Common Sense or Gun Control?
Political Communication and News
Media Framing of Firearm Sale
Background Checks after Newtown

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Abstract  Gun violence is a critical public health problem in the United States, but it is rarely at the top of the public policy agenda. The 2012 mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, opened a rare window of opportunity to strengthen firearm policies in the United States. In this study, we examine the American public’s exposure to competing arguments for and against federal- and state-level universal background check laws, which would require a background check prior to every firearm sale, in a large sample of national and regional news stories (n = 486) published in the year following the Newtown shooting. Competing messages about background check laws could influence the outcome of policy debates by shifting support and political engagement among key constituencies such as gun owners and conservatives. We found that news media messages in support of universal background checks were fact-based and used rational arguments, and opposing messages often used rights-based frames designed to activate the core values of politically engaged gun owners. Reframing supportive messages about background check policies to align with gun owners’ and conservatives’ core values could be a promising strategy to increase these groups’ willingness to vocalize their support for expanding background checks for firearm sales.

Keywords  firearms, gun policy, background checks, framing

Introduction

Gun violence is a critical public health problem in the United States, where more than 30,000 people die from firearm homicide and suicide each year (CDC 2014) and another 80,000 or more are wounded (NCIPC 2014). High rates of gun ownership (Hemenway and Miller 2000) and constitutional protections for gun owners (Vernick et al. 2011) contribute to rates of
firearm morbidity and mortality that are significantly higher than rates in most other high-income nations (Hemenway and Miller 2000). In spite of its toll on US society, gun violence is rarely at the top of the US public policy agenda. In the past decade, news media coverage of and public attention to gun violence have been concentrated in the brief periods following highly publicized mass shootings such as those at Virginia Tech in 2007, in Tucson, Arizona, in 2011, and in Aurora, Colorado, and Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012 (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski et al. 2014).

The December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, was unique among other recent mass shootings in that twenty young children, along with six adult staff members, were killed. This event generated sustained national dialogue about the causes of and appropriate policy responses to gun violence in the United States (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski et al. 2014). Proponents of stricter firearm laws were quick to recognize a window of opportunity to strengthen gun laws, and in the months following the shooting, federal and state lawmakers introduced numerous legislative proposals to prevent people with mental illness from having guns, ban military-style semiautomatic assault weapons, expand background check requirements for firearm sales, and more (McGinty, Webster, Vernick et al. 2014; LCPGV 2013; LOC 2014). Opponents of stricter gun laws introduced competing legislation to loosen existing firearm restrictions and increase gun owners’ ability to carry weapons in public places (LOC 2014; LCPGV 2013). An estimated 40 federal and 1,500 state firearm bills were introduced in the first half of 2013 (LOC 2014; LCPGV 2013).

By early 2013, many proponents of stronger firearm laws had focused their energy on promoting federal and state legislation to expand the background check system for firearm sales. Under current federal law, to purchase a gun from a licensed firearm dealer an individual must pass a background check to ensure that they are legally allowed to possess a firearm. Firearm dealers are required to keep records of such sales to assist with traces of guns used in crime and as a deterrent to illegal gun sales. In contrast, firearm purchases from unlicensed and private sellers do not require background checks or record keeping under federal law and in most states (Wintemute 2013). Background checks are designed to identify individuals prohibited by federal or state law from purchasing or possessing firearms. Federal law prohibits felons, individuals convicted of domestic violence misdemeanor crimes, persons involuntarily committed to psychiatric care, and six other categories of individuals from having guns, and some states have enacted additional categorical firearm

Published by Duke University Press
prohibitions that go beyond federal law (Webster et al. 2013). Under current federal law, these prohibited persons can avoid a background check and legally purchase a gun from a private seller (Wintemute 2013), and surveys of incarcerated gun offenders indicate that criminals exploit this gap in the background check requirement to obtain firearms (Webster and Vernick 2013).

Research suggests that closing this private sale loophole in the background check system, as some states have already done by enacting universal background check laws requiring a background check for all gun sales, can reduce gun violence by making it harder for criminals to get firearms (Wintemute 2013). Furthermore, public opinion polls show widespread support for universal background checks among the American public. A national public opinion survey conducted in January 2013 (the month following the Newtown shooting) showed that large majorities of Americans overall (89 percent) and gun owners (84 percent) supported requiring a background check for every firearm sale (Barry et al. 2013). The same survey showed widespread public support for universal background checks across the political spectrum. Support was high regardless of political ideology (92 percent among respondents who identified as liberals, 93 percent among moderates, and 83 percent among conservatives) or party identification (92 percent among Democrats, 88 percent among Independents, and 86 percent among Republicans) (Barry et al. 2013). In contrast, while nearly 70 percent of Americans overall supported banning military-style assault weapons (another frequently proposed policy response to the mass shooting in Newtown), only 46 percent of gun owners, 55 percent of conservatives, and 52 percent of Republicans supported such a ban (Barry et al. 2013).

In the months following the Newtown shooting, bills to expand the background check system were introduced in both the federal and several state legislatures. Ultimately, these bills met with mixed success. At the state level, Colorado and Delaware successfully enacted new universal background check laws while Connecticut, Illinois, and New York strengthened their background check requirements. In Nevada, universal background check legislation passed both houses of the state legislature but was then vetoed by the state’s governor. At the federal level, a bipartisan bill sponsored by Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Pat Toomey (R-PA) and endorsed by President Barack Obama would have required individuals purchasing a firearm online or at a gun show to undergo a background check. The bill was the only proposal to strengthen federal firearm law that reached a full vote on the Senate floor, but it ultimately failed to reach the
sixty votes required to proceed and was defeated by a vote of 54–46 on April 16, 2013—four months after the Newtown shooting.

Why, in the face of widespread public support, did the US Congress fail to pass legislation to strengthen the background check system for firearm sales? Why were some states able to succeed where the federal government failed? To begin to answer these questions, we need to consider the complex political context surrounding firearms in the United States, where, in many regions and especially in rural areas, gun ownership has long been an important part of cultural identity. This identity, forged through the nation’s early resistance to colonial powers and later expansion to the western frontier, has remained strong for large segments of US society even in the face of modern life, stable government, and increased urbanization (Horwitz and Anderson 2009). For many Americans, firearm ownership has come to symbolize a broad set of conservative values related to a rural way of life, the importance of personal responsibility, and a limited role for government (Horwitz and Anderson 2009). As a result, the symbol of firearm ownership is now tied to conservative ideology and the Republican political party with which many conservatives are aligned, making gun policy one of the most politically polarized public policy issues in the United States (Horwitz and Anderson 2009; Stimson 2004).

The symbolism of firearm ownership is strikingly evident in the arguments opponents of stronger firearm laws use in the political debates surrounding gun policy proposals. These opponents, who include powerful, well-funded interest groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Gun Owners of America, often frame firearm restrictions of any kind as an overreach of government power, a threat to Second Amendment rights and individual liberties (Sugarmann 1992). Public opinion surveys show that large segments of gun owners and conservatives (these two groups have significant but not complete overlap—in 2013, 49 percent of gun owners in the United States identified as conservatives, 33 percent as moderates, and 18 percent as liberals) support multiple specific proposals to strengthen US gun laws, including universal background checks (Barry et al. 2013; PollingReport.com 2014). However, opposing messages framing these proposals as an affront to conservative values may decrease gun owners’ and conservatives’ support or inhibit their willingness to publicly advocate for the proposals that they favor. Vocal support from these constituencies is critical to passing legislation to strengthen US firearm laws. Without voluble support from these groups, policy makers in conservative states with high rates of gun ownership may be primarily influenced by the opinions of the small but very politically engaged
subgroup of voters who oppose any restrictions on firearm ownership (McGinty, Webster, Vernick et al. 2014).

During periods of intense public debate about firearm policy, such as the months following the elementary school shooting in Newtown, the public is exposed to competing arguments for and against strengthening firearm laws. Research from the fields of communication, social psychology, and political science suggests that the strength and volume of these competing arguments can influence public support for and political engagement around specific gun policy proposals (Chong and Druckman 2007a). To date, however, no studies have assessed competing supportive and opposing arguments in the public dialogue about firearm laws. To better understand how competing arguments about gun policy are used in the public discourse, we conducted an analysis of the volume and content of arguments for and against universal background check laws in a large sample of US television and print news stories published in the year following the Newtown school shooting. In the remainder of this article, we discuss the theoretical background, methods, results, and implications of this news media content analysis.

Theoretical Background

Framing Theory

Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman (2007b: 104) define the major premise of framing theory as the idea that “an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations.” Much of political communication attempts to influence how the public views issues by framing them in a certain light. Political campaigns, policy makers, and interest groups frame policy problems by emphasizing certain aspects of a given issue to make it more salient, for example, by highlighting a specific cause or consequence of a problem (Chong and Druckman 2007b; Iyengar 1991; Scheufele 1999; Entman 1993). A robust body of literature spanning several disciplines shows that framing can significantly influence public opinion about policy issues (Scheufele 1999; Iyengar 1996; Chong and Druckman 2007a). In a classic example from the political science literature, Thomas E. Nelson, Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe M. Oxley (1997) showed that a significantly higher proportion of survey respondents supported allowing a hate group to hold a political rally when allowing the rally was framed as protection of free speech versus when it was framed as a threat to public safety. Frames
are constructed and communicated by a variety of actors in issue debates, who compete to build the dominant frame defining the problem (Nisbet et al. 2013). Specific messages and arguments often form the building blocks of issue frames, and framing effects can be exerted by as little as small wording differences. In another classic example, Kenneth A. Rasinski (1989) examined national survey data from the 1980s and found that while 65 percent of Americans believed that too little public funding was being spent on “assistance to the poor,” only 20 percent believed that too little was being spent on “welfare.”

**Competitive Framing**

Framing studies clearly show that exposure to a single issue frame can influence public preferences (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). In reality, however, political communication exposes the public to multiple competing issue frames over the course of policy debates (Chong and Druckman 2007a). In one of the first empirical analyses of competitive framing, Paul M. Sniderman and Sean M. Theriault (2004) found that when citizens were exposed concurrently to competing issue frames, the frames neutralized one another and failed to influence public opinion. The researchers concluded that presentation of simultaneous competing frames leads members of the public to choose the position that is most consistent with their core values—in other words, the same position they likely would have chosen in the absence of exposure to either issue frame (Sniderman and Theriault 2004).

Subsequent research in the nascent field of competitive framing supports the role of core values identified by Sniderman and Theriault but suggests that competitive framing effects are also influenced by the salience of the issue being framed; the strength, volume, sequence, and timing of competing frames; and the knowledge and motivation of the citizens receiving the frame (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2010, 2013; Druckman et al. 2010). Using two randomized experiments testing alternate frames of urban development and the US Patriot Act (which allows law enforcement agencies to monitor public communications in order to identify terrorist threats), Chong and Druckman (2010) found that when competing frames were administered days or weeks apart, respondents’ policy preferences were influenced by the most recently administered issue frame, a finding supported by more recent research conducted by Sophie Lecheler and Claes H. de Vreese (2013). However, this accessibility effect did not hold for the subset of individuals (“memory-based processors”) who were
motivated to deliberately process information about the issue. This suggests that for motivated and knowledgeable citizens the strength—that is, the perceived merits, relevance, and/or consistency with core values—of an issue frame has more influence on policy preferences than the volume or timing of exposure to competing frames (Chong and Druckman 2010).

Important in the context of firearm policy, where many individuals already hold strong attitudes about the issue, studies also show that certainty about an issue influences the effects of competitive framing. In a study designed to test predictors of the longevity of framing effects, Jörg Matthes and Christian Schemer (2012) found that certainty of opinion explained the persistency of opinions over time and resistance to counterframing. In a competitive framing experiment on the topic of emerging technologies, Druckman and Toby Bolsen (2011) found that individuals who had already formed coherent opinions about an issue were less likely to be influenced by the presentation of new information, instead subconsciously interpreting new facts about the issue in a way that conformed to their already established attitudes. This phenomenon, called motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990), could play an important role in the public’s susceptibility to competing messages about gun violence prevention policies.

News Media Framing

The news media are the main link between politicians and other elite opinion leaders and the public (Scheufele 1999; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). As a result, framing effects are most frequently studied in the context of news media coverage (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Policy makers and interest groups frame issues in ways that they believe will shape policy debates in their favor and work to garner news coverage that uses those frames (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Hilgartner and Bosk 1998; Iyengar 1991, 1996; Niederdeppe et al. 2013). The more frequently the public is exposed to a given issue frame in the news media—particularly a strong frame that resonates with citizens’ values—the more likely it is that the frame will influence public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007b). The political actors who serve as topics of and sources for news coverage vie to disseminate their framing messages to as wide an audience as possible (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Callaghan and Schnell 2001). Importantly, studies suggest that while these external actors influence news media content, they are not the sole determinant of how issues are framed in news coverage (Callaghan and Schnell 2001). Editorial decisions and reporters’ own preferred issue frames can play a
significant role in news media framing of public policy debates (Callaghan and Schnell 2001).

In addition to influencing the public’s attitudes and policy preferences, studies show that volume and content of news media coverage of public policy issues can influence political engagement (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006, Nisbet 2009, Dahlgren 2009). Exposure to news coverage overall and in particular news coverage that focuses on presenting both sides of a political conflict—thus presenting competing issue frames and a choice for voters—is associated with increased voter participation (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Dahlgren 2009). News media framing of issues may also influence citizens’ willingness to engage in political activities such as voting, participating in public demonstrations, contacting an elected representative, or joining or donating to an advocacy group (Eveland and Scheufele 2000; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). In particular, frames that increase the salience of the issue, for example, by linking it to a core value or increasing its direct relevancy to citizens’ lives, may lead to political mobilization (Nisbet 2009). For example, Ted Nordhaus and Michael Schellenberger (2007) suggest that reframing the climate change debate to focus on the economic opportunities of climate change, rather than the dire environmental consequences, could catalyze increased public engagement around the issue by making it more salient to the broad swath of Americans who (regardless of political ideology) consistently rate the economy as the issue about which they are most concerned. Framing messages may also be designed to mobilize specific subsets of voters, such as Hispanics or gun owners. Studies of mainstream news sources suggest that the public is often exposed to competing issue frames within the same news story (Niederdeppe et al. 2013), but dissemination of targeted framing is aided by the promulgation of news sources that cater to specific demographic and ideological groups and are less likely to present both sides of a politically polarized issue (Iyengar and Hahn 2009).

News Media Framing of Gun Violence and Firearm Policy

A limited body of prior research has examined news media framing of gun violence and firearm policy. Callaghan and Schnell (2001) assessed issue framing messages in news media coverage of two US federal firearm proposals (the Brady Act and the federal assault weapons ban) from 1988 to 1996. The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 (Pub. L. No. 103-159, 107 Stat. 1536) required federally licensed firearm dealers to conduct background checks designed to identify prohibited purchasers prior to every gun sale. The assault weapons ban, or Public Safety and
Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act (formerly codified at 18 U.S.C. § 921 et seq.), which was enacted in 1994 and expired in 2004, banned the sale and manufacture of firearms defined as assault weapons under the law. Callaghan and Schnell (2001) found that the news media most frequently framed the policies as needed to curb the culture of violence in the United States (47 percent of news stories), a political contest between Democrats and Republicans (14 percent), “feel-good” laws unlikely to reduce gun violence (13 percent), and sensible legislation (11 percent). Thomas Birkland and Regina Lawrence (2009) examined how the news media framed the causes of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and found that the two predominant causal frames used in news stories were weak gun laws and violent popular culture. A study of US news media coverage of gun violence and mental illness from 1998 to 2012 found that the news media were more likely to frame serious mental illness, as opposed to widespread availability of firearms, as an important cause of gun violence (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski et al. 2014).

In addition to describing the issue frames used in news media coverage of gun violence and gun policy, prior research has shown that news media framing of these issues can influence public support for firearm policies. In 1999, Donald P. Haider-Markel and Mark R. Joslyn (2001) conducted an experimental study assessing the effects of two policy frames commonly employed in US news media coverage of a proposed concealed handgun law, which would allow citizens to carry concealed weapons in public places. Compared to messages framing the law as a threat to public safety, messages framing the law as an individual right increased support for allowing concealed handguns in public. Another randomized experiment assessed the effects of news media messages framing “dangerous people” with serious mental illness versus “dangerous weapons” with large-capacity ammunition magazines as important causes of mass shootings on public support for firearm policies (McGinty, Webster, and Barry 2013). While dangerous-weapons causal framing increased support for banning large-capacity ammunition magazines (which allow some guns to shoot ten or more rounds without reloading), dangerous-people message framing did not increase support for such a ban or for a policy proposal to prevent people with serious mental illness from having guns (McGinty, Webster, and Barry 2013).

Production of Competing Gun Policy Frames in the News Media

To begin to explore competitive framing of firearm policy in the news media, we first need to consider how competing frames are produced and
how they evolve over time. Controversy is one of the most important criteria journalists use when considering which issues are newsworthy, and conflict is particularly salient to audiences when the issue under discussion is timely and has the potential to directly influence news consumers (Graber and Dunaway 2014). Firearm policy is widely acknowledged as one of the controversial policy issues in the United States (Horwitz and Anderson 2009), and new proposals to strengthen laws in this area—particularly when they receive serious consideration by policy makers and are perceived by the public as having a realistic chance of being enacted—consistently garner news coverage (McGinty, Webster, and Barry 2013; Callaghan and Schnell 2001). Much firearm policy is enacted at the state rather than the federal level, and the prior literature suggests that volume of news coverage of state gun policy proposals will be highest in the state and local news sources whose audiences represent the target population of the policies (Graber and Dunaway 2014; Fowler et al. 2011). Prior research suggests that volume of coverage will peak during active consideration of a controversial policy and then fall off rapidly, particularly if the policy proposal is not enacted into law (Graber and Dunaway 2014).

Importantly, prior studies suggest that competitive framing of issues is dynamic and can evolve significantly over the course of debate, particularly when the issue at hand is new and has not been well-defined in prior discourse (Fowler et al. 2011; Chong and Druckman 2007b; Nisbet, Brossard, and Kroepsch 2003). For example, Fowler et al. (2011) explored competing arguments in news media coverage of the HPV vaccine debate and found that experts and advocates quoted in the news media initially relied on familiar arguments, such as the opposition to government mandates often expressed by conservatives in debates about other issues. As the debate lengthened, however, shifts in opinions and arguments made by key stakeholders occurred (Fowler et al. 2011). The sources that reporters draw on to inform their stories may also change over the course of issue debates. For example, when a new issue emerges, reporters may initially turn to trusted government sources but then later expand their sources to include the other political elites, interest groups, and affected citizens who play a prominent role in the debate (Graber and Dunaway 2014; Fowler et al. 2011; Terkildsen, Schnell, and Ling 1998). Firearm policy has a long history of debate in US public discourse, and many actors’ opinions are already strongly solidified in support or opposition (Horwitz and Anderson 2009). However, it is possible that issue framing in regard to specific policy proposals, such as universal background checks, could still evolve over time. For example, opponents to the policy may begin by framing the policy
as a threat to firearm rights—a common argument known to resonate with conservatives and gun owners (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001)—and then evolve to focus on different opposing arguments that are more specific to the particular policy under consideration or are developed as counter-arguments to the arguments made by proponents of the policy (Chong and Druckman 2013). Further, it is possible that news coverage of supportive versus opposing arguments may reflect public opinion and the political feasibility of a given policy proposal. For example, news coverage of universal background checks in states that went on to pass background check laws may have a higher volume of supportive versus opposing arguments compared to national coverage of the unsuccessful federal legislation. As public opinion about and the political chances of policies change over the course of public debate, news coverage of the policy may evolve in parallel.

It is also important to note that the type and balance of competing frames, and the arguments that help to construct those frames, may differ by news source. A robust body of literature on political polarization and selective exposure in the news media suggests that the proliferation of news sources catering to specific ideological groups may mean that some members of the public are primarily exposed to only the arguments about firearm policy that are consistent with their preexisting values and policy preferences (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2008, 2010; Hollander 2008). Ideological catering is particularly prevalent in cable television, radio, and Internet news, where audiences have a variety of news sources to choose from. While ideology is not absent from newspaper coverage, newspapers tend to be geographically based, and audiences may have fewer local newspapers to choose from than they do television, radio, and Internet news sources (Stroud 2010). In a study of the National Annenberg Election Survey, Natalie Jomini Stroud (2010) found that people’s political preferences motivate their choice of news sources: Democrats and Republicans were significantly more likely to get their news from liberal and conservative media outlets, respectively. The selective exposure literature suggests that competing arguments about firearm policy following the Newtown elementary school shooting may not have been evenly distributed across news sources. For example, among the news sources examined in the present study, the cable news programs (Fox and CNN, widely acknowledged as producers of news with a conservative [Fox] and liberal [CNN] slant [Aday, Livingston, and Hebert 2005; CMPA 2003]) may be more likely than network television news or newspapers to cover primarily supportive or opposing, rather than competing, arguments regarding firearm policy.
Similarly, conservative news sources may be more likely to quote Republican political elites or strong opposition interest groups, such as the NRA.

**Overview of the Present Study**

To our knowledge, no prior studies have considered the competition between supportive and opposing framing messages in news coverage of firearm policy. Understanding the role of competing message frames on public opinion and political engagement is particularly critical in the context of gun policy, an ideologically polarized issue characterized by intense political debates that expose the public to multiple supportive and opposing arguments. To begin to fill this gap, we conducted a study designed to describe the competing messages employed in national and regional US news media coverage of universal background check policies in the year following the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. While this method does not allow us to empirically test the effects of competing message frames on the public’s support for universal background check laws, our study takes the important first step of identifying the volume, content, and timing of competing issue frames in news stories about background check policies.

**Study Objectives**

Our study had seven objectives. First was to assess the volume of news coverage about universal background check policies in the year following the Newtown shooting in all news sources studied and in newspapers in the three states that successfully passed universal background checks legislation (Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada—Nevada’s law was ultimately vetoed by the governor). Second was to assess which supportive and opposing framing messages appeared most frequently overall, in national and regional news media coverage and in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspaper coverage of universal background checks. Third was to assess which competing frames were most likely to co-occur in news stories. Fourth was to determine whether framing messages differed in news coverage of federal background checks legislation, which the US Congress failed to pass, compared to news coverage background check policies in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada. Fifth was to assess whether the volume of supportive and opposing framing messages changed over the study period, and whether messages differed in national and regional versus Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada news sources. Sixth was to assess which
supportive and opposing sources, such as politicians or interest groups, were most frequently quoted in news stories about universal background checks. And seventh was to examine differences in volume of supportive and opposing messages and sources quoted by news sources. The results of this study will provide insight into the current landscape of political communication surrounding firearm policies in the United States and lay the groundwork for development of future studies assessing the effects of competing framing messages on public support for and political engagement around proposals to strengthen US firearm laws.

**Methods**

We analyzed print and television news stories focused on the topic of firearm background check laws from December 15, 2012 (the day after the elementary school shooting in Newtown), to December 31, 2013. This time frame encompasses the year of news coverage following the Newtown shooting as well as coverage in the two weeks following the one-year anniversary of the event, which garnered renewed news media attention. News sources included four of the highest circulation national newspapers in the United States in 2013 (*Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post*); one of the highest circulation newspapers in each of the US census regions, including the Northeast (*New York Daily News*), the South (*Tampa Bay Times*), the Midwest (*Chicago Tribune*), and the West (*Los Angeles Times*); and the highest circulation newspaper in the three states where legislatures passed universal background checks legislation: Colorado (*Denver Post*), Delaware (*Delaware News Journal*), and Nevada (*Las Vegas Review Journal*). We also analyzed transcripts from evening news programs on the three largest broadcast television networks (ABC’s *World News*, CBS’s *Evening News*, and NBC’s *Nightly News*) as well as transcriptions from CNN’s *The Situation Room* and Fox’s *Special Report*. We used the Audit Bureau of Circulation to identify newspaper circulation rates in 2012 and used Nielsen Media Research to identify television viewership in the same year.

**News Coverage Selection**

We used Lexis-Nexis and ProQuest online archives to collect news media stories using the following search terms: “gun” or “firearm” or “rifle” or “handgun” or “pistol” and “background check” and “legislation” or “policy” or “law” or “bill.” We reviewed each news story identified by these search terms and excluded those that were not focused on background
check policies. News stories shorter than one hundred words or classified as corrections, book reviews, letters to the editor, business or stock, obituaries, duplicate wire stories, story previews, or calendar reports were also excluded. The final analytic sample included 486 total news stories and opinion pieces (editorial or opinion-editorial pieces).

Content Analysis

We developed a thirty-nine-item structured coding instrument to analyze the content of news coverage of universal background check policies for firearm sales. Two authors (Sell and Wolfson) piloted the instrument on a random selection of thirty news stories from the study sample and refined the items included in the instrument based on pilot results. The same two authors then independently coded a random sample of 20 percent of the news stories ($n = 96$) to assess interrater reliability for each dichotomous yes/no item. With the exception of two items that appeared very rarely in the news stories and therefore had high rates of raw interrater agreement but subpar kappa statistics, all items met conventional standards for adequate reliability with kappa values of 0.69 or higher; the majority of items had kappa statistics of 0.80 or higher. The two items with kappa values < 0.69 had raw agreement of 98 percent and 99 percent, respectively (see supplemental materials in the online appendix).

Measures

We measured items in six categories. To identify framing messages for inclusion in the coding instrument, we conducted an informal media scan to identify commonly used frames and asked gun violence prevention experts and advocates affiliated with the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research to identify framing messages used in the firearm policy debates following the Newtown shooting. Additional framing messages used by the news media were identified through the piloting process described above. These messages, while not issue frames in and of themselves, are components of the larger issue frames of stakeholders use to define the issue of firearm policy in the United States.

Opposing Messages. We measured whether news stories mentioned seven opposing framing messages, including messages arguing that to prevent

1. To access the online appendix, please navigate to the article online and click on the “Supplemental Materials” link.
violence, policy makers should focus on treating mental illness rather than expanding the background check system for firearm sales and messages arguing that policy makers should focus on enforcing current firearm policies rather than making new background check laws. We also measured messages framing expanded background checks as ineffective at preventing crime, as restrictions on gun ownership, as a violation of Second Amendment rights, as leading to registries of gun owners, and as leading to gun bans or seizures. These last three framing messages fall into the category of rights-based frames often used by the politicians and interest groups that oppose stronger firearm laws in an attempt to activate the subset of politically active gun owners who view any attempt to strengthen firearm laws as a serious overreach of government power and a threat to their individual rights (Horwitz and Anderson 2009). While existing federal law forbids it (Trumble, Erickson Hatalsky, and Kessler 2013), background check opponents often argue that the records of gun sales resulting from background checks will be used to create a national registry of gun owners, and that the government could then go on to seize the firearms of those included in such a database (Koening 2013; Bowers 2013).

Supportive Messages. We measured whether news stories mentioned five supportive framing messages, including messages framing background check policies as a way to keep guns away from dangerous people in general, as a way to keep guns away from people with mental illness, as a way to keep guns away from criminals, as supported by the majority of Americans, and as a “common sense” policy.

Informational Messages. We measured whether news stories mentioned four informational messages about background checks for firearm sales, including messages noting that a large proportion of firearm sales in the United States are not currently subject to background checks and messages noting that, under current law, individuals who buy firearms from any private seller, at a gun show, or on the Internet are not required to undergo a background check prior to purchase.

“Gun Control” Messages. While many Americans across the political spectrum report support for universal background check policies, only about half support “stricter gun control” (PollingReport.com 2014). As the phrase may have negative connotations for many Americans, we measured how many news stories described proposals to expand the background check system for firearm sales as “gun control.”
Sources. We measured whether news stories quoted six categories of sources, and whether each of those sources supported or opposed expanding background checks: politicians (e.g., elected officials or candidates for political office), interest groups (e.g., the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence or the National Rifle Association), victims of gun violence, gun-owning citizens, non-gun-owning citizens, and law enforcement officers.

Data Analysis

We calculated the proportion of news stories mentioning each measure to assess the content of news stories focused on firearm background check laws during the study period. We used chi-square tests to test differences in the proportion of news stories mentioning supportive and opposing messages in national and regional news sources versus Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers. We also used chi-square tests to assess differences in messages and quoted sources by news source. Specifically, we assessed differences in the proportion of messages and quoted sources in newspaper versus telephone stories, network versus cable television news stories, the liberal-leaning The Situation Room (CNN) versus the conservative-leaning Special Report (Fox), local versus national newspaper stories, and hard newspaper stories versus newspaper editorials.

Results

Of the 486 included news stories and editorials, 316 (65 percent) were “hard news” newspaper stories, 100 (21 percent) were newspaper editorials, and 70 (14 percent) were television news stories. Among all news sources, the volume of news coverage about background check policies increased following the Newtown shooting in December 2012 and peaked in April 2013, the month the federal Manchin-Toomey background checks legislation was defeated in the US Senate (fig. 1a). Coverage in newspapers from states that passed universal background check legislation showed similar trajectories (fig. 1b). Background checks coverage in the Denver Post peaked in February and March of 2013 and then rapidly declined after the law was passed on March 20. Coverage in the Las Vegas Review Journal peaked in April 2013, just prior to passage of the background check bill on May 22, and declined at a rate slower than the rate observed overall and in Colorado, likely due to the controversy surrounding the governor’s veto of the bill in June 2013. Delaware followed a slightly different trend, with a peak in coverage of background check policies in
March 2013, two months before that state’s background check law was passed in May 8. This finding may be due to the small number of total stories (n = 8) published in the Delaware News Journal. Consistent with prior studies, these findings suggest that the public is exposed to intense coverage of gun violence and firearm policy through the news media for a relatively brief period following mass shootings. After the Senate did not
advance the bill to expand the background check system for firearm sales on April 16, 2013, the volume of news coverage on the topic declined rapidly and returned to pre-Newtown levels by July 2013. No substantial increase in volume of news coverage was observed in December 2013, suggesting that news stories about the one-year anniversary of the Newtown shooting did not focus on background check policies.

Overall, news stories were more likely to mention supportive messages (69 percent) than opposing messages (46 percent) (table 1). Thirty-seven percent of news stories mentioned only supportive messages, 14 percent mentioned only opposing messages, and 32 percent mentioned competing supportive and opposing messages. The most frequently mentioned supportive message framed universal background checks as a way to keep dangerous people in general from having guns (43 percent). The most frequently mentioned opposing message frame was a direct counterframe to that message: 24 percent of news stories included the message that background checks are ineffective at preventing crime. The second and third most commonly mentioned supportive messages framed universal background checks as supported by the majority of the public (37 percent) and as a “common sense” policy (21 percent). The second and third most commonly mentioned opposing messages were rights-based messages framing universal background checks as leading to registries of gun owners (15 percent) and as a violation of Second Amendment rights (11 percent).

Seventy-eight percent of news stories mentioned at least one informational message, and 64 percent mentioned “gun control” (table 1). Compared to news stories about background checks in national and regional news sources, news stories about background checks in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers were significantly more likely to describe universal background check policies as a way to prevent dangerous people from getting guns, include a message about universal background checks as a violation of Second Amendment rights, and include informational messages about specific categories of gun sales not currently subject to background checks. Stories in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers were significantly less likely than national and regional news sources to mention that universal background checks are supported by the majority of the public, that background checks can lead to firearm bans and seizures, and the phrase “gun control” ($p < .05$).

The most frequently co-occurring messages were the arguments that universal background checks prevent dangerous people from having guns,
### Table 1   News Media Messages about Universal Background Check Policies, December 2012–December 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Mentioned in News Story</th>
<th>All News Stories (n = 486)</th>
<th>News Stories about Background Checks in National and Regional News Sources¹ (n = 388)</th>
<th>News Stories about Background Checks in CO, DE, and NV Newspapers² (n = 98)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive Messages—Messages used to argue for universal background checks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks prevent dangerous people from getting guns:</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminals (e.g., felons, perpetrators of domestic violence)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons with mental illness</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks are supported by the majority of the public</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks are a “common sense” policy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opposing Messages—Messages used to argue against universal background checks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks are ineffective at preventing gun violence</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks lead to registries of gun owners</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks are a violation of Second Amendment rights</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks lead to firearm bans and seizures</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need to enforce current laws, not make new background check laws</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should focus on treating mental illness instead of background checks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal background checks are restrictions on gun ownership</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 1  News Media Messages about Universal Background Check Policies, December 2012–December 2013  (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Mentioned in News Story</th>
<th>News Stories about Background Checks in National and Regional News Sources¹ (n = 388)</th>
<th>News Stories about Background Checks in CO, DE, and NV Newspapers² (n = 98)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informative Messages—Messages used to describe need for universal background checks</td>
<td>78 76 87*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many gun sales are not currently subject to background checks:</td>
<td>78 76 87**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All private sales</td>
<td>70 66 83**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun show sales</td>
<td>40 45 20***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sales over the Internet</td>
<td>24 27 12**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Gun Control” Message—Universal background checks framed as “gun control”</td>
<td>64 69 42***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:
¹National and regional news sources include the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, USA Today, the Washington Post, the New York Daily News, the Tampa Bay Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, ABC’s World News, CBS’s Evening News, NBC’s Nightly News, CNN’s The Situation Room, and Fox’s Special Report.
²Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada state legislatures passed universal background checks legislation, which was subsequently signed into law in Colorado and Delaware. In Nevada, the bill was vetoed by the governor.

Notes: We used chi-square tests to find the proportion of news stories mentioning messages about background checks in national and regional news sources versus Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < 0.001
on the one hand, and are ineffective at preventing crime, on the other hand. These messages co-occurred in 37 percent of the news stories containing competing messages. Thirty-two percent and 26 percent of stories juxtaposed the arguments that background checks keep criminals and people with mental illness, specifically, from having guns with the argument that background checks are ineffective at preventing crime. The next most frequently co-occurring competing messages were the arguments that background checks are a “common sense” policy / ineffective at preventing crime (28 percent), are supported by the majority of the public / ineffective at preventing crime (25 percent), and prevent dangerous people from having guns / lead to registries of gun owners (19 percent). Mentions of “gun control” occurred in 40 percent of news stories mentioning that background checks prevent dangerous people from having guns and 37 percent of news stories mentioning that the policy is supported by the majority of the public. See online appendix for more information.

The volume of supportive messages in news media coverage increased steadily in the months leading up to the federal Manchin-Toomey vote (fig. 2a). Sixty-four percent of news stories mentioned any supportive message in January, 61 percent in February, 68 percent in March, and 74 percent in April. In contrast, the volume of opposing messages in the news media fluctuated, from 61 percent in January to 47 percent in February, 47 percent in March, and 59 percent in April. The proportion of news stories describing universal background check policies as “gun control” was higher than the proportion of news stories mentioning either supportive or opposing stories in both January (73 percent) and April (80 percent).

![Figure 2a](image-url)  
**Figure 2a** Trends in Overall Supportive, Opposing, and “Gun Control” Messages: National and Regional News Sources

Published by Duke University Press
In January, February, and March of 2013, the months leading up to the US Senate vote on the Manchin-Toomey background checks legislation, news stories were more likely to mention that background checks are a way to prevent dangerous people from having guns than they were to mention that background checks are ineffective at preventing crime (fig. 2b). In the
first two weeks of April, leading up to the Senate vote, however, the proportion of stories mentioning these messages was almost identical: during this period, 36 percent of news stories mentioned that background checks prevent dangerous people from getting guns and 31 percent mentioned that background checks are ineffective at preventing crime.

The overall volume of opposing, rights-focused messages in national and regional news stories peaked in March 2013 and then plateaued in the weeks leading up to the Senate’s vote on the Manchin-Toomey proposal (fig. 2c). At the beginning of the policy debate in January 2013, the rights-based message most frequently mentioned in the news media framed universal background checks as a threat to Second Amendment rights (mentioned in 18 percent of news stories). At the end of the debate, national and regional news stories were more likely to include the message that background checks lead to registries of gun owners (23 percent in April 2013).

Unlike in national and regional news sources, where gun control messages occurred more frequently than supportive messages at several time points, supportive messages were consistently higher than both opposing and gun control messages in newspapers from the three states where universal background checks legislation was passed (fig. 3a). A much higher proportion of news stories mentioned supportive messages (55 percent in January, 78 percent in February, 73 percent in March, 68 percent in April, and 50 percent in May) than opposing messages (18 percent in January, 28 percent in February, 50 percent in March, 59 percent in April, and zero in May).

Like national and regional news sources, the two most frequently occurring supportive and opposing messages in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada were...
Nevada newspapers were “background checks prevent dangerous people from having guns” and “background checks are ineffective at preventing gun violence” (fig. 3b). Unlike in national and regional coverage, where the supportive message occurred more frequently than the opposing message January through March 2013 and then converged with nearly
equal frequencies in April 2013, in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers these competing messages appeared with similar frequency in January 2013 and then diverged for the rest of the period examined, with the supportive “background checks prevent dangerous people from getting guns” message mentioned in 61 percent, 55 percent, 46 percent, and 50 percent in February, March, April, and May, respectively, compared to the 11 percent, 18 percent, 14 percent, and 0 percent of news stories mentioning the opposing “background checks are ineffective” message over the same period. Trends in firearm rights messages in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers also appeared to differ from trends in national and regional news sources. In national and regional news sources, such messages were mentioned in 20–40 percent of news stories across the period of interest. In state news sources, no firearm rights messages were mentioned early (January) or late (May) in the debate (fig. 3c).

Overall, newspaper stories included more supportive messages about universal background check proposals than television stories. Compared to television news stories, newspaper stories were more likely to mention only supportive messages and no opposing messages and were significantly less likely to mention any opposing messages, competing supportive and opposing messages, and “gun control” messages ($p < .05$). There were no statistically significant differences in message type between network and cable television networks, although a notably higher proportion of cable television stories mentioned competing supportive and opposing messages (56 percent vs. 41 percent) and gun control messages (91 percent vs. 70 percent). Compared to Fox Special Report news transcripts, a significantly higher proportion of CNN The Situation Room transcripts mentioned “gun control.” A higher proportion of national news stories than regional news stories mentioned any opposing messages, and a significantly higher proportion of opinion pieces mentioned any supportive messages, only supportive messages, and any opposing messages ($p < .05$) compared to hard news stories. Opinion pieces were less likely than hard news stories to mention no supportive or opposing messages and less likely to frame proposals to strengthen the background check system as “gun control” ($p < .05$). See the online appendix for more information.

Overall, the sources most frequently quoted in news stories were politicians (72 percent of stories quoted a politician in favor of expanding background checks and 53 percent quoted a politician in opposition), interest group representatives (25 percent in support, 26 percent in opposition), victims of gun violence (24 percent in support, 1 percent in opposition), gun-owning citizens (10 percent in support, 2 percent in
opposition), non-gun-owning citizens (4 percent in support, 1 percent in opposition), and law enforcement officers (4 percent in support, 1 percent in opposition). Compared to television news stories, a significantly smaller proportion of newspaper stories quoted supportive victims of gun violence, supportive non-gun-owning citizens, opposing sources overall, opposing interest groups, and opposing law enforcement officers ($p < .05$). Quoted sources did not differ in network versus cable television coverage, and a smaller proportion of Fox Special Report transcripts quoted a supportive interest group, supportive victim of gun violence, and opposing interest group than CNN The Situation Room transcripts. National newspapers were more likely than regional newspapers to quote any opposing sources and opposing interest groups ($p < .05$). Compared to hard newspaper stories, a significantly smaller proportion of opinion pieces quoted any supportive sources, supportive politicians, any opposing source, opposing politicians, and opposing interest groups. These findings are likely due to the fact that editorials are written expressly to portray the authors’ point of view and as a result do not cite as many outside sources. See the online appendix for more information.

**Discussion**

In the aftermath of the Newtown shooting, the American public was exposed to information about universal background check policies in the news media for a relatively brief period. The volume of news coverage of universal background check policies peaked four months after the Newtown shooting, in the weeks surrounding the US Senate vote on the Manchin-Toomey background check proposal, and then rapidly declined. Similar peaks and rapid declines were observed in coverage of successful background check legislation in Colorado and Nevada. News stories were more likely to include supportive than opposing messages, but framing research suggests that the effects of these messages on public opinion and political engagement may depend upon the strength of the competing messages in addition to the volume (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2010). In the remainder of this article, we draw upon prior theory and research to consider the relative persuasiveness of competing news media message frames about universal background check policies. The types of supportive and opposing messages about background check policies in news media coverage differed: supportive messages tended to use rational, fact-based messages, while opposing messages appealed to core beliefs and values.
Competing Frames

The two supportive and opposing message frames used most frequently in news media coverage were direct counterarguments asserting that universal background check policies are a way to prevent dangerous people from obtaining firearms, on the one hand, and are ineffective at preventing criminals from getting guns, on the other hand. These two messages were also the two messages most likely to co-occur in news stories. The latter message was often characterized by the taglines “criminals don’t get background checks” or “criminals don’t follow gun laws” (Feldman 2013). The supportive message is backed by evidence showing that comprehensive background checks make it harder for criminals to get guns by serving as a deterrent (individuals with criminal intent would prefer not to have a record of sale) and by reducing the likelihood that firearms will be trafficked illegally (firearms trafficked on the illegal market often originate with private sellers) (Wintemute 2013). However, the mechanisms by which background checks prevent criminals and other individuals at high risk of committing violence from getting guns are not necessarily intuitive to the majority of the public, whose understanding of gun violence and the background check system for firearm sales is likely limited (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006).

As a result, the “criminals don’t get background checks” message likely resonates with many Americans, who cannot imagine a criminal going to purchase a firearm from a legal dealer where they may have to undergo a background check. This is, of course, exactly the point of closing the private sale loophole—requiring a background check deters criminals from attempting to purchase firearms and deters those selling firearms from selling a gun to someone who could not pass a background check (Wintemute 2013). However, the opposing message frames the success of background check laws as hinging on the premise that criminals will act in a way that does not align with the public’s perceptions of criminal behavior. The cognitive dissonance that this creates may serve to discredit the fact-based supportive message that background checks prevent dangerous people from obtaining guns (Chong and Druckman 2007a).

Cognitive dissonance may also result from an incongruity between the message that background check policies can reduce gun violence by preventing dangerous people from obtaining firearms and public conceptions of gun violence. The public is primarily exposed to the issue of gun violence in the context of mass shootings (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski et al. 2014). While research shows that background checks can prevent the
“every day” acts of gun violence that burden US society, an expanded background check system for firearm sales would not have prevented the Newtown shooter, who used his mother’s gun, from obtaining a firearm. In addition, the public commonly sees reports of dangerous people who have evaded gun laws and committed acts of violence with firearms, but instances in which dangerous people are blocked from getting guns are not observed or reported. Violent crime (including but not limited to gun violence) in the United States has decreased in the past decade (FBI 2012), but most Americans believe that violence is increasing (Jones 2010). Studies suggest that this misperception is due, in part, to the high volume of news coverage about violent crime: even when overall rates of violent crime go down, the news media capture the public’s attention by its reporting of sensational crime stories (Chermak 1994; Lowry, Nio, and Leitner 2003; Dowler 2003). As a result, Americans may believe that existing firearm regulations have failed to prevent gun violence, despite research evidence showing that multiple existing policies have had beneficial effects (Zeoli and Webster 2010; Whitehill et al. 2014; Webster et al. 2013; Webster et al. 2004; Wintemute et al. 2001; Wintemute 2013), and conclude that new laws such as universal background checks will be equally ineffective.

Prior framing research suggests that knowledge can influence the effects of framing messages on individual attitudes (Chong and Druckman 2010). Chong and Druckman (2007b) assert that framing can have a stronger influence on more knowledgeable individuals because they can readily access and understand the element of the issue highlighted by the frame. We posit that knowledge may be particularly influential in the case of fact-based messages that require the public to understand a complex connection between a policy proposal and how it would affect a desired outcome, especially how background check regulations can reduce the flow of guns into the underground market. While most news stories included informational messages about background check policies, these messages focused on describing the rationale for expanding the background check system for firearm sales (by describing categories of gun sales not currently subject to background checks) rather than on how the policy can lead to reduced gun violence. Description of the deterrent effect of background checks and the role of private sellers in illegal firearm trafficking does not lend itself to the short, straightforward messages that news reporters depend on to convey content to readers and viewers.

Like the argument that universal background check laws prevent dangerous people from getting guns, the second and third most frequently occurring supportive messages in news media coverage of the policy were
fact-based and rational arguments. The message that universal background checks are supported by the majority of Americans was backed up by the results of multiple public opinion polls conducted in the year following the Newtown shooting, and the “common sense” policy message also attempted to frame the argument for expanding the background check system in rational terms. In contrast, opposing messages often used rights-based messages, arguing that universal background check policies lead to registries of gun owners, are a violation of Second Amendment rights, and lead to firearm bans and seizures. Each of these messages is objectively untrue in the case of background check laws. There has been a federal background system in place since 1994 with no registries (which are prohibited under federal law) or confiscations from legal gun owners, and background checks have been upheld as constitutional in federal court (Winter 2014). Nonetheless, these messages are likely effective at activating the core values symbolized by firearm ownership, potentially overpowering fact-based supportive messages among gun owners and conservatives (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Horwitz and Anderson 2009).

Overall, 32 percent of news stories had competing supportive and opposing messages in the same story. Importantly, prior research shows that when competing messages are coadministered, they tend to have little effect on attitudes; instead, audiences stick to their prior attitudes regarding the issue (Sniderman and Theriault 2004). While the political polarization and selective exposure literature suggests that some individuals may choose news sources that primarily expose them to messages that are consistent with their existing opinions (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2010), this was not borne out by study findings. While results suggested that CNN was more likely than Fox (this difference was not statistically significant, likely due to small sample size) to present any supportive messages (80 percent [CNN], 62 percent [Fox]) and only supportive messages (23 percent [CNN], 8 percent [Fox]), the two cable news channels were equally likely to present both supportive and opposing viewpoints in the same news show (57 percent [CNN], 54 percent [Fox]). Furthermore, CNN was significantly more likely than Fox to quote a representative of an interest group opposed to background checks. One possible explanation for these somewhat counterintuitive findings is that both cable networks use a point-counterpoint setup in order to reinforce their audiences’ existing beliefs, that is, they present the opposite side of the issue and then argue against it in a manner they know is consistent with their viewers’ attitudes toward firearm policy, thus encouraging motivated reasoning.
The Gun Control Message

Sixty-four percent of the news stories included in our study described universal background check policies as “gun control.” While not necessarily intended as an opposing message—55 percent of news stories mentioning only supportive messages also mentioned gun control—this frame may decrease public support for expanding the background check system for firearm sales. Public opinion polls consistently show that while 80 percent or more of Americans support “requiring a background check for every firearm sale,” only about half of Americans support “stricter gun control” (PollingReport.com 2014). This is likely in part because the umbrella of “gun control” covers policies that many conservatives and gun owners do not support (such as assault weapons and ammunition bans). However, this pattern is also likely due to the fact that the phrase “gun control” has come to symbolize a threat to the conservative values associated with gun ownership. Political scientists have long recognized that many conservatives and liberals report support for the same specific public policy proposals (Stimson 2004). However, when a policy position has evolved into a symbol of political ideology—as gun control surely has—citizens ultimately tend to vote and engage in other political activities (such as donating to an interest group or contacting their elected official) according to their political identity rather than their specific policy preferences (Stimson 2004). That the “gun control” message activates opposition to universal background check proposals on ideological grounds is supported by the fact that news stories published in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada newspapers were significantly less likely to mention the phrase than news stories in national and regional news sources, perhaps suggesting that the dialogue around the successful state bills was less likely to employ the gun control message than the dialogue around the unsuccessful federal legislation. In addition, some leading proponents of stricter firearm laws have begun to replace the phrase “gun control” with “gun safety,” as in “gun safety laws” (New York State Assembly 2013).

Limitations

Our study findings should be considered in the context of limitations. First, our sample did not include the local television and Internet-only news sources through which many Americans access news. It is unclear whether our findings are generalizable to news media coverage in these other types of news sources. Second, our analysis does not allow us to completely
explain the trends in news coverage, which may be driven by competing issues in the news cycle or the changing landscape of news media coverage in the Internet age. Third, although prior studies have shown direct links between news media coverage and public attitudes (McGinty, Webster, and Barry 2013; Iyengar 1990; Gross 2008), analyzing the content of news stories does not allow us to assess how exposure to competing messages about universal background check policies influenced public opinion about or political engagement around the issue. Future experimental research testing the effects of competing framing messages about firearm policy on public attitudes is needed.

**Conclusion**

In the year following the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, the American public was exposed to multiple competing messages about background check policies through the news media. Proponents most often made the rational argument that universal background check policies prevent criminals from obtaining guns. However, the mechanisms by which background checks prevent criminals from getting firearms may not be intuitive to many Americans, potentially making opponents’ counter-argument that “criminals don’t get background checks” a persuasive one. Many news stories, including a high proportion of stories mentioning only supportive messages about background check laws, described the policy as “gun control.” The use of this phrase alone may alienate the large numbers of conservatives and gun owners who support universal background checks for firearm sales but do not support “stricter gun control” (PollingReport.com 2014).

While proponents of universal background checks used fact-based messages in support of the policy, opponents often used rights-based messages designed to activate the core values of politically active gun owners and conservatives. Political battles over firearm policy in the United States are characterized by a political participation gap, where a small subset of politically active gun owners opposed to any government regulation of firearm ownership have an outsized influence on policy outcomes because they are very engaged single-issue voters (Stimson 2004; McGinty, Webster, Vernick et al. 2014). In contrast, the majority of Americans—including gun owners and conservatives—who support universal background check policies are not similarly engaged and do not tend to vote based on candidates’ stances on gun policy (McGinty, Webster, and Barry 2014; McGinty, Webster, Vernick et al. 2014; Stimson 2004).
be successful, it will be critical for advocates of stronger gun laws to employ communication strategies that energize and increase the political participation of these supportive groups. Given prior research demonstrating the persuasiveness of issue frames that activate core values (Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007a), designing supportive messages about background check policies that align with gun owners’ and conservatives’ values—for example, by framing background checks as a tenet of responsible gun ownership and accountability—could be a promising strategy to increase these groups’ willingness to vocalize their support for expanding the background check system.

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