liberal* democracy: a system of political decision-making characterized by electoral representation, consensus, due process, and civic inclusion. Liberal democracy aims at maximizing the political values of equality, freedom, and justice, even or *especially* with respect to one’s political opponents. Liberal democracy guards politics as an uncertain, unpredictable, and dynamic terrain where any particular political party or coalition sometimes wins, sometimes loses—but always gets a chance to try again.⁸⁸

Yet democracy need not take on these classically liberal values. As Dylan Riley⁸⁹ and Michael Mann⁹⁰ each argue in separate studies on “the dark side of democracy” (to use Mann’s formulation), democracy at its core is simply an argument for the legitimacy of a system of governance: whereas governments might be justified by the notion of divine rule (such as the French monarchy) or through sheer coercion (such as the rule by terror in Stalinist Russia), democracies look to “the

will of the people” for their legitimacy. Illiberal democracy, like liberal democracy, would still celebrate governance as a mechanism for channeling the “will of the people.” But unlike liberal democracy, illiberal democracy might stipulate “the people” in narrow, exclusionary terms. It would likely treat rights not as universal attributes of the citizenry but as privileges reserved for those fully included in “the people.” And it would eschew consensus-based processes in favor of despotic tactics—such as executive orders or political violence—in order to transform the “will of the people” into political decisions and outcomes.

The concept of illiberal democracy helps clarify the politics of Trump, who has often presented himself as a crusader for popular rule of an exclusionary kind. Fueled by racist tropes and xenophobic banter, Trump’s populist promises to “drain the swamp” and build America as “Great Again” are also calls to reclaim a lost American democracy—one that re-asserts an anachronistic version of “the people” who presumably have been abandoned by the Democratic Party and its progressive, multiracial politics. While Trump’s attempts to overturn the 2020 election results can be chalked up to sheer self-interest, many of his supporters were genuinely baffled that roughly half the country’s voters could have cast votes for Biden—as much as Biden supporters found themselves baffled that nearly half could have voted for Trump. As much as an authoritarian power grab, their insistence and effort to “stop the steal” can *also* be read as disclosing a peculiarly “democratic” conviction among those conservatives supporting Trump’s presidency: a conviction that Trump represents the will of (“real”) Americans—and that if the electoral process failed to produce him as a winner, then there must be something wrong with how that process was executed.

Even explicit conservative rejections of US democracy—the quip, for example, that the United States is better off as a republic than a democracy because a democracy, as the saying goes, “is two wolves voting on what to do with a sheep”⁹¹—reveal not a straightforward call to authoritarianism but rather a clear, if contrived, allegiance to “the will of the people.” As Braunstein⁹² notes in her comparison of conservative and liberal civic organizations, Americans across the political spectrum express “a profound faith in the American democratic project itself and

a conviction that ordinary citizens have played a crucial role in propelling this project forward.” Whether these are opportunistic rhetorical moves rather than sincere investments in democracy is beside the point; approaching democracy as simply a system of governance based on the will of the people opens the door for exactly this kind of impasse because democracy, crucially and frustratingly, leaves open the questions of *who*, precisely, counts as the “people” and *how*, exactly, their “will” is to be represented.⁹³ Though *liberal* democracies have inclusive answers to these questions, there is no a priori reason that illiberal understandings of “the people” and illiberal forms of enacting their “will” might not also be incorporated into a governing apparatus that—by virtue of seeding its legitimacy in the will of the people—would earn the moniker of “democracy.” No reason, that is, other than our own investment in democracy *as* a liberal institution.

Rather than a benchmark of liberal institutions and norms, American democracy has historically been a struggle over *which* people are included in government’s legitimating “will” and *how* that will is “represented.” Moving through their everyday political lives, people help to constitute those realities by forging who is included in “the people,” which aspects of their “will” rise to the occasion of governance, and how that “will” should best be championed. Democratic imagination is not just about levels of civic engagement or enthusiasm about liberal norms; the very heart of democracy—that is, what democracy means as a system that celebrates the “will of the people”—is at stake. Opening up the terrain of democracy beyond the presumption of liberalism allows us to analyze a much more contested struggle over democracy—one that takes shape not just in high-level political machinations but also through the everyday practices and meanings forged by people on the ground.

Evidence

Recognizing the contemporary conservative movement as a multifaceted phenomenon, this book focuses on gun politics as one window into conservative politics, and it primarily relies on in-depth interviews

with gun retailers and analysis of contemporary pro-gun media, as well as historical and legal accounts that help put the 2020 crisis into context. Situated at the intersection of gun markets, gun politics, and gun culture, gun sellers are in the business, quite obviously, of selling guns. Gun sellers are certainly the financial beneficiaries of strident efforts by the gun lobby to protect their industry as a matter of rights. No doubt, they gain from the deregulation of firearms and the protection of gun rights, which have translated into new markets and surging profits for those in the gun industry. But expansive gun laws are *simultaneously* about championing rights, safeguarding a culture practice, *and* protecting a market.⁹⁴ Chalking up the incentives of gun sellers to mere profit motives, however, vastly simplifies the cultural work that happens within, around, and through the marketization of gun rights. As they sell the firearms central to the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms, gun sellers also shape how those rights are engaged and exercised.

To put this into sociological perspective, recall that deliberative spaces are crucial building blocks for what Jürgen Habermas⁹⁵ theorized as the “public sphere”—that arena where citizens can discuss public issues, exchange ideas, and eventually form public opinion that reflects mutual understandings. The public sphere paved the way, in Habermas’s⁹⁶ view, for the rise of Western democracy by providing a means of organizing people—and their multitudes of attitudes, ideas, and opinions—into a public with coherent political objectives and cohesive expectations about how to reach those objectives. Refracted into our contemporary context of raging partisanship, gun stores are not entirely unlike the nineteenth-century coffeehouses and salons that, as Habermas⁹⁷ saw it, provided the infrastructure for the public sphere. Gun stores are *not* spaces of yawning political discourse that can traverse the spectrum of views (nor were the coffeehouses and salons of the past, although many have idealized them as such). Rather, gun stores are vibrant arenas for debates *within* conservative politics.

From the conservative, pro-Trump signage some hung on their walls to the political banter many encouraged among their customers and employees, almost every gun seller I interviewed intimated that political engagement was inextricable from the business they ran. Customers

hoping to simply buy a gun might instead find themselves in the middle of a lecture on gun laws, the ethics of self-defense, and perhaps chastised for not voting for Trump. Employees might spend their downtime wondering about the likeliest cause of the Apocalypse or bemoaning the latest anti-gun power grab by Democrats. During one interview, a gun seller suddenly put me on speaker phone with a crew of his customers and employees; I didn't realize until they started energetically responding to what I thought were questions he was posing rhetorically—in fact, he had an audience! Apparently, he just couldn't pass up the opportunity to turn our one-on-one interview into a communal ritual of political banter.

Gun sellers sell guns, but they also build political culture. While this everyday politics, as this book will show, largely operated within quite conservative parameters, the active engagement of gun sellers in building conservative culture from the ground up upends the presumption that conservatives are political dupes “clinging to guns and religion.”⁹⁸ Rather, gun stores (alongside shooting ranges, gun training, gun shows, and even other pro-gun businesses adjacent to the gun industry—like the coffee brand Black Rifle Coffee) provide space for conservative gun rights proponents to share and sharpen their views. Politics appears as part of the “package deal” of running a gun store—something that gun sellers provide and gun buyers expect, too. Indeed, the only real exception⁹⁹ to this was one of the few self-identified left-leaning gun sellers I interviewed: citing the “us versus them” mentality, “blatant racism,” and “crazy antics” she observed in her store and the broader gun culture, she took advantage of the lockdown orders of 2020 to permanently close the public-facing portion of her gun store, putting some distance between herself and the customers who came there looking not just to buy a gun but also to talk gun politics.

The 50 gun sellers interviewed for this book span four states in order to maximize variation in state-level gun cultures, gun laws, and—crucially—responses to the multilayered crises of 2020: fourteen gun sellers in Arizona, twelve in California, fourteen in Florida, and ten in Michigan. Rather than big-box gun retailers like Cabela's or Walmart, the gun sellers I interviewed ran independent “mom-and-pop” shops that were not beholden to the kinds of business guidelines that might

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