

# Fracturing Figureheads

**Group Organization and Power Structures in the  
Gun Rights and Gun Control Movements**

Gun Politics in the United States Colloquium  
Chloe Dennison, Senior Capstone

# Research Question and Argument

- How does the organization of a movement define how leaders operate?
  - How are leaders empowered differently in the gun control and gun reform movements?
  - Are figureheads similarly deployed in both the gun rights and gun control movement as a means of symbolically representing the ideological goals of the organization?
- Contextual circumstances shapes the rise and power of leaders
- Ideological pursuits of movements influences their organization

# Definitions of Leadership

- Joseph Rost sees leadership as an “influence relationship among leader and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.””
- Ronald Heifetz “has recently reconceptualized leadership as the mobilization of group resources towards solving group problems and achieving group objectives. He views leadership as primarily adaptive in nature.”
- James Burns “maintains that leadership is different from mere power holding or brute force. Leadership is authority or legitimate power in that it involves ‘mutual persuasion, exchange, elevation, and transformation.’”

## Traits of a Leader:

- Shared goal or agenda
- Ability to mobilize followers
- Sustained action

# Political Party Organization

- David Nexon: “Republicans are a high participation party with an amateur base composed of right wing ideologues, while the Democrats are a low participation party with a professionalized base not dependent on ideological incentives to activism.”
- Republican Party
  - Ideologically based
  - Top-down power distribution
- Democratic Party
  - Composed of competing interest groups
  - Multiple power centers that make demands on leaders
  - Bottom-up power distribution

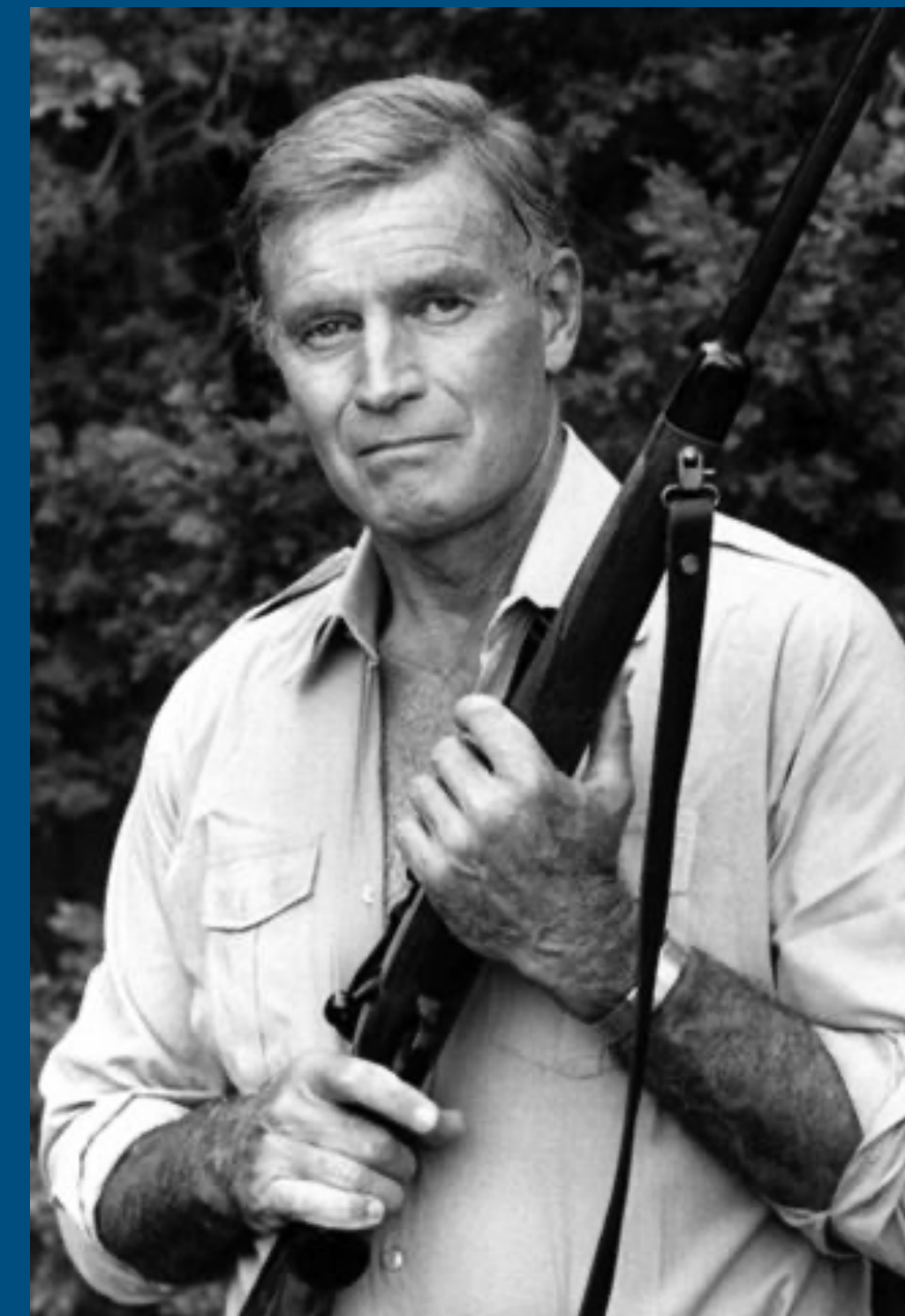
# Movement Organization

- NRA portrays gun ownership as a constitutional right - embeds them within the larger conservative movement's antigovernment message
- Symbolism of guns enacts top-down power arrangements - informs the boundaries of membership
- Gun control driven more by events than organized citizen action
- Kristin Goss: "In terms of paradigms of policy change, gun control fits an interest-group model (a small cadre of elites working through staff-driven nonprofit organizations to push legislative change in Congress) far better than it fits a social-movement model (elite-direct masses pushing social as well as policy change in multiple private and governmental arenas)."



# Movement Leadership

- Charlton Heston
  - Culture wars: beyond gun rights, broader conservative message
  - Adhere to strict ideologue-orientation of conservative organization
- Emma González and David Hogg
  - Sought to bridge coalitions into united group
  - Recognized as leaders by mainstream media and opponents





# Conclusions

- Fundamental difference in gun control and gun rights movement organization
- Different conceptions of leadership to align with the ideological construction of movements:
  - Jennifer Earls: “instead of focusing on the hard-to-define concept of leadership, scholars interested in leadership should concentrate on the actions of key organizers by focusing their analyses on specific *leading tasks*. [...] the salience of various leading tasks—by which I mean the extent to which key organizers identify specific leading tasks as important or place certain leading tasks ‘on their agenda’—can vary across movements and within a movement over time.”
- Institutionalized party leadership has immense influence over issue-based organizations and their own leadership