



All Fired Up: A Comparative Analysis of Public Opinion on Gun Control in Past Democratic Primaries and the 2020 Campaigns

Katie Klain | Kak2220@barnard.edu

Abstract

This paper focuses on past Democratic primaries to answer questions about public opinion and gun control trends observed within the 2020 campaigns.

- This paper begins with an analysis of the 1992 Democratic primary, followed by the 2000 Democratic primary, then the 2008 and 2016 Democratic primaries.
 - Examining several subcategories of public opinion allows for possible explanations of the extent that particular candidates' stances on gun control reflect public sentiment.
 - The case studies depict the salience of public opinion in shaping voter and campaign issues more broadly—in contrast to research that suggests public opinion is merely a response to candidate discourse and media coverage.
- Following the analysis of past Democratic primaries, this paper analyzes two Democratic candidates running for president in the 2020 election: Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren.
 - Considering that both Biden and Warren have outlined comprehensive gun control policies, this paper cross-examines the candidate platforms in relation to public opinion and each other.
 - An investigation into Biden and Warren's gun control plans suggests the consequence of public opinion on candidates' agendas and the increased concern paid to gun control in the 2020 election.

Three Measures of Public Opinion

1. Broad support for increased gun control laws
2. The importance of gun control positions when deciding whom to vote for in a presidential election
3. The role of gun related interest groups

Assessing Public Opinion, Gun Control, and Past Democratic Primaries: 1992 to 2016

Past Democratic primaries highlight how the three measures of public opinion on gun control shift over time and how gun control opinions correspond to candidates' policy positions.

- **1992 Democratic Primary – Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown**
 - Public opinion for increased gun control laws was high and a salient policy issue for both voters and candidates; however, interest group involvement was low.
- **2000 Democratic Primary – Al Gore and Bill Bradley**
 - Support for increased gun control laws decreased, although gun control was a major voter issue and interest groups held more financial weight than in 1992.
- **2008 Democratic Primary – Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton**
 - Strengthening gun control laws and gun control issues were not top concerns for voters in 2008; interest group involvement was also low.
- **2016 Democratic Primary – Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders**
 - Public support for strengthening gun control laws decreased, although 2016 marked a high point for gun control as a voter issue and for interest group involvement.

The four primaries indicate that public opinion including – broad support for increased gun control, the importance of gun control positions when deciding whom to vote for, and interest group involvement – is largely predictive of the relevance of gun control within candidates' campaign agendas.

Public Opinion on Gun Control in the 2020 Election: Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren

This paper also analyzes two Democratic candidates in the 2020 election: Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren. In a departure from previous elections, these candidates outlined extensive gun control platforms. Additionally, gun control laws and policies remain important issues for 2020 voters.

- **2020 Democratic Primary: Joe Biden**
 - Biden capitalized on gun control issues already receiving majority support, aligning these policies within his centrist campaign strategy.
- **2020 Democratic Primary: Elizabeth Warren**
 - Warren's gun control positions emphasized a public health and progressive strategy, in contrast to Biden's mainstream political approach.

The 2020 Democratic primary furthers the notion that public opinion -- broad support for increased gun control, the importance of gun control positions when deciding whom to vote for, and interest group involvement – influences the gun-related policy proposals that candidates include within their campaigns.

Findings

Public opinion is not solely a consequence of candidate discourse. Instead, the three measures of public opinion outlined in this paper – broad support for increased gun control, the importance of gun control positions when deciding whom to vote for, and interest group involvement – predict the pertinence of gun control within a given Democratic primary and provide an explanation for why gun control has become a critical voter issue in 2020.