



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

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## 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.