



**PRESS RELEASE**

Contact Information:

Caitlin Kizielewicz  
412-554-0074 | caitlin@asc41.com

**Study: Candidates' Pro-Gun Stances, NRA Funding Influence Voters**

Two principal movers of American politics increasingly appear to be connected: racism and guns. However, the racial content underlying gun rights rhetoric is rarely made explicit during political campaigns. A new study sought to determine whether candidates' pro-gun messages court prejudiced voters without transgressing popular egalitarian norms. The study found that candidates' funding by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and their positions on gun control affect voters' evaluations, with voters' racial stances moderating the effects.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Albany, the University of Cincinnati, Xavier University, and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. It appears in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

“Dog whistles are used to mobilize racist voters—to connect voters' racial beliefs with their attitudes on policy and their political commitments—without explicitly mentioning race,” explains Nathaniel Schutten, a Ph.D. student in criminal justice at the University at Albany, who led the study. “We wanted to determine whether gun rights rhetoric functions as a racial dog whistle in elections.”

The political vigor of gun rights activists and gun owners is often attributed to group social identity, self-interest, and the perceived threat of having their guns taken away, but another possible explanation may be racial prejudice. Prior research suggests an association between racial resentment and gun ownership and opposition to gun control.

Although candidates for office generally avoid speaking directly in racial terms, racism remains a factor in political life, operating primarily in a veiled way. This is especially true in the case of gun rights, one of the most politically divisive issues in the United States. Since gun rights activists are better organized and more willing to vote solely on a candidates' stance on gun control, leveraging gun rights supporters—many of whom are one-issue voters—is viewed as a productive political strategy.

In this study, researchers examined whether a political candidate's gun stance might operate as a racial dog whistle to motivate racially resentful voters—similar to the way tough-on-crime rhetoric and support for the police are used by politicians as racist dog whistles. Their data came from an experiment embedded in a 2018 nationwide survey of 1,100 American registered voters that resembled the general U.S. population in terms of demographics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, education, geographic location) and gun ownership; the survey was fielded by YouGov, a global public opinion and data firm.

The experiment focused on the midterm elections of 2018, where candidates' policy positions strongly influenced voting and racism played a heightened role. Each respondent was presented with two different vignettes describing two candidates running against each other in a hypothetical midterm election and asked to choose which candidate they would vote for in different scenarios; researchers randomly varied the candidates' party, the funding they received from the NRA, and their support of gun control legislation. The survey also measured respondents' racial resentment by asking them to respond to statements, and asked about



respondents' demographics.

The study found that candidates' NRA funding status and position on gun control affected voters' evaluations, with racial resentment moderating the effects. Racially resentful voters were more likely than those who were not racially resentful to say they would vote for a candidate when the candidate was funded by the NRA and did not support gun control. This finding was true among voters who owned guns and those who did not. It was also true regardless of the candidates' political party, despite opposition to gun control typically being associated with Republican platforms. This suggests that among racially resentful voters, a candidate's gun control stance may take precedence over the political party they endorse, the authors note.

The study also identified a strong backlash effect among voters low in racial resentment: These individuals were aversive to NRA-funded candidates and strongly supported pro-gun control candidates. The backlash effect among low-resentment voters was larger than the effect found among racially resentful voters.

"Racist dog whistles may go unnoticed for years, but once their racial content is recognized, they become less effective and may even backfire for some," according to Justin Pickett, associate professor of criminal justice at the University at Albany, who coauthored the study. "Americans are becoming more vigilant about race-coded political issues, so although guns are not explicitly racial, many Americans may recognize the racial undertones of the issue and respond accordingly."

The study's authors note several limitations: Although evidence suggests that vote choices in surveys are informative about actual voting behavior, it is unclear whether there is a similar interaction between voters' racial attitudes and political candidates' gun positions. Moreover, the study used only one measure of racial prejudice, so further research using alternative measures is needed.

###

Summarized from *Criminology*, *Are Guns the New Dog Whistle? Gun Control, Racial Resentment, and Vote Choice* by Schutten, NM (University at Albany), Pickett, JT (University at Albany), Burton, AL (University of Cincinnati), Jonson, CL (Xavier University), Cullen, FT (University of Cincinnati), Burton, Jr., VS (University of Arkansas at Little Rock). Copyright 2021 The American Society of Criminology. All rights reserved.