



THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

III. GUN VIOLENCE

“Fantasists and zealots can be found on both sides of the debate over guns in America. On the one hand, many gun-rights advocates reject even the most sensible restrictions on the sale of weapons to the public. On the other, proponents of stricter gun laws often seem unable to understand why a good person would ever want ready access to a loaded firearm. Between these two extremes we must find grounds for a rational discussion about the problem of gun violence.” – Sam Harris

Topic Overview: Guns in America

The political divide on the issue of gun violence is, at its core, about whether it is more important to protect gun rights or control gun ownership—a conflict that runs largely along partisan lines. While research suggests that most Americans favor tighter gun regulations, interest groups and political polarization have made compromise on this issue extremely challenging.

Gun violence has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S. On average, an estimated 100 people in the U.S. are killed with guns every day, representing a clear public health crisis. In his article [“American Guns, American Deaths,”](#) Paul Auster states: “Bloodshed and death on this scale and at this level of frequency would seem to call for national action, a concerted effort on the part of state, federal, and municipal governments to control what by any measure of rational understanding is a public-health crisis. America’s relationship to guns is anything but rational, however, and therefore we have done little or nothing to fix the problem. It’s not that we lack the

intelligence or the wherewithal to relieve this threat to the safety and well-being of society, but for complex historical reasons, we have lacked the will to do so.”

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy’s most recent [Mood of the Nation Poll](#) found that a majority of Americans support universal background checks, licensing, and an assault weapons ban—with over half of Republicans and Second Amendment supporters favoring gun licensing provisions and universal background checks. If the majority of Americans support sensible gun laws, what accounts for our inability to balance 2nd Amendment protections with reasonable regulations to mitigate gun violence? The answer, at least in part, is that guns are not simply valued for hunting and home protection, they have powerful symbolic and cultural importance in the United States—and, not unlike [abortion](#), guns play a central role in the culture wars that have come to dominate our politics.

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Teachers may wish to use the frames below to build a unit on gun violence or select a few key activities and sources to complement an existing lesson plan. Others may simply want to use a specific article or set of quotations for inspiration as they design new lessons. (Note that frames are organized by increasing sophistication of ideas and resources.)

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