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Persisting in Paradox

Gun Violence Prevention and the Boundaries of Political Opportunity

Mila Seppälä

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Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science
Political Science with a focus on North American Studies
Doctoral Programme of Social and Behavioural Sciences

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The originality of this publication has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

ISBN 978-952-02-0662-8 (PRINT)
ISBN 978-952-02-0663-5 (PDF)
ISSN 0082-6987 (Print)
ISSN 2343-3191 (Online)
Painosalama, Turku, Finland 2026

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU
Faculty of Social Sciences
Philosophy, Contemporary History, and Political Science
Political science with a focus on North American studies
MILA SEPPÄLÄ: Persisting in Paradox: Gun Violence Prevention and the Boundaries of Political Opportunity
Doctoral Dissertation, 214 pp.
Doctoral Programme of Social and Behavioural Sciences
May 2026

ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the development of the gun violence prevention movement in the United States. The dissertation is an article-based compilation that consists of four peer-reviewed articles. The articles trace the movement from its beginning in the 1960s to today and examine 1) how the movement has defined and framed the issue of gun violence, 2) the types of actions and goals members of the movement have employed and articulated, and 3) the shifting political, historical, and cultural context that has shaped the political opportunities available to advocates.

The analysis in the articles is based primarily on materials collected during three fieldwork periods conducted in Austin, Texas (2018, 2019, 2021–2022). Newspaper articles, social media posts, adverts, podcasts, white papers, a documentary related a youth-led gun violence prevention movements, and media reporting on mass shootings complement written testimonials, non-participant and participant observation, and semi-structured interviews.

Considering the findings of the articles under the broader theoretical framework of political process theory (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015), the dissertation argues that gun violence prevention has developed in three related and overlapping but distinct cycles: gun violence as crime, gun violence as disease, and gun violence as insecurity. Furthermore, exploring the three cycles through defining *key events, groups,* and *political opportunities*, the dissertation makes three claims. First, that definitions about gun violence have moved toward a much more comprehensive understanding of the problem. Second, that strategies have changed from issue advocacy by interest groups at the federal level toward active resistance at a local, grassroots level. Third, that political opportunities for gun violence prevention have been broadened as a result of engagement outside the state institutions. The dissertation considers more broadly why gun control has mostly failed in the United States and makes an argument for the possibilities that local level grassroots activism holds for social movements contending with culturally polarizing issues.

KEYWORDS: gun violence, social movements, youth activism, political imagination, political opportunities, issue definitions, movement strategies, mass shooting reporting, media polarization, security/insecurity

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MILA SEPPÄLÄ: Sitkeästi Paradoksissa: Aseväkivallan Ehkäisy ja Poliittisten Mahdollisuuksien Rajat
Väitöskirja, 214 s.
Yhteiskunta- ja käyttäytymistieteiden tohtoriohjelma
Toukokuu 2026

TIIVISTELMÄ

Väitöskirjassa tarkastellaan aseväkivallan ehkäisyyn pyrkivää yhteiskunnallista liikettä Yhdysvalloissa. Neljässä väitöskirja-artikkelissa tarkastellaan liikettä 1960-luvulta nykypäivään ja keskitytään kolmeen pääteemaan: 1) miten aktivistit ovat määrittäneet ja kehystäneet aseväkivaltaongelman, 2) millaisia strategioita ja tavoitteita aktivistit ovat hyödyntäneet ja sanoittaneet ja 3) miten alati muuttuva poliittinen, historiallinen ja kulttuurillinen konteksti Yhdysvalloissa on vaikuttanut aktivistien poliittisiin mahdollisuuksiin.

Väitöskirjassa käytetään aineistoa, jotka on kerätty pääasiallisesti kolmen kenttätyömatkan aikana Texasissa (2018, 2019, 2021–2022). Aineisto koostuu kirjoitelmista, osallistuvasta ja ei-osallistuvasta havainnoinnista sekä teemahaastatteluista. Tämän lisäksi täydentävää aineistoa kerättiin lehtiartikkeleista, sosiaalisesta mediasta, mainoksista, podcasteista, virallisista kannanotoista ja nuorten aktivismiin keskittyvästä dokumenttielokuvasta.

Yhteenvedossa artikkelien loppupäätelmiä tarkastellaan poliittisen prosessiteorian viitekehyksen kautta (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Tämän tarkastelun pohjalta väitöskirja esittää, että liikkeen kehityksen voi jakaa kolmeen päällekkäiseen, mutta toisistaan eroavaan sykliin. Syklit perustuvat aseväkivaltaongelman pääasiallisiin määrittelyihin: aseväkivalta rikoksena, yhteiskuntaa vaivaavana tautina ja turvattomuutena. Lisäksi väitöskirja keskittyy eri sykleissä esiintyviin päätapahtumiin, ryhmiin sekä poliittisiin mahdollisuuksiin ja tekee kolme väitettä. Ensinnäkin aseväkivaltaongelman määritelmät ovat muuttuneet kokonaisvaltaisemmaksi. Toiseksi liike on siirtynyt kansallisella tasolla toimivasta etujärjestöliikkeestä kohti paikallistason vastarintaliikettä. Kolmanneksi liikkeen poliittiset mahdollisuudet ovat lisääntyneet tämän muutoksen myötä. Väitöskirjassa pohditaan yleisemmin, miksi aseita rajoittava politiikka on pääosin epäonnistunut Yhdysvalloissa sekä niitä mahdollisuuksia, joita paikallistason aktivismi antaa kulttuurisesti polarisoivia asioita käsitteleville liikkeille.

ASIASANAT: aseväkivalta, yhteiskunnalliset liikkeet, nuorisoaktivismi, poliittinen mielikuvitus, poliittiset mahdollisuudet, ongelmamääritelmät, liikestrategiat, joukkoammuskelut, media polarisaatio, turvallisuus/turvattomuus

Acknowledgements

My dissertation at its core is about people and community. It is pretty fitting then, that the process of me learning how to write that dissertation, and everything else that comes with it, is just as much about people and community. There would be no dissertation without my community and no budding academic career without my people. It takes a village to raise a child and a Ph.D. student. Bear with me as I try to express my appreciation to some of the many people who made this happen.

I will start by thanking Benita Heiskanen, my first supervisor, whose enthusiasm, resourcefulness, and tenacity inspired me endlessly, whose belief in me kept me going even when I did not see the light, and who taught me basically everything I know about academia. You gave me my community. If there is one thing I know, it is that I could have never made it here without you. Wherever I go, I will carry your words of advice with me for the rest of my life. Thank you to Henri Vogt, my second supervisor, who took me on board on a chance, who told me it is okay to slow down and read books, and enjoy the things I had in the here and now, and who had the uncanny ability to give the most useful advice when I least expected it. Thank you to my last supervisor, Michael Hansen, who saw me struggle with the vast unstructured ocean that is Finnish academia. Thank you for the reading lists and for the practical lessons. Even more importantly, thank you for listening, for the food and the laughs, and for seeing me.

Thank you to both Laura Browder and Tuomas Ylä-Anttila for your excellent pre-examination comments, for taking the time to provide insightful feedback, and for engaging so thoughtfully with the core aims of my research. Special thank you to Laura Browder for agreeing to be my opponent. The most exciting part of my defense is getting the opportunity to talk to you about my research.

Thank you to my village at the John Morton Center for North American Studies. All of you have read and commented on the first and last drafts of my dissertation. The grant writing bootcamps were exceptional. You put me through the paces and I am a much better academic because of it. Thank you, first and foremost, Pekka Kolehmainen, for taking me along for the Collapse ride, for trusting me with the project, and always being down to geek out, both at work and outside of it. Thank you, Jaakko Dickman, for being such a great office roommate and providing me with

much needed emotional and peer support. Sometimes I wanted to cry in front of my computer while working on my dissertation, but with you I always laughed instead. Thank you, Niko Heikkilä, for always going along with all of our craziness. Thank you, Oscar Winberg, for always providing insightful comments and asking the necessary questions at workshops that made my work better. Thank you for the banter too and for laughing about the boat. Thank you, Nadia Nava Contreras, for your encouragement and for always finding a new angle to look at things. Thank you, Olli Saukko, for your advice on how to do this thing called defense. Thank you, Julia Niinistö, for speaking my language, for the million silly jokes, and for making the grey hallways of Publicum so much brighter.

Thank you to all others who I have met during my years working at the JMC. Thank you, Malla Lehtonen, for writing my first ever article with me. I wish all writing would be as easy as it was with you. Thank you, Maiju Kannisto and Kirsi Cheas, for working with me on first ever project and providing me with feedback and support when I really did not know anything. Thank you, Reetta Humalajoki, for all the writing sessions. In the last 500 meters of the marathon that was my dissertation, you're the one who picked me up and pushed me to the finish line. Thank you, Tuula Kolehmainen, for "the unsolicited advice corner" that was always wise and always helpful. I know, you can relate. Thank you, María Gutiérrez Bascón, for staying up late with me and having the best intellectual conversations of my life at 1 AM. Thank you to Lotta Kähkönen, Samira Saramo, Albion M. Butters, Henna-Riikka Pennanen, Sampo Ruoppila, and Elina Kestilä-Kekkonen. Your comments and advice helped me grow as an academic and as a person.

Thank you to everyone in political science for so graciously welcoming this oddball in. Thank you for the seminars and the beer group, for the lively discussions, for giving me feedback about the dissertation, and for advice about academia in general. This includes basically all of you, which says something. Thank you to all my more experienced colleagues Maija Setälä, Antti Pajala, Juha Vuori, Heino Nyyssönen, Anna Kronlund, Juho Ylisalo, Mikko Leino, and to my seminar peers Teemu Rantanen, Katariina Kulha, Waltteri Immonen, Sakari Nieminen, and Kimmo Makkonen. Thank you, Sami Torssonen, for the Capital reading seminar, easily the best detour of my dissertation. The many grumpy old social democrats in my family, also thank you, with cigars and whiskey.

Thank you, Suvi Salmenniemi and Leena Vastapuu, for the feminist book club, for taking imagination and utopias seriously, and for the most insightful and helpful conversations I have ever had about navigating academia as a young woman. Words cannot begin to describe how much I admire you and the work you do. Thank you to Isabelle Johansson for asking me what the problem is about. You got me out every time I lost sight of what I was doing.

Thank you to Harel Shapira for being my host supervisor at the University of Texas at Austin. Your help with the IRB process and setting up those first interviews was invaluable. Thank you to the whole Department of American Studies at UT Austin. You took me in and showed me the very best of an academic community. I will forever be grateful to you for the experience and no matter what happens, I will never forget the important work you do. Thank you to Janet Davis, Julia Mickenberg, and Randolph Lewis for your hospitality and for Taylor, Bahar, Hartlyn, Eliane, and Laura for giving me a family so far from home.

Thank you to the Department of English at the University of Turku for getting me started on my Ph.D. journey in the first place. Thank you, Attila Krizsán, for being my endlessly creative and inspiring Master's thesis supervisor and the first person to ask if I had thought about doing a Ph.D. – I had not. I did not even know it was a thing people could do. Thank you, Matti Peikola, for being my supervisor for those very first years, for always being so encouraging, and for getting me excited about historical linguistics even if that part of my research interests did not make into my dissertation (maybe someday). Thank you, Damon Tringham, for proofreading the final version of this dissertation. A full circle moment that I was really happy for.

Thank you to my peers at DocSoBe. We did not have a community for doctoral researchers but you made it happen. My last years of doing a Ph.D. were so much richer because of you. You also made me into an association person (oh, the horror). Thank you to Zoé Allen-Mercier, Ville Kokko, Kristiina Teppo, Samuli Laine, Jerkko Holmi, and many others for those very early days of organizing and for Matti Eskelinen, Essi Saloranta, and Toni Rajala for expertly steering the ship.

Thank you to the Doctoral Programme of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Turku for providing me with a salaried position for four years to work on my dissertation. The position gave me invaluable and frankly extraordinary amounts of freedom to just focus on my research. I will remember this privilege fondly for the rest of my career. Thank you to Fulbright Finland Foundation for being the first to believe in my project enough to fund it and allowing me to conduct the bulk of my fieldwork in the United States even amidst a global pandemic no one knew what to do with. The support provided by Fulbright Finland Foundation was exceptional and made this project into what it was. Thank you to Alfred Kordelin Foundation for funding the last year of my dissertation and being ever so graciously flexible with plans that kept changing.

Over the years, I have had so many friends that have supported me through this process of writing a dissertation. Thank you, Tiia, you know me the best and you have been a part of me for so long I do not even know where or who I would be without you. Thank you, Sarkku, for putting up with me in the same apartment for almost ten years and offering me gentle mothering when I was too tired for such

executive functions as dressing for the weather or calling the electric company. Thank you, Elin, for some of the most memorable times of my life and literally being down for anything, from the frat house experience of Scotland to road trips in the US, for Ph.D.-related freakouts, for practicing with me for my very first conference and media appearances and for proofreading my texts, you did it all. Thank you to Siiri, Ellis, Jukka, Tommi, Noora, Ronja, Timo, Laura, Katri, Tiina, Heidi, and many others for listening and taking me out whenever I needed.

Thank you to my three wonderful godsons for giving me perspective and reminding me what life is about. Thank you to my siblings Ina, Inka, Roni, and Jasu for being there for me and for the many times you helped me work by forcing me to take breaks. I know. That is what I needed. Thank you, Ropo, for being the best, most supportive person a stepdaughter could ever hope for. Thank you, Riitta, Emmi, Heidi, and Katja, for being the best second family. Thank you, dad, for the music that played as the soundtrack to all my writing and for my sense of humor.

Thank you, mom, for teaching me that there is nothing I cannot do, for leading me to where I am with your relentless faith in my capabilities, and for showing me that no one can stop the women in our family from doing exactly what they set out to do. Must be something in the water or that I am my mother's daughter.

This dissertation is for my interviewees. Your time and experience made my project possible. Hopefully, I was able to do justice to how much your work matters.

May 2026
Mila Seppälä

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List of Original Publications

This dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I Lehtonen, M., & Seppälä, M. (2021). "Like a double-edged sword:" Student testimonials on Campus Carry in Texas. *Journal of American Studies, 55*(2), 274–285. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875820001401.

II Seppälä, M. (2022). Radical political imagination and generational utopias: Gun control as a site of youth activism. In B. Heiskanen, A. M. Butters, & P. M. Kolehmainen (Eds.), *Up in arms: Gun imaginaries in Texas* (pp. 134–163). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004514676_007.

III Seppälä, M. (2024). Partisan media bias in the framing of the Parkland school shooting and the March For Our Lives movement. *Journal of Mass Violence Research*. https://doi.org/10.53076/JMVR53552.

IV Seppälä, M. (2025). "Let it go:" Finding possibilities for new movement strategies after failure. *European Journal of American Studies*, *20*. https://doi.org/10.4000/14eiq.

1 Introduction

1.1 Defining the Paradox

This article-based dissertation studies the development of the gun violence prevention movement in the United States. The articles trace the movement from its conception in the 1960s to today and examine 1) how the movement has defined and framed the issue of gun violence, 2) the types of actions and goals that members of the movement have employed and articulated, and 3) the shifting political, historical, and cultural context that has shaped the political opportunities available to advocates. Using ethnographic methods, the dissertation explores particularly how the interpretations that movement members themselves had about the issue worked to illuminate or obfuscate their political opportunities amidst significant structural obstacles.

Why has gun control largely failed in the United States? In 2024, the Gun Violence Archive recorded 40,971 gun-related deaths in the United States, of which 24,156 were suicides. Gun homicides and suicides have been steadily rising in the 21st century (Gun Violence Archive, 2025; Mascia, 2022). Relative to population growth, with the exception of a spike during the COVID-19 pandemic, gun homicides have declined from 7.2 per 100 000 in 1974 to a rate of 5.6 per 100 000 in 2023 (Gramlich, 2025). However, even relative to population growth, gun suicides have only been increasing in the 2000s, and in 2023, 7.6 gun suicides per 100 000 matched the record-high levels of the 1970s (Gramlich, 2025). Southern states have the highest overall rates: in 2023, Mississippi recorded a rate of 29.4 gun-related deaths per 100 000, Louisiana 28.3, and Alabama 25.6 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). For the past decade, there have been more mass shootings in a year than there are days (Gun Violence Archive, 2025).

And yet, ever since the mid-20th century, the movement for extending gun rights has been slowly but surely winning both the legislative battle and the culture war on guns. In 2025, 29 states out of 50 allowed constitutional carry or permitless carry,,[1]

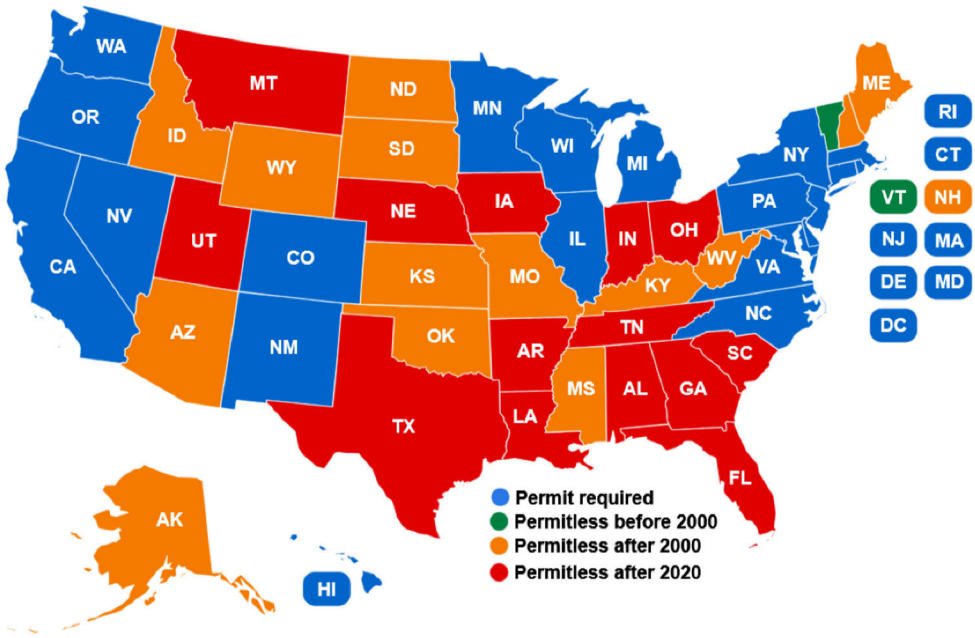
[1] Laws and requirements between states vary somewhat but generally, constitutional carry and permitless carry laws allow all those who can legally own a gun to carry it, open or concealed, in public spaces without a permit or a license. See, e.g., the Texas Firearm Carry Act of 2021 (Texas Legislature, 2021).

which meant residents could carry firearms without any permit. In all but Vermont, constitutional or permitless carry laws were passed in the last 20 years while in 16 of them, the laws were passed in the last five years (**Figure 1**) (USCCA, 2025). The only significant effect mass shootings have had on state level legislation is Republican-led legislatures enacting gun laws that loosen restrictions as a reaction to such tragedies (Luca et al., 2020). In the 1990s, 78% of Gallup respondents wanted stricter gun laws and only 2% wanted them to be less strict. In 2024, the issue had become more contested, with 57% in favor of more strict laws and 10% for less strict (Gallup, 2025).

The rapid increase of laws that loosen gun regulation, and the slower shift toward favorable views on these permissive laws among the general public have been driven by two primary forces. First, the gun rights movement has been extremely successful in advancing their agenda of as little gun regulation as possible within the conservative Republican Party (Goss, 2006; Melzer 2009; Rasmussen, 2020). Melzer (2009) argued that the National Rifle Association (NRA), through its effective grassroots operation on one hand, and aggressive lobbying and legislative strategy on the other, managed to define the terms of the gun debate better than any other organization or individual. The NRA is a well-funded organization run by membership dues and vast donations,[2] courtesy of the mutually beneficial relationship between gun rights organizations and gun manufacturers invested in maintaining a domestic market for their products (Haag, 2016).[3] Second, increasing partisan polarization, particularly on the issue of guns, has been driving both elite and popular opinions towards positions advocated by interest groups (Hansen & Seppälä, 2023; Miller, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021).

[2] Recently, this has become less true. In 2019, the Trace began to uncover a widespread corruption scheme within the NRA. In 2024, several members of NRA leadership, including the former CEO Wayne LaPierre, were found liable of corruption, mismanagement, and misuse of NRA funds (Freskos, 2024). In the wake of the corruption scandal, NRA has lost a significant amount of its revenue with plummeting membership fees and dwindling donations to their political action committee. However, many smaller organizations that are often pursuing even a more radical approach to gun carrying are filling the void left by NRA (Sant, 2024).

[3] It is difficult to estimate how much exactly is the revenue of the gun industry because most of the gun manufacturing companies are privately owned and are not mandated to release reports about their revenue. Calculated based on the revenue of the few largest gun manufacturers that are publicly traded, in 2025 rough estimates came to around $19.6 billion for U.S. gun and ammunition manufacturing, with around $9 billion just from the civilian-owned domestic gun market (Mascia, 2025).



Map created at www.fla-shop.com

Figure 1. Map tracking the states that require permits to carry and the states that became permitless carry after 2000 and 2020 to show the rapid spread of the policy. Map created by the author in October 2025.

In contrast, most studies have shown that the gun violence prevention movement, or the gun control movement as it was still known in the beginning of the 21st century, has been relatively weak, at times even non-existent (Carter, 1997; Goss, 2006; Vizzard, 2000). Goss (2006) theorized that an effective movement never grew on the other side of the gun debate due to the so-called gun control participation paradox, where most people want stricter gun control laws, but they do not mobilize to get them. This epitomizes the classical social movement theory about the collective action problem: it is not in the self-interest of anyone to take the costs of action for collective benefit (see e.g., Cook & Goss, 2014; Edwards, 2014). To mobilize people, costs of joining need to be lowered and benefits made concrete. Many studies show that there exists a pervasive gun culture in the United States, sustained in the everyday rituals of its believers (Carlson, 2015; Shapira et al., 2018; Stroud, 2016; Taylor, 2013), which has mobilized single-issue voters in a way that gun control simply does not (Conley, 2019; Goss, 2003; Goss, 2017). The NRA in particular has cultivated a politicized gun owner group identity within its members and imbued them with a sense that that identity is under threat, which has successfully mobilized gun owners into political action (Lacombe, 2019).

Moreover, organizations such as the NRA offer its gun-owning members very concrete benefits, such as discounts on events, training, educational programs, magazine, merchandise, museums, and insurances (Schwartz, 2022). The incentives to join a gun control advocacy group are very different and the benefits much less concrete. Furthermore, social regulatory policy is hard to implement and rally support around, especially on culturally significant issues (Cook & Goss, 2014; Spitzer, 1995).

There is no comparable industry to fund gun control efforts in the way gun manufacturers support efforts to make gun ownership and carrying as easy as possible. The discrepancy in funding is clear when it comes to campaign donations. During the 2024 Presidential Election, gun rights groups spent more than four times more money than gun control groups, even as they spent less money than the four years prior and gun control groups made the largest donation they had ever made (OpenSecrets, 2025a; OpenSecrets, 2025b). Consequently, as the movement remained weak and the opposition strong, the Democratic Party that generally favors government regulation only recently consolidated around supporting gun control policies (Quinn, 2019). The asymmetry of resources between the movement for gun rights and for gun violence prevention has ensured a much more stable growth on the side of gun rights that has also made it less reliant on "attention-grabbing moments" (Laschever & Meyer, 2021).

Comparing the gun rights and gun control movements and given the external structural obstacles to advocacy for gun violence prevention, it seems there is not much of a puzzle to study why gun control has failed in the United States. However, I argue that since the gun violence prevention movement has experienced unprecedented levels of mass mobilization in the 2010s, it is necessary to revisit the issue. First, it seems quite clear that the gun control participation paradox no longer holds true as people increasingly have begun to mobilize to advocate for gun control at least episodically. How then does activism for gun control happen even with the high cost of participation, where the benefits seem vague and far-off, and the opposition is better funded and has more political power? Can a social movement for gun violence prevention change the political opportunities available to them despite the structural obstacles? How much agency does civil society have? These are the broader questions that motivated this dissertation.

Previous research has focused on, for example, how women have managed to mobilize grassroots activism for gun violence prevention (Goss, 2003, 2017; Heiskanen, 2022; Kelley, 2022) and how young people have changed the discourse surrounding gun control (Holody & Shaughnessy, 2020; Rohlinger et al., 2022). Some have examined the difficulties the movement has faced in framing the problem in the more recent, more mobilized present (Metzl, 2024; Riemann, 2023; Ziminski, 2024). As far as I am aware, there has yet to be a comprehensive record that takes

into account both the historical trajectory of the movement and considers how new issue definitions, strategies, and goals have not only changed the movement but their prospects in sparking wider policy and societal change.

I begin the exploration by defining the gun violence prevention movement. I employed a movement definition by Tilly and Tarrow, who consider social movements to be "a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities" (2015, 11). I considered the core of the movement to be the largest national organizations advocating for gun violence prevention. I extended the boundaries to also include all the small local organizations that might have two volunteers, to those not working under any organization but participating in everyday forms of resistance, such as public claims-making as individuals through channels such as social media. I primarily use gun violence prevention to describe the movement that broadly speaking has been advocating for addressing the problem of gun violence through other means than by broadening so called gun rights the United States. The core of the movement has historically advocated for restricting access to guns, which is why the term gun control movement is also used to describe their historical positioning. However, members themselves mostly avoid using the term gun control and prefer gun violence prevention (see e.g. section 3.2.2. and article IV).

The first question I consider is how the gun violence prevention movement has defined the issue they have mobilized for. Rather than treating gun control as the inevitable, natural oppositional force to the gun rights movement, I problematize the problem definition. While the movement has avoided the term gun control to describe its activities, restricting access to guns has been de facto the core policy approach taken to solve the issue of gun violence for most of the history of the organizations and activists working in the field. The movement has defined the problem of gun violence primarily through the framework of access to guns, in direct opposition to the movement for gun rights, which I problematize in my dissertation. From this perspective, gun control becomes a type of *problematization* of what the issue is represented to be, a policy that in itself produces a certain type of problem (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This is not done in an effort to claim that the problem is not inherently about the existence and wide propagation of guns among the civilian population of the United States but to show how problem definitions delineate the boundaries of the type of strategies and goals available to activists. Thus, after problematizing the problem definition, I consider the strategies and movement goals that different problem definitions have produced. The final part of the analysis focuses on how the definitions and strategies have interacted with the political structures they have been employed in, how they have answered (or not

answered) existing opportunities, or if they have created new ones. The main research questions of this dissertation are:

1) How has the movement for gun reform defined the issue of gun violence?

2) How have the negotiations over the issue definition impacted the strategies and goals of the movement?

3) What kind of political opportunities have there been for gun violence prevention?

4) How has the movement responded, failed to respond, and changed the political opportunity structures within which they have operated?

5) Have the definitions, strategies, and political opportunities (RQ's 1-4) changed after the forming of the first gun control interest groups in the 1960s to the movement of today? If they have, how?

I consider the political opportunities of a movement to rise from both the interplay of the institutions and political systems that contextualize all political debate in any given society and the internal understanding movement members themselves have about the issue, its solutions, their opportunities, and their difficulties. McAdam argues that "collective action is almost always triggered by a significant shift in popular awareness and subjective understanding of the issue in question" (McAdam, 2017, p. 202). The way the movement has understood the issue plays a key part in their ability to create cracks in their political structure that allow room for change (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014; Holloway, 2010).

1.2 Compiling the Dissertation

Table 1. Research questions and dissertation articles.

	Article I: "Like a double-edged sword:" Student testimonials on Campus Carry in Texas (2021)	**Article II: Radical political imagination and generational utopias: Gun control as a site of youth activism (2022)**	**Article III: Partisan media bias in the framing of the Parkland school shooting and the March For Our Lives movement (2024)**	**Article IV: "Let it go:" The possibilities for new movement strategies after failure (2025)**
RQ1: How has the movement for gun reform defined the issue of gun violence?		Structural understanding of gun violence Gun violence as insecurity	Gun violence as access to guns Gun violence as an epidemic	Gun violence as access to guns, as an epidemic, as insecurity
RQ2: How have the negotiations over the issue definition impacted the strategies and goals of the movement?		Humor and art, changing culture Community violence prevention	Gun control legislation Electoral politics	Gun control legislation Research and education Community violence prevention
RQ3: What kind of political opportunities have there been for gun violence prevention?	Opportunities for change closed in local legislature	Opportunities for change closed in the federal and local legislature	Opportunities for change closed in the federal legislature	Opportunities for change closed in the federal legislature Open and closed opportunities in local legislature
RQ4: How has the movement responded, failed to respond, and changed the political opportunity structures within which they have operated?	Stakeholders defining the issue as who gets to carry firearms	Broadening strategies and avenues to non-legislative change	Opening opportunities in local legislature Restricted strategies and avenues for change	Broadening strategies and avenues to non-legislative change

Articles II, III, and IV offer different perspectives on all four research questions from different points in the history of the movement, from the 1990s nationally (Article IV) and in states like Texas (Article II) to the March For Our Lives youth advocacy in the late 2010s (Article II and III) (**Table 1**). Article I focused more broadly on stakeholders in a university setting and, as such, provided answers mainly to question four in assessing how those affected by policies related to guns make sense of them (**Table 1**). The articles are numbered according to the order in which they have been published, but not in the order I worked on them. My research process was not linear or straightforward from the beginning, but rather, the dissertation came together concurrently, going back and forth with articles throughout the process. A global pandemic postponed my 2020 fieldwork trip for a year, which meant that in the meantime, I had to find solutions elsewhere. My supervisor Benita Heiskanen had research materials she had gathered during her own fieldwork trip to Texas, which she was generous enough to let me use, allowing me to progress in my dissertation research with articles I and II. Article I acts as an introduction to the issue, and for the dissertation, it offers an avenue to understand the core issues behind debates on guns and security. Work on Article III began in 2019 in a separate research project, and after many permutations, eventually came out in 2023 as part of my dissertation. I was finally able to travel to Texas for my own fieldwork in 2021, and Article IV, my last article is the labor from that fieldwork experience.

Compiling the articles for this dissertation has been work full of uncertainties and unexpected turns. The road towards a cohesive dissertation was at times murky. I did not begin the work knowing it was about the entire gun violence prevention movement nor with the research questions presented here. Yet, all of the questions offer observations about the core issue of gun violence and guns in the United States. From the different perspectives both inside and outside the movement, from people working on the issue every day, from people feeling the consequences of the policies, the media narratives that shape not only the general perception of the issue but also the advocates' perception, a more comprehensive understanding of *what the issue is about* can be gleaned. These different actors, actions, and structures that construct understanding about the issue are not separate, nor just the combination of their sum, but different pieces that change and create each other in a cyclical motion. The articles, and the ways in which they built each other and came together to offer different perspectives on the movement, the issue, and the horizon for possibilities for change, are as follows:

Article I: Lehtonen, M., & Seppälä, M. (2021). "Like a double-edged sword": Student testimonials on Campus Carry in Texas. *Journal of American Studies*, 55(2), 274–285.

Article I was published in the leading American studies journal the *Journal of American Studies* in 2021. There, we analyzed 124 written student testimonials about experiences with the Texas Campus Carry law SB11 (Texas Legislature, 2015) that allowed guns on the premises of higher education. We considered how the new law influenced the students' sense of (in)security. On the surface, we found the most common American myths about gun culture such as its inalienable nature in the nation building project of "America," racialized notions of good guys and bad guys, and the way guns represent freedom. Underneath the myths, we found that the students' understanding of the new policy and their sense of (in)security were often tied to inconsistent and contradictory understandings of who should be allowed to own a gun and how security in communities should be produced. Even as the policy itself redefined the lines of *where* firearms can be carried, the students both against the policy and in favor of it based their considerations mostly on their evaluation of *who* is allowed to carry and their estimation of the character of potential gun carriers. The testimonials were collected from three universities in Texas in February 2019 as a part of the Research Council of Finland-funded Campus Carry project led by my supervisor Benita Heiskanen. I considered the findings from Article I as a way to probe how people understand and experience their own sense of safety and how gun violence prevention could be reframed to find new avenues for change.

Article II: Seppälä, M. (2022). Radical political imagination and generational utopias: Gun control as a site of youth activism. In B. Heiskanen, A. M. Butters, & P. M. Kolehmainen (Eds.), *Up in arms: Gun imaginaries in Texas* (pp. 134–163). Brill.

Article II was published in 2022 in the Brill series *European Perspectives on the United States* as a book chapter in the open access anthology *Up in Arms: Gun Imaginaries in Texas* that focused on different aspects of gun culture, politics, and history in Texas. There, I examined the youth-led gun reform protests organized in Texas in the late 2010s. I compared the efforts of these youth movement to broaden their imagination and their understanding of their political possibilities to the development of radical political imagination (Khasnabish, 2020) and utopia (Levitas, 2013) in the New Left and anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s. I began the article by considering how radical political imagination developed in the late 1960s by exploring newspaper articles in the underground campus paper the *Rag* published in Austin in 1966–1977. I then traced how that imagination was suffocated by the conservative backlash of the 1970s and 1980s, and how the gun control

movement that formed during that period was a product of constrained political imagination. I used the legislative battles in Texas over a law that allowed Texans to carry concealed weapons in 1995 and the 2015 campus carry law that allowed guns to be carried on the premises of higher educations as examples of this limited imagination.

I argued that in the 2010s the youth-led gun control movement had begun to revitalize political imagination both within the Left and in the gun control movement. They stretched the boundaries of what is possible to achieve by understanding their political power as generational power and, through this, redefining what the issue of gun violence is about. As case studies, I examined interviews conducted with students involved with protests against Campus Carry in 2016 in Austin as well as photographs from the March For Our Lives gun control protest organized in 2018 in Austin. In addition, I analyzed a 2018 documentary about the student protest against the Texas Campus Carry law and interviews given by the movement leaders in social media (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook).

The findings from Article II provided information and examples about the gun-control-related lobbying strategies of the movement during the 1990s and 2010s built around the understanding of gun violence as crime and as an issue of public health. The main findings concentrated on the way particularly young people and youth of color related gun violence to their collective identities. Their activism expanded understanding of gun violence as community violence rooted in structural insecurity and brought in new strategies based on social media campaigns, humor, and art as well as direct action and grassroots local organizing. With these strategies, I argued that the youth movements had broadened strategies and avenues to change through non-legislative means.

Article III: Seppälä, M. (2024). Partisan media bias in the framing of the Parkland school shooting and the March For Our Lives movement. *Journal of Mass Violence Research*.

Article III was published in 2024 in the new open access *Journal of Mass Violence Research* sponsored by the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Rockefeller Institute of Government, which was created to disseminate research related to mass violence both to the academic community and the general public. In the article, I examined how partisan media bias affected the way national newspapers represented both the issue of gun control and the youth-led advocacy group March For Our Lives that was formed by the survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida in 2018. The March For Our Lives protest march the survivors organized in March, only a month after the shooting, became the largest student-led march since the anti-Vietnam War protests of 1969 (Lopez,

2018). March For Our Lives is now one of the leading national organizations advocating for gun violence prevention. Moreover, the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School were able to leverage the issue attention into successfully pressuring the Florida Legislature to pass legislation that implemented some gun control measures. Florida is a state that has had some of the most pro-gun legislators and consequently, one of the laxest gun laws in the country (Mascolo, 2024). The outrage and the sheer scale of the mobilization gave the movement a new sense of hope after more than two decades of inaction on federal-level gun legislation, which is why the movement became the focus of Article III.

My data consisted of 200 articles from four national news media outlets collected between February 14, 2018, and February 14, 2019. The articles were gathered as part of the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation-funded TRAGE project (Tragediauutisoinnin haasteet – median mahdollisuudet käsitellä kouluampumisia), where I was a project researcher in 2019. Drawing on grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019), I analyzed the role of partisan bias on mass shooting reporting and media discussion about gun control policy. I found that the narratives the news media used to report on the shooting and the youth advocates were dependent on the partisan leanings of the media outlets. Left-leaning media represented mass shootings as a problem of a lack of gun control and affirmed claims of generational power made by the youth advocates. Right-leaning media represented mass shootings as being about the mistakes of law enforcement and local officials, and lack of school security, and the youth advocates as being either naïve or brainwashed.

I concluded that there were meaningful differences in the narratives of each outlet that gun control advocates could take advantage of when messaging on the issue. The findings of Article III were particularly relevant to analyzing how understandings about gun violence developed concurrently in a political context characterized by party polarization, exacerbated by media polarization, and the consequent government dysfunction that had closed opportunities for gun control advocates. Strategies focused on electoral politics were able to provide some desired policy changes for the movement in state legislatures controlled by the Democratic Party.

Article IV: Seppälä, M. (2025). “Let it go:” Finding possibilities for new movement strategies after failure. *European Journal of American Studies*, *20*.

Article IV was published in 2025 in the *European Journal of American Studies*, which is an open access journal published by the European Association for American Studies (EAAS) that unites national American Studies associations across Europe. In the article, I examined how experiences of failure with gun control policies, both

national and local, and diffusion of ideas from Black racial justice movements changed the gun violence prevention movement. I considered how movements develop their repertoires of strategies through their shared understanding of their own historical context and the accumulation of experiences constraining and broadening possibilities open to the movement carried into today that Rossi termed as stocks of legacies (Rossi, 2015). I argued that the combination of persistent failures, closing opportunities, and the presence of new approaches changed the way gun control advocates understand what the issue is about, and through that, the strategies and goals of the movement.

I used materials gathered during my fieldwork period in Austin, Texas in 2021–2022, including 30 semi-structured interviews with activists in 14 different states as well as 15 hours of non-participant observation in webinars, at a non-profit organization, and at a March For Our Lives protest. I found that by focusing on community building and everyday acts of resistance, gun violence prevention activists found renewed meaning in their work as well as more creative and ambitious solutions to gun violence better suited for the political opportunities available to them in the 21st century. Testimonies and conclusions from Article IV became the base for the entire dissertation. The interviewees offered insights from their own understandings of the issue and their political opportunities as well as their strategies, goals, and motivations from the 1990s to the current day. They explained how they had seen the field of gun violence prevention shift throughout their activism, the immense frustration related to the closure of opportunities in state legislatures and on the federal level, and the hope they sensed in the increase of awareness about the issue in the general public.

1.3 Political Process Theory and Conceptualizing Movement Cycles

The four dissertation articles answer different aspects of all the research questions. However, research question five rose from considering the articles together, and recognizing pervasive change developing between the different time periods they cover. Consequently, exploring research question five became the main driving question for this introductory chapter. Furthermore, the main body of this dissertation synthesis is not structured according to the articles but reorganizing their findings into a historical timeline that works as an exploration of research question five. The narrative starts from the 1960s and covers the historical development of the movement in each time period until today.

To understand and explain observable changes in social movement trajectories, I relied on political process theory and the theory of contentious politics developed by Tilly and Tarrow (2015) as my main theoretical framework. Political process

theory has focused on particularly the political context of social movements to explain their emergence, development, and success (Edwards, 2014; Meyer, 2004). While in the beginning, political context meant primarily the state and its institutions, the theory developed to broadly emphasize three factors: political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and framing processes (McAdam, 2017; Rossi, 2023; Van Hauwaert, 2021).

Political opportunity structures refer to the opportunities available to social causes and agendas within the political institutions of any given society or state. The opportunities or constraints in that system for social movements are malleable and shifting, along with factors such as the political parties in power, the state of the economy, the national mood, and domestic or international crises. Resource mobilization focuses on the organizations and networks available to individuals mobilized by an issue. Framing processes encompass the cultural understandings, master narratives, affects, and the connection between the issue and salient identities that have the potential to generate support for the social movement cause. McAdam argues that it is the framing processes that are the most consequential for movement development, especially whether movements are able to connect the issue to salient collective identities that give people ownership of the issue (McAdam, 2017, p. 202).

Political process theory has been criticized for over-emphasizing structural factors, for treating social movements as predetermined, and not giving enough consideration to the role of human agency, culture, and affect (Edwards, 2014; Meyer, 2004). Tilly and Tarrow's contribution of theories of political contention attempted to answer that criticism. Tilly (1986, 2008) and Tilly and Tarrow (2015) have studied extensively how political contention, which they define as making collective claims that have bearing on the interests of others, happens and the type of outcomes it has on the political structures within which it happens. Relevant here is the way they have considered how different types of regimes produce different types of contention and how repertoires of contention (the set of public actions performed by actors to make their claims) change in the interplay of everyday social interaction and shifting political opportunities.

In addition, repertoires of contention can change in periods of high protests activity or cycles of contention. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) define cycles of contention as social movements themselves opening opportunities for other movements, triggering a period of wide contention, where multiple social movements and groups work closely together, ideas and repertoires diffusing between them. Population wide, large-scale contention can create enough pressure to lead to policy change, new prevalent cultural understandings, political realignment, or even under certain conditions, sparking revolutionary movements (Almeida, 2019; Rossi & von Bülow, 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

Building on these theories of social movement research and the results from my articles, focusing on issue definitions, strategies, and political opportunities available to gun violence prevention, this dissertation makes two broad arguments. First, applying the framework by Tilly and Tarrow (2015), I argue that the development of the gun control movement from the 1960s to today can be conceptualized as three distinct cycles of gun violence prevention: gun violence as crime, gun violence as disease, and gun violence as insecurity. In the first cycle, gun violence as crime, gun violence is framed as criminal, deviant behavior with solutions focused almost exclusively on national gun control legislation, supported in a political context favoring "tough on crime" positions. In the second cycle, gun violence is treated as a population level disease, framed in the language of public health, with strategies focused on injury prevention in a context of high partisan polarization. In the last cycle, gun violence as insecurity, gun violence is understood as insecurity caused by structural inequality that needs to be addressed systematically with strategies focused on community violence prevention in a political context of high polarization and limited opportunities.

I use cycles of gun violence (instead of frames or discourse) to describe how each phase or cycle triggers another with the definitions, strategies, and goals diffusing and morphing into new forms of contention. The cycles represent the main framework through which gun violence is understood over a certain period of time, how it is defined, and how the advocacy work—the strategies and the goals—are built around that framework. I emphasize the temporality of the definitions, how each framework influences and reproduces the next one, and amalgamates with the new definitions in different iterations.

Through these cycles, I present the answers to my research questions: how the issue has been defined, how those definitions have changed, why and how they have impacted the strategies of the movement, what the political opportunities for change have appeared to be throughout the decades, and how the movement has contributed to setting the boundaries for possibilities. I am not making the claim that the cycles and their definitions, strategies, and goals are separated from each other or that the entire movement could be so neatly categorized into different moments that everyone, or even most people, working in the field followed. I am arguing that there are different understandings of gun violence that developed as the movement developed, which led to different types of strategies and goals for new organizations. The cycles represent the main thrust of that change.

For each cycle, I start by considering the answer to research questions one, two, three, and four that ask how the movement has defined the issue, what strategies have been used, the type of goals that have been articulated, and the kinds of political opportunities available to the movement. Then, in line with political process theory, I examine surrounding context to locate the sources that influenced the emergence

of specific definitions, strategies, goals, and the availability of political opportunities. The parameters that constitute each cycle consolidated around three factors: key events, mobilized groups, and changes in the political opportunity structure. I argue that developments in these three factors sparked changes in the movement in a mutually reinforcing, cyclical manner (**Figure 2**).

Key Events

Key events are events that bring sudden attention to an issue, such as crises or mass protests. Often, it is through media reporting on such events that an issue can gain prominence in the public consciousness. Highly salient media events like crises or protests are important in how they have the potential to spark movement mobilization by activating new groups of people who identify with the issue or have an affective reaction to the event such as anger or fear (McAdam, 2017). These types of events can also open policy windows that advocates can take advantage of in political institutions if the problem becomes pressing and captures the attention of government officials (Kingdon, 2014). In articles III and IV, I considered how for the gun violence prevention movement, mass shootings became the main triggering events that brought attention to the issue, mobilized new groups into the movement, and opened some policy windows. Mass shootings also triggered a few significant mass protests that brought further attention to the issue of gun violence and mobilized new groups with new definitions, strategies, and goals.

Mobilized Groups

Social movements can emerge and develop into strong networks with the power to spark political and cultural change when enough people adopt the issue as important to them and mobilize for collective action. Linking individual identities that are salient to people to an issue that then ties groups of people together in collective solidarity and identity is key for mass mobilization (Almeida, 2019; McAdam, 2017; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In social movement research, collective identities have been used to bridge the gap between understanding the role of structural factors such as open political opportunities and the meanings, incentives, and calculations individuals make about an issue (Melucci, 1995; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In some cases, such as the Black Lives Matter protests against police violence, the link is clear. With other issues, such as climate change, the connection to salient identities is harder to recognize (McAdam, 2017). Gun violence is not easily connected to salient identities either, a fact that was evidenced by the lack of mass mobilization for the issue for the 20th century. Instead, the movement operated as a network of institutionalized interest groups working closely together with the state instead of

disrupting its operations. I argued in Article II, III, and IV that as key events such as mass shootings or police violence mobilized different groups such as women, students, and people of color, they articulated understandings about gun violence in a way that related to their identities. These newly mobilized groups brought with them not only new understandings about the issue, but about what the end-goal should be and preferred repertoires of contention.

Political Opportunity Structure

In the United States, institutional power is divided between the three branches of government and between the federal government and state government. Social movements have an important role in influencing the agendas of federal and state governments. They can either exert pressure through institutionalized interest groups with a direct presence in the policy process (Kingdon, 2014) or through grassroots protests that can shape the opinions and behavior of the voting public (Gillion, 2020). Likewise, these political institutions have an important role in shaping the social movements that emerge (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Who holds power, the relative political influence of the opposition, and what the national mood is structure the political context within which social movements operate. These institutional power dynamics influence not only the actual success of the movement but how members evaluate their own opportunities, the strategies they decide to employ, and the goals that they can even imagine to be possible. In Article II, I argued that the conservative backlash to the social movements of the 1960s significantly shaped the form of the gun control movement, its orientation towards institutionalized interest groups, and the focus on piecemeal, "commonsense," gun control policies primarily on the federal level. The movement had focused on advocating for gun control policies as the rational policy solution to stop gun violence by restricting access to guns. In a so called rational-national approach, they specifically lobbied for federal level legislation as they believed for gun control policies to be effective, stopping the interstate proliferation of guns was imperative. In Article IV, I claimed partisan polarization had changed the political context enough to force the entire focus of the movement away from gun control. In the 2010s, partisan polarization at the party level, whereby parties had become much more ideologically sorted, and divided on policy issues, had crippled the legislating capabilities of Congress. Consequently, during the Obama Administration (2008–2016) political opportunities for gun control on the federal level had closed almost entirely. I also argued that closing opportunities on the federal level drove activists towards local legislatures but with mixed results, revealing the original dilemma at the center of the rational-national gun control policy approach: restricting access to guns can only work if the policy is implemented nationwide.

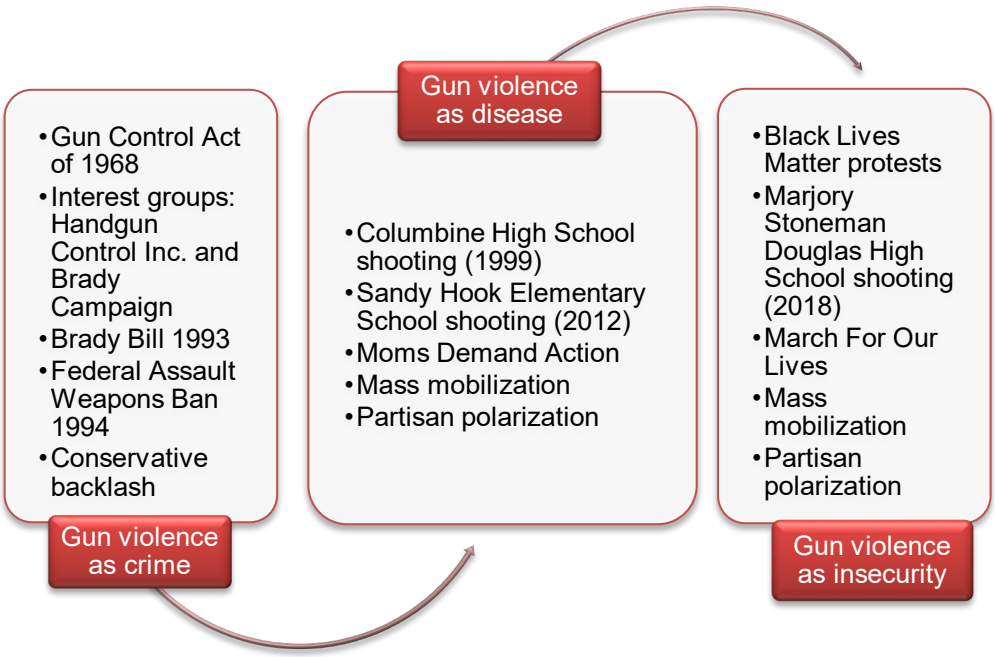


Figure 2. Cycles of gun violence prevention.

By considering the trajectory of the movement and its changing political opportunities through the three cycles of gun violence prevention, my dissertation makes its second main argument. The main focus for most of the history of the movement has been to advocate for rational policies premised on the fact that guns—at least in certain situations and in certain hands—are the problem. This definition of the issue has led gun violence prevention advocates towards repertoires of contention that rely on opportunities already existing within state institutions, focusing on finding middle ground, "commonsense" gun control legislation that can pass the policy process in Congress. The approach is rational and often based on research-driven, sound policy. Yet, arguably to the movement's detriment, the national gun control approach has also ignored the historical, political, and cultural context of both the issue and of its opposition and consequently, the actual political opportunities available to them. In particular, neither the "commonsense" gun control approach nor the "non-political" healthcare focus has been able to counteract the deep identity work done by the opposition, where gun ownership is presented as fundamentally "American"—an unassailable core right that should not be infringed on.

By the time the first gun control advocates organized, the NRA had already established vast political influence networks with wealthy donors and a considerable grassroots membership base ready to activate for the issue (Melzer, 2009). By the time gun control organizations were able to mobilize grassroots participation, gun rights organizations had managed to gain enough influence in the local and state levels to pass legislation that not only advanced gun rights but made gun control impossible in some Republican-led states (Goss, 2006; Goss, 2018). By the time gun control organizations had gained enough political power, money, and a grassroots operation capable of confronting gun rights organizations, the issue of guns had become so polarized even amongst the general public that they had no way left to reach those who saw themselves to be on the opposing side (Metzl, 2024).

However, I argue that the most recent developments in issue definitions in the movement have significantly changed their repertoires of contention and strategies, which have offered new avenues for advocacy work, opened comprehensive solutions to gun violence, and created new possibilities for success in effecting change. Issue definitions that understand gun violence as a structural problem driven by broader issues of insecurity and lack of trust have led to community-focused strategies that can work outside or in direct resistance to the state, in a way that contends with the realities of the closed political opportunities for gun violence prevention. This strategy also has the potential to offer a counter to the identity work done by the gun rights organizations: a sense of place-based group identity and a vision for the future centered on community care instead of the narrative of "Americanism" centered on individual freedoms offered by groups such as the NRA.

By defining the problem as a wide, structural issue, activists are calling for solutions much harder to achieve than the passing of individual gun control policies. In this sense, it may seem that they are setting themselves up for even more failure, an impossible task guaranteed to burn out even the most dedicated of advocates. Passing gun control policies is clearly definable and, at least in theory, a goal that should be—and has been practically everywhere else in the world—reasonable to achieve. Yet, gun control has failed because of the structural reasons outlined in this introduction: because of the money and power accumulated by forces working for gun rights, their success in mobilizing voters with politicized group identity intertwined with "Americanness," the polarized political system that has incapacitated the entire federal legislative branch, and the simple fact that the US has more civilian-owned firearms, both in total numbers and relative to population, than any other country.[4] Thus, while it may seem counterintuitive that broadening movement goals to include systemic change would open more opportunities for

[4] For country level comparison on civilian owned guns see Karp (2018).

success for activists, I suggest that the more than half a century of failure to pass countrywide gun control policies proves it is the only workable pathway forward. Local community programs offer concrete, small-scale solutions for activists in the present and hope for change in the future. Finally, I concur with scholars who have concluded that despite the prevalence of institutionalized networks and interest groups, social movements need grassroots bottom-up approaches to be effective (Boersma et al., 2019; Caniglia et al., 2015; McAdam, 2017). Or, as McAdam argued, that the effectiveness of social movements depends on "their willingness to disrupt established institutional routines" (McAdam, 2017, 199).

2 Methodological Framework

2.1 Approaching Gun Violence Prevention from the Intersection of American Studies and Social Sciences

The research questions, materials, and ways in which the materials have been analyzed in this dissertation have been motivated by a transdisciplinary approach to research. The dissertation itself was carried out in the unit of political science but the main work for it has been done at the John Morton Center for North American Studies. Thus, my dissertation is firmly situated at the intersection of American studies and political science, and more broadly, between the traditions of humanities and social sciences. American studies itself is a transdisciplinary field of study that works across instead of within the boundaries of traditional disciplines to study different cultural, political, and historical phenomena emerging from North America from a transnational perspective (Dix, 2022; Heiskanen, 2012; 2019; Rowe, 2012). American Studies has its origins in mostly frustrated American literary scholars and intellectual historians breaking away from the confines of their disciplines to search for the exceptional nature of "America" (America here was synonymous with the United States) (Meikle, 2018; Wise, 1979).

Eventually, the field developed into a transnational program with diverse connections to both humanities and social sciences, where questions of power and inequality became integral to its existence (Dix, 2022; Meikle, 2018; Rowe, 2012). The focus shifted from attempting to excavate something like the one, singular "American" mind from so-called high culture (which for the longest time meant the literary works of white men) towards the multitude of experiences found in the everyday life of people, paying particular attention to how power operates within the intersections of race, class, and gender. To this end, transdisciplinary research in American studies is to let the research subject define what theoretical and methodological approaches are needed instead of disciplinary practice (Heiskanen, 2019). Transnational research in American studies is to constantly critique and unsettle the meaning of "American," where its borders and influence can be found, and what it means to study the area from an outsider's perspective (Heiskanen, 2009; Rowe, 2012). Both of these approaches contribute to the commitment of American

studies scholars to conduct research that aims to uncover unequal power dynamics and advance social justice (Dix, 2022)—explicit goals of this dissertation, too.

From the field of political science, I draw on research from the subfield of American politics, which broadly encompasses the study of the political institutions and political behavior in the United States. The field developed in order to study, among other topics, the particularities of the American political system, the way power is divided between federal government and the states, the three branches of government, how elections are organized, how voters behave, and the relationship between public opinion, policymaking, and interest groups (McKay, 2022; Mansfield & Sisson, 2004; Smith, 2024). For this dissertation, research on how social movements, interest groups, and civic participation influence and interact with political institutions in the United States was particularly important. I considered theories of how policies are passed in Congress, the role of civil society in policymaking (Da Rimini et al., 2021; Gronow et al., 2019; Kingdon, 2014), and how protest can shape broad public opinion (Gillion, 2020). On the other side, political scientists have also studied how different types of regimes and systems of governance shape the type of contentious politics and social movements that develop (Císař, 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In addition, I examined sociological research on the role of identities (Melucci, 1995), culture (Taylor et al., 2009), and civic imagination that inform political participation (Baiocchi et al., 2015; Luhtakallio et al., 2024) in an effort understand the impact and shape that social movements take. Such research is also considered to be at the core of social movement studies that are widely considered across all social sciences.

Approaching the gun violence prevention movement from the perspective of political science and social sciences in general, my dissertation focuses on how the specific political system and institutions in the United States have impacted the politics of guns and the type of movement that has developed around the issue. Approaching the gun violence prevention movement from the perspective of American studies guides my focus toward the way people themselves experience and understand their position and the issue, and how those experiences and understandings impact their advocacy. With an American studies approach, I can bring the particular—very personal matters that relate to how people themselves experience life—to the broader theoretical understanding of the issue and how policy, social movements, and politics interact. This approach required qualitative research methods, such as fieldwork and textual analysis, that I elaborate more on in the next section.

While combining the approaches was necessary for the research, in practice, the articles that form the dissertation also reflect the straddling of the research between two very different schools of thought. With one field focused on the everyday experiences of people and their culture, while the other is concerned with the

workings of institutions and explaining how broad groups of people behave, the ways of doing research differed at times quite significantly. I found myself contemplating not only the choices between research designs and questions that favored qualitative or quantitative methods, but also the way I should write and structure the articles and this compilation. In American studies, a narrative style of writing is preferred, where the research materials and theoretical frameworks carry through the text from the very beginning to the end. This allowed for more creative ways of writing about the research, where people's experiences could be expressed in their own words with all their complexities. Surprising breakthroughs in the argumentation came in the very act of writing. However, this also meant that before a breakthrough, the focus of the article was often hard to pin down, and the cacophony of voices in the materials sometimes overwhelming. On the other hand, in political science, papers are more often modelled on natural sciences and as such offer rigorous but formulaic writing structures, less open to breakthroughs coming from the process of writing but clear and focused in their ways of doing things.

In the course of conducting and writing this dissertation, I relied more on the approaches and narrative structure of American studies, finding concepts such as radical political imagination (Khasnabish, 2020), utopia (Levitas, 2013), and failure (Halberstam, 2011) as a way to make sense of people's experiences and to understand the overall trajectory of the gun violence prevention movement. However, I also analyzed how institutions and structures impact the political realities of the movement using theories of processes and mechanisms of contention (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015), polarization of institutions and the media (Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Mason, 2018; Nivola & Brady, 2007), and generations and social movements (della Porta, 2019; Mannheim, 1952; Milkman, 2017; Terriquez, 2015). This offered the research a solid framework and focus. Articles I, II, and IV of the dissertation were published in the field of American studies, while Article III was published in the *Journal of Mass Violence Research*, a specialized social science journal. This compilation presenting the dissertation articles and my overall argument was structured narratively but written according to the APA style guide familiar to social sciences.

2.2 Research Materials

2.2.1 Focusing on Experiences and Understanding: Fieldwork in Texas (Articles I, II, and IV)

Many scholars have advocated for the importance of fieldwork as a method for American studies, and it has slowly become central to researching North American phenomena, alongside literary and historical analysis (Caughey, 1982; Desmond,

2014; Dix, 2022; Heiskanen, 2012, 2021; Heiskanen et al., 2022). Fieldwork, as a method of social sciences, bridges the study of people's lived experiences and the complex and contradictory meanings they assign to their worlds to broader questions about such issues as politics and culture, power and social hierarchy. Doing interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and recording events and the environment allows the researcher to get deeper information about what an issue means to a group of people and about people's experiences in their own words. Fieldwork was the key method for this dissertation, too, as I strived to bridge the gap between structural explanations for why the gun control movement has been relatively weak and gun laws exceptionally lax and the agency people have to change the conditions of those structures. Fieldwork was central to uncovering the experiences movement members themselves had about gun violence, their political opportunities, what they thought desirable, what they imagined to be possible and what effective, and how they acted relative to these understandings.

Most of the research materials in this dissertation were collected during multiple fieldwork trips to Texas. In articles I and II, I used materials collected during two fieldwork trips that were conducted by the Research Council of Finland-funded Campus Carry project led by my supervisor Benita Heiskanen in 2018 and 2019. In Article I, Malla Lehtonen and I probed student attitudes toward the Campus Carry law SB11 that had passed in the state just two years before (Texas Legislature, 2015). Students in three undergraduate classes were asked to write and draw testimonials about their experiences with the new Campus Carry law. The classes were held in 2019 at three different universities in Austin—the public state flagship University of Texas at Austin, the private St. Edwards university, and Austin Community College, which generally has a student population that is socioeconomically of a lower class compared to other two. This resulted in a total of 124 essays that we then analyzed by considering how students experienced their sense of safety with guns on campus and how they themselves understood the law and its impact on their everyday lives. As the first article, this offered an introduction to the issue for me and a perspective on most of the common arguments and cultural myths related to arguments both for and against permissive gun laws in general, and related to campus carry and young people, in particular.

In Article II, I focused on youth activism and the gun violence prevention movement in Texas. The main source of materials in the article consisted of different contemporaneous accounts, statements, and cultural products made by students at the University of Texas at Austin protesting conditions on the campus during the 1960s and compared the Anti-Vietnam war movement to the advocacy and protest against gun laws in the 1990s, 2010s and 2020s. I explicate these textual sources further in the next section. Relevant here is that this analysis was complemented by the fieldwork materials collected by the Campus Carry team in 2018 and 2019.

Interviews by both students and faculty that had protested the Campus Carry law as well as photographs and speeches recorded at the March For Our Lives protest in 2019 showed the continuation between the protest events of the late 2010s and demonstrated how political imagination around the issue had developed. In Article II, I argued that the new youth-led gun control protests had revitalized radical political imagination in the movement, broadening what was possible to imagine, and creating new political opportunities for action.

Article IV was the product of my own fieldwork, conducted for nine months during 2021-2022 in Austin, Texas. Due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, somewhat counterintuitively fieldwork formed the very last part of my research. I worked as a visiting scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, and when I arrived in September 2021, the campus was still mostly empty due to pandemic restrictions. Not only did the pandemic postpone my trip by a year, it also altered my actual fieldwork plans considerably. While I had originally intended to interview and observe student activists on campus and around Austin, this proved an impossible task in the reality I had landed in. The students were absent from the places they used to occupy. The pandemic had changed their activism, not only in the ways they attempted to influence decision-making but in what they were most concerned about. Instead of activism being visible in the public space, it had shifted almost entirely to online conclaves made of shared social networks and algorithmically determined interests. A global health crisis exacerbated all the problems that had made gun politics particularly difficult.

For some, in the face of crumbling institutions, combating gun violence had become a lost cause. For most students, the population I was keen on observing, it was also probable that the tactics the university had applied to hide the existence of guns on campus had worked. The legislation that had allowed guns to be carried on campus had provoked fierce resistance from the students and staff at UT Austin but that had been five years ago. Three years since the March For Our Lives protests had activated those same networks and mobilized many more. In 2021, I could not find many traces of these events or people who had continued to work on the issue. There were a few exceptions to this rule found among the teaching staff at the university. They changed the course of my research visit and the focus of my planned fieldwork.

Through the few remaining active gun-free campus advocates, I was able to get in contact with a group of gun violence prevention activists on Facebook who then recommended me to their own circles of activists and friends. Most of them were not in Texas but the pandemic had made some things easier. For one, almost everyone was comfortable doing interviews with me on Zoom. Using the snowball method, I interviewed 30 gun violence prevention advocates in 14 different states, with a diverse set of roles, employment, and educational backgrounds. The interviews were semi-structured with the goal of uncovering what the advocates had

done, what motivated them, how they understood the issue, what they imagined was possible to change in the future, what they wanted to change, and whether there was any difference between what they wanted and what they imagined was possible. I introduced my project to the interviewees by saying that I was interested in studying how the movement for gun violence prevention had changed in the past couple of decades, and some of my participants provided analysis of that question unprompted in the actual interviews.

In addition, I did 15 hours of non-participant observation in activist webinars, in one March For Our Lives protest event, and at a non-profit organization. I worked through the materials by transcribing the interviews, pseudonymizing the transcripts,[5] reading and rereading the fieldnotes I had written about the interviews and the observations, and by coding segments of the texts according to different themes in the NVivo 14 software. I divided the different issue definitions, strategies, motivations, and goals that the participants discussed under larger themes to find commonalities between activists working in very different contexts. In the analysis, I focused on the emerging complex descriptions of experiences related to failure on one hand, and new opportunities and sources of hope, on the other.

As my dissertation research relied so heavily on the fieldwork conducted in Texas, a particular state with a very unique gun culture intrinsically tied to the history and identity of the state (Heiskanen et al., 2022), it is important to acknowledge the possible biases related to my findings. Gun culture and gun politics in Texas are very different from, for example, California. California has arguably the strictest restrictions on gun purchases and carrying in the country, including bans on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines as well as extreme risk protection orders (ERPO) that allow the confiscation of weapons from individuals considered dangerous (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2025). In contrast, Texas after a long

[5] Anonymization of the full transcripts proved to be an almost impossible task. In the small circles of the field of gun violence prevention, replacing all identifiers from people's personal stories, recounts of their activist careers, and encounters with local policies and politicians was impossible without erasing most, if not all, of the context in which the participants had formed their experiences. In some cases, that would have meant erasing the entire story. How to anonymize the recounting of a longtime activist fighting for policy changes in Colorado without mentioning Colorado? How to mention Colorado and the policy fights in a way that the details of the cases would not reveal the identity of the person to those working on the same issue in the same state? I had planned to store the full transcripts of the interviews in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive but with these problems, this proved to be an unsolvable conundrum. As a compromise, I included pseudonymized information in article IV in a manner that, in my evaluation, erased a satisfying level of context to protect the identities of my interviewees. Once the dissertation is finished, I will store the metadata of the interviews into the Finnish IT Center for Science Sensitive Data repository and destroy the recordings.

trajectory of loosening gun regulation has become a constitutional carry state with very limited restrictions on guns (Texas Legislature, 2021). When it comes to the political opportunities and the consequent strategies advocates have chosen, the findings from states with legislatures open to gun control differ drastically from states hostile to the policy.

I offer two counterarguments to why it is still appropriate to draw some broader conclusion from my research that considers the gun violence prevention movement as a whole. For one, while Texas is overrepresented in the case studies in the dissertation, the interviews and observations I made during my fieldwork period that form the main body of the research materials happened mostly outside of Texas. In Article IV, I examined the case of Colorado specifically as a counterargument to the failures advocates in other states had experienced with gun control. While passing gun control policies had brought a sense of accomplishment to advocates there, without federal legislation, states with strict gun control policies could not be insulated from states in which acquiring and carrying guns was almost entirely unregulated. In practice, gun control approaches focused on the state level encountered the very same rationality problem that had first motivated the rational-national approach. Advocates in states such as California that had a long history of strict gun laws were attempting to find new strategies and solutions as they had found gun control to be inadequate to address the scale of the problem. In Texas, they were turning to other solutions because the opportunities in the legislature were closed to gun control. While the motivations differed, the result in different contexts was nevertheless the same.

Arguably, it is due to states such as Texas that it can be said that gun control has failed in the United States, the reason why the movement needs to find new solutions, and the reason why more research on gun violence prevention is needed. As Metzl (2024) argued, the gun violence prevention movement has particularly failed in developing a "southern strategy" to implement gun control legislation, even as it has poured effort and money into public health research aimed at solving the gun violence problem these states have. Moreover, Texas specifically as "the epicenter of gun debates" (Heiskanen et al., 2022, 9) characterizes everything that makes the problem of gun violence difficult specifically in the cultural and political context of the United States. In addition to guns, Texas has become the testing ground for conservative movements advancing their agenda on culture war issues more broadly. The way the state has criminalized abortion with initiatives such as the "sanctuary cities for the unborn" and the "bounty hunter" provisions provide great examples of

the unique nature of Texas conservative politics (Heikkilä, 2025).[6] I argue studying Texas holds the key to the solution to the gun violence problem in the Unites States.

2.2.2 Media Sources Broadening the Analysis (Articles II and III)

Even as I considered fieldwork to be central to my dissertation, like others in the field of American studies I did not view it as mutually exclusive but complementary to other more traditional textual sources such as archival research, cultural products, and media sources (Desmond, 2014; Heiskanen, 2012). Consequently, I used media sources such as newspaper articles, social media posts, podcast interviews, ad campaigns, and a documentary to broaden both the temporal and geographical perspective of my research. In Article II, I started my analysis of the development of political imagination and the utopian belief in transformative futures with the student movement at the University of Texas and used the campus underground newspaper the *Rag*, published between 1966–1977, as my source. Continuing the examination of political imagination related to gun violence prevention, I considered newspaper reports about the fight over a law that allowed licensed gun owners to carry concealed firearms in Texas (Texas Legislature, 1995). To conclude the analysis with two case studies of youth protests against gun laws, I examined the *Come & Take It* documentary (Spiro & Raval, 2018) about the Cocks not Glocks youth-led protest, a variety of interviews of movement leaders in newspapers and podcasts as well as ads, social media posts, and white papers articulating movement goals made by the March For Our Lives organization. The fieldwork provided crucial information about the protest networks that were mobilized in both of the case studies as well as the sense of opportunities experienced by the activists. The contemporaneous textual sources allowed me to compare and contrast the development of political imagination in the Texas context and broaden the temporal focus of the article.

The starting point for Article III, and the dissertation itself was the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. As a part of the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation-funded project focused on media tragedy reporting, newspaper articles about the Parkland shooting and the March For Our Lives protests that followed were collected across local and national media. Article III took this key

[6] Abortion in Texas is illegal after six weeks. The "sanctuary cities for the unborn" are city-wide initiatives that attempt to ban people from travelling to other states to seek reproductive healthcare. The "bounty hunter" provisions give monetary incentives to private citizens to monitor and report anyone they suspect is helping pregnant people terminate their pregnancy (see e.g., Heikkilä, 2025).

moment in the history of the movement and examined the impact of the case in the discourse by analyzing national news media reporting. At the time, the Parkland school shooting was the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, and the activism it sparked was unprecedented. In Article III, I collected a dataset of 200 articles in four national media sources that used the phrases "Parkland school shooting" and "March For Our Lives" published between the day of the shooting, February 14, 2018, until the one-year mark in February 14, 2019. I examined the materials to determine what the key narratives were that were told about mass shootings and about the youth activists advocating for gun control in the aftermath of the tragedy they had experienced. CNN, the *New York Times*, Fox News, and Breitbart were chosen to represent broadly speaking left-wing and right-wing narratives on what mass shootings are about as well as to illustrate how these narratives portrayed the messengers for gun control, the Parkland shooting survivors. The article found that right-wing and left-wing narratives about mass shootings and the following protests differed drastically, but also in a way that left opportunities for advocates to construct persuasive messages. By using media sources, I could examine a significant moment in the movement and broaden the analysis to consider the issue from a nationwide perspective.

2.3 Ethical Considerations: Doing Fieldwork and Researching Violence and Social Movements

Lastly, before I move on to presenting the cycles of gun violence prevention that form the main argument of this introductory chapter of my dissertation, I consider the ethical implications of my research. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at Austin.[7] However, there are multiple other ethical questions I had to consider that fall outside of an institutional review. Gun violence in the United States has had devastating health, economic, and social repercussions across all communities. Arguably, the United States has catastrophically failed to protect its people and violated the basic premise of any social contract between the government and those governed. It was ethically imperative that my research did not lose sight of the ongoing real-life consequences of gun violence. Consequently, it was important to recognize that the research was not just about academic inquiry but concretely about how I could support the efforts to prevent gun violence. Particularly after conducting fieldwork and forming relationships with movement members, I became cognizant of what kind of

[7] IRB ID STUDY00001935. The participants signed informed consent forms and received privacy notices that outlined how their data was protected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation by the European Union.

knowledge I was producing and whether it was helpful to people doing the work of gun violence prevention in the everyday. While remaining critical in my analysis and dedicated to transparent academic practices, part of what I considered ethically good practice was to first and foremost be respectful to my interviewees, the time and resources they had shared with me, and to give back to them with my own.

When constructing my research design, the research questions, methods, and materials, I was guided by my research background in American studies and political science as well as the very practical demands of my degree and academic publishing. I chose to focus on the gun violence prevention movement because I recognized a gap in the research that I could aid in filling with my academic background. While some research has been done on the gun violence prevention movement across the decades, hardly any has used primarily ethnographic research methods. I centered the experiences of movement members to consider the agency people have even under conditions that structurally appear impenetrable and unmoving. Without the perception of agency, apathy and disengagement often become the likeliest outcome. The first step of sparking a movement for transformative change is to convince people it is even possible to imagine things to be otherwise—to revitalize the ability to imagine (Eskelinen, 2020; Gordin et al., 2010; Jameson, 2010; Levitas, 2013).

However, I also had to be careful to not overemphasize the power gun control or gun violence prevention advocates have. My goal was not to offer an uncritical celebration of civic action and the possibilities for change that activism and advocacy can achieve or to claim that advocates could or should have done better. The United States has a gun violence problem because legislators both on the federal and on the state-level have been unable or refused to address it. The U.S. political system has been called the tyranny of the minority, with institutions such as the Senate and the Electoral College prioritizing states' rights over majority rule, which together with plurality voting in single-member districts has led to a geographically polarized two-party system (Abramowitz, 2010; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2023). This system makes it especially hard to achieve legislative success with highly polarized issues such as guns no matter how advocates frame and strategize.

Comprehensive gun control regulation has proven to decrease gun violence in places such as Australia and Finland (Chapman et al., 2016; Santaella-Tenorio et al., 2016; Sutela, 2024). While it is also a fact that gun control legislation alone is not enough to eradicate the problem of gun violence (see e.g., Squires et al., 2008 for UK), it is a crucial part, often the very first step of the solution. The failure to address gun violence in the United States is a political problem caused not in small part by the gun rights movement, such as the NRA, that has the power, the money, and the influence to push for its agenda. My focus was motivated by practical consideration (research gap), by my academic background (American studies guiding me towards exploring everyday life with fieldwork methods), and my belief in human agency

and the importance of revitalizing political imagination. My dissertation offers one side of a solution, addressing what can be done from an activist perspective without dismissing the very real structural issues that have made gun violence such a prevalent problem.

While doing fieldwork for the dissertation in Texas, I also was conscious about the fact that I was a white Finnish scholar, who had never directly experienced gun violence in my personal life nor had I grown up around guns or any type of hunting culture. I was in middle school when the two school shootings happened in Finland at Jokelan koulukeskus in 2007 and at Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoulu and Koulutuskeskus Sedu in 2008. I remember feeling afraid quite distinctly at the moment that the news broke, but that fear dissipated quickly as normal everyday life continued. There were no lockdown drills at our school and my trust that I was safe and that our institutions were capable of effective governance was not fundamentally shaken. Gun laws in Finland were strengthened significantly after the shootings as I think government ought to do, especially after such tragedies (Lindström et al., 2011).

With these experiences growing up in Finland, and after having conducted research for my dissertation for two years, I knew that doing fieldwork in Texas would be very different. I knew how common gun violence in the United States was, and I knew that what the government in Texas was doing about it went against all my understanding of how the issue should be dealt with. When I arrived, I was bombarded by notifications on my phone about shootings happening just miles away from me on a daily basis, AMBER alerts[8] on my phone waking me up in the middle of the night, and my university constantly sending emails about assaults happening on campus. The lack of social safety net was an apparent and visible part of the city. Economic deprivation, poor healthcare, homelessness, mental illness, and the subsequent treatment of these problems with different types of narcotics was around me in a way that it simply was not in Finland. Public transport that I had used all my adult life was the place where I was directly threatened on multiple occasions. Signs on storefronts prohibiting guns acted as a constant reminder they were elsewhere. I realized I had no idea what living in an environment that *felt* threatening would feel like. Knowing in theory and *knowing* as something embodied were very different experiences. You cannot legally own guns in Finland for self-protection and with my life experiences and knowledge about the issue I would never choose to carry one myself, but perhaps I could better understand how someone with different experiences would come to a different conclusion. Easy access to guns leads to more

[8] AMBER (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) alerts are messages that ask the public for help in cases of child abductions. The system is nationwide but originated from Texas (U.S Department of Justice, 2019).

gun violence and gun violence compounds all social problems but paradoxically, social problems are also the reason why some people choose to carry—to feel safe in a society without a safety net.

I had to carry these complex and contradictory experiences in my head when conducting the interviews. Mostly, it was easy to separate myself from the questions, as they were aimed at uncovering the participants' own experiences, ideas, and imaginations. Sometimes the interviewees knew that Finland had a comparatively high amount of civilian owned guns but very little gun violence, and that we had strengthened our gun laws after a school shooting. Sometimes, they asked me what it was like in Finland, and I would offer this information to them, the albeit simplistic story of guns in Finland but very much reflected in how safe I had felt growing up there. All who I shared my experiences with were mournful about the fact things could be different in the United States, that it could be so simple, and yet, because of politics, it was not. I always emphatically agreed with them, even as I had become convinced by research that it could never be so simple in the United States, and in fact it was not anywhere else either. Many of my interviewees expressed the same doubts explicitly. Yet, they could not help but be wistful about the possibilities of gun control, the same way I could not help it either. Such is the power of simple stories.

Many of my interviewees had been victims themselves, or lost family members, neighbors, and friends to gun violence. In an effort to not retraumatize anyone simply by talking to me, I made sure to let each participant know in the beginning of the interview that they could share with me as much or as little about anything they wished and that they could always end the interview without any questions asked. Some participants made passing remarks to the violence they or their loved one had experienced, stating that they did not wish to explicate more. Some of the participants told their stories at length, often visibly emotional. I could only listen and offer my sympathy, but it never felt adequate. Lacking in trauma training, I could only take comfort in the fact that all my interviewees were experienced activists used to talking about their experiences. What I could offer them was my understanding and my research.

Some of my interviewees were curious about how a Finnish scholar came to study gun violence in the United States, but none asked it in a way that questioned my right to do it. There has been much academic debate about who should study which topics and communities. Indigenous researchers and activists alike have long critiqued harmful ethnographic practices, where knowledge is extracted from communities to the detriment of the people being investigated and the research itself is used to uphold unequal power relationships (Carlson et al., 2018; Morton Ninomiya et al., 2020; Smith, 2021). Should white scholars study Black communities, straight scholars LGBTQIA+ spaces, or Finnish scholars American

culture? Certainly, with stigmatized groups it is very easy to recognize that concerns stem from a very real and long history of exploitation. I agree that all academics need to reflect on their different positionalities and the potential power imbalances present in all social interaction.

However, I also recognize that identity categories are always malleable, layered, and contested, and cannot be the basis of rigorous, academic research (Heiskanen, 2009, 2012). Draconian demarcations on who exactly is suitable for which type of research would be essentializing, tokenistic, and deprioritize the quality of the research. For my dissertation, some very practical considerations were on my side. In the United States after the passing of the Dickey Amendment (Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, 1996), federal funding could not be used for research that could be considered to advocate for gun control policies. In part, I needed to do this research because my colleagues in the United States in many cases explicitly could not. Scholars need to consider the difficult ethical questions related to their case study and be aware of the sometimes surprising ways their work contributes to societal conversations without letting the difficulty act as a barrier to conducting important research (Heiskanen, 2014).

Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) encourage social movement scholars to critically rethink how academia reproduces oppression and take seriously the lived realities of movements they are studying instead of viewing them as just objects. Part of this process is to reconsider and decenter success as something that can only be institutional, focus on movements outside of grand narratives, consider how success can be non-instrumental, and to understand the "much longer arc of networked struggle" (2014, 53). In keeping with these calls, I incorporated tenets of respect, cooperation, reconsidering success, and being conscious of the benefits to the movement into my research. It was not my position to claim to know better. Rather, I traced the history of a movement that has not been studied conclusively, connected threads that might open new pathways to those who know and do the work in the everyday, and added understanding to an issue that has had, and continues to have, destructive consequences that will be felt for generations.

3 Cycles of Gun Violence Prevention

3.1 Cycle I: Gun Violence as Crime (1960s–2000s)

3.1.1 Politicization of Gun Control during the Social Uprisings of the 1960s

To understand how the gun control movement first developed, how advocates first came to define the issue, and their strategies and goals to address that problem definition, I begin by considering the political context of the 1960s. This time period has received little attention in research about gun control as the first organizations focused primarily on gun control appeared mostly in the 1970s. Much of the research on gun control in the 20th century focused on why the movement remained weak or non-existent. Studies have found explanations from internal movement strategies that were seen as detrimental to movement growth (Goss, 2006), ineffective policy proposals (Carter, 1997; Vizzard, 2000), the strength of gun rights movement and the NRA (Goss, 2006; Melzer, 2009), and the broader difficulty of advocating for gun control policies in the United States, where individualism and small government are generally preferred (Spitzer, 1995). However, one of my main findings from Article II is that the social and political upheavals of the 1960s had long-lasting consequences that impacted the formation of a meaningful gun rights movement: the lack of an opposing side, and the emphasis on "gun violence as crime" framework. The 1960s were integral to tying together the issue of gun rights, culture wars, and the Republican Party but also to understanding why no similar tight networks formed in opposition. In this section, I connect that finding to the first cycle of gun violence prevention.

First, I consider the first initial mobilized groups for the issue of guns and show how the social movements of the 1960s sparked the conditions for both non-mobilization in favor of any anti-gun movement and a strong gun rights countermovement. Central to the New Left was the struggle against federal, state, and local government, and that struggle sometimes turned militant with revolutionary aspirations. The conflict between the New Left and the state escalated into covert surveillance operations and violent encounters that created internal strife, paranoia, and deep distrust that eventually led to the demise of the coalition of movements. This creates the first key dynamic to the trajectory of the gun violence prevention movement

as no anti-gun or pro-gun control movement with repertoires of contention familiar to the social movement of the 1960s developed on the Left. In contrast, the NRA radicalized in direct backlash to the social movements of the 1960s and the New Left. The grassroots gun rights movement that evolved out of the radicalization benefited but was not controlled by the Republican Party, and it grew largely without opposition. The strength of the gun rights movement is the second key dynamic relevant to the development of the gun control and gun violence prevention movement. I move on to exploring how political assassinations as key events triggered Congress to pass the Gun Control Act of 1968, which also marked the first time gun control was mentioned in the party platforms of both Democrats and Republicans. This settled the last key dynamic relevant to the formation of the gun control movement. The Democratic Party adopted gun control into its agenda as a means of crime control and racial control while the Republican Party adopted the rhetoric of gun rights.

Movement Spillover from the New Left: Non-mobilization and Counterprotest

The period of political uprising in the 1960s had started already in the 1950s with the protest campaigns organized by the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) theorized that new political opportunities in the aftermath of World War II allowed room for the Civil Rights Movement to fundamentally change the repertoires of contention in the United States. These new repertoires of contention included legal mobilization by using the courts, large protest marches to Washington D.C., sustained summer campaigns, and disruptive practices of sit-ins, boycotts, teach-ins, and picketing in the pursuit of desegregation, liberation, and civil rights for Black people (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, 2). The protests started by the Civil Rights Movement cascaded into the mobilization of other identity-based liberation groups in major cycles of protests and came together with the countercultural movement of the time to create a sense of brief opening for sweeping societal change. In Article II, I examined the political atmosphere of the 1960s and how these movements that would be called the New Left were formed under the shared conviction that transformative societal change was not only necessary but possible to achieve. I argued that what was unique about the activism of the time was radical political imagination, to be understood as both action taken towards fundamentally changing societal structures and as something that is created in the very act of imagining and collectively sharing visions for different worlds (Article II; Khasnabish, 2020). The utopian sense of the future that radical political imagination offered, not in the sense of one imagined fixed desirable future but in the broadening of what was even possible to imagine (Eskelinen, 2020; Gordin et al., 2010; Levitas, 2013), animated and mobilized particularly young people in an unprecedented manner. As radical imagination animated mobilization and mass mobilization further opened the possibilities of what could be imagined, the strategies

and goals of the activists expanded in a way that created political opportunities where there had been none (Article II).

As the visions for change did not materialize and, instead, the activists faced increasingly brutal state crackdowns and repression, ideas of political violence and militancy became more salient, too (Article II; Brick & Phelps, 2015; Burrough, 2015; Scott, 2016). Particularly, Black activists and Civil Rights organizers were radicalized by their experiences of trying to agitate for change. Especially in the South, self-defense instead of non-violence was ingrained in the daily life of Black people, who kept facing lynchings, police violence, and complete denial of access to power despite the promises that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 ostensibly made (Jeffries, 2009; Tyson, 1998). Concurrently, as legal segregation was dismantled in the South, the Black youth in the North and West found that the successes of the Civil Rights Movement did not do much to change their lives—they were still poor, without economic opportunities, pushed into ghettoes and out of power (Bloom & Martin, 2016).

The idea of Black Power grew simultaneously both in the South, in the midst of the significant legislative steps toward civil rights that did not protect Black people from state-sanctioned violence nor provide economic opportunities, and in the North, where little had changed and where police brutality and impoverishment were still the norm despite the lack of legal segregation. Black Power centered around the idea of Black self-determination in politics, culture, education, economic opportunity, and, importantly, armed self-defense when necessary. Despite the term being popularized later in the 1960s, it was still, nevertheless, a continuation, not a break, from the Civil Rights Movement (Carson, 1995; Jeffries, 2009; Tyson, 1998)—a product of ever-developing radical political imagination, itself constructed through shared experiences and social interaction.

With the Black freedom struggle and the Black power movement, questions of violence and firearms became a contested issue in the New Left. For some, like the Black Panther Party (BPP), obtaining self-determination required armed self-defense and the willingness to use violence when necessary. For the BPP, there was no reforming a state that they saw as having been constructed to conserve white supremacy, where protecting the interests of white people was seen as the status quo of all institutions, and the primary job of law enforcement to enforce that supremacy by force (Carmichael, 1966; Newton, 1973).[9] The only way to achieve

[9] I capitalize Black and other racial and ethnic terms when referencing to the identity of a group of people with some shared cultural and historical experiences. For this reason, I use lowercase for white as it does not broadly refer to shared cultural and historical experiences of a group of people or their sense of identity. For debate about the capitalization of Black and white see e.g. Meir (2020) and Olson (2004, xix).

transformative change was through an armed revolution (Bloom & Martin, 2016; Burrough, 2015). The BPP was the vanguard of the New Left by the end of the 1960s and was seen by other groups as showing the way forward. The BPP benefited not only from charismatic leaders but from a political atmosphere, where anti-Vietnam War sentiment provoked anti-American, anti-imperialist views both globally and at home. Disillusioned white students such as the ones in Students for Democratic Society (SDS) aligned themselves with the goals of the Black Freedom movement (Article II; Brick, & Phelps, 2015). As a testament to the appeal of revolutionary violence and armed self-defense in the New Left, both white and Black women took up arms to challenge patriarchy, redefine gender constructions, and justify their place in the movement (Browder, 2006). Guns were glorified and fetishized in certain parts of the more radical New Left, representing a way for primarily White middle-class activists to transgress racial and class boundaries (Browder, 2006).

The New Left was profoundly distrustful of the US government; it was the ethos that brought the different groups together. Tensions between the New Left—the BPP, the Chicano movement, the Gay Liberation Front, Native Americans, and the anti-war protestors with SDS in the frontline—and both local and federal law enforcement had grown into violent encounters, where increasingly the brutality of the police was answered in kind by the protestors (Brick & Phelps, 2015; Burrough, 2015:). Feelings of distrust and paranoia were increased by the fact that activists knew the FBI had infiltrated their organizations to create chaos and infighting to dismantle the New Left from within (Cunningham, 2004). Disagreement over the need for political violence and armed self-defense eventually fractured and disassembled the New Left (Article II; Brick & Phelps, 2015). Crucially, the decades of growing distrust and violent encounters with the government also almost certainly guaranteed that a gun control movement, one that relied on government regulation and law enforcement to provide security, would not come from the Left. In Article II, I argue that this would have far-reaching consequences for the type of gun control movement that would develop, in issue definitions, repertoires of contention, and mobilization opportunities.

The New Left and the social movements of the 1960s are also important in partly explaining why the type of gun rights movement developed on the Right through the radicalization of the NRA. The NRA was founded in 1871 as a club to "promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis" (National Rifle Association, 2025). However, up until the 1960s, the NRA had been focused on promoting the craft of shooting for the purposes of sports and hunting rather than religiously defending the Second Amendment or the right of individuals to keep and bear arms (Davidson, 1993). As such, the NRA had been somewhat open to concessions and gun control legislation, even going so far as to sponsor, albeit moderate, regulative legislation such as the FFA in 1934 (Zimring, 1975).

Melzer (2009) argued that the hardening rhetoric of the 1970s, the establishment of a formal lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) in 1975, and the eventual coup in leadership in the Cincinnati convention in 1977 happened largely as a conservative backlash to the New Left movements of the 1960s. As Black, Brown, and Native people, LGBTQ+ people, and women demanded more equality across all levels of society, white conservative men viewed these groups as threats to traditional American values and their hegemonic power status. The NRA held the concept of frontier masculinity central to the American experience, and during the late 1970s, the leadership of the organization aligned themselves in direct opposition to the New Left as a culturally conservative movement (Melzer, 2009). The New Left reproduced many direct oppositional movements in the New Right—groups that fought against abortion rights, gay rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment, among others. For the NRA, there really was no existing counterpart.

The NRA began cultivating a politicized group identity among gun owners that mobilized them for issues of gun rights incredibly effectively (Lacombe, 2019; Lacombe et al., 2019; Schwartz, 2022). The cultivation of a group identity is intertwined in the overarching narratives NRA propagates to its members in the culture work it does: in their educational and training programs, on the gun range, at gun shows, and in the *American Rifleman* magazine (Melzer, 2009; Lacombe, 2019; Schwartz, 2022; Taylor, 2013). These narratives rely intrinsically linked with idea of "Americanism" and what it means to be American. Guns are presented as being an important part of the nation building project through the Second Amendment and historical narratives about conquering the West but also fundamental to the American way of life, a core value tied to family and religion, and what makes "America" exceptional (Schwartz, 2022). The cultural work done by groups such as the NRA are key to understanding why the rational argument for gun control made by the lobbying groups in the coming decades would fail to implement effective legislation or persuade a popular countermovement.

Political Assassinations and the Gun Control Act of 1968

While federal gun control legislation was not passed directly as a response to the threat the government saw the New Left militancy and Black radicalism as posing, political violence of the 1960s drove the issue. What ultimately pushed Congress to try to address the threat firearms posed were the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the 1968 assassination of his brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Throughout the 20th century, the federal government had taken little interest in regulating firearms. When the last two major pieces of gun regulation had passed, the National Firearms Act of 1934 (NFA) and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938 (FFA), they had been part of a larger crime control campaign of the 1930s that

attempted to curtail the activities of gangsters and organized crime (Zimring, 1975). The NFA established that atypical firearms should be regulated as a form of crime control, the regulation itself was the purview of the Treasury, and that taxation through licenses was the enforcement tool (Zimring, 1975). FFA was a compromise bill sponsored by the NRA that was meant to curtail further regulation, and Zimring's assessment in the *Journal of Legal Studies* epitomizes the efforts of Congress to deal with the issue of guns for decades to come:

> Congress got pretty much what it wanted in the F.F.A.: a symbolic denunciation of firearms in the hands of criminals, coupled with an inexpensive and ineffective regulatory scheme that did not inconvenience the American firearms industry or its customers. (Zimring, 1975, 143)

The Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA) was assembled upon the satisfactorily symbolic but ineffective practices already established by the NFA and the FFA. The GCA was devised to address particularly interstate sales of firearms and to "provide support to Federal, State, and local law enforcement officials in their fight against crime and violence" (Gun Control Act, 1968). It imposed further licensing requirements on federal dealers, prohibited the sale of firearms or "destructive devices" to those who had been convicted of a crime punishable by more than a year of imprisonment, a fugitive, convicted drug users, people found mentally ill, or those who were under the age of 18 (Gun Control Act, 1968). The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division of the Internal Revenue Service was reorganized into the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Division (ATF) and given jurisdiction to enforce the law. In his remarks when signing the law, President Johnson declared that "[a]ll of our people who are deeply concerned in this country about law and order should hail this day" while still lamenting the fact that a national firearm register was blocked from the bill because of the influence of the powerful gun lobby (Johnson, 1968). In many ways, the dynamics of legislative debates over gun control would come to repeat themselves over the course of the 20th century and the 21st century.

Democratic Party Control and Bipartisan Agreement on Crime Control

What was new about the federal legislative debates over the GCA was how the two political parties, Republicans and Democrats, adopted the issue of guns into their 1968 party platforms, setting the stage for the politicization of gun control and guns becoming the stark partisan issue it is today. Democrats took credit for the GCA as part of their focus on combating particularly youth crime, presenting the GCA as part of their efforts to aid "cities needing help to bring major disturbances under control" and as "a step toward putting the weapons of wanton violence beyond the

reach of criminal and irresponsible hands" (Democratic Party Platform, 1968). Republicans also presented controlling the "indiscriminate availability of firearms" as their achievement in their platform, even as they also declared that they were able to safeguard lawful firearm ownership and the right of states to set their own gun laws (Republican Party Platform, 1968).

This is the first time the issue of gun control was addressed by either major party's platform (Spitzer, 1995). However, even as these partisan lines were drawn in the sand, they were still quite porous. The parties themselves were not polarized or ideologically sorted the way they have increasingly been since the 1990s (Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Nivola & Brady, 2007). 39 Democratic and 31 Republican Senators voted for the GCA while 13 Democrats and 4 Republicans voted against it (Senate Vote #558, 1968). In the House, 97 Democratic and 63 Republican members voted for approval, while 67 Democrats and 62 Republicans voted against it (House Vote #473, 1968). It would take almost half a century before the parties would become the most prominent messengers on the issue, and for partisan identification to become a strong and consistent predictor of attitudes towards guns among the general public (Hansen & Seppälä, 2023; Miller, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021; Smith, 2002).

During the 1960s, as a response to the social upheavals and protests of the time, crime control became an issue for the federal government in a way that it had not been before (Shjarback & Young, 2018). Crime control was a key part of the Democratic Party Platform of 1968. The Johnson Administration declared "War on Crime" in 1965 to expand federal purview over issues such as policing and sentencing (Hinton, 2017), and as such, gun control was an extension of that agenda. While crime control and "tough on crime" positions were certainly the modus operandi of the Republican Party as well—indeed, it is not something the parties were on opposite sides of but in a competition to see who could be seen as "tougher" on the issue—regulating guns held a limited role on the party's agenda. Where the parties found common ground on issues of gun control was often when racial animus was involved. Indeed, historically crime control has often signified racial control and punitive measures used as a way to mass incarcerate in particular black men—a system, which some scholars have argued is a modern extension of chattel slavery ((Alexander, 2011; Hinton, 2017).

With a much stronger lobbying arm on the side of gun rights, the incentives of both parties were to produce federal gun regulation that was mostly symbolic in nature. The effects of the NFA, FFA, and GCA were limited because of the lack of defined enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures placed on even federally licensed dealers (Zimring, 1975; Carter, 1997, 74). The failure of the laws was by design—the tools given for regulation were never strong enough to answer the questions they ostensibly attempted to address. Indeed, in the case of such

legislation as the GCA, Senator Thomas J. Dodd initially introduced the bill in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency to stop the import of foreign military surplus and the sale of so called "Saturday Night Specials," i.e., cheap, poorly made handguns to protect domestic gun manufacturing (Utter, 2016, 93).

Furthermore, throughout the history of the United States, both gun carrying and gun control laws have had a symbiotic relationship with crime control and racial control that has not been at all contradictory but rather interdependent (Cook & Goss, 2014; Cottrol & Diamond, 1991; Winkler, 2022). Just as guns and permissive gun laws were used to dominate Black people, who were seen as a threat to white society (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; Stroud, 2016), gun control became another tool for control. Laws denying access entirely or requiring licenses in the Antebellum South were passed specifically to limit free Black people from owning and carrying firearms, and the southern black codes passed during the Reconstruction era continued in that tradition (Cottrol & Diamond, 1991). Gun control as racial control manifested itself in the 1960s as well, deepening the resentment and distrust towards regulatory policies among Black communities at large.

In California, lawmakers passed and Governor Ronald Reagan signed the NRA-drafted Mulford Act of 1967 that prohibited the carrying of firearms in public places without a permit to disarm the Oakland BBP that had been patrolling the streets, or copwatching as they called it, with weapons (Leonardatos, 1999; Simonson, 2016). In Chicago, law enforcement officers had had a long history of using measures such as firearm seizures and harsher penalties on firearm-related offenses as a reason to arrest, surveil, and penalize Black citizens, actions that intensified as soon as organizations such as the Illinois Black Panther Party encouraged Black people to take up arms in self-defense (Balto, 2019). In New Orleans, in the violent encounters between Black Panthers, their affiliates, and the police, the Federal Gun Control Act of 1968 was used to issue a federal complaint to the list of murder charges the Panthers faced (Austin, 2006). During the debate over the ban on "Saturday Night Specials" that became part of the GCA, the language used was clearly racialized: distinctions between bad gun ownership that was an "urban blight" associated with gangs and "hoodlums" and good rural, white, gun ownership were explicitly made (Wolter, 2021). Even as gun laws became less overtly racist in their language, they were still used explicitly as tools of racial control, and measures such as tougher penalties for firearm offenses were often employed specifically against Black men (see section 3.3.2 for more discussion).

Gun control and guns became a political issue at the end of more than a decade of social upheavals and disruptions in the status quo of power structures, as traditionally subjugated groups demanded more rights, and a significant swell of support for transformative change sparked ideas about revolution. The sea change happened just as swiftly, as the state brutally cracked down on the activism, and the

cultural, political, and social backlash suffocated the last of the countercultural movement. Guns were not at the center of the debates during the 1960s. For liberal Democrats, they were tangential to concerns about crime and political violence, while for conservative Republicans, they were a token representative of states' rights. For a small group of Black people, a possibility for self-protection and power. For the NRA, a way of life. These dynamics would reproduce themselves for the rest of the century.

For it is only the NRA, and other gun rights groups that would significantly mobilize in part because they found the NRA to be too flexible, that make guns their central driving force for political action. The NRA might have become more zealous due to the threat they perceived the social movements of the 1960s to pose, but for the New Left, their focus was on the government and the institutions upholding their power. Government distrust, militancy, and belief in the possibility—and necessity—of revolution closed the door on any movement for government-regulated gun control to appear on the Left. However, by the end of the 1970s, a growing number of interest groups made up of professionals such as doctors, law enforcement officials, clergymen, and teachers would position themselves directly opposed to the positions the NRA held. Their problem was that at that point, the NRA had grown into an entirely different organization that they were wholly unprepared to confront.

3.1.2 Growing Roots: Non-governmental Organizations and Professionals Lobbying for Gun Control Policies

During the 1960s, and arguably throughout the 20th century, a discernible grassroots social movement for gun control did not exist. Instead, this time is characterized by the mobilization of interest groups advocating for gun control. One of my main findings from Article IV is that the interest groups that endured from the 20th century to the 2000s formed the entire operational basis for the movement when it does mobilize in a significant way. Consequently, the definitions, strategies, and goals that were adopted when the gun control movement was relatively small and scarcely funded carried on to the grassroots movement of the 21st century. In this section, I consider these interest groups, their repertoires of contention, their framing of the issue, and their goals in order to understand the trajectory of the movement and connect the findings from Article IV to the first cycle of gun violence prevention.

I begin by considering the mobilized groups and few organizations that were involved with the passing of the Gun Control Act of 1968 and how those organizations quickly diverged on disagreement over either banning or controlling handguns. I consider how the faction that supported controlling handguns outlasted its counterparts and eventually evolved into the Brady Campaign, the oldest and most

influential national organization in the field of gun violence prevention. The Brady Campaign, with its Republican leadership, was a moderate organization advocating for "commonsense" policies on the federal level in Congress. In what would become a common cycle in the movement, the key events of this period were triggered by a few mass shootings that gained national prominence. These shootings eventually opened a policy window in a politically favorable context that the Brady's Campaign successfully took advantage of, lobbying for the passing of two major pieces of gun control legislation of the 1990s, the Brady Bill of 1993 and the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994, the last federal gun legislation to be passed before 2022. However, the lessons from these moments were overlearned as it became clear that the strategies of the movement were not enough to counter the force of the NRA and other gun rights organizations. I end the section by exploring the crime framework behind the arguments for gun control, the assumptions about collective and individual security inherent to the policy, and the critique scholars have made against the approaches of national gun control organizations of the 20th century.

Gun Control Interest Groups Forming the Base of the Movement

The National Council for Responsible Firearms Policy (NCRFP), founded as a project of the Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church in 1967, was the first national interest group that was solely focused on gun control (Carrol, 2015). It was a coalition made up of fifty professionals interested in advancing national gun control policies but careful in trying to avoid upsetting the NRA and other gun rights advocates—hence responsible firearm policy rather than gun control (Carrol, 2015). As an organization, it was short-lived and mostly forgotten in history, but it did play a considerable role in forming the bipartisan Emergency Committee for Gun Control that pushed Congress during the GCA debates in favor of more comprehensive gun control policies, such as national gun licensing and registration (Carrol, 2015). The Emergency Committee for Gun Control disbanded after it reached its goal as the GCA was passed by Congress.

However, the Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church did not give up on the issue and, in 1974, founded the National Coalition to Ban Handguns (NCBH) (Carrol, 2015; Carter, 1997). NCHB was markedly different from the former NCRFP as well as from other gun control interest groups of the time, as demonstrated already by the decision to highlight banning handguns in the name of the organization. It was a coalition of interest groups, women's associations, religious organizations, and labor unions that advocated for a more aggressive strategy to combat gun lobbying groups such as the NRA and attempted to advance federal legislation that would ban private handgun ownership on the model of other countries in Europe and Asia (Carter, 1997; Goss, 2006). According to Gallup, in the

1960s, banning handguns was still approved of by 60% of the American public, but that approval was in steady decline, and by the time the NCBH was founded under 40% population supported a law that would ban handguns (Brenan, 2022). Unsurprisingly, then, NCBH changed its name to Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV) and with it, shifted its focus to banning assault weapons (Carter, 1997; Goss, 2006). Despite the name change, they remained one of the most aggressive groups in pressuring the NRA, including condemning the NRA over its "insurrectionist" interpretation of the Second Amendment (Horwitz & Anderson, 2009). The CSGV became defunct only in 2022 when it merged into the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions.

In 1974, the same year that the CSGV was founded, Mark Borinsky, an armed-robbery victim, established the National Council to Control Handguns (NCCH), which would become arguably the most long-lasting gun control organization of the entire movement. He was joined by Edward Welles, a retired CIA officer, and Pete Shields, a Republican marketing manager from DuPont whose 23-year-old son had been murdered with a firearm in San Francisco in a case related to the so called "Zebra murders" (Carrol, 2015; Carter, 1997). The "Zebra murders," so called because of the police channel used to track the case, stoked racial fears in San Francisco in 1973 and 1974 as the victims were all white, while survivors and eyewitnesses testified to the attackers being "well-dressed" Black men (Lamberson, 2016). Four Black men were eventually convicted of the murders with an informant accusing them of being part of a cult inside the Nation of Islam called the "Death Angels," whose mission was to murder white people to gain points within the ranks of the group and to incite a race war (Lamberson, 2016). While there seems to be at best dubious evidence of the existence of a cult like the "Death Angels,"[10] what is relevant here is how the radicalism and sometimes violent methods of groups such as the Black Liberation Army, Weather Underground, and Symbionese Liberation Army, together with rising levels of street crime, produced paranoia and fear particularly among the white general public. This again popularized "tough on crime" politics, often at the expense of the civil liberties the social movements of the 1960s had fought to gain. Here, too, through personal loss and tragedy, the racial politics of the 1960s were also interwoven with the origins of the gun control movement.

The NCCH began its work as part of the NCBH coalition, but as it formed its own identity, goals, and strategies, the organization decided to distance itself from

[10] The informant accused the men on trial of being part of the "Death Angels" cult but no investigation on the issue was apparently started, which implies that there was not enough credible evidence for the state or government officials to pursue the lead (Lambertson, 2016).

the position of banning handguns and, by extension, the NCBH (Carter, 1997). Borinsky left the organization, and in 1981, the remaining leadership decided to change the name of the organization to Handgun Control, Incorporated (HCI) (Carrol, 2015). HCI advocated for strict gun control measures while emphasizing that they did not want to intrude on the right of "law-abiding citizens" to carry firearms (Carter, 1997). Protecting the right of law-abiding citizens to carry firearms was what the NRA had proclaimed as its mission, and by the late 1970s, with a changed leadership, it had convinced its members that any attempt at gun control legislation was an encroachment on that right (Carter, 1997; Melzer, 2009).

The goal of HCI was to get federal gun control legislation passed, and toward that goal the organization adopted a strategy where they advocated for policies they believed were acceptable to the American public and possible to convince members of Congress to support (Carrol, 2015). When the press secretary of President Ronald Reagan, Jim Brady, was shot in an attempt on the president's life in 1981, his wife, Sarah Brady joined HCI and eventually, in 1989, became the chair of the organization (Brady, 2025). In 1983, Shields founded a separate but affiliated organization called the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence to focus on education, outreach, and litigation as complementary to the legislative work HCI had been doing, and Sarah Brady also became the chair of that organization (Carrol, 2015). In 2001, HCI became the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the Center became the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence (Brady, 2025). Both of the organizations today are more familiarly known as just Brady, the oldest and perhaps still the most influential gun control organization in the movement.

Mass Shootings Opening Policy Windows under Democratic Leadership

Under the leadership of Sarah Brady, the fundamental beliefs, goals, and strategies of the former HCI did not significantly change. Sarah and Jim Brady were both Republicans, as had been the previous leadership, and they believed that change could be achieved through national legislative compromise (Carrol, 2015; Goss, 2006). This strategy proved successful in the early 1990s when the Democratic Party under the leadership of Bill Clinton won the presidency and maintained majorities in both the House and the Senate in the Presidential Election of 1993. After the shooting of Jim Brady in 1981, HCI had been lobbying for the Brady Bill that would implement background checks and a five-day waiting period for handguns sold by federal dealers. The bill had not gained traction before, but Clinton had expressed support for it during his presidential campaign to boost his tough on crime position. Mass shootings in a schoolyard shooting in Stockton, California in 1989, where five children were murdered and 30 were injured, and at Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas, where 23 were killed and 27 were wounded, helped push gun control onto the

agenda in Congress (Utter, 2016; Vizzard, 2000; William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum, 2025). During this period of open political opportunities, HCI, along with its allies, managed to push for the passing of both the Brady Bill in 1993 and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 1994 before opportunities closed again after the Congressional Elections of 1994, where the Democratic Party lost control of both the House and the Senate.

Mirage of Opportunities: Interest Groups Consolidating around Gun Control as Crime Control

Up until the late 1990s, HCI, gun control advocates, and legislators supportive of gun control policies relied mostly on framing gun control as part of crime control (Quinn, 2022; Vizzard, 2000). Advocates of gun control argued that regulating policies were needed to keep firearms away from criminals and certain groups of unwanted people, that the presence and easy access to firearms exacerbated both the attitudes that produced violence and the violence itself (Quinn, 2022; Vizzard, 2000). These types of arguments were often most rigorously countered by gun rights organizations that claimed that criminals would not be stopped law, that gun control policies only placed a burden on law-abiding citizens, and that the presence of firearms in the hands of law-abiding citizens, the "good guys" would work as a deterrent (Quinn, 2022; Stroud, 2016; Vizzard, 2000).

The fundamental, and possibly insurmountable, disagreement at the center of the debate over gun control, whether it is the responsibility and right of the government or the individual to provide safety in a society, lay underneath the basic assumption for the crime control argument. Positive attitudes towards gun control are often tied with belief in collective security, where government is held responsible for protecting its citizens, and government solutions are trusted, or at least preferred to self-defense that is seen as counterproductive (Vizzard, 2000). On the contrary, pro-gun attitudes are associated with individualism, distrust in the state, government, and law enforcement, and their capabilities in providing safety (Celinska, 2007; De Angelis et al., 2017; Hansen & Seppälä, 2023; Vizzard, 2000). Relevant to the crime control framework are also the equally irreconcilable imaginations over *who* are the people carrying firearms found at the center of gun debates—who are the "good guys," and who, importantly, are therefore the "bad guys" (Article I; Heiskanen, 2022; Stroud, 2016).

As gun violence was understood and framed as a crime, and gun control as the solution to the problem, federal-level gun control policies became key in the movement's strategy. Goss (2006) argued that the approach of the gun control movement, what she called the rational-national approach, was firmly a product of its time. While some groups on the state and local level existed, the 20th-century gun

control movement, as far as it can be considered one, was overwhelmingly characterized by national-level interest groups. Advocates believed state laws and local ordinances were not effective if there was no national law that curtailed the interstate trafficking of guns (Goss, 2006). As they believed national legislation was imperative, the national organizations were unwilling to dedicate their limited resources, money, and volunteer workers to state-level efforts, let alone establish their own local chapters that would be only a drain on the main organization (Goss, 2006). This made rational sense as federal legislation was seen as imperative for any gun control policies to work. It was not conducive to movement building.

However, Goss (2006) also argued that the movement of the 1970s and 1980s was not incremental enough in its policy goals but rather so invested in the idea of banning handguns that it weakened the entire effort to pass gun control legislation because of the way it activated the NRA and other gun rights interest groups. To demonstrate this, Goss (2006) referred to NCBH, to HCI roots in the coalition and failures to pass a handgun ban on the federal level in 1974, a Chicago effort to ban handgun ammunitions in 1975, failed ballot measures to ban handguns in Massachusetts in 1976, and in California in 1982 and the swift gun rights activation as a response to each of these efforts. Goss (2006) attributed the focus on national handgun ban as something done to cater to the more zealous members choosing to volunteer their time as well as the spirit and lessons learned from the 1960s and the legislative wins the social movements of that time had gained.

Others have argued that focusing on incremental policies is exactly the reason why the movement was so weak. Vizzard (2000) argued that the compromise policies that passed Congress were symbolic, ineffective, and incoherent with implementation issues, which left the gun control movement vulnerable to attacks that gun control as a policy did not work, while discouraging both the support of elected officials and the public. Vizzard provided examples of how the Brady Bill and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban both dealt with the same dilemmas that had been present in the passing of the NFA (1934), the FFA (1938), and the GCA (1968). To avoid accusations of radicalism by gun rights groups, concessions were already made in the initial bills that HCI crafted, which then were further watered down in the policy process of Congress (Vizzard, 2000). The Brady Bill that passed imposed waiting periods on gun sales but concerned only handguns sold by federal dealers, left oversight to local police departments without any federal recourse and did not allow retention of sales information that would have made tracking of illegal sales and firearms possible (Cook & Ludwig, 2003, 2013; Vizzard, 2000). The Federal Assault Weapons Ban included a 10-year sunset provision, excluded weapons that had already been sold, and was mired in debate over the definition of an “assault weapon” that led to a significant exemption list and extensive criticism from both advocates and opponents (Koper, 2013; Vizzard, 2002).

What these legislative debates show is that HCI and later Brady, the most influential gun control interest group of the 20th century, moved away from banning handguns and explicitly advocated for pursuing compromise legislation shortly after it was founded (Carrol, 2015; Carter, 1997; Goss, 2006). This did not accrue any goodwill for them among the NRA and other gun rights groups, who proselytized to their members that all gun control policy suggestions were a slippery slope towards gun confiscation (Goss, 2006; Marietta, 2008; Spitzer, 1995). Goss (2006) considered the very real efforts to ban handguns to have given the NRA this leverage. With the benefit of hindsight of twenty more years of successful gun rights politics and considering how radicalized the NRA of the 1970s already was, it is worth questioning whether they would have adopted the no-compromise position no matter what the gun control groups of the time did.

In Article II, I argued that the modern gun control movement that began to grow its roots in the 1970s did not inherit the radical spirit of the 1960s and rather was a testament to the shifting tides and the loss of utopian projects that came with the political backlash to the New Left social movements of the time. For example, when 15 people were murdered and 31 were injured in the tower shooting at the University of Texas at Austin already in 1966, a debate over banning handguns entered the public consciousness in Texas (Article II). By the end of the 1990s, banning handguns was gone from the conversation and the goals of all the major gun control groups. The only exception to that was the Violence Policy Center, a small research and education-focused non-profit founded in 1988 that was, by most accounts, the most uncompromising in its policy proposals and support for strict, far-reaching gun control (Carrol, 2015; Goss, 2006).[11] In Article II, I also considered the 1995 Concealed Carry law debate in Texas, where Sarah Brady made an impassioned appeal against the passing of the law, which widened the scope of public places where concealed carry was allowed. Brady emphasized that they were not for disarmament, that like most people, they were in the middle, and that regulating firearms was a matter of public health and safety (Article II). A moderate, pragmatic approach was the key for gun control groups whose goal was to pass national legislation (Article II).

Moreover, while banning private ownership of handguns as a policy in the 21st century certainly strikes one as such a radical idea that it could be considered utopian,

[11] In 2015, according to Carrol, the VPC still supported a ban on civilian ownership of handguns. In 2025, banning handguns is not mentioned on the VPC's website. However, they do feature, for example, detailed information about what they call "concealed carry killers," gun death and injury caused by concealed carry permit holders, indicating that the organization has shifted its focus towards permit and licensing systems (Violence Policy Center, 2025).

in Article II, I argued that at the heart of the radical political imagination and broadened horizons of futures for the New Left was transformative societal change. Such a change could never be achieved through simple policy change. Thus, the goals and the repertoires of contention available to gun control organizations accumulated through experiences of advocacy over a period were fundamentally limited no matter whether they supported bans on handguns or not. Throughout the 20th century, animating a grassroots movement was not something the groups strived for either, and that too was reflected in their strategies.

With the resources and knowledge gun control advocates had in the 20th century, it was the rational choice to focus on federal legislation and limit outreach to local and state-level groups. In hindsight, it is also arguably true that, as Goss writes, it was the right approach "in the wrong nation at the wrong time" (2006, 167). The influence the NRA was able to garner with their large network of members and money that far surpassed any of the resources all the interest groups in the gun control movement had combined was enough to dissuade enough members of Congress from voting for a gun control bill. Even more crucially, the NRA had the resources and local chapters with grassroots activists to keep pressure on southern state legislatures in particular. The slew of pre-emption laws they managed to pass at the state level that denied the rights of municipalities to pass local gun control ordinances were successful in both deterring those ordinances and in further depressing gun control activism (Goss, 2006; Melzer, 2009). The national-rational approach had no tools to answer the state and local level strategy of the gun rights movement, and the cession of this ground, the South, would invariably hamper the movement well into the following two decades.

The gun control movement of the 20th century consisted of professional but relatively small national interest groups focused on lobbying, who framed gun control as crime control, as was popular at the time, and prioritized federal legislation while moderating the policy goals to what was believed to be more palatable to both members of Congress and the public. This strategy was shown to be successful in the early 1990s under the open political opportunities created by the election of Bill Clinton and a Democratic Congress as well as the national tragedies that helped push gun control onto the agenda.

Most of the activists I interviewed who had begun their advocacy work already before the turn of the century had, at the time, viewed passing federal legislation as the most important goal. These activists, and most that came after them, described how they were hopeful in the beginning because the issue was straightforward and the gun control policy proposals sensible, "commonsense," and rational. In Article IV, I examined how these feelings of hope largely turned into experiences of failure. Coming into the 21st century, as mass shootings began to gain more attention and cause wide national outrage, the gun control movement

hoped that the time was finally right to continue on the path set out by the successes of the 1990s. The depth of disappointment and frustration they experienced could not be overstated when it became apparent that that time had slipped entirely out of reach.

3.2 Cycle II: Gun Violence as Disease (2000s–2010s)

3.2.1 Making Sense of Mass Shootings in the Era of Partisan Polarization

In Article III, I argued that mass shootings were the most prominent way that gun violence prevention gained media attention and issue salience. My main finding in the same article was that media reporting on mass shootings had become highly partisan. In this section, I consider how gun violence became to be understood through mass shootings as a mediatized phenomenon and by the resulting partisan debate over gun control. I explore how mass shootings made gun violence salient to the broader public but also further polarized the issue in a political environment increasingly characterized by partisan polarization both among party members and the media. I connect mass shootings and partisan polarization into the broader discussion over how the gun control movement evolved entering the 21st century. In this period, the public health framework developing in the movement merged new strategies and policy solutions together with the old issue definitions and goals familiar to the crime framework to create a new cycle as a response to changing political opportunities.

I begin by considering how mass shootings as a mediatized phenomenon brought attention to gun control as a solution preferred by the public in a way that had opened the policy window in Congress for gun control advocates in the 1990s. Yet, those opportunities closed almost entirely in the next two decades. I examine how two key events, the election of a Republican president in George W. Bush and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 closed federal legislation from gun control advocates, while the slow but broader trends of party and media polarization first further gridlocked the policy process and eventually changed the politics of gun control permanently. I end the section by demonstrating that while issue definitions in the movement oscillated between crime and public health, the repertoires of contention and goals did not change even as the political landscape did. This resulted in bitter failures for advocates for decades to come.

1999 Columbine High School Shooting Starting the Era of Mediatized Mass Shootings

Seemingly random events of mass shootings are not a new phenomenon. Mass shootings according to federal law are defined as "mass killings," which "means 3 or more killings in a single incident" (Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act, 2013). As discussed in the previous sections, they motivated intense discussions about gun control that in the 1990s led to the passing of the Brady Bill (1993) and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (1994). After the turn of the century, mass shootings did become increasingly prevalent and consistently more deadly, but what significantly changed in the 21st century was how particularly school shootings gained exponentially more media attention after the 1999 Columbine shooting (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Braselmann, 2016).

The 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Colorado caused a national media frenzy that lasted for a month with high news salience (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). According to the Pew Research Center (1999), it was the most followed news story of 1999 and the third most followed event of the 1990s. Media narratives during catastrophic events serve not only to inform the public, but they also aim to make sense of the incident and offer justification to explain the randomness of disasters and acts of senseless violence in order to preserve the continuation of normal life in societies (Braselmann, 2016; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). In the case of the Columbine shooting, blame was assigned to easy access to weapons and lack of gun control, mental illness, and violent popular culture in the form of video games, TV shows, and movies (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert, 2007).

In the following two decades, media framing of mass shootings did not significantly change (Article III, Holody & Shaughnessy, 2020; LaRose et al., 2021). I argued in Article III that there are predictable scripts media outlets rely on when reporting on mass shootings, ones that today are almost entirely dependent on the partisan leanings of the news outlets. However, particularly at the beginning of the 2000s, when explicitly conservative media outlets had not become mainstream in the way that they were to be in the 2010s and 2020s, gun control was such a prevalent frame for mass shootings that it almost became synonymous with the public understanding of what the shootings themselves were about.

Before the advent of social media, for the public experiencing the shootings primarily through news media, the media scripts related to the reporting of shootings became so integral to the actual events that "school shootings [were] literally unimaginable and unexecutable without media" (Ruddock, 2012, 13). School shootings became media spectacles that sensationalized violence, stoked fear about rising crime, and moral panic around the tragedies (Braselmann, 2016; Ruddock, 2012). Myths about amoral, brutal, remorseless juvenile

superpredators[12] were used to describe "alienated" youth as something "other" from traditional American culture, to sensationalize and fuel anxieties over youth crime, and to perpetuate the idea that "tough on crime" punitive policies were necessary to protect people (Frymer, 2009; Madfis, 2016; Morrow et al., 2016; Muschert, 2007).

Catastrophes such as mass shootings and the consequent media attention that emphasized the need for gun control policies while inflating a sense of collective fear should have opened political opportunities for the gun control movement. The sudden attention to a problem that crises bring with them can shift the national mood toward a policy solution that government officials are compelled to consider. Kingdon (2014) described this process as a problem opening a policy window that activists can seek to take advantage of. Indeed, the national mood at the beginning of the 21st century seemed to be in favor of gun control. In public polls, more than half of the population was in favor of stricter gun laws, these opinions were stronger in the aftermath of mass shootings, and some specific proposals, such as implementing national background checks for all gun sales, were consistently favored by more than 80% of the population (Gallup, 2025).

National news media outlets in their reporting of mass shootings used gun control to frame the narratives (Article III; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert, 2007), which reaffirmed the idea that the national mood was behind stricter gun laws and especially the need for Congress to be seen doing something. The gun control movement had established its presence in Washington D.C, it had rational policy proposals ready as solutions to the problem attracting national attention, and a history of successfully pressuring Congress over the extensive opposition and resources of the NRA. Moreover, for the first time, it appeared the gun control movement was expanding towards real grassroots mobilization, when the Million Mom March (MMM) attracted around half a million people to march to the Capitol to demand gun control laws on Mother's Day, May 14, 2000. Such a show of grassroots support was unprecedented in the history of the gun control movement.

[12] While superpredator is a racialized term often employed specifically to incite an image of a dangerous young Black man, in the case of school shootings most of the perpetuators were white. Muschert used the term to describe how the media narratives of the Columbine shooting created a new archetype of a juvenile superpredator that relied on the same myths: "the suburban rampage school shooter" (2007, 363).

Partisan Polarization Closing Opportunities in the Aftermath of 9/11 and the Bush Administration

While crises do bring attention to problems, the policy windows opened for political advocates created by the favorable national mood exist only for a very short time (Kingdon, 2014). The recurrence of mass shootings and the national attention on them could have potentially given the movement multiple open windows. However, first the election of George W. Bush in October 2000, and then the following year the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City had a monumental impact on the whole political culture of the United States for decades to come. Consequently, as the Republican administration was being loudly pressured and financially supported by gun lobbying groups such as the NRA, and the national mood turned towards pro-war and pro-military policies, federal policy windows were closed entirely for gun control.

This was not necessarily because the gun control policies advocated for were contradictory with the broader political environment created by 9/11. As discussed, gun control as crime control in the aftermath of mass shootings was framed in a way that answered people's sense of collective fear and moral outrage. However, 9/11 and the consequent "war on terror" campaign waged by the Bush Administration pushed all other potential policy agendas out of Congress. In the policy process, there are only a limited number of resources to push for an agenda change in any given administration (Kingdon, 2014). Moreover, in the 20th and 21st centuries, it is a simple fact that no Republican Administration has passed gun control legislation. During the Bush Administration, gun control advocates themselves recognized how limited their opportunities were, no matter how popular their policies seemed to be among the public (Article IV). For a movement organized almost exclusively around national legislation, the effect was debilitating (Article IV).

Even without the existence of the "war on terror" agenda, there were other, more fundamental problems developing in the political system of the United States that would make passing federal gun control laws even harder and practically impossible under a Republican administration. After the 1960s, the Democratic Party was bitterly divided on the issue of civil rights. The Republican Party took this as an opportunity to implement their "southern strategy," where relying on racial grievances, the Republican Party managed to gain support among white conservative southerners who had been loyal to the Democratic Party (Crespino, 2007; Kruse, 2005). If the parties had been more evenly divided among ideologically conservative and liberal members, in the post-civil rights era driven by racial animus, the two parties began to significantly sort themselves ideologically and along issues in a way that was bound to upturn the entire policy process (Campbell, 2018; Hare & Poole, 2014).

Coming into the 2000s, party polarization was slowly but surely spreading to the news media (Article III; Levendusky, 2013; Shultziner & Stukalin, 2021) and to the politically active population (Abramowitz, 2010; Mason, 2018; Nivola & Brady, 2007). By the 1980s, the Republican Party had not only branded itself as the defender of gun rights but also specifically as being against gun control (Vizzard, 2000). As such, they had also adopted the NRA position as their own, where gun rights were used as an identity marker in the culture wars in the same way as were issues such as abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights. This made persuasion and bargaining with members of the Republican Party extremely difficult for gun control advocates. At the same time, the Democratic Party had not adopted gun control quite as unreservedly into its agenda (Quinn, 2019). On the contrary, when the Democratic Party lost Congressional Elections in 1994, some members pointed to the Federal Assault Weapons Ban as the compromising vote that cost some members their office (Fung, 2022; Hulse, 2019).

Exacerbating these tendencies was the rapid polarization and fragmentation of news media. In the post-World War II period, conservative activists and political actors began to increasingly accuse mainstream media of having liberal biases that they had merely disguised as objectivity (Hemmer, 2017). In an effort to combat what they saw as liberal control, conservative political actors established conservative newspapers and broadcasting channels that explicitly purported to be factual but ideologically conservative to offer a "balanced" view of world events (Hemmer, 2017). Thus, already in the 1950s, something that could be called conservative media existed, even if it was not yet very popular (Hemmer, 2017). However, media choices dramatically increased in the late 20th century due to the introduction of new television technologies, with audiences going from having three major networks to consume in the 1970s to having more than a hundred at the beginning of the 2000s (Webster, 2005).

Predictably, the audience fragmented away from following the same channels into smaller groups consuming a wide variety of different types of networks (Webster, 2005). Researchers theorized that a high variety of choice would lead to selective exposure, that is, that audiences would choose to consume media that catered only to their own interests and values, which would lead to self-contained enclaves and group polarization (Zillmann & Bryant, 2013; Turow, 1998). Partisan media became more popular and Fox News, the conservative news channel started by Rupert Murdoch in 1996, became the preferred news channel for those identifying with the Republican Party, while Democrats gravitated towards CNN, CBS, ABC, and NBC (Hollander, 2008). While it was difficult to prove whether partisan selective exposure was leading to partisan media polarizing their audiences or increased partisan polarization of audiences was leading to partisan selective exposure, the polarization of media and of politically engaged viewers had become

evident in the 2000s (Hollander, 2008; Jamieson et al., 2010; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010).

Gun control became an easy target for conservative media, and media narratives about mass shootings began to diverge. The rationality of gun control, and the moral outrage the mass shooting media narratives produced had been aggressively disputed by the NRA and other gun lobbying groups throughout the 20th century, but now their arguments were adopted by the Republican Party and echoed by right-wing media as well (Article III). In Article III, I showed how conservative media outlets had adopted the arguments of the NRA. They talked of law-abiding gun owners, their imaginations of racialized "good guys" and "bad guys," blaming mental illnesses and failures by government officials, such as law enforcement and school counselors, for not being able to stop mass shootings, and promoting the deterrence logic by arming teachers (Article III). Meanwhile, more liberal media outlets continued promoting gun control policies, expressing moral outrage, and blaming the government for its inaction (Article III). As the issue continued to become more polarized (Miller, 2019), and elite rhetoric offered two diverging narratives, it was easier for decision-makers to ignore the "national mood" despite polls still indicating that the public preferred gun control (Gallup, 2025).

Gun Violence Recognized as an Issue of Population Health

While mass shootings had made gun violence a salient issue, these random acts of terror were still often understood through the framework of crime and deviant behavior. However, since the 1960s, gun violence, both suicides and homicides, had been rapidly and steadily rising, and by the 1990s, over 20,000 people died yearly due to firearms (Gramlich, 2025). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention had taken notice, and the amount of medical research about the health toll of gun violence had already begun to increase in the 1980s (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 1996; Vizzard, 2000). Through the research, a public health approach to gun violence became a more popular framework in the movement, solidifying "around issues of firearm access, storage, and safety devices" (Vizzard, 2000, 9). The public health approach was evident in the language of the Brady campaign, when they attempted to oppose the Texas concealed carry law in 1995 (Article II), and at least at the time, it showed some promise in being less easily attacked by gun rights advocates as the crime control framework (Vizzard, 2000).

However, this approach was stymied by the Dickey Amendment passed in 1996, which severely hampered the continuation of medical research into gun violence. This amendment to the 1997 budget plan prohibited government funding allocated to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from being used for anything that could be considered as advocating or promoting gun control policies (Omnibus

Consolidated Appropriations Act, 1996). The language of the act was vague enough that it effectively chilled a significant amount of gun injury and death-related research until the provision was clarified in 2018 (Rostron, 2018; Spolar, 2024). Moreover, new groups promoting different understandings of the problem were still not mobilized in any significant and consistent way during this era. Through mass shooting media reporting, the debates over gun control as a form of crime control gained national prominence in a way that they did not in the 20th century. Thus, even as solutions focused on safe gun ownership stemming from public health research were adopted into the movement, repertoires of contention and movement goals did not change.

Increased attention on a problem, such as gun violence, with a policy answer ready, should have led to an opening of the window for gun control advocates when the political streams turned back towards them. In the most immediate terms, the election of Bush and a Republican Congress, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks that promoted the "war on terror" on the agenda, closed opportunities for the movement for eight years. However, when the opportunity opened again in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, where 20 children under the age of 8 and 6 staff members were massacred, with a groundswell of support and a Democratic Administration and Democratic Congress in power, gun control advocates were certain the time had finally come to pass the policies they had been advocating for decades. And yet it did not. The slow trends of polarization on the party level and in the media had changed the policy process irreparably, and eventually, the failures of the decades would change the direction of the movement entirely.

3.2.2 The Sandy Hook Effect: Grassroots Mobilization in a Time of Closed Opportunities

In Article IV, my main argument was that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012, was a watershed moment for the gun control movement, both because of what happened and what did not in its aftermath. By employing the concept of stocks of legacy (Rossi, 2015), I considered how the experience of the Sandy Hook shooting left such a lasting mark on the memory of activists that the lessons of it were learned in a way that shaped the repertoires of strategies[13] of the entire movement (Article IV). On one hand, the tragedy of Sandy Hook reverberated across communities throughout the country,

[13] Repertoires of strategies is Rossi's (2015) effort to expand Tilly and Tarrow's repertoires of contention to include actions and performances that are not public. I employ the term in Article IV to particularly note the personal motivations and both private and public actions of the movement members I interviewed.

which led to unprecedented levels of grassroots mobilization for the issue and the emergence of such influential organizations in the movement as Moms Demand Action. On the other hand, the failure to pass any federal gun control legislation, despite the wave of support and the opportunities of a Democratic federal government should have provided, was the final nail in the coffin for the gun control movement of the 20th century that had focused most of its efforts on national gun control policies.

In this section, I cover the time from the Sandy Hook shooting in late 2012 until the Parkland shooting at the beginning of 2018, two inflection points that I argue are integral to the development of the movement. First, I consider how the Sandy Hook tragedy mobilized particularly women to take action against gun violence by appealing to their sense of social responsibility through motherhood. Second, I examine the government gridlock, political forces, and institutional structures that stopped any gun legislation bills from passing in Congress in 2013 in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook school shooting. I tie together my main argument from Article IV that the opposing forces of mass mobilization and closing political opportunities are central to understanding how the movement changed with showing how the dominant issue definitions of gun violence shifted from crime control toward public health. In short, how the gun control movement became the gun violence prevention movement. I end the section with my argument from Article IV that the public health approach cannot solve the political problem of gun violence prevention.

2012 Sandy Hook Shooting Mobilizing Women to Take Ownership of the Issue

The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting caused particular outrage because most of the victims were so young. However, as horrific as the shooting was, in many ways, what had happened and what happened in the aftermath were not new. Part of what made the event a breaking point for many of the primarily white, suburban, middle-class activists mobilized in the aftermath of Sandy Hook was how common school shootings had become and how little had changed in response to them. Yet, even the initial grassroots mobilization was not new; as mentioned in 3.2.1, the Million Mom March had gathered around half a million gun control advocates on the Capitol right after the Columbine High School shooting. Schildkraut and Muschert point out how mass shootings that became highly salient media events, such as the Columbine shooting and the Sandy Hook shooting, activated the "collective moral sensibilities" of the public (24, 2014).

In particular, as was the case with the Columbine and Sandy Hook, it activated feelings of social responsibility in women. A stark gender gap has been at the core of the issue of guns and gun control for as long as guns have been a political issue in

the United States. Studies show that women have been and continue to be consistently more in favor of gun control policies than men (Goss, 2003, 2017; Hansen & Dolan, 2025; Schaeffer, 2024; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986). This is not surprising when considering the lived experiences of women. They are less likely than men to own a gun (Brenan, 2022), more likely to die in a household with a gun than without one (Anglemyer et al., 2014), more likely to be killed by their intimate partner than anyone else (Smith, 2022), and much more likely to die of intimate partner violence if their partner used a gun (Zeoli et al., 2016). Moreover, gun culture, the frontier mentality, and the individualistic sense of security propagated by gun rights groups have become the very symbols of masculinity (Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2009; Kelley, 2022; Stroud, 2016).

However, despite the high support for gun control policies, women have not mobilized in support of gun control anywhere near the levels of men who support expansions of gun rights (Goss, 2003, 2017), which has accounted for some of the discrepancies between the strength of gun rights groups and the relative weakness of the gun control movement. The MMM was the first example of women mobilizing in a significant way for more gun control legislation. The march organizers explicitly appealed to the sense of social responsibility of women and, in particular, mothers. Childhood innocence was weaponized to make the moral argument for gun control. In her study of the motivations of the women who participated in the march, Goss (2003) found that fear for their child's safety was the most commonly cited reason for joining. She concluded that the participation gap between women who supported gun control but did not mobilize for it and politically active men who supported gun rights could potentially be bridged with a shift from crime control to a more maternalistic frame because it allowed women to feel ownership over the issue (Goss, 2003).

Indeed, the problem of the MMM was not its lack of mobilization but sustaining that mobilization. Due to declining membership and lack of funding, the organization merged with the Brady Campaign only a year later (Carrol, 2015). Goss (2003) found fault with the lack of large-scale follow-up by the organizers. The MMM did not differ from the broader movement in its demand for more federal gun legislation, and as the election of Bush and 9/11 closed those opportunities, it likely affected women's calculations about whether to keep organizing. There was internal tension too. Gray White found in her study of MMM that while the organizers attempted to bring together the primarily white suburban moms with the Black mothers of urban communities that had struggled with gun violence far more often and far longer, they ultimately were not very successful in their efforts (2011).

The color-blind, middle-ground commonsense approach was perhaps attractive to Republican moms, but it came at the cost of answering the concerns of Black mothers and the racially charged critique lobbied against them by gun rights groups

who dismissed gun violence as a problem of gangs and poor (Black) mothering (Grey White, 2011). In Article IV, I also argued that large-scale protest marches are not always conducive to sustained activism. They are a powerful tool for gathering support, bringing awareness, pushing the issue into the mainstream, and sometimes through that to the policy process. However, if the agenda fails in the aftermath of a large-scale march, it can also induce intense feelings of disappointment and disengagement in the participants (Article IV).

The Sandy Hook shooting in 2012 mobilized women again, and similarly to MMM, organized around childhood innocence, child-protection, and a maternalistic sense of moral and social responsibility. Unlike MMM, the mass mobilization that happened in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting proved to be sustainable. Goss (2018) considered three factors to have influenced the different outcomes of these two moments of mass mobilization: money, framing, and movement strategies. When Shannon Watts started a Facebook group together with a group of moms right after the Sandy Hook shooting, a group that eventually turned into the organization Moms Demand Action, former New York City mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg was ready to donate his resources to help the cause. In 2014, Moms Demand Action merged with Bloomberg's group Mayors Against Illegal Guns to become Everytown for Gun Safety, which is still one of the largest, most influential, and well-funded organizations in the movement. In 2014, total revenue for Everytown For Gun Safety Action Fund Inc. was 52 million dollars (Suozzo et al., 2025b). By comparison, in 2004, Brady Campaign, the largest organization in the field that had subsumed the MMM organizers into its operation, had a revenue of around 7 million dollars (Suozzo et al., 2025a).

Moms Demand Action brought back from MMM the child-protection framework that appealed to broader values of moral and social responsibility and encouraged women to adopt the issue as their own (Goss, 2018). However, framing in the movement had already slowly started shifting away from the crime control approach. In the post-9/11 years of the Bush Administration, as policy opportunities for gun control closed but media attention grew and the issue began to increasingly divide the polarized parties, gun control advocates looked towards a public health approach as a less political and more broadly appealing framework. While the Dickey Amendment had stifled the research done at CDC, researchers at private universities such as Johns Hopkins University had begun to focus more on firearm violence and its prevention. Studies done on how access to firearms increased the risk of suicides and of becoming victimized by gun violence as well as the regulatory policies that could reduce that risk gave activists new tools to rely on.

The language of science that emphasized objectivity, rationality, empirical evidence, and apoliticism was used to find opportunities in a political climate that had become exceedingly polarized and unfavorable to gun control (Metzl, 2024). It

is also through the framework of public health that the movement began to call itself a movement for gun violence prevention rather than for gun control. Just as handgun bans in the name of organizations in the 1970s and 1980s were changed due to their negative connotations, the same was now happening to gun control, the defining force of the whole movement. Public health officials were comfortable and familiar with injury and violence prevention and preferred gun safety to gun control (see e.g., Degutis & Spivak, 2021). As a sign of the shifting framework and how it had penetrated the public consciousness, the Obama Administration declared gun violence a public health crisis in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting (Underwood, 2013).

Finally, the mass mobilization and the money that was infused into the movement through organizations such as Moms Demand Action and Everytown for Gun Safety allowed the focus to move away from federal legislation towards local legislation. Movement building became much more sustainable with local chapters focused on invigorating grassroots activism and finding success in local legislatures (Goss, 2018). In 2013, there was no large-scale protest to show the strength and unity of the movement, but by the end of the year, Moms Demand Action had established chapters in 50 states with 130,000 members, with many more local organizations growing out of the mobilization (Library of Congress, 2013).

Solidified Partisan Polarization Opening Opportunities in State Legislatures and Closing Them in Republican States and the Federal Government

Local organization led to sustained advocacy on the local level and in state legislatures. In states such as Colorado, the Columbine High School shooting and later the Aurora theater shooting in 2012 brought particular sustained attention to the issue, which, coupled with electoral wins for the Democrats, opened political opportunities for local activists to get laws such as background checks on gun show sales and restrictions on ammunition passed (Article IV). In Connecticut, in the direct aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, the legislature passed laws such as extended background checks, restrictions on high-capacity ammunition, and added more than 100 different types of firearms to a list of banned assault weapons (The Associated Press, 2013).

After Sandy Hook, similar measures that focused on preventing mass shootings were taken in states like New York that had had a Democratic legislature for decades, and the influence of gun rights groups were not as strong as it was in conservative states (Kaplan, 2013). Party polarization and members sorting more clearly into the two parties along issue lines meant that political opportunities on the federal level had closed completely during a Republican Administration in the White House. It also meant that when gun violence gained public attention through sudden tragedies

like mass shootings that were highly reported by the media, opportunities in Democratic-led states opened in a way that had not been possible before.

While the Sandy Hook shooting was the direct spark for legislative change in multiple Democratic-led states, the same did not happen on the federal level. In the Presidential Election of 2008, the Democratic Party had won control of both the White House and Congress for the first time in the 21st century. Yet, just like in 2001, another catastrophe would push other agendas away from the policy process. By the end of 2008, the housing bubble had burst, Wall Street had crashed, and the global economy had plunged into the deepest recession since the 1930s. During his first year in office, Obama focused on passing a stimulus bill that would stymie the recession and blunt the worst of the effects of an economic downturn. The stimulus bill did what it was set out to do and slowed down the recession, but it was not popular among the general public (Bartels, 2016).

The rest of Obama's first term was spent on passing health care, immigration, and financial regulation reforms with the slimmest possible majority against a unified Republican Party whose main goal in the era of polarization was to obstruct every piece of legislation on the Obama Administration's agenda (Bartels, 2016). Moreover, partisan polarization on the issue of gun control had begun to significantly cleave public opinion during Obama's presidency (Dimock, 2017; Miller, 2019). This came with an accompanying dramatic rise in gun sales in the immediate aftermath of the election, which one study called the "Obama effect" (Depetris-Chauvin, 2015). The study found evidence of news reporting that fear of coming gun control regulation caused the spike in gun sales (Depetris-Chauvin, 2015).

The levels of fear experienced by gun owners were a testament to how effective groups such as the NRA were in demonizing Obama, who during his campaign, expressed support for the Second Amendment and gun safety, and during his first term, only signed into law a bill allowing concealed carry in national parks and Amtrak trains (Gerena, 2015). In the 2010 Congressional Elections, the Democratic Party lost control of the House, and their Senate majority diminished to only 51 seats with two independents caucusing with them. In the 2012 Presidential Elections, Obama won the presidency, and the Democratic Party gained back two Senate seats, but Republicans kept control of the House.

If legislating had been difficult before the 2010 elections, gridlock and obstruction characterized the rest of Obama's terms. Nevertheless, after the Sandy Hook shooting, which Obama himself described as "the single darkest day of [his] presidency" (Obama, 2022), the Administration pushed for action on federal gun control legislation. They expressed support for a variety of policies such as extended background checks, an assault weapons ban, and restrictions on high-capacity ammunition (Curtis, 2013). Senate Amendment 715 to Senate Bill 649 (2013)—the Manchin-Toomey Amendment—a modest compromise that would have extended

background checks, came closest to passing but ultimately failed in the Senate with six votes short of the needed 60 to break the Senate filibuster. The failure depressed the movement and caused widespread outrage (Article IV), but in the context of the polarized parties and power balances in Congress, this result was the likeliest outcome.

Moreover, advocating for gun control had become even more difficult in Republican-led states, particularly in the South. Coming into the 2010s, gun rights advocates had implemented their election strategy of getting legislators supportive of their cause elected to local and state-level offices and courts for decades (Goss, 2006; Goss, 2018; Melzer, 2009). These legislators had been very successful in passing pre-emption laws that prevented local gun control ordinances from being passed. They also had begun to dismantle any gun control regulation by extended the purview of guns to public places such as school campuses and churches (Goss, 2018), removed licensing and permit requirements (Brownlee, 2023), and broadened the rights of individuals to defend themselves with deadly force (Spitzer, 2015). Eventually, the influence of organizations such as the NRA, and less established groups such as Gun Owners of America focused entirely on defending Second Amendment rights, made its way to the Supreme Court of the United States. The *District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570* (2008) decision set a precedent for the onslaught of modern gun laws that extended both the right to carry and where to carry. The Supreme Court decision changed the established interpretation of the Second Amendment from concerning gun ownership in the context of state militias to the fundamental right of every American to carry a firearm.

Conservative legal scholars had argued the case for an individualistic view of the Second Amendment since the 1960s as part of the "originalist movement" that had grown as a backlash to "what were seen as the excesses of liberal judicial activism of the 1950s to the 1970s" (Spitzer, 2015, 69). In the originalist view, the original intent of the Constitution, the only thing they believed judges should concern themselves with, was to protect the right of individual citizens to carry firearms on their person for purposes such as self-defense, and that right was as inalienable as freedom of speech (see e.g. Halbrook, 2013).

Critics considered the *District of Columbia v. Heller* decision to have gone against precedent, misconstrued history, and contradicted the contemporaneous debates about the Second Amendment at the time of its writing, and as such was in fact a very modern example of judicial activism that was driven by ideology and the influence of gun rights groups (Cornell & Kozuskanich, 2013; Spitzer, 2015). Regardless of what motivated the decision, its consequences were significant. Two years later, the Supreme Court clarified in *McDonald v. City of Chicago, U.S. 742* (2010) that the Second Amendment right extended to states and local governments as well and ruled Chicago's handgun registration law unconstitutional.

Consequently, in addition to the slew of laws passed that extended gun rights, hundreds of challenges to existing gun control laws were made in the immediate aftermath of the decisions, although at least initially with a relatively low success rate (Liptak, 2012; Peck, 2019).

Public Health Failing to Solve the Political Problem of Gun Violence

The Bush Administration and 9/11 had pushed the gun control movement into an in-between state of not-success but not quite failure, a state that Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) refer to as dwelling in the hiatus for social movements. With federal opportunities closed, they were forced to reconsider the national-rational approach. Mass shootings brought more attention to the issue of gun violence but increasing elite and media polarization had begun to muddle narratives of why such shootings happened and to divide public opinion. The movement pivoted toward a public health approach that emphasized injury prevention and gun safety and began to call itself the gun violence prevention movement in an effort to circumvent the political debate in an environment that was not advantageous to gun control.

Activists were turning towards local legislatures for opportunities and making some strides in states like Colorado, where mass shootings had had a significant effect on the population. The Sandy Hook shooting in 2012 turned out to be an inflection point that rapidly accelerated the changes in framing and strategies that were already in motion. Women, and particularly mothers, were mobilized by the shooting, and with an influx of money from wealthy donors such as Michael Bloomberg, were able to sustain the grassroots organizing in a way that had failed after the Million Mom March. Mass mobilization and parties sorting even more strongly on the issue of gun control allowed for more opportunities for activists in Democratic-led states such as Connecticut, the site of the Sandy Hook shooting, and New York.

While the language advocates chose focused more on violence prevention and defining the issue as a problem of public health, the suggested policies did not change drastically from the regulatory framework that had been lobbied by gun control groups for decades. In practice, gun violence as crime was cycled into the gun violence as disease framework in a manner that made them indistinguishable. Momentum was stymied by the failure to pass federal legislation that, despite the changes in the approach, had remained the most important goal for many in the movement. The Obama Administration, which had skirted the issue of gun control during Obama's first term, had nevertheless mobilized gun owners and gun rights activists and significantly polarized the voting population. With a slim majority in the Senate and a minority in the House, the parties voted almost entirely on party lines on a compromise bill for extended background checks and failed to pass the Manchin-Toomey Amendment.

At the same time, activists in Republican-led states were contending with increasingly zealous gun rights groups emboldened by the *District of Columbia v. Heller* decision to push for more guns in public spaces, fewer restrictions on deadly use of force in self-defense, and the right of citizens to carry without a license. While the public health approach with its focus on passing incremental local legislation worked in Democratic-led states, it was ultimately unable to answer the challenges posed by the gun rights movement in Republican-led states.

Gun violence is a political problem, and the public health approach did not have any means to address the politics of guns in conservative states (Article IV; Metzl, 2024). It could not counter the sense of group identity intertwined in "Americaness" that had been cultivated by the NRA and other gun rights groups. Historically, much more valence has been paid in the United States towards individual freedoms such as the right to carry firearms compared to considering collective goods such as healthcare as a similar type of fundamental right. Furthermore, the public health approach was not able to answer the racial biases inherent in some of the proposed gun control solutions (Article IV; Mezl, 2024; Riemann, 2023). Focusing on gun violence as pathology could not address the political, cultural, and historical reasons that have led to the proliferation of guns in the US, the culture of defensive gun ownership, or the racially biased criminal justice system that had made Black communities unable to trust the government to guarantee their safety. The movement would be forced to confront that coming into the turn of the decade.

3.3 Cycle III: Gun Violence as Insecurity (2010s–)

3.3.1 The Parkland Effect: Mobilizing the Mass Shooting Generation

In articles II, III, and IV I argued that the Parkland shooting represented another inflection point in the movement as it mass mobilized another key social group into the gun violence prevention movement. On Valentine's Day 2018, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, became another site of a horrific massacre in a long list of school shootings that had become a recurring tragedy in the 2000s. At Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the gunman murdered 17 students and injured another 17. It was the deadliest high school shooting of its time but what made it such a crucial moment for the gun violence prevention movement was the students organizing a gun control protest just months after the shooting that became the largest student march in the US since the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam.

In this section, I explore the evolution of youth mobilization on the issue of gun violence and examine the impact the students had on the movement. I begin with my main argument from Article II, where I claimed young people, who through their

generational experiences with school shootings in particular, and the world in general, had very different ideas about what activism looked like, what gun violence was about, and how it could be fixed. I considered how generational experiences and the realization of agency through mass mobilization fostered radical political imagination in the movement. I move onto examining one of the findings from Article III, where I found that the students focused their message primarily on gun control in a conscious effort to refute what they saw as the gun rights groups' attempts to obfuscate the role of guns in mass shootings by casting the blame on everything else. This represented a major change in the movement that had, for the better part of the decade, shifted toward an apolitical public health approach. I end the section by tracing how, after experiencing initial success in the Florida Legislature, the students were left disillusioned by the closed opportunities at the federal level. I connect findings from Article II and IV, where I argued that the students who stayed engaged with the issue developed their advocacy toward a structural understanding of gun violence that required wholesale, radical change as a solution to the last cycle of gun violence prevention.

Young People Mobilizing through the Collective Identity of Generations

Mass shootings and school shootings had become a familiar phenomenon during the first two decades of the 21st century, and they had significant consequences on the education system and on the experiences of younger generations who were going through their formative years in school. For example, in terms of direct impact, the *Washington Post* calculated that between the Columbine and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shootings, "more than 187,000 students attending at least 193 primary or secondary schools have experienced a shooting on campus during school hours" (Cox & Rich, 2018). Shootings have also become normalized in the everyday lives of young people through exposure to mass shootings on the news and on social media, and through measures schools have taken to prepare students for such events. According to the U.S Department of Education, in 2020–2021, 96.6% of all public schools in the K-12 program had written procedures for active shooter events and 95.5% of them drilled their students on lockdown procedures (Digest of Education Statistics, 2023). These drills are not standardized or regulated, and practices vary wildly from traditional lockdown practices that require students to shelter in place to multiple-option approaches such as the "run, hide, fight" method[14] to active shooter

[14] The Alert Lockdown Inform Counter and Evacuate (ALICE) training program developed by law enforcement officials is one of the most popular iterations of the "run, hide, fight" method that advises teachers and students on the different actions they can take when facing an active shooter (ALICE, 2025).

simulations with props, actors, and sensory elements like police officers shooting blanks inside the school (Huskey & Connell, 2021; Moore et al., 2024).

There is little empirical evidence on how effective different drills are in actuality in preventing casualties, not least of all because of the ethical issues such research would pose. The results on how prepared and safe teachers and students reported feeling after drills are mixed (Moore et al., 2024), but ample evidence exists that they increase the levels of fear and anxiety experienced by students (ElSherief et al., 2021; Huskey & Connell, 2021; Moore-Petinak et al., 2020). The American Psychological Association found in their 2018 annual *Stress in America* survey that 72% of Generation Z and 73% of Millennials reported school shootings as a significant source of stress (American Psychological Association, 2018). While not every student experienced an actual shooting, most experienced the fear related to it. School shootings had become a generational experience. These experiences were reflected in a Pew Research Center poll on attitudes about gun laws—those under 30 were more in favor of stricter laws than any other age group, with 62% in favor, while only 15% thought gun laws were too strict (Schaeffer, 2024).

When discussing the generational experiences of young people in the gun violence prevention movement in Article II, I used the definition by Pew Research Center and focused on Millennials (born between 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) (Dimock, 2019). No one official source exists that defines exactly and conclusively where one generation stops and another begins. Indeed, because it is difficult to ascertain the existence of generations empirically, and their usage can lead to oversimplification of complex social phenomena, some researchers have argued that generations are not an analytical category that should be used to study differences between different age groups (see e.g., Rudolph et al., 2020).

Considering this criticism, it is important that I clarify how I use the concept. In *The Sociological Problem of Generations*, which I relied on in Article II, Mannheim contended that while generations should not be considered as a concrete group quantifiable in nature, they were still indispensable to understanding social change and "the structure of social and intellectual movements" (1952, 168). Mannheim treated generations as a similar social location as class, one that guides the possible range of modes of thought and action through collectively shared historically bound experiences that do not require concrete membership in a community or consciousness of group position. Mannheim (1952) considered the location of a generation to be primarily a potentiality that can materialize in actuality when members take part in the process of social change. Furthermore, an actualized generation does not necessitate a homogenous generation, whose conclusions and impulses toward social change are the same. Rather, generational units, often opposing units, form within a generation when members share an understanding of the character of society and of the change they are experiencing (Mannheim, 1952).

Thus, the specific years of birth that separate generations are a starting point, but less relevant to their conceptualization. What defines generations is the shared social location in the historical process of change and the way that process has the potential to create new impulses of thought and action in the related age groups. Mannheim's theory of generations is particularly useful for me because of its role in social change and social movements. "Social generations" has had a significant role in youth studies, and research about the political behavior of young people, their styles of political activism, and the nature of youth movements. Much of the research that studies generational differences in political participation and social movements has been focused on Millennials, as their cohort has been part of the political process for much longer. There are some common themes found in these studies. Millennials are described as being racially diverse, educated but economically precarious, more liberal than older generations, disillusioned and distrustful of institutions and political processes in representative democracies, and less inclined to believe in American exceptionalism (Foa et al., 2020; Milkman, 2017; Reilly, 2013; Rouse & Ross, 2018).

Millennial social movements tend to be centered around identity-based street politics empowered by modern technologies, decentralized with intense periodic participation in events such as protests without long-term commitment to any established organizations with hierarchies (della Porta, 2019; Milkman, 2017). The historical dynamics and tendencies observed in Millennials have been found in Generation Z as well, with these trends manifesting even more starkly in the generation that grew up fully immersed in internet culture and social media (Parker et al., 2019; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Tyson et al., 2021). Munger and Plutzer (2024) found evidence that Millennials and Generation Z are becoming political collective actors more broadly—generations in actuality. They found that they identify with their own generation, find that identity salient, experience linked fate with others in their generation, and are willing to act on the interests of the generational group (Munger & Plutzer, 2024).

2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting as the Catalyst

In Article II, I explored how at least the idea of generational change became a driving force in the gun violence prevention movement and how the particularities of youth activism that some researchers have identified as generationally specific styles shaped that change. The 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting and the extraordinary leadership shown by the survivors triggered unprecedented mobilization for the issue of gun violence. Never in the history of the movement had the grassroots movement been so activated. In Article II, I argued that the youth mass mobilization that followed the Parkland school shooting materialized and

developed into a movement that adopted a utopian orientation toward the future, which was fostered by how young people recognized their location in a generation with shared investment in a common destiny. During the March For Our Lives protest marches, a generational unit—the mass shooting generation—crystallized into being from the shared experiences of Millennials and Generation Z who came of age during the era of school shootings and lockdown drills. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School began to speak out in favor of gun control immediately after the shooting.

Liberal news media featured their message prominently as it had already been primed to emphasize the stories of survivors rather than the perpetrators in large part because of the campaigning that had been done by the family members of the victims of the Aurora theater shooting in Colorado in 2012 (Article III). The Parkland youth very consciously focused on gun control and reiterated that it was primarily easy access to guns that was to blame for mass shootings instead of mental health, school security, or individual mistakes that had been propagated for decades now by right-wing media such as Fox News (Article III; Holody & Shaughnessy, 2020). The zealous prioritizing of gun control was also, in part, a direct consequence of the public health turn of the gun violence prevention movement. In an effort to depoliticize the issue in a closed political environment, gun control had fallen out of use to the point that for the youth now being socialized into the advocacy work, it became the very policy that felt radical. The framework of gun violence as crime had translated into gun violence as disease, with different issue definitions but the same repertoires of contention and problem solutions, but here the old framework gained new repertoires of contention. The cyclical nature of gun violence prevention and how the different frameworks comingle with each other helps bring clarity to the different strategies chosen by advocates.

The Parkland youth spoke of gun control and affirmed their agency through generational power: older generations had failed to solve the issue for decades, and it was precisely because they were young, and therefore different, uncorrupted by politics, that they would do better (Article II, Article III). Especially in the beginning, the Parkland youth made familiar appeals to childhood innocence and to moral responsibility employed already by the mothers of MMM and Moms Demand Action. They combined messaging in social media with traditional media, where their viral social media posts would be covered by traditional news media, such as in the case of the CNN town hall attended by the highest office holders in Florida and NRA representatives (Cheas et al., 2020; Jenkins & Lopez, 2018). Studies have shown that the Parkland youth's strategy was effective in keeping their experiences and their message in the news cycle far longer than the few days up to a month that even high-profile mass shootings normally are covered for (Holody & Daniel, 2017; Schildkraut et al., 2018). Peak social media activity and news media coverage related

to the Parkland shooting occurred more than a month later on the day of the March For Our Lives protest march on March 24, 2018 (Cheas et al., 2020; Holody & Shaughnessy, 2020), with sporadic stories about the activists featured throughout the year in national news such as *CNN* and the *New York Times* (Article III).

Forcing Open Some New Opportunities

While much of the attention on the Parkland youth focused on their social media activism (Austin et al., 2020; Cheas et al., 2020; Zoller & Casteel, 2021), it is important to note that the Parkland youth actively engaged with traditional media and politics just as much. They lobbied the Florida Legislature successfully to pass the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (2018) that appropriated funding to mental health services and law enforcement as well as set up provisions for red flag laws. They engaged in what Jenkins and Lopez (2018) described as participatory politics, where they used a variety of social media platforms, messages, and videos together with traditional media to mass mobilize the public in offline actions. In the familiar repertoire of contention of the New Left in the 1960s, they organized the March For Our Lives protest march that gathered more than a million people in 800 different events marching for gun control in March, continued to coordinate school walkouts in April, and carried out a summer campaign, where they registered young voters in a nationwide bus tour (March for Our Lives, 2018).

Generational belonging, encouraged by the successful campaign to lobby the Florida Legislature, and the mass mobilization the marches generated, held a promise of unstoppable power that could force open the political opportunities that had been closed for the gun violence movement (Article II). The Parkland youth explicitly leaned on generational change, and for a moment, as it seemed that a generational cohort had been activated in actuality; it created a sense of opening that allowed for forms of radical political imagination to develop (Article II). First, the Parkland youth focused on a message of gun control and pushed for federal gun control legislation even with the pro-gun and pro-NRA President Trump administration. Since this proved to be impossible, the Parkland youth, with their newly formed March For Our Lives (MFOL) non-profit organization, began their voter registration campaign with the promise of voting out those politicians who took contributions from the NRA and refused to support gun control measures (see, e.g., March For Our Lives, 2018). Moreover, in the wake of the Parkland shooting and the MFOL, localized protest marches for gun control successfully increased legislative action in states receptive to the policy (Sato & Haselswerdt, 2022).

The results from the 2018 Congressional Election showed that gun control could be a winning issue for Democratic candidates. Particularly in House races,

candidates supportive of gun control policies found success (Yablon & Nass, 2018). The Circle found young people engaged in gun violence prevention activism much more engaged in the election than their peers (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2018). Yet, in other places, especially disappointingly in Florida, the campaign failed (Yablon & Nass, 2018). "The blue wave" of newly elected Democrats extended only to the House, which had the power to stop some of President Trump's agenda from moving forward but could do very little to advance its own issues, such as gun control legislation. Federal gridlock had once again proven to be a source of disappointment for the gun violence prevention movement.

Movement Spillover from Black Lives Matter and Developing a Structural Understanding of Gun Violence

Following the election and the disappointing lack of federal action, the MFOL youth kept articulating and developing their approach to gun violence. The youth moved from their focus on the role of guns and gun control legislation toward a structural understanding of gun violence that emphasized what they called the root causes of violence (Article II; Article IV). These root causes are the conditions that led to people becoming both the victims and perpetrators of gun violence and the institutions that uphold these conditions. They proclaimed that ending gun violence would require radical change in the institutions in charge of legislating, in how power is distributed across these institutions, and how elections are organized to make access to participation easier (March For Our Lives, n.d.). It would also require local action, resource distribution, and social services that provide mental healthcare, help in the search for employment opportunities, and teach conflict resolution skills (Article II; Article IV). Some of these developments in changing issue definitions and strategies were happening elsewhere in the movement already. This was in part due to decades-long failures both at the federal and state levels that had proved both the soundness of the rational-national gun control approach and the impossibility of its success under the political realities of the United States (Article IV).

However, the youth movement was in large part influenced by internal generational dynamics and the broader waves of protest that MFOL was swept up in. Millennials and Generation Z are each more diverse than the generation that came before them, and intersectionality as a collective action frame is one of the defining characteristics of the youth social movements of the 21st century (Article II; della Porta, 2019; Milkman, 2017; Terriquez, 2015). The Black Lives Matter protests of the 2010s that brought attention to the structural inequalities faced by Black Americans impacted the whole predominantly white gun violence prevention movement. MFOL faced some criticism for its predominantly white leadership

(Lockhart, 2018; Rannard, 2018), as did the media that seemed to put all of its focus on the white, upper-middle-class students of the wealthy Parkland neighborhood. The Parkland youth responded to the criticism by having Black advocates speak at the first MFOL march and by incorporating community violence prevention approaches practiced by criminal justice groups into their policy plan (March For Our Lives, n.d.). Moreover, MFOL formed rapidly in direct response to a tragedy that forced the youth to become issue experts overnight. In the broader context, it came together in the middle of a period of high political contention, whereby the existence of one movement has a tendency to trigger another one in a wave of protests (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Movement spillover is typical in these periods, and MFOL came to frame the issue of gun violence as an issue of not only criminal justice and policing, but also climate change, immigration, and democracy (Article II).

Young people mobilized for gun violence prevention after Parkland in a way that shaped the movement. Generational experiences with school shootings and generationally specific activism styles brought into the movement repertoires of contention and belief in radically different futures familiar to the New Left social movements of the 1960s. The mass mobilization reinforced that sense of possibility, as did the initial success with the Florida legislature passing the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (2018). However, at the beginning, the youth activists cycled through the issue definitions and solutions from previous frameworks of crime and public health familiar to the movement, even as the repertoires of contention changed. In an equally familiar manner, as federal legislation moved nowhere, disappointment led to disengagement for some and hobbled the momentum. However, the youth who continued their advocacy developed new issue definitions and goals far more comprehensive than were common in the previous cycles of gun violence prevention. Spillover from Black Lives Matter protests became instrumental to redefining what gun violence is about. Intersectionality as a collective action frame brought all the youth movements of the late 2010s together. Understanding gun violence through the structural insecurities that intersecting identities position people in is the final chapter of the cycles of gun violence prevention.

3.3.2 Impoverished Neighborhoods, Community Gun Violence, and the Influence of Black Racial Justice Movements

In Article I, I examined how students at different Texas universities experienced the new Campus Carry law SB11 (Texas Legislature, 2015) and their own safety in relation to guns. Whether they felt their safety had deteriorated due to the presence

of guns on campus or felt safer with the knowledge that there could be "good guys with guns" stopping any violent incidents, their sense of security was primarily tied to who they imagined carried those guns. The testimonials related to a very specific situation, in a very specific environment, in a state that has a very specific type of gun culture and gun politics, and as such, the students' answers are not directly generalizable to the larger context of the United States. However, arguably, the question of *who* has always been central to debates about guns. As recounted in previous sections, gun control advocates have framed their policies as crime control that aims to limit unfit people from carrying, while gun rights advocates propagate themselves as the defenders of the rights of law-abiding citizens. Both have relied on imaginations about who is trustworthy, who gets to carry, whose carrying needs to be controlled, and who is the target of lethal force—imaginations that are inherently racialized, gendered, and class-based (Heiskanen, 2022). It is also an argument about who we trust to be responsible for the safety of people, the state and its institutions, or the individual. On this question, for both gun control and gun rights advocates, the answer has appeared to be straightforward.

In the late 2010s and 2020s, gun control advocates had to reconsider their position in the aftermath of the decades-long failures to pass gun control legislation and the intersectional understandings brought into the movement both by Black racial justice movements and the young March For Our Lives activists. In this section, I consider my final argument from Article IV, where I explored how experiences with gun violence in Black communities had fundamentally changed definitions, strategies, goals and ultimately, the opportunity structure for the movement. First, I examine the racialized aspects of gun control and how the arguments that the state should restrict access to guns as part of its responsibility to guarantee the safety of its citizens becomes complicated by the relationship marginalized people have with the state and its law enforcement. Building on my findings from Article IV, I trace how community violence organizing as part of Black racial justice movements brings a structural understanding of gun violence into the gun violence prevention movement as well as community-based strategies and goals that are focused on reimagining public safety and building trust on the local level. I show how these strategies have opened new political opportunities for gun control in places where there has not been any in decades by considering the passing of federal gun legislation centered on community-based methods. Connecting these arguments to cycles of gun violence, I define the last cycle of gun violence prevention to be about insecurity rather than public health. Moreover, I claim understanding gun violence as insecurity offers a more equitable way to answer the inherent fears of who gets to carry and who is responsible for community safety at the heart of the gun debate. Lastly, the vision for the future the

comprehensive solutions offered in this last cycle also offers a response to the narratives propped up by the NRA and other gun rights movements.

Racialized Forms of Gun Violence and the Problem of Gun Control

As described in section 3.1.1, the debate over who gets to carry guns has been, at its core, a racialized debate throughout the history of the United States. Gun rights were first explicitly legislated as the right of white citizens, and after legislation became less explicitly racist, gun control continued to be used as a way to restrict access of Black Americans to guns late into the 20th century. Racial resentment persists in people's attitudes toward gun rights and gun control. Research shows that white racial prejudice drives support for gun rights and suppresses support for gun control, while being confronted with Black gun ownership decreases support for gun rights even among partisans who are the most entrenched in their opinions (Filindra & Kaplan, 2016, 2017; Higginbotham et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2020). Furthermore, Walker et al. (2020) found that Black children dying of gun violence in instances of what is termed community gun violence in predominantly Black neighborhoods either did not move or even suppressed white support for gun control, irrespective of racial animus. They theorized that this is because Black death is framed as a moral failure that the community itself needs to fix, while high-profile mass shootings that often have white perpetrators are framed as societal problems with institutional solutions and, as such, drive support for gun control measures (Walker et al., 2020). Indeed, the predominantly white gun control movement for most of its history did not focus its advocacy on solving the problem of gun violence in communities that were most impacted by it (Article IV).

Young Black men carry the greatest brunt of gun violence in the United States. In 2020, firearms became the leading cause of death for individuals under 19 in the United States. The same year, Black youth were significantly more likely to die from firearm-related causes than white youth, with rates of 17.4 and 3.4 deaths per 100,000, respectively (Mariño-Ramírez et al., 2022). This disparity has widened dramatically over the last decade—between 2013 and 2020, firearm-related deaths among Black youth increased by 108.3%, compared to a 47.8% increase among white youth (Mariño-Ramírez et al., 2022). In 2022, the rate of gun homicides among Black youth aged 15–24 reached 63.78 per 100,000, while the rate for their white peers was 2.58 per 100,000 (Villarreal et al., 2024). According to a 2022 study, Black and Latinx youth were three to seven times more likely to be exposed to gun homicide than white youth, and the probability of exposure rose particularly among those simply living in disadvantaged neighborhoods compared to factors such as direct high household poverty (Kravitz-Wirtz et al., 2022). In other words,

neighborhood poverty was a more significant predictor of exposure to gun homicide than individual-level household poverty.

Disadvantaged neighborhoods are often the consequence of historically racist policies. Policies such as redlining have segregated racial minorities, particularly Black families, into areas of high unemployment, underemployment, and poverty, conditions exacerbated by continued public and private divestment from education, work opportunities, housing, and social services (Buggs et al., 2022; Hirsch, 1983; Voisin, 2019). Studies show that interpersonal community gun violence is the cause behind the high racial disparities in gun-related deaths and is endemic to impoverished neighborhoods (Bancalari et al., 2022; Buggs et al., 2022; Stansfield & Semenza, 2023; Wong et al., 2020). Community gun violence is often described as "everyday gun violence" as the people living in these types of neighborhoods are, in fact, exposed to gun violence and gun death on a daily basis. For example, between 2014 and 2024, almost 40,000 people were shot in Chicago, a city of 2.6 million people (Nass, 2025).

Consequently, as they have felt the consequences of gun violence the most acutely, Black Americans have, in general, been in favor of gun control policies. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center poll, 77% of Black Americans wanted gun laws to be stricter, the highest of any racial group, and particularly significant compared to the 51% of white people preferring stricter laws (Schaeffer, 2024). Opinions towards gun control began diverging between Black Americans and white Americans already in the 1970s (Walker et al., 2020).

Yet, the relationship Black Americans have had with the gun control movement is complicated despite their support for the general policy. For most of the history of the predominantly white gun control movement, the policies and approaches advocated by the organizations in the field were not generally aimed at solving the type of gun violence that happened in these impoverished neighborhoods. Policies such as universal background checks and an assault weapons ban have done little to address the underlying causes of what has made guns so prevalent in poor neighborhoods. Poverty, lack of schooling, housing, and work opportunities increase crime and insecurity, creating the conditions of *why* someone chooses to use a gun in the first place. Gun control, specifically as a policy, is not aimed at erasing these conditions and as such, has proven to be inadequate in answering the problem of persisting everyday gun violence that people living in poor neighborhoods are facing. On the contrary, research has shown that punitive measures such as increased punishment for firearm offenses meant to act as a deterrent have not decreased gun violence in impoverished neighborhoods. Instead, it has increased mass incarceration and mentally damaging and physically violent encounters with law enforcement, encounters that have perpetuated the social and economic determinants

that increase gun violence in such neighborhoods (Bernstein, 2022; Buggs et al., 2022; Del Toro et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2019; Rios, 2011).

Gun control policies fundamentally require citizens to first trust their government to regulate and second to then enforce safety in place of individual gun ownership. Historically, law enforcement in the United States has been used to control Black Americans to ensure the safety of white Americans (Balto, 2019; Bell, 2017; Hinton, 2017; Schenwar et al., 2016). As such, law enforcement, as a key component of successful gun control, presents a problem for minorities who are more used to excessive surveillance and overpolicing rather than police officers serving their communities effectively. Indeed, police violence is a significant component of the gun violence experienced by people living in impoverished neighborhoods (Bernstein, 2022; Haile et al., 2023; Mikdash & Zaiour, 2024). Excluding police violence as a form of gun violence from the agenda of national gun violence prevention organizations has been one of the main sources of conflict for activists of color attempting to bridge their local community work with the broader movement (Reed et al., 2025; Wilf et al., 2024).

Black Americans Mobilizing for Community Violence Prevention and Opening New Opportunities

Gun violence in majority Black neighborhoods has traditionally been addressed by community organizations focused on racial justice and criminal justice instead of the traditional gun control movement. In particular, organizations servicing community members who have been impacted by the carceral state have had a long history of implementing Community Violence Intervention (CVI) programs that have attempted to intervene directly in the most immediate cases where there is risk of violence. These programs used strategies such as stopping cycles of retaliation by providing victims of gun violence with financial resources, housing, and mental health services in the direct aftermath of a shooting or by using credible messengers, mainly formerly incarcerated community members, to reach out to chronically dispossessed and alienated youth (Article IV; Buggs et al., 2022; Lund et al., 2025). CVI measures are important as research shows how there is significant overlap between victimization and becoming a perpetrator of gun violence, and that most community gun violence is perpetuated by a relatively small group of people in co-offending networks (Jennings et al., 2012; Papachristos et al., 2015). When the problem of gun violence was recognized as part of a system of structural issues with multiple overlapping and reinforcing poor economic and social conditions, the solutions centered on community wellbeing. They ranged from providing social services, resource distribution such as food aid, hygiene products, securing housing,

repurposing vacant lots for recreation, and providing mentoring programs (Article IV).

In the 2010s, the primarily white gun violence prevention movement began to shift more focus towards community violence prevention. I argued in Article IV that the shift was happening due to collectively experienced failures with the gun control approach as well as the larger influence of protests led by Black racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter. I considered experiences of failure with gun control to include both the gridlock on the federal level that crystallized in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting as well as disillusionment with the more local fights in Republican-led states that often led to the passing of laws extending gun rights. With opportunities for passing gun control legislation being closed at the federal level and in many conservative states, gun violence prevention advocates were forced to look for alternative avenues for change. Community violence prevention became a fruitful channel for many advocates living in large cities because the impact of community violence was so staggering. I also argued that community violence prevention required less legislative action on the federal or state levels and was premised on local and city-wide initiatives that could but did not necessarily require the involvement of a legislative body.

Concurrently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement mobilized the largest protest marches in the history of the United States during the summer of 2020, which had a profound effect on public awareness of racial injustices (Dunivin et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2020; Ray, 2022; Sanchez, 2023). For the gun violence prevention movement, BLM brought attention particularly to police violence as a form of gun violence, the problems of centering law enforcement as part of the solution, and the racialized and systemic nature of community violence (Article IV). In Article IV, I used Rossi's (2015) concept of stacks of legacy to demonstrate how these experiences became collectively shared in the movement and how they influenced the repertoires of strategies available to advocates. Closed political opportunities on the one hand, and broadened understanding of the issue on the other, changed the way advocates defined the issue, what they considered their goals, and what strategies were available to them.

Advocates I interviewed in 2021 and 2022, even those involved primarily in community violence prevention, talked mostly of gun violence being an issue of public health (Article IV). However, as discussed in section 3.2.2 and demonstrated by Metzl (2024), the public health intervention strategy has not been able to answer particularly the political challenges faced by advocates in the South in Republican-led states. Regardless of their intentions, gun owners in red states have considered public health research mostly conducted in Democrat-led states to be biased against guns (Metzl, 2024). Furthermore, gun rights advocates have managed to build an enormous amount of influence within the Republican Party, which has found the

issue of guns to be an effective mobilizer for voters in the South, creating a vast political network consisting of elected officials at all levels of government pushing for gun friendly legislation (Goss, 2018; Metzl, 2024; Melzer, 2009). Metzl (2024) argued that a successful strategy that counters that apparatus needs to take into account the social and cultural factors that drive gun ownership and rebukes the master narrative propagated by gun rights groups that speak to people's identity and experiences of societal crisis that guns appear to be an answer to. Gun violence prevention advocates need their own mobilizing group identity and their own vision for the future, where safety is provided without the need for guns.

Continuing from Metzl's argument, I suggest that an effective gun violence prevention strategy needs to address on a societal level the multitude of reasons why people carry guns. Lack of trust, in the government and its ability to provide safety with law enforcement as well as in fellow citizens, seems to be at the core of people's positive attitudes towards gun rights (De Angelis et al., 2017; Hansen & Seppälä, 2023; Kelsay et al., 2018; Spitzer, 1995). This lack of trust is intertwined with experiences of social precarity, feelings of loss of place in the world, and perceived societal decline (Calrson, 2015; Shapira, 2013; Stroud, 2016). I argue that, taken altogether, gun ownership and the inevitable gun violence that follows are about insecurity, experienced in a multitude of different ways and in different contexts. I also argue that community violence prevention that focuses on the root causes of gun violence—of insecurity—offers the vision for the future that Metzl (2024) calls for. Addressing the root causes of gun violence by focusing on neighborhood-level wellbeing through measures such as hospital-based violence intervention, restorative justice, housing and education programs, food security, and making public spaces usable for community members has shown promise in decreasing gun violence (Gobaud et al., 2022; Juillard et al., 2016; Schleimer et al., 2024). Moreover, participating on very localized, neighborhood-based community care programs can also foster a sense of identity and belonging that encourages further action (Bowe et al., 2020; Forsyth et al., 2015). While shifting from understanding gun violence as crime to understanding it as an issue of public health broadened strategies available to the movement, it did not ultimately change the core of the activism being about gun control policies. Understanding gun violence as structural insecurity and centering community violence prevention has brought into the latest cycle new issue definitions, repertoires of contention, and goals.

One of the clearest signs of the shifting focus in the approach of the movement, and the opening of political opportunities that community violence prevention offered, was the passing of the federal Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) on June 25, 2022—29 years after the Federal Assault Weapons Ban. Negotiations over a slew of gun control bills began in the Democrat-led House after the mass shootings at Tops Friendly supermarket in Buffalo, New York, on May 14, 2022,

and at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24, 2022 (Fox, 2022). The House passed the Protecting Our Kids Act (2022) along party lines that included such familiar gun control policies as universal background checks, limits on high-capacity magazines, regulation of bump stocks, and a safe storage framework. The bill was not voted on in the more evenly divided Senate, but it acted as a pressure point for both Democrats and Republicans to work on a bill that could pass the Senate ahead of the midterm elections (Fox, 2022). The resulting Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (2022) included gun regulations such as expanding background checks, adding straw purchasing[15] as a criminal offense, and closing the boyfriend loophole.[16]

However, most of the bill focused on adding funding to various kinds of mental health services, community violence intervention programs, and education—the type of solutions advocated by community violence prevention activists. While partisan polarization over the issue of gun control had only intensified throughout the 21st century (Schaeffer, 2024), some things had also changed. The gun violence prevention movement mobilized a significant amount of people in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that kept public pressure on the issue. At the same time, the largest gun rights organization, the NRA, was weakened by mistakes made by its leadership. Increased and diversified advocacy led to new issue approaches that coincided with a Democratic Administration and majorities in Congress after the 2020 Presidential Election as well as an opening of the policy window as a result of the mass shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde. Just enough had changed in the politics of gun control for the first piece of firearm regulation to pass on the federal level in the 21st century.

Moreover, in states like Texas, where gun rights have been expanding steadily since the 1990s, community violence prevention with city-level action has been the only avenue advocates have found success in. Despite the Trump Administration closing the newly established federal Office of Gun Violence Prevention in 2025, such an office can still be found in Austin, Texas. The City Council of Austin decided to strengthen the office amid state-level attacks on programs that have so called Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks (Thompson, 2025). Federal grants have also been made available for some community violence prevention measures through the Project Safe Neighborhood Grant Program (Texas Government, 2025). In comparison, 21 gun control bills were brought to the Texas

15 Straw purchases are cases, where a person acquires a gun for someone who cannot legally own a gun.

16 The boyfriend loophole is a law that had allowed individuals convicted of domestic violence to keep their firearms if the victim had not lived with or had a child with them.

Legislature in the aftermath of the Uvalde Robb Elementary School shooting, but none of them passed (Serrano, 2023). Instead, in 2025, the Legislature passed, for example, Senate Bill 1362, which prohibits extreme risk protective orders, so called "red flag" laws that allow judges to issue orders to confiscate firearms from persons who are considered to be a risk to others or themselves (Runnels, 2025).

In the late 2010s and 2020s, the gun violence prevention movement went through significant changes. Youth mobilization through organizations such as March For Our Lives brought into the movement new networks, understandings about what the issue is about, and repertoires of contention. The youth mobilization continued the movement's trajectory toward other avenues to advocate for gun violence prevention as gun control legislation repeatedly failed at the federal level and offered no avenues for change, particularly in Republican-led states. Gun control policies, even those successfully passed in Democrat-led states, proved to be insufficient when surrounded by weak federal law and open, permitless carry states. In the cross influence of intersectional youth activism and Black racial justice movements, the gun violence prevention movement leaned into community violence intervention. Community violence prevention that is premised on addressing the root causes of gun violence and the multitude of forms of insecurity and precarity that lead people to carry weapons for self-protection, displaced gun control policies and federal legislation from the center of solutions. Focusing on neighborhood wellbeing instead of on only preventing the individual pathogen—the gun—has shown promise as a solution to the problem while opening political opportunities both in the federal government and in states hostile to gun control policies. For the first time, the activism is not premised on working together with the government, but outside of it, and in direct resistance to it. This, I argue, is the only feasible way forward after the election of Donald J. Trump for a second term in the White House in 2024.

4 Discussion

My dissertation asked five research questions focused on movement issue definitions, strategies, goals, and political opportunities as well as how these factors have fluctuated throughout the history of the movement. In the previous section, I answered RQ5 by exploring the historical trajectory of the movement, arguing that three distinct cycles of gun violence prevention developed in the confluence of different *groups* coming together due to political *events* under open or closed *political opportunity structures.* In this section, I go back to discuss the four research questions that the articles answered within the context of the three cycles. I do this to synthesize what the findings from the articles in the context of the cycles of gun violence prevention mean for efforts to prevent gun violence and the broader politics of guns in the United States.

4.1 Whose Safety? Toward a Comprehensive Framework to Gun Violence

RQ1: How has the movement for gun reform defined the issue of gun violence?

When the first gun control interest groups were formed in the late 1960s and 1970s, they consisted of mostly white, middle-class professionals who were moderate in their positions (Articles II and IV). In Article II, I argued that the burgeoning gun control movement was a product of its time, reflecting the winnowing down of radical political imagination and utopian belief in transformative change. The organizations were formed at the latter-end of the social upheavals of the 1960s amidst significant political violence and particularly leftist radicalization, where the national mood was turning into conservative backlash. The political assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy were triggering events that led Congress to debate the Gun Control Act of 1968, which created a sense of open opportunities for gun control focused groups. Consequently, the emerging understanding of gun violence in the movement was seen primarily through the framework of crime. Gun violence was framed as being something caused by criminals—by deviant individuals having access to guns—and the solution therefore was to first and

foremost limit that access through gun control legislation. After the Columbine shooting in 1999, mass shootings became mediatized events inseparable from public understanding of gun control (Article III; Ruddock, 2012). As such, the framing of gun control in the media reinforced the idea of deviant behavior, the type of morally incomprehensible indiscriminate violence mass shootings represents, being the primary cause of gun violence.

In the debates over the Campus Carry law SB11 (Texas Legislature, 2015) in Texas, understanding guns through the imaginations and beliefs people have about *who* carries were deeply ingrained in the reasoning of both people against and for carrying weapons for self-protection (Article I, Heiskanen, 2022). However, this understanding also is the cause of fundamental disagreement over gun carrying and gun legislation. Some see gun owners as good, "law-abiding" citizens, inherently more trustworthy than the government while others would rather the government provide collective safety than trusting their chances with those who have access to weapons. Furthermore, people's beliefs and fear about crime are often related to race and consequently, crime control policies in general have been notoriously racially biased (Alexander, 2011; Balto, 2019; Hinton, 2017). Studies have shown extensively that punitive measures in particular have been historically racist and had detrimental effects on the wellbeing of Black communities (Bernstein, 2022; Buggs et al., 2022; Del Toro et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2019; Rios, 2011). The collectivist versus individualistic disagreement over who should be enforcing whose safety has made it difficult for movement members to effectively employ the crime control framework to advance their goals (Goss, 2006, 2017; Vizzard, 2000).

Definitions of what gun violence is about slowly changed in the movement as political opportunities closed in a climate of polarization and an unfavorable government leadership. Coming into the 2010s, opportunities in federal legislation and in conservative states had closed as political parties had begun to sort and polarize along ideological lines (Abramowitz, 2010; Mason, 2018; Nivola & Brady, 2007). The issue of guns had become particularly polarizing, as radicalized gun rights groups with resources, political power, money, and membership far outpacing the entire gun control movement had become intertwined with the Republican Party (Melzer, 2009). Polarized media reporting on mass shootings with scripts centered on gun control strengthened two contradictory understandings of what gun violence is about (Article III). In Article IV, I argued that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the subsequent failure to pass federal gun control legislation even during a favorable federal government leadership after decades of inaction acted as triggering events that changed the course of the movement. To respond to the unfavorable political realities for this particularly polarized issue, the framework in the movement shifted away from crime and toward understanding gun violence as a disease, as a population level problem, as an epidemic. The language of science

with an emphasis on objectivity and empirical data was employed to depoliticize gun control as a policy solution. Within the framework of healthcare and disease prevention, gun control became gun violence prevention. In Article IV, I argued along the lines of Metzl (2024) that framing gun violence as a disease, and focusing on objective, data-driven solutions that were presented as non-political failed because they could not address what at its center was a fundamentally political problem. Legislators in conservative states were not willing to implement gun control policies no matter how non-politically they were presented. The disease framework could not answer entrenched ideas about individualistic self-protection, address people's sense of insecurity and fear of crime nor their deeply entrenched identities related to gun culture.

As political opportunities remained closed and the disease framework did not manage to depoliticize the issue sufficiently to create new openings, definitions began changing once again. I argue that this change is triggered primarily by the 2018 Parkland school shooting, which brings young people and their understanding of gun violence into the movement (Articles II and III) as well as by the Black Lives Matter protests, where racially cognizant ideas about community safety are diffused into the movement (Article IV). In Article II, I considered how younger generations, Millennials and Generation Z, were mobilized in the movement because of their sense of insecurity related to their experiences with school shootings and perceiving the failures of previous generations as the cause for them. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas School shooting in Parkland, Florida mobilized an unprecedented amount of young people in the March For Our Lives (MFOL) marches. The students' visions for the future and imagination of what was possible were broadened by a sense of belonging in a generation and belief in doing things differently than had been done before (Article II). The broadening of imagination that turned into a utopian belief in the possibility of transformative change allowed room for defining gun violence as a problem entrenched in the structures and institutions of the United States. Gun violence was about access to guns, but it was also about police violence, mass incarceration, and economic inequality created by student debt or the effects of climate change (Article II).

The MFOL movement was part of the waves of youth protests of the 21st century, and it both incorporated other agendas into their master narrative and influenced the surrounding movements in a reciprocal manner, as tends to happen in major cycles of contention (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The Black Lives Matter protest had the most significant impact on the movement through their focus on community violence prevention, the negative impacts of violent overpolicing, and the racial bias inherent in many punitive policies (Article IV). BLM's racialized understandings of how safety is constructed in the neighborhoods most impacted by interpersonal gun violence decenter the perpetuator of the violence—the *who* carrying the gun. Instead

of focusing on crime deterrence (crime framework) or on individual pathology (disease framework), the starting point is on the structural inequality that causes the conditions in which gun violence becomes a part of how people manage their experiences of insecurity. Consequently, I propose that this last framework should be understood through insecurity. I also argue that this framework offers a more comprehensive approach to gun violence and answers some of the problems present with the earlier definitions. Understanding gun violence as insecurity does not rely on resolving the conflict over collective and individual safety without first addressing the root of people's fears while the community-based approach places emphasis on building both a sense of group identity and political power on the local level in a way that the previous definitions did not. This comes apparent when considering the strategies and goals each definition created in the movement.

4.2 From Interest Groups Lobbying for Legislation to Active Resistance and Transformative Change

> RQ2: How have these negotiations over the issue definition impacted the strategies and goals of the movement?

The first groups and organizations that formed the basis for the modern gun violence prevention movement in the late 1960s and 1970s were focused mainly on gun control. As gun violence was seen as criminal, deviant behavior, the main way advocates addressed the issue was by lobbying for gun control regulation such as background checks on gun purchases, harsher penalties for gun-related infractions and crimes committed by a firearm and limiting certain types of firearms. In a strategy described as the ration-national approach, particularly federal level legislation was seen as vital to limit interstate trafficking of firearms, and most of the limited resources the first gun control interest groups had were dedicated to lobbying Congress (Goss, 2006). The leadership in the early gun control groups such as Handgun Control Inc. were mostly white, middle-class professionals with connections to the political class in Washington D.C. and knowledge about how the legislative process worked, which these groups were able to leverage to some success when opportunities opened in the late 1960s and 1990s. The approach depended on working together in cooperation with state actors, advocating for change in a highly professional manner. However, when opportunities closed at the federal level in the 2000s, the rational-national gun control approach led mostly to failure, feelings of frustration, and activist burnout (Article IV).

The mobilization of women and the infusion of money from wealthy donors after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 allowed for attention and

resources to be divided among new local level organizations as well, with groups such as Moms Demand Action quickly becoming the largest gun control group in the field. As the framing of gun violence began to change from crime toward disease, strategies focused more on increasing research about gun violence and preventive measures while educating people about safe practices for gun carrying and storage (Vizzard, 2000). However, within the disease framework, access to guns remained the main issue and, as such, gun regulation as the key policy solution.

The mobilized advocacy groups on the local level managed to find success in states with Democratic leadership. The groups relied on cooperation with state actors and the infusion of money further professionalized the interest group working in the field. As such, the new definitions did not significantly change the strategies or the goals of the movement. Yet, in an increasingly polarized Congress and in conservative states with Republican leadership, advancing legislation regulating guns became extremely difficult. The emphasis on seemingly non-political gun violence prevention could not bridge the doubts of people inundated with Republican messaging via polarized media about the ineffectiveness of gun control policies, their distrust of government regulation, and the inherent "Americaness" related to the idea of the Second Amendment (on Republican messaging see Article III; Hansen & Seppälä, 2023). I argued in Article IV that while advocates were able to successfully lobby for gun regulation in states with Democratic leadership, even within the disease framework the goal of—and, indeed, the need for—federal level legislation remained highly central to the gun control approach. Furthermore, along the lines of Metzl (2024), I contend that the approach was not able to produce any political solutions to disrupt the mutually beneficial relationship of wealthy gun rights groups such as the NRA and the Republican Party in power.

As opportunities on the federal level and in conservative states remained closed, and young people were mobilized into the movement after the Parkland shooting while concurrently being influenced by intersectional movements and Black Lives Matter protests, definitions within the movement changed again. Understanding gun violence as structural insecurity caused by multiple overlaying inequalities characteristic of impoverished neighborhoods opened a variety of new strategies and goals for the movement (Article IV). In this framework, targeted community violence prevention programs such as hospital-based interventions, stopping cycles of retaliation, mentoring for at-risk young people, mutual aid drives, providing public space for recreation and education opportunities were all gun violence prevention (Article IV). With this definition, gun regulation, while important, was no longer considered to be the key solution. Community violence prevention was something that was possible to carry out at a very local level even in states with Republican leadership as it did not require federal level or state level legislation

(Article IV). Consequently, the approach could be much more antagonistic towards hostile political leadership.

Young people, and youth of color brought with them strategies that resembled those of the styles of contention in the 1960s—protests, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and summer campaigns with the ability to use social media to effectively diffuse their message (Article II). To a movement that had once been formed entirely around national level interest groups, coming into the 2020s it now had both mobilized advocacy organizations on the very local level and a grassroots operation based on tactics of resistance.

4.3 Broadening Opportunities Outside State Institutions

> RQ3: What kind of political opportunities have there been for gun violence prevention?
>
> RQ4: How has the movement responded, failed to respond, and changed the political opportunity structures within which they have operated?

The first gun control interest group was formed at a time where there was an opening for gun control policies in Congress. The Democratic Party controlled both the White House and Congress and in the aftermath of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy needed to be seen to be doing something. The Gun Control Act of 1968 was pushed through with the help of lobbying from gun control advocates. More gun control group were formed in the aftermath and the advocates used similar tactics in the 1990s after the election of Bill Clinton, who had adopted gun control as part of his tough on crime positions. Mass shootings such as the Stockton schoolyard shooting 1989 had once again brought the problem of gun violence into the public discussion and with the Democratic trifecta in place in 1993, opportunities for gun control had opened. The public mood was on the side of gun control and advocacy groups successfully leveraged this opening to lobby for the passing of the Brady Bill in 1993 and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 1994 despite the growing political influence of the NRA.

Perhaps paradoxically, these successes might have set the movement along the wrong path from the very beginning. Goss (2006) outlined in great detail how the rational-national approach meant the gun control movement did not have enough local presence to counter the strategies of the radicalized NRA during latter half of the 20th century. The NRA, which already had far superior resources with vast grassroots membership and money, focused their strategy on winning over influence on the local and state level (Goss, 2018; Melzer, 2009). Without any movement-

building efforts in the gun control movement and their few resources directed mostly toward lobbying for federal legislation, the NRA did not encounter any significant resistance. They were able to build their political networks and influence state legislatures to pass pre-emption laws that made future gun regulation on city and district levels impossible (Goss, 2006). Furthermore, the federal legislation that was passed still faced strong opposition and what was eventually passed had very weak enforcement mechanisms (Zimring, 1975, Vizzard, 2000). Thus, as the impact of the laws was hard to discern, the overall policy of gun regulation became an easy target for gun rights supporters. Focusing on federal legislation came with a high price.

Mass shootings continued to open political opportunities for the gun violence prevention movement. In Democratic-led states such as in Colorado after the Columbine shooting in 1999 and the Aurora theater shooting in 2012, and in Connecticut after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, advocates were able to successfully lobby for gun control legislation (Article IV). This was particularly true after the movement was able to mobilize grassroots membership and gain significantly greater resources after the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting. Even in states with Republican legislatures such as Florida, the Parkland shooting and the subsequent protests led to successfully passing gun regulation (Article III). However, as the parties and the issue of guns continued to polarize, the political opportunities for gun control diminished considerably. After the *District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570* (2008) Supreme Court decision, states with Republican leadership began to implement legislation extending who and where people could carry, often as a response to mass shootings.

In Article IV, I argued that the failure by Democrats to pass gun control legislation in the aftermath of Sandy Hook shooting became a stock of legacy for the movement that eventually triggered changes in definitions and strategies. The pattern of failing to pass federal legislation after ever-increasing mass shootings worked to depress the public too—in Article I, students that were against the Campus Carry law SB11 in Texas disclosed that they felt gun violence had become an inevitable part of their culture. Kingdon claimed that if no action was taken when a policy window opened, the harder it would be to open it again as "the longer people live with a problem, the less pressing it seems" (Kingdon, 2014, 170). The more mass shooting led to inaction, the more likely it was it would do so in the future as well.

Without the gun violence prevention movement gaining political power long-term in federal legislature, the political opportunities for gun control today remain limited. Consequently, new strategies, resistance, and options outside of legislation are needed. In Article II, I argued that various youth-led protests responded to the inaction on gun violence by innovating new strategies, definitions, and goals that explicitly broke from the path the gun control movement had been on for more than half a century. In Article IV, I considered how people who had been in the movement

for decades and people who had just joined, had come to the conclusion that something different needed to be done after decades of persistent policy failures. Community violence prevention has proven to be useful for opening opportunities where gun control policies have been difficult—The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (2022) was the first piece of gun regulation passed on the federal level since 1994, and it contained funding for measures targeting overall community wellbeing. In conservative states like Texas, community violence prevention has also been one of the only avenues for advocates to gain successes. Studies examining place-based community violence intervention programs have shown them to be an effective way to prevent violence (Fazel et al., 2023; Gobaud et al., 2022).

Similar changes in movement strategies prompted by long-term policy failures and federal gridlock have been found in other contexts as well. For example, in Australia, some NGOs in the climate policy networks have also turned toward local-level direct action in an effort to mobilize new constituencies and create disruptive alliances by framing climate concerns "as a matter of everyday life and livelihood" rather than in scientific and technical terms (Da Rimini et al., 2021). More research is needed to understand the long-term success of community intervention programs in preventing gun violence as well as on how local-level action can be helpful in circumventing resistant federal legislation across different contexts, especially after prolonged policy failures.

4.4 Reflections on Research Challenges and Implications

Article dissertations have become the norm in most fields of study in Finland, and there are clear benefits to being able to start publishing research early on in your dissertation process. However, it is also the nature of article dissertations that where you start is usually not where you end up. This dissertation started as a dissertation about youth activism on gun violence. It was only by the last article that it became clear to me that the dissertation is about the whole movement. Thus, in the first three articles of the dissertation, I focused on young people and gun politics. Due to the pandemic delaying my fieldwork trip to Texas, it was only in the last article that I could use interviews I conducted with activists as my main research materials. Yet, I had the most meaningful insights about my research while doing and writing about the fieldwork. I was not able to initially locate the youth activists in Texas and the research evolved as I found long-time activists, who led me to interviewing members from all ages and parts of the gun violence prevention movement. An acute sense of frustration and failure were apparent in the interviews but so was hope and even excitement in new strategies, campaigns, and community violence prevention programs. The fieldwork shaped and crystalized my dissertation arguments.

However, there is such a clear focus on the youth-led parts of the movement in the first three articles of the dissertation that it is reasonable to say I was biased toward emphasizing the changes happening in the movement and the solutions and strategies they proposed. Some movement members and scholars researching gun control will undoubtedly disagree with at least parts of my analysis. Had I been able to start with what I ended, with fieldwork and the interviews, the focus of the three other articles would have been different, taking better into account the whole movement. Moreover, undoubtedly Texas had an enormous influence on my research. I argue that understanding Texas is ultimately absolutely crucial to finding the solution to the gun violence problem in the United States. However, I recognize that this might look different from another part of the country.

One of the other major challenges I encountered while working on this dissertation was feeling uncertain of my own research identity in between the two fields of American studies and political science. While interdisciplinary research has become encouraged and even required in many parts of academia, certainly in Finland, at times the day-to-day experience left me feeling as if instead of mastering one field, I was becoming inadequate in two. The process was frustrating at times, as I had to keep reorganizing my research according to the different backgrounds of journal reviewers and relearning the ways of doing things for each article in ways that did not automatically make sense to me. Consequently, I became very cognizant of the unwritten rules and underlying beliefs separating different fields in the social sciences and the humanities. I often encountered the age-old debates between objectivity and transparency, positivism and constructivism, and quantitative and qualitative methods that led me to wonder what types of questions could you even ask your subject matter.

I am an American studies scholar first, and as such, orienting myself back in the principles of the field helped me in times of confusion. What I ended up with in articles I, II and IV were American studies articles focused on explaining a political problem through the subjective experiences and interpretations that people themselves have had about the issue. I believe these insights bring something new to studies of gun violence and gun control policies that have mostly been conducted by medical professionals concerned with injury prevention. I contribute to political process theory criticized for underemphasizing the human agency that movement members themselves have in influencing their political opportunities. Such a perspective is lacking in the few studies that have been done on the gun control movement.

However, writing Article III with more of a political science perspective, research questions, and methods gave me a valuable lesson as well. It taught me the importance of systematic analysis and how to articulate not only your argument but the process by which you arrive at the argument in a transparent way that others can

then evaluate. American studies has been on a quest for a method for the field for decades. Moving toward fieldwork and other social science methods gave me the tools I needed for this dissertation. Many scholars have developed, and continue to develop, American studies methods, where the objectives of examining power relationships withing the context of North American culture, history, and politics are considered with such social science methods as fieldwork (Caughey, 1982; Heiskanen, 2019; Desmond, 2014). More systematic overviews of American studies methods are still needed.

5 Conclusion

In my dissertation, I considered how the gun violence prevention movement had defined the issue, what strategies they have employed, how they have understood their opportunities, and what kinds of change they have articulated to be desirable, achievable, and imaginable. My four dissertation articles offered different answers to all of these questions. Contextualizing the articles in different points in time and space offered a broader picture of the historical trajectory of the movement. I argued that the movement has developed in three distinct cycles of gun violence prevention. First, gun violence was initially understood as crime and to solve it, a small network of interest groups coalesced primarily to lobby for national gun control legislation, with some success. As political opportunities dwindled, women mobilized for the issue, and advocates began to frame gun violence as one of public health, with solutions still focused on gun control, only now at state level in addition to federal legislation. Finally, as partisan polarization closed opportunities on the federal level and in Republican-led states, young people, and particularly youth of color mobilized for the issue and changed definitions in the movement toward structural insecurity, with solutions aimed at community violence prevention. My second main argument of the dissertation is that this strategy has opened new political opportunities for the movement even in places where there were none before.

I do not suggest that gun control regulation is a hopeless cause that should not be pursued. Such legislation clearly has a role in any country hoping to curtail gun violence. Guns are weapons designed for the sole purpose of killing other living beings and their availability will always lead to violence. However, I would propose that even if the solutions might differ, there has to be recognition over the need for diverse movement strategies at this moment. Goss and Lacombe (2024) argued in their study that due to the threats of mass shootings and legislation removing gun regulation as well as increased issue-based polarization, gun control has become a durable issue that mobilizes people in a sustained manner even more than gun rights. This suggests that there is a grassroots base that could be leveraged with an explicitly political strategy. Metzl (2024) called for such a strategy along with structural solutions and a unifying narrative about safer communities that could counter the fear-based narrative proposed by groups such as the NRA. Spitzer (1995, 2023) has

been proposing a framework borrowed from international relations according to which states deal with the "security dilemma" caused by arms proliferation with incremental agreements towards non-proliferation of new weapons and regulation over the existing ones. Bernstein (2022), Bernstein et al. (2019), Reed et al. (2025), and Wilf et al. (2024) emphasize the need for community violence prevention that takes seriously the violence produced by structural racism and law enforcement.

Activists acutely need solutions that address gun violence in the areas worst impacted. Advocates in conservative states need strategies to deal with the insurmountable political problems they face, as do the national organizations now dealing with a federal government whose primary goal seems to be prosecuting and dismantling every organization and person they consider their political opponent. There needs to be more research conducted on how well the solutions outlined in this dissertation are able to both address the actual problem of gun violence as well as the political problems related to gun culture and the intertwined nature of gun rights groups, gun manufacturers, and the Republican Party. The different approaches, strategies, and goals I have examined in this dissertation offer at least one answer, even if it certainly is not the only one. While the structural issues are enormous and power is concentrated in the hands of those who benefit from the status quo, cultivating hope is the first step in forcing change even where it does not appear possible.

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TURUN
YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU

Painosalama, Turku, Finland 2026

ISBN 978-952-02-0662-8 (PRINT)
ISBN 978-952-02-0663-5 (PDF)
ISSN 0082-6987 (Print)
ISSN 2343-3191 (Online)