



CivicPulse Report:

How Would Gun Laws Change If Local Governments Took Charge? Local Policymakers' Attitudes Toward Gun Laws Across the U.S.

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Summary

The issue of gun violence in America seems intractable, with high levels of political polarization impeding any resolution. The toxicity of the debate at the national level has led some experts and policymakers to suggest that the best forum for the gun debate would actually be the local level, where localities could tailor gun restrictions to suit their specific needs.¹ To investigate this question further, CivicPulse conducted a national survey of local policymakers to better understand what kinds of policy proposals these officials are more or less likely to support. At the moment, the existence of preemption laws in 45 states makes the enacting of gun legislation at the local level impossible. In the absence of these preemption laws, and if gun regulation was decentralized, how would gun legislation change overall? We found that, while party polarization seems to be as pronounced at the local level as it is in higher levels of government, some key policies like waiting periods and red flag laws have a high degree of bipartisan support. Additionally, we also find that policymakers in more urban areas tend to support stricter gun laws than those in more rural areas.

¹ In 2018, Mitch McConnell told community leaders that “I don’t think at the federal level there’s much that we can do” about gun violence, reflecting an interest in moving the gun debate to a subnational forum. Professor Joseph Blocher reflected this sentiment in a New York Times Op-Ed in 2015, arguing that gun ownership policy should be made by local communities, which could form gun ownership policy to suit their particular needs.

Key Findings

Finding 1: Local officials have polarized attitudes toward gun ownership laws.

One possible reason compromise might be easier to reach at the local level on gun legislation would be if local politicians are less polarized on this issue than national politicians.² Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case.³⁴⁵ When local officials were asked whether they wished to make gun laws less strict, keep them the same, or make them stricter, a large majority (77%) of Democrat respondents supported making them stricter, while about half of Republicans (46%) wished to make them less strict or keep them the same.

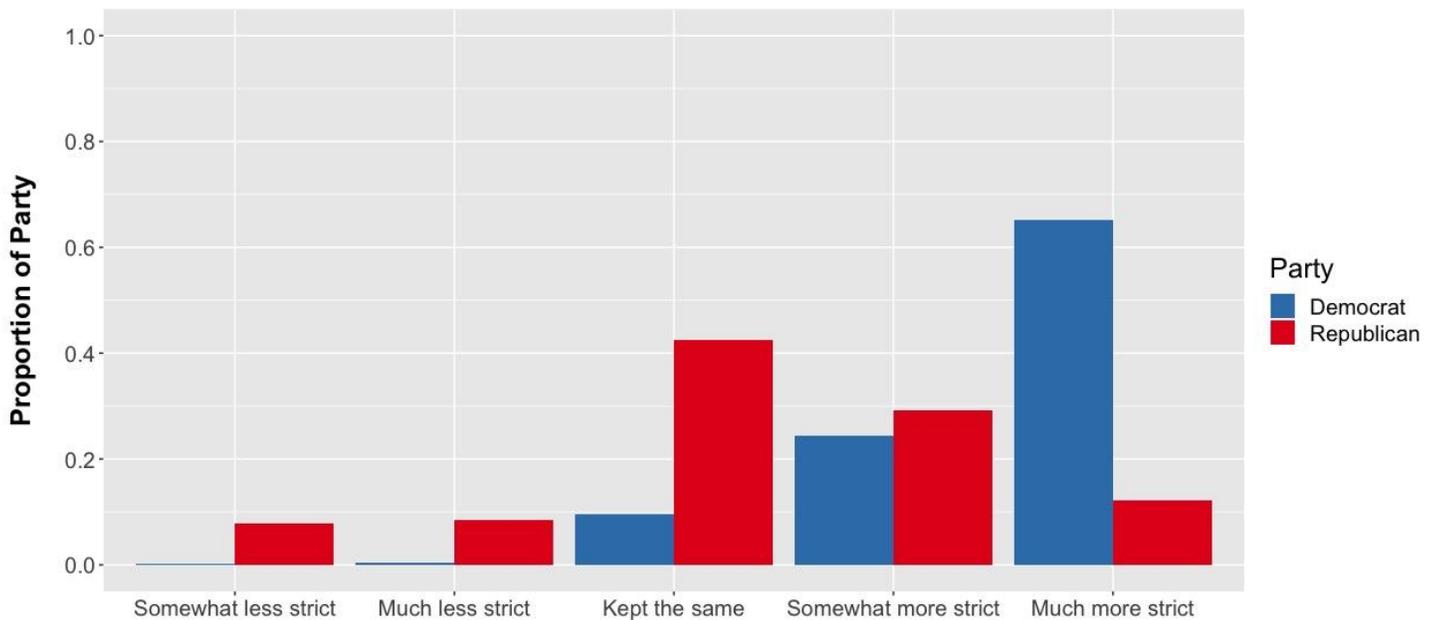


Figure 1: Local policymakers' general attitudes toward gun control by party. Each respondent was asked to choose between one of five choices to describe their overall attitude toward gun control laws. The height of the bars corresponds to the percent of respondents by party that chose each answer. Republicans generally favor keeping gun policy the same, while Democrats strongly favor increased gun control.

² Evidence on whether local politics is less partisan than national politics is mixed. Past surveys and studies have examined local levels of ideological polarization on various issues, with varying results. Some studies have found that local politicians' from different parties do behave differently in office, but only in the issue areas over which they have direct control. Others have found that some local officials from different parties actually tend to be less polarized than the average democratic and republican voters. Despite the lack of clarity, a recent study of gun control opinions suggested at least one clear pattern - levels of polarization about gun ownership at the local level mirror the polarization found at the federal level in many ways.

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00499.x>

⁴ http://web.stanford.edu/~dthomp/papers/Thompson_Sheriffs_Immigration_Enforcement.pdf

⁵ <https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/04/polarization-cities-education-labor-public-opinion-taxes/587746/>

However, legislative changes in individual local governments don't depend on national coalitions, by their very nature; they only require coalitions within particular communities. Consequently, reducing local preemption restrictions on gun laws would likely facilitate greater legislative activity despite the fact that the overall distribution of opinion among local policymakers appears to mirror those at the federal level.

Finding 2: Waiting periods and red flag laws have significantly more bipartisan support than others.

While local policy makers were polarized when asked about gun control in general terms, they expressed more bipartisan support on some specific policies. We asked participating lawmakers about six gun control policies: banning the sale of assault weapons, seizing guns from people reported to be threatening, mandatory waiting periods before purchasing a gun, only allowing people over 21 to buy guns, limiting the number of guns an individual can own, and training teachers to carry guns at school. Of these policies, the imposition of a waiting period garnered the most bipartisan support, with 77% of Democrats and 38% of Republicans in its favor. Democrats strongly supported the waiting period and assault ban policies and expressed high levels of support for all policies except the arming of teachers. Republicans, on the other hand, expressed the second highest level of support for arming teachers, and extremely low support for the limiting of the number of guns per individual. They also expressed considerably less support for an assault weapons ban than their Democratic counterparts. Even gun owners - who make up 38% of the respondent sample - strongly favor waiting periods and the removal of guns from risky people, although they are not in favor of an assault weapons ban. While it is clear that some of these policies lack the support necessary for implementation, removing guns from threatening individuals and imposing a waiting period on gun purchases show more potential to be enacted. Support for each policy can be observed in Figure 2, below.

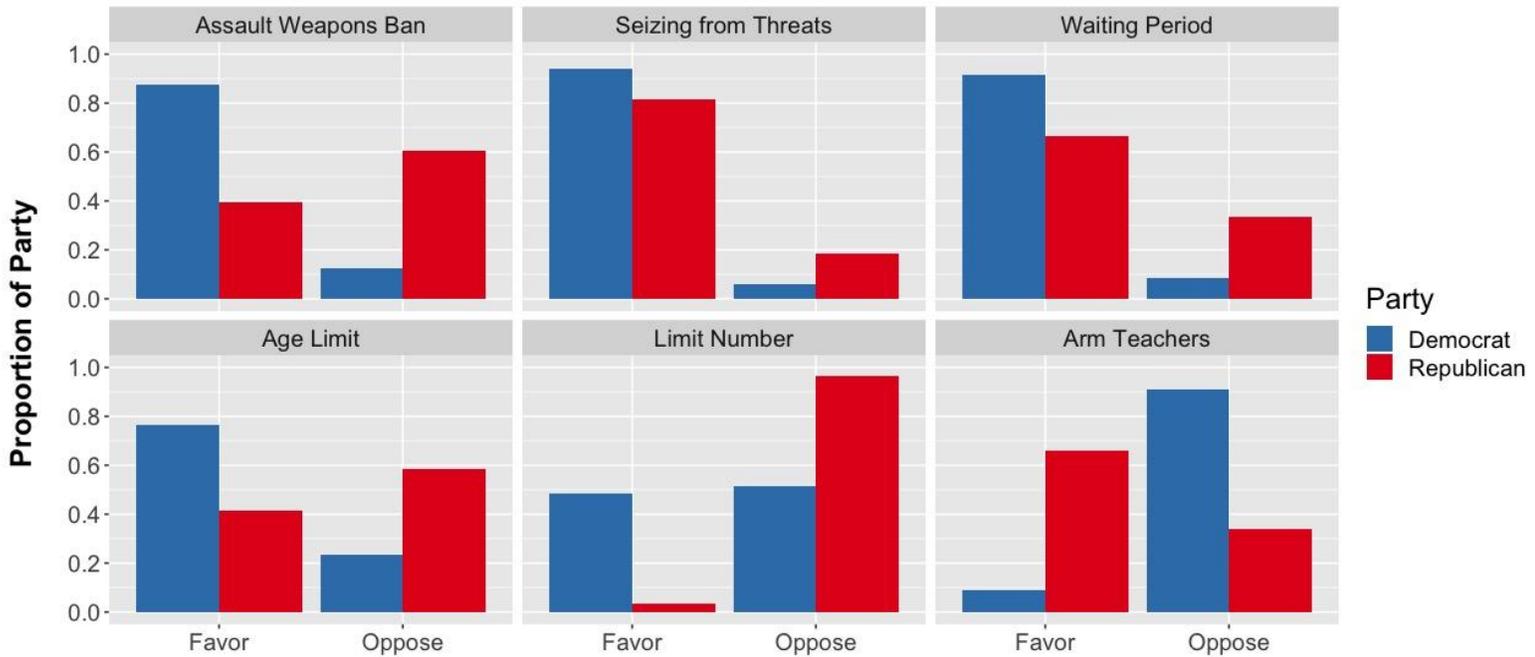


Figure 2: Local policymakers' attitudes toward different gun policies by party. Each quadrant represents a different policy and shows the percent of respondents by party that supports and opposes that policy. Democrats favor banning assault weapons, seizing guns from threatening individuals, waiting periods, and age limits, strongly oppose arming teachers, and are split on limiting the number of guns per person. Republicans favor a waiting period, taking guns from threatening individuals, and arming teachers, and they oppose banning assault weapons, age limits, and limiting the number of guns.

Finding 3: Policymakers in urban areas tend to support stricter gun laws than those in more rural areas.

Party is not the only factor that can have an influence on whether a respondent favored or opposed gun control. Even within the same party, policymakers who served relatively urban areas held different opinions than their relatively rural counterparts. Democrats in both more urban and less urban areas strongly favored increased gun control, with only slightly more opposing stricter gun control in less urban areas. For Republicans, however, the majority attitude actually switched depending on urban proportion, with Republicans living in less urban areas more likely to oppose gun control, and Republicans in more urban areas slightly more likely to favor increased gun control.

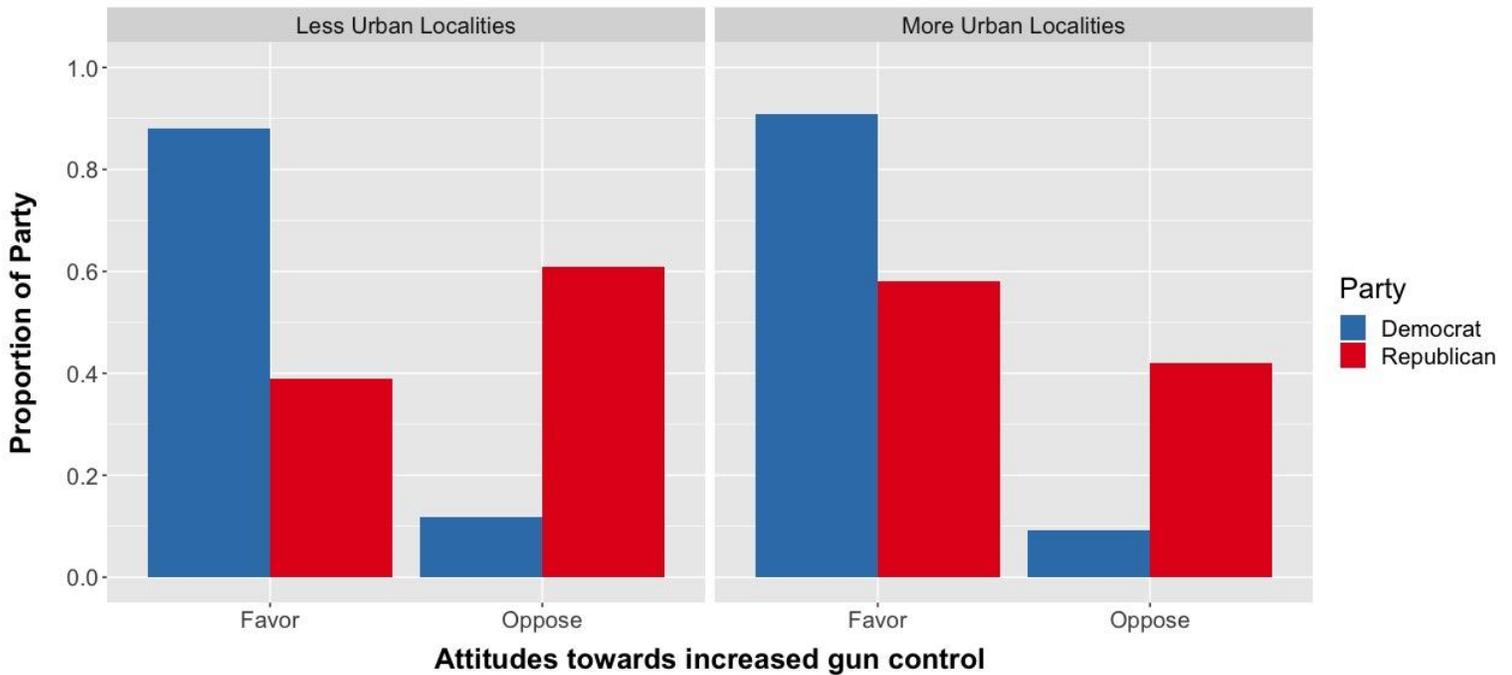


Figure 3: Interest in gun control in more urban and more rural areas by party. The graph on the left shows the proportion of Democrats and Republicans who want gun control in more rural areas, and the graph on the right shows the same for urban areas. While Democrats in both areas overwhelmingly favor increased gun control, Republicans in rural areas are generally against increased gun control, and Republicans in urban areas are almost evenly split.

Implications

Our survey data show that many local officials hold policy stances on the issue of gun control that depart from the status quo. However, state preemption laws currently prevent most local governments from passing their own gun laws. One implication of this report is that a removal of these preemption laws would likely lead to a great deal of legislative activity at the local level. Notably, this would be true even with existing party polarization, since many localities tend to be under unified party control. However, more local control over this issue would also likely lead to greater policy fragmentation geographically. The practicality of these different policies would need to be evaluated in this light.

Appendix

Survey Methodology

CivicPulse is a nonprofit organization which seeks to promote greater understanding of local government in the United States through nonpartisan surveys of local policymakers. CivicPulse maintains a dynamically updated contact list of elected executives and elected legislators associated with all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more (98% coverage). Each survey includes a random sample of officials from this list. Invitations to participate in each survey are sent via email and implemented through Qualtrics.

Our surveys routinely include representation of policymakers from all 50 states and both major political parties. Consistent with nationally representative mass public surveys, our surveys modestly overrepresent more urban and more populated localities than the national average.⁶ To address this, we provide survey weights based on conventional raking procedures. The main findings in this report use these survey weights; however, the unweighted sample means are not substantively different from the weighted sample means.

This survey was completed in March 2018. A total of 652 officials completed the survey, of which 447 were municipal elected officials (e.g., city councilmember, mayor) and 205 were county elected officials (e.g., county commissioner, county executive). The map below displays the geographic location of the survey respondents.

⁶ For example, the average municipality represented in this survey has a population of 45,000. The average municipality in the United States has a population of 5,300 (2015 American Community Survey).

Geographic Spread of Respondents

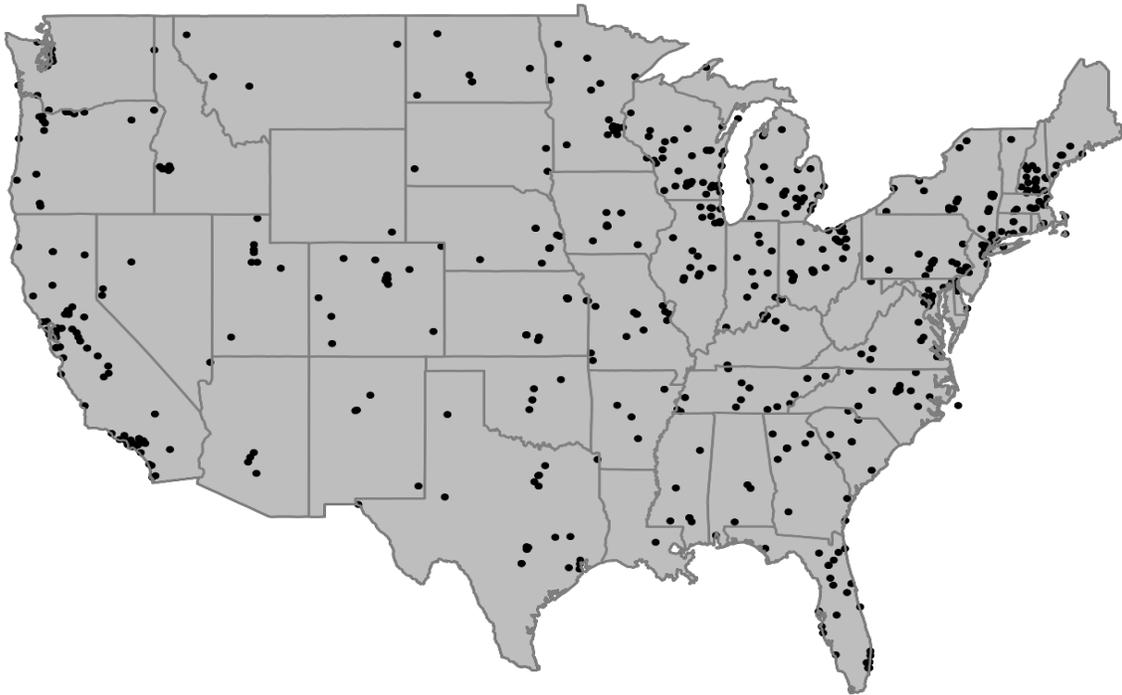


Figure 4: This map shows the locations of the respondents to the survey cited in the article. Each dot represents one respondent.

Survey Questions

1. Do you think gun laws should be made to be more or less strict than they are now?

- Much more strict
- Somewhat more strict
- Kept the same
- Somewhat less strict
- Much less strict
- Not sure

2. Do you favor or oppose the following gun laws?

	Favor	Oppose	Not sure/neutral
Ban on the sale of assault weapons (like the AR-15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seizing guns from people reported to be threatening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mandatory waiting period before anyone can buy a gun	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Don't allow persons under 21 to buy any type of gun	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Limit the number of guns an individual can own	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Train teachers to carry guns in schools	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>