

**ATTITUDES ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: PEOPLE DO SEEK
BALANCED INFORMATION AND WILL CHANGE THEIR ATTITUDES
ON POLICIES BUT NOT VALUES**

Lu Zeng, Dawei Da and John Leddo

MyEdMaster, LLC

John Leddo is the director of research at MyEdMaster, LLC.

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ABSTRACT

Today's political world is highly polarized with a great deal of animosity on each side for the opposing side. This polarization is amplified by media that cater to partisan positions on issues, creating a narrative that people seek out information sources that bolster their initial positions and then emerge more convinced that their side is right and the opposing side is wrong. The present study investigates people's openness to examining information on both sides of an issue and whether such examination can move people's attitudes. 19 high school students were given a questionnaire that asked them about their attitudes on guns. The questionnaire contained purely value-related questions like whether guns are good or bad and policy-related questions like whether teachers should carry guns in the classroom. Participants were then given access to information pieces that were labeled as to their content and which side of the gun debate they advocated. Participants were allowed to view as many or as few of the pieces as they chose. After viewing the information, participants were given the questionnaire again to see if any changes occurred in their attitudes towards guns. Results showed no correlation between initial opinion on guns and whether pro or anti-gun information was looked at. Rather, there was a strong correlation between the number of pro-gun and anti-gun information pieces viewed, suggesting that people differed in the amount of information they sought rather than the type. In absolute terms, Participants' attitudes changed on only one question, with Participants becoming more likely to believe teachers should carry guns in classrooms. Related to this, there were three questions for which Participants' change in attitude scores correlated negatively with their initial scores: whether teachers should carry guns in the classroom, whether there should be stricter gun laws and whether assault weapons should be banned. These findings suggest that while

people are unlikely to change their overall values on guns, they may be more willing to change their beliefs on specific gun-related policies.

Introduction

Today's political world seems highly polarized, particularly in the United States. People seem so divided on issues such as abortion, gun control, affirmative action that compromise seems virtually impossible between the opposing sides. In Congress, votes are often cast along political party lines, and even within the US Supreme Court, we see rulings that appear to be divided along ideological lines.

This polarization bleeds into the news and social media with channels that cater to liberals or conservatives, rather than being the impartial presenters of information that were prevalent decades ago. This polarization has given rise to the colloquialism "living in a bubble." Here, the narrative goes something like this: people on each end of the political spectrum seek out information sources that conform to their existing world views. These sources present one-sided views of the issues, which in turn reinforce people's existing preconceptions. Moreover, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that the partisan information sources typically demonize the other side such that Donald Trump's campaign slogan of MAGA ("make America great again") becomes a derisive label liberals use for conservatives and "woke" serves the same purpose for conservatives when describing liberals. The result is that the country becomes more divided and more hostile to the opposing side.

This type of polarization can be explained by social scientists. For example, Fischer et al. (2010) found that people often seek out information that is consistent with their beliefs, a phenomenon known as selective exposure. Del Vicario et al. (2017) demonstrated that online users frequently chose information that supported their worldviews and disregarded contradictory data. Once such confirmatory information is found, people become even more convinced in their original points of view (Lord et al., 1979).

Polarization can affect not only information selection but also information recall. Hastie and Park (2005) found that people were more likely to remember information that supported their beliefs than that which contradicted them.

The confluence of these factors—selective information search, selective recall, strengthening of previous beliefs—can lead to beliefs that are extreme. Researchers have found that people tend to be even more certain about their beliefs when those beliefs are extreme (cf. Heinzlmann and Tran, 2022). When people amplify each other's extreme beliefs, polarization occurs. Here is where the news and social media outlets come into play. Media personalities can add fuel to the amplification of extreme views, thereby causing polarization (Lim, 2022).

Collectively, the above analysis presents a bleak picture. It suggests that we may be trapped in a never-ending spiral of polarization leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of selective information and social reinforcement of extreme political views. The present study investigates whether this cycle is inevitable or whether people will seek out balanced information and be made less extreme as a result of it. The topic of gun control/gun owners' rights was chosen as the testbed as this is one of the most polarizing issues in America today.

Method

Participants

Participants were 19 high school students, 12 were recruited from Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax County; 7 were recruited from Broadwater Academy in Exmore, Virginia.

Paul VI Catholic High School located in Northern Virginia, which the students predominantly have a similar political standpoint. Broadwater Academy located on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, does not have unified political leaning, students living in this area have a mix of political tendencies.

Materials

There were two types of materials used in the survey. One was a questionnaire regarding beliefs about guns. The questions are listed below.

1. What is your gender?
2. Do you think guns are good or bad?
3. What is your opinion about "Assault weapons should be banned"
4. What is your opinion about "Teachers should have firearms in the classroom"
5. What is your opinion about the "Gun violence is rising"?
6. Do you believe that mass shootings are a gun control issue?
7. Do you believe that mass shootings are a mental health issue?
8. Do you favor and oppose a federal law requiring background checks on all potential gun buyers
9. Do you believe stricter gun laws would reduce violence in the future?

10. Do you agree that law should make the sale of guns stricter?

The second was materials that included online articles, statistics, websites, and videos that advocate for both gun rights and gun control. These materials are described below.

Advocate for gun right

Online Article:

1. Describes data says about gun deaths in the U.S. and states that the majority of death caused by gun violence is suicide.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/03/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>

2. Never Enough: Congressional Democrats Ignore the Constitution and Reality to Push Futile Gun Ban

<https://www.nraila.org/articles/20220716/never-enough-congressional-democrats-ignore-the-constitution-and-reality-to-push-futile-gun-ban>

3. Self-Defense Gun Use

https://vpc.org/revealing-the-impacts-of-gun-violence/self-defense-gun-use/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6_CYBhDjARIsABnuSzrtpfLGBuhrj6Un1zKOMLTM8axfZP4mz3LcW_o_kJpaIpskWjMtTKhUaAtYcEALw_wcB

Website:

1 The NRA website is a national rifle association supporting gun rights and advocating for gun ownership.

<https://www.nraila.org>

2.Pew Research Center is a professional think tank that provides accurate and comprehensive data and analysis.

<https://www.gunowners.org/>

3. The analysis, provided by Harvard University, shares the multiple-side information of guns.

https://gunresponsibility.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6_CYBhDjARIsABnuSzrPsOC8DnGJnkveeEFQhdDwlmodqokA5YuoVOd9WdyWMrGdIpg-08aApHkEALw_wcB

Statistic:

1. The data in this website show the demographic difference of the gun violence rate in each state.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/massachusetts-population>

Video:

1. This video briefly describes the gun situation in Switzerland.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjIT4BME2aE>Switzerland:

2. This video analyzes the reasons behind the gun situation in Switzerland.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgYJ5V2HYy4>Switzerland's

Advocate for gun control

Online Article:

1. Broad Public Approval of New Gun Law, but Few Say It Will Do a Lot To Stem Gun Violence. The article states that the majority of Americans want Congress to pass more gun policy legislation.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/07/11/broad-public-approval-of-new-gun-law-but-few-say-it-will-do-a-lot-to-stem-gun-violence/>

2. America's gun culture - in seven charts. The article provides multiple facts about guns in the United States, including the statistics of mass shootings and people's attitude toward gun control.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>

3. The staggering scope of U.S. gun deaths goes far beyond mass shootings. The article states the fact that deaths caused by guns do not only occur in mass shootings, but everywhere.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2022/gun-deaths-per-year-usa/>

Website:

1. This website covers vicious incidents about abusing gun rights and urges the people to pay attention about the incremental gun violence.

<https://www.bradyunited.org/>

2. This website indicates the urgency of solving the gun issues and provides the solution to how we can terminate it.

<https://www.everytown.org>

3. A youth-led movement that urges the young people to find the solution of gun violence.

<https://www.teamenough.org/>

Statistic:

1. The website visualizes the incremental gun violence in the past and provides a multiple perspective about gun issues to us.

<https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-violence-statistics/>

2. The website uses the actual quantity to indicate the social issue caused by gun violence.

<https://www.bradyunited.org/key-statistics>

Video:

1. The incremental concerns and threats to public health caused by gun violence.

<https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/gun-violence>

2. The true stories about how gun violence either bothers or threatens these teenagers' lives.

<https://youtu.be/CMTKNe4Dhrs>

Procedure

Participants were first given the questionnaire to determine their initial attitudes toward gun rights/gun control. They were then shown links to the different information sources. These links were grouped by whether they advocated for gun control or gun owners' rights and were labeled with a summary of their contents. Each group also was labeled by whether the content advocated gun owners' rights or gun control. The labels on both the groups and the individual content pieces served to notify participants of which side of the issue the information piece was on. This was done to prevent people from checking all the sources in search of those that confirmed their side. Participants were allowed to access as many or as few information sources as they wanted and were given unlimited time to do so. Once they were done looking at information sources, they were given the questionnaire again to see if there were any changes in their attitudes.

Results

One of the main contentions is that people tend to favor information that conforms to their prior views on a topic. Therefore, it would be expected that people who favor gun control would be more likely to look at information that argues in favor of gun control and less likely to look at information that argues in favor of gun owners' rights. Similarly, it would be expected that people who favor gun owners' rights would be more likely to look at information that argues in favor of gun owners' rights and less likely to look at information that argues in favor of gun control.

To test whether the data support this contention, we looked at people's initial ratings of whether they thought guns were good or bad and how many sources of information they looked at that were pro-gun control and were pro-gun owners' rights. Regarding the question on whether guns were good or bad, the lower the rating, the worse the participants thought guns were. Therefore, if a person tended to look at information that supported their initial attitudes on guns, there would be a negative correlation between ratings of guns and how many pro-gun control sources of information were viewed. Instead, the correlation is .20, which is statistically not different from 0, suggesting that participants were no more likely to look at sources advocating gun control if they thought guns were bad.

Similarly, if the contention that people look at data that support their initial attitudes were true, we would expect a positive correlation between the participants' ratings of guns and the number of sources advocating gun owners' rights that they looked at. Instead, the correlation is .15, which is statistically not different from 0, suggesting that participants were no more likely to look at sources advocating gun owners' rights if they thought guns were good.

On the other hand, what is interesting is that there was a positive correlation of .87, $p < .001$, between the number of pro-gun regulation sources and the number of pro-gun owners' rights sources that participants checked. This suggests that rather than being selective in the information they used, participants differed in the amount of information they used as the range in number of sources viewed went from 2 to 19. Notably, in all cases, participants viewed a minimum of one source each that was pro-gun control and pro-gun owners' rights.

Given that the initial position on the gun issue did not affect information seeking behavior, the next question one could ask is whether viewing sources of information changed anyone's attitudes on the issues. This can be looked at in two ways: did a person's initial position influence their final position, and were there any issues where people changed across the board, regardless of their initial positions?

Of nine survey questions not related to gender, in only one question was there a statistically significant change in attitude as a result of viewing the available sources. This question was whether teachers should have guns in the classroom. Interestingly, on average, participants moved 1.5 points in the direction of favoring teachers having guns in the classroom, paired $t = 2.28$, $df = 18$, $p < .05$. For this question, participants' initial positions correlated $-.51$, $p < .05$, with a change in their final positions, meaning that the higher their initial positions, the greater the drop in their final positions was likely to be. This could not be due to a ceiling effect since initial ratings for this question ran the full gamut with a range of 2-9. There were only two other questions for which participants' initial positions had a statistically significant correlation with a change in their final positions. The first question was whether assault weapons should be banned. Here, too, the correlation was negative $r = -.66$, $p < .01$ —suggesting that the higher the initial position, the greater the drop in their final positions was likely to be. The second question was the one that asked whether gun laws needed to be stricter. Again, the correlation was negative $r = -.56$, $p < .05$ —suggesting that the higher the initial position, the greater the drop in their final positions was likely to be.

There was one other notable finding. In addition to asking whether initial attitudes influence information sought or final attitudes, one can ask whether the information sources themselves affected people's attitudes. This gets to the fundamental question of how persuadable people are. In general, there was no statistically significant correlation between the number of information sources that a participant was exposed to, on either side of the issue, and the amount of attitude change registered on any of the questions. The notable exception was that the attitude change score for the question of stricter gun laws correlated negatively with both the number of pro-gun control ($r = -.66$, $p < .01$) and pro-gun owners' rights ($r = -.65$, $p < .01$) sources the participants used. This result is not surprising since it appeared that, based on our data described above, stricter gun laws is an issue that people are willing to change their attitudes on. Also, given the high correlation between the number of pro-gun control and pro-gun owners' rights sources used, it is not surprising that the two correlations between number of sources and attitude change are virtually identical.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that people are open to viewing information on both sides of controversial issues. Rather than being partisan, participants generally viewed roughly equal numbers of pro-gun control and pro-gun owners' rights sources, suggesting that they were being balanced in their information seeking. Given the high ($r = .87$) correlation between the number of pro-gun control and pro-gun owners' rights information sources people chose to read, the real distinction seems to be people who seek lots of information on an issue and those who are content to seek limited information.

The second major finding related to whether the information sources were able to move people's attitudes or whether people were unmovable from their initial positions.

Positions that moved seemed to be more ones that described action items like banning guns, arming teachers, or making gun laws stricter than purely attitudinal ones like whether guns are good or bad or cause mental health problems.

From a big picture perspective, the present results go against the intuitive notion that in today's polarized world, the only information that people seek out is that which confirms their existing positions and that such information only strengthens those positions. Rather, regardless of initial position on an issue, participants were generally balanced on the side of the issue of the information they sought out. Similarly, people were not as resistant to change as is generally assumed. However, the key finding here is that people seem more willing to change not their general values or world views, but rather what actions they are willing to see happen in society. For example, proponents of strong gun control laws who see guns as bad may continue to see guns as bad and want them controlled, but they may also be willing to accept the idea that teachers could carry guns in the classroom to protect children. This explains why even a majority of pro-gun advocates favor universal background checks on gun purchases or child safety locks on guns. One can favor those things without changing one's overall views about guns and risking a state of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

The implications for this may be that the winning strategy for those on opposing sides of an issue is not to focus on convincing the other side to change allegiances but rather to concentrate on what action items the other side can live with. This conclusion is consistent with findings by Bruneau et al. (2022) who report research on bringing together both sides of a military conflict by focusing on attitudes that each side may be willing to change about the other.

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