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Do moms demand action on guns? Parenthood and gun policy attitudes

Steven Greene^a, Melissa Deckman^b, Laurel Elder^c and Mary-Kate Lizotte^d

^aDepartment of Political Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, United States;

^bDepartment of Political Science, Washington College, Chestertown, MD, United States;

^cDepartment of Political Science, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY, United States; ^dDepartment of Political Science, Augusta University, Augusta, GA, United States

ABSTRACT


The idea that motherhood primes women to support stronger gun control policy permeates our contemporary politics. Motherhood shapes views on a variety of issues, but the question remains whether mothers hold distinctive views on gun control policies relative to their non-parent peers. We draw on 2017 Pew Research Center data to explore the ways gender, parenthood, and race intersect to shape attitudes on gun policy in the post-Sandy Hook era when gun violence has become prominently linked with schools and children, and during a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn national attention to the relationship of gun violence and racial inequality. Most notably, we find that contemporary depictions of mothers as a distinctively pro-gun control constituency are largely inaccurate. The very real gender gap in gun policy attitudes appears to be falsely attributed to motherhood, rather than gender. We also find very little impact of parenthood for men. Finally, we generally fail to see much relationship between race, parenthood, and gun attitudes. Overall, despite common belief and media reporting to the contrary, the story is very much one where parenthood seems to play little role in gun policy attitudes.

KEYWORDS Gun control attitudes; gender gap; parenthood

Introduction

From the Million Mom March in 2000¹ to the visibility and activism of Mothers of the Movement² and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America³ in recent elections, the idea that motherhood primes women to support

CONTACT Steven Greene  shgreene@ncsu.edu  Department of Political Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, United States

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¹The Million Mom March was the largest gun control demonstration in U.S. history, taking place in Washington DC in 2000. Attendance was estimated at 750,000 (Hampson 2018).

²Mothers of the Movement emerged in the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal in 2013 and is composed of the mothers of unarmed black sons killed by police (Flynn 2019).

³Moms Demand Action was founded after the 2012 school shooting in Sandy Hook CT and remains one of the largest organizations focused on gun control, with close to 6 million members (Chozick 2019).

stronger gun control policy permeates our contemporary politics. That motherhood is used by leaders of political organizations to frame their activism is hardly a new strategy in American politics: one need look no further than Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), arguably one of the most successful grassroots groups in terms of shaping legislation and building broad consensus about an issue in American history (Griffin 2019). However, while the strategic decision by groups to employ motherhood monikers may make much political sense, there is the open question as to whether motherhood uniquely shapes attitudes about the issues that such groups champion. In many cases, motherhood has been shown to shape views on social welfare issues from education, to helping the poor, to health-care (Greenlee 2014; Elder and Greene 2016a, 2012; Lizotte 2017). However, there is little research about whether mothers, primed by a desire to protect their children, do in fact hold distinctively liberal views on gun control policies relative to their non-parent peers or relative to fathers. This study draws on Pew Research Center data from the March and April 2017 waves of the American Trends Panel, which includes a rich array of questions relating to guns and gun control policy, to explore the impact of motherhood and fatherhood on gun policy attitudes.

This study makes several contributions to our understanding of the factors shaping public opinion on gun-related issues. First, we explore the ways that being a parent shapes gun policy attitudes and the extent to which parenthood acts as a gendered experience in terms of its political impact. Second, we investigate the ways gender, parenthood, and race intersect to shape attitudes on gun policy in the post-Sandy Hook era when gun violence has become prominently linked with schools and children, and during a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn national attention to the relationship of gun violence, the killing of unarmed black children, and racial inequality. Further, this study provides a fuller picture of gun policy attitudes in contemporary America by exploring views on a broad range of gun-related policies, including issues intimately related to children such as whether teachers and other school officials should be armed as well as gun safety issues in homes with children.

We find that contemporary depictions of mothers as a distinctively liberal, pro-gun control constituency are inaccurate. Despite a long-standing narrative that motherhood liberalizes women when it comes to gun control issues out of a desire to protect their children and drives them to be at the forefront of activism to stem gun violence through additional gun control regulations, our findings tell a different story. On all of the issues we examine, when controlling for related factors, moms are *not* a distinctively liberal, pro-gun control constituency in American politics. Parental status does not predict more liberal attitudes for women, even on gun policies related to children—a result that predominantly holds true for Black women as well as women overall. On

only a single measure is motherhood significant with controls, and in that case, in the unexpected conservative direction—although in specific instances we find that motherhood does liberalize attitudes pertaining to arming teachers among black women as well as attitudes about gun prevalence among conservative women. Likewise, in all cases but one—where dads are more conservative—parenthood does not predict attitudes of men on gun policy either. While previous research shows that parenthood contributes to the well-known gender gap on other issues, it does not have a parallel impact on gun policy attitudes. The gender gap on guns is robust, but does not appear to be strengthened or mitigated by parenthood.

Gender and gun policy attitudes

Attitudes on gun control policies have long been characterized by a gender gap with women more supportive than men of stricter regulations on the sale and ownership of guns (Erskine 1972; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Howell and Day 2000; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Celinska 2007).⁴ Gun ownership is lower among women (Jiobu and Curry 2001), and men are more likely to believe gun ownership is a means of self-protection (Kleck, Gertz, and Bratton 2009; Carlson 2014; 2015). Women are more likely than men to favor requiring a police permit to buy a gun (Brennan, Lizotte, and McDowall 1993) and are more supportive of a complete handgun ban (Kleck, Gertz, and Bratton 2009). In their study about the political attitudes of Millennials, Rouse and Ross (2018) found women were more likely than men to support a federal policy that required background checks and waiting periods before the purchase of a gun. Of course, not all women support greater gun ownership restrictions; conservative women, including Tea Party women, are less supportive than liberal women of gun control (Deckman 2016).

Furthermore, multiple studies show that the gender gap continues to be significant when controlling for a variety of other variables related to gun policy attitudes (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Wolpert and Gimpel 1998; Koleva et al. 2012; O'Brien et al. 2013; Cook and Goss 2014; Spitzer 2015). For example, the gender gap on gun control policy remains significant when including libertarianism, racial resentment, and support for spending to reduce crime (Filindra and Kaplan 2016). Controlling for egalitarianism also does not eliminate the gender gap on gun control (Howell and Day 2000). The gender gap also remains significant with the inclusion of attitudes toward hunting, burglary, robbery, fear of crime, and support for government activism (Celinska 2007). Recent evidence suggests that the gender gap in gun control attitudes can be explained, in part, by differences in how

⁴The gender gap in support for gun rights has varied from 7 percent points to 16 percent points over the past three decades (Pew Research Center 2017).

authoritarian men and women think about gun control with authoritarian men viewing guns as means to security and authoritarian women viewing gun control as way to ensure greater safety (Lizotte 2019). The mechanism at work may be anxiety, which individuals often respond to by gravitating toward protective policies that they view as mitigating the threat (Albertson and Gadarian 2015); for men having access to guns while for women greater gun control may be the protective policies they differentially prefer to lessen the threat of gun violence. In short, the gender gap in gun control attitudes, with women being more liberal than men, is significant and robust and no political or demographic factors are able to substantially explain it away.

Beyond the role of gender, studies of gun control attitudes consistently find that being a Republican, identifying as a conservative, living in the South, being a White Evangelical Protestant and owning a gun makes individuals significantly more likely to support gun rights (Brennan, Lizotte, and McDowall 1993; Koleva et al. 2012; Parker et al. 2017; Merino 2018). Other studies suggest that symbolic racism among white Americans is related to opposition to gun control (O'Brien et al. 2013; Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 2017) as is support for Christian nationalism, which is the belief that Christianity should be promoted in the public sphere, hence Christian nationalists' claim that gun rights are often "God-given." (Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry 2018). Koleva et al. (2012) also find concerns about harm, as part of a larger set of moral foundation attitudes, are linked to stronger opposition to gun control. In contrast, fear of crime predicts support for gun control (Kleck 1996; Celinska 2007; Filindra and Kaplan 2016, 2017)

Motherhood and gun policy attitudes

While research finds that women are more likely to support greater regulations of guns, there is relatively little research as to whether motherhood impacts attitudes on gun control policy and hence is a driver of the gender gap on issues relating to guns. Motherhood, as opposed to just being a parent, is associated with distinctive views on a range of policy issues including day care, education, assistance to the poor, and health care (Howell and Day 2000; Greenlee 2014, 2010; Elder and Greene 2016, 2012, 2006; Lizotte 2017). Elder and Greene (2012) and Lizotte (2017) argue that women's distinctive social roles as parents shape their political views and thus the effects of parenthood are gendered. Even two decades into the twenty-first century, women still take on a majority of child-care activities and spend more time with their children than men do (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). Society still expects women to play a particularly nurturing and protective role when it comes to their children—and to a large degree mothers fulfill these expectations—even while the majority of mothers combine caring for their children with work for pay outside the home (Elder and Greene 2016b). The dual workload of contemporary motherhood appears to foster

a greater appreciation of the government taking on activities such as providing education, day care, and assistance to the elderly and those in need, resulting in mothers being distinctively more supportive of a range of social welfare programs (Elder and Greene 2006, 2012, 2016a).

Given the consistent relationship between motherhood and more liberal attitudes on social welfare policy, it seems logical that women's role as mothers might also lead them to want the government to take a more robust role in regulating guns in an effort to protect children. Moreover, the particular focus by the media and in the culture on the relationship of gun violence and harm to children, and school shootings in particular, may prime mothers to be more supportive of gun control regulation than others. Indeed, several well-known gun regulation groups invoke motherhood in their monikers. After the school shootings that took place in Columbine, Colorado in 1999, Donna Dees-Thomases organized the Million Mom March on Mother's Day 2000, which brought an estimated 750,000 to march on Washington (Hampson 2018). More recently, after the tragic 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, the grassroots organization Moms Demand Action was formed to promote gun control legislation at the state and grassroots levels. While the organization certainly welcomes all participants, its founder, Shannon Watts, says that most members are mothers, driven by what she calls a "bad ass warrior emotion," adding, "[t]here is something instinctual about women and mothers wanting to protect their children and their communities children, even strangers' children" (quoted in Timmons 2018).

In one notable empirical finding on the issue, Lizotte (2019) explores the impact of authoritarianism on the gender gap on gun attitudes, finding that being a mother was significantly associated with women being more likely to support gun control policies. Suggestive as this is for present purposes, Lizotte's work relies upon 2012 ANES data, which was collected prior to the most recent wave of motherhood mobilization around the issue of guns. In the years since, the issue of gun safety has taken on a markedly more prominent role in American public discourse and media coverage, particularly in relation to schools and children. The 2017 Pew data used in this study is more contemporary and also has a broader set of measures on gun policies, especially items that deal directly with policies geared to reduce gun violence in school settings and homes with children. These preceding findings lead us to our first investigatory hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Motherhood will be associated with more liberal views on gun control policy, and the liberal motherhood effects will be most pronounced on gun control policies explicitly linked to children and/or schools.

There is an alternative narrative, however, when it comes to the impact of motherhood on attitudes about the right to own guns. It is possible that the

recent and highly visible wave of school shootings has pushed mothers, or at least some mothers, in the opposite direction—wanting more access to guns as a means to keep their families safe, and in the case of schools, wanting school officials to be armed to better protect their children. As Deckman's work (2016) shows, pro-gun, Tea Party women activists argue that greater access to guns is critical to women, in particular, because it serves as "the great equalizer" for women who often lack the physical strength to defend themselves in case a stronger male attacks them—a rationale that is often extended to their role as mothers. For example, former National Rifle Association spokeswoman Dana Loesch (2014) recounts her decision to apply for a concealed carry gun permit as a way to protect her family after receiving death threats: "[I] take gun rights very personally. I view it as a threat to my and my family's well-being whenever anyone seeks to erode or take away my Second Amendment civil liberty. The people screeching about disarming someone like me, a mother trying to protect her family ... do not face what I face (14)." These pro-gun women activists oppose bans on virtually all types of guns. In congressional testimony after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the Independent Women's Forum Senior Fellow, Gayle Trotter, responded to questioning from Republican Senator Charles Grassley (IA) whether she thought semi-automatic weapons, such as the AR-15, have a value in self-defense. Trotter said that this gun was often women's "weapon of choice" because it is lightweight, easy to handle and looks intimidating to potential criminals. She explained: "An assault weapon in the hands of a young woman defending her babies in her home becomes a defense weapon (Quoted in Deckman 2016, 228)." Unlike the women activists who maintain that access to guns should be heavily regulated as a way to safeguard their children's safety, pro-gun mothers argue that their family's safety is better served by easier access to guns for law-abiding citizens. Thus, we test for an alternative hypothesis that motherhood may correlate with more conservative attitudes on gun control policy, especially for women who hold a conservative political ideology.

Hypothesis 2: Motherhood will be associated with greater support for gun rights over stricter laws and greater support for the idea of arming school officials. Relatedly, the interaction between motherhood and ideology will be significant indicating that motherhood has a distinctively conservatizing impact on conservative women.

Fatherhood and gun policy attitudes

Parenthood remains a gendered experience in contemporary America. Most Americans still expect fathers to act as economic providers, as well as protectors of their families (Elder and Greene 2016b) and indeed fathers respond differently than mothers to the experience of becoming parents. Fatherhood

is not associated with distinctive political attitudes as much as motherhood, and in some cases when fathers hold distinctive attitudes they have been in a conservative direction (Elder and Greene 2016, 2012, 2006). It is therefore quite possible that parenthood may shape gun control policy attitudes differently for men than women, and that fatherhood could be associated with less support for gun control. Men may view access to guns as a way to protect their families, and may resent government policies to regulate guns as undermining their ability to carry out their role as protectors. Research on this topic based on data from the pre-Sandy Hook era found mixed results. Elder and Greene found that in some but not all recent decades fathers held more conservative views than men who were not fathers on gun control policy (Elder and Greene 2012, 84). Employing 2012 ANES data, Lizotte (2019) found that having children did not affect men's gun control attitudes. One explanation for is that fathers, unlike mothers, need to have their identity as a parent activated or primed in order for it influence their political attitudes (Klar, Madonia, and Schneider 2014), and another is that the social setting or the strength of an identity can influence the impact of an identity on attitudes (Klar 2014a; 2014b). In the current era, particularly with gun issues being framed around issues of children and families, fathers may emerge as having distinctively conservative attitudes, leading us to test a third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Fatherhood will be associated with distinctively conservative attitudes on gun control policies, especially on policies connected to protecting families and children.

Race, gender, parenthood and gun control

Given the relationship of gun violence and race, particularly the high-profile police shootings of unarmed black children, it is important to consider the ways that race, gender, and parenthood intersect in shaping gun control attitudes. Mothers organizing politically at the community level is nothing new in urban areas for many women of color, who are disproportionately more likely to see their children harmed by gun violence than white mothers. Take, for instance, Tamar Manasseh, who started the group Mothers Against Senseless Killings, or MASK, in which she calls on mothers of "every race, religion, color, creed and of every educational, economic, and social background" to become engaged in anti-gun activism: "We need a collaborative effort of mothers of to help amplify the voices of those mothers whose wails, moans, and cries for help don't seem to be loud enough for those that can affect change to hear them" (quoted in Spooner 2016). Similarly, Mothers of the Movement emerged in the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal in 2013 and is composed of the mothers of unarmed black sons

killed by police (Flynn 2019). This group has received widespread national attention and played a particularly high profile role advocating for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election (Chozick 2016). The intersection of race, gender and parenthood as it relates to gun violence and gun control policy leads to our final investigatory hypothesis concerning the possible interaction of race and motherhood status:

Hypothesis 4: The interaction of motherhood and race will be significant, showing that black mothers are distinctively liberal compared to their white counterparts.

Methods

Previous research into gun policy attitudes has been constrained by the limited number of survey questions measuring gun policy attitudes on national political data sets. In most years, the General Social Survey only asks respondents about gun ownership and not gun policy attitudes, and the American National Election Study asks a single question on whether the government should make it easier or more difficult to purchase a gun.⁵ There are an array of attitudes about gun policy—especially related to guns in the home and in schools—that are not captured in these data sets. This study employs 2017 data collected by the Pew Center for Research as part of Pew's nationally representative American Trends Panel (ATP). The data about guns are drawn from two waves of panel data (wave 26 and wave 25) in March and April of 2017.

Dependent Variables: This study employs a number of different items relating to gun policy attitudes as its dependent variables. First, we analyzed responses to broad gun control measures. The first dependent variable asks whether gun laws should be more or less strict on a five-point scale, comparable to earlier studies of gun control attitudes. (In all our dependent variables, higher values indicate more conservative/pro-gun attitudes.) The Pew survey had a large variety of closely-related items on regulating gun ownership that we collapsed into a single gun ownership scale, our second dependent variable, for more parsimonious analysis. The scale included items on support for allowing concealed carry in more places, allowing concealed carry with a permit, shortening waiting periods, preventing the mentally ill from purchasing guns, banning assault weapons, creating a federal database to track gun sales, banning high-capacity ammunition, and requiring background checks on all private gun sales (Cronbach's $\alpha=.86$). We also created a "gun prevalence scale" based on degree of support for widespread gun ownership including items for who should be able to own a gun (almost

⁵One exception to this is the 2012/2013 ANES Re-Contact Survey, which included five questions about gun policy including one question about guns in schools.

everyone to no one), where guns should be allowed (almost anywhere to nowhere), and what types of guns should be legal (almost all types to almost no types) (Cronbach's alpha = .82.).

In three dependent variables, we examined questions of gun policy relating to children that we thought would be of particular relevance to parents. First among these is whether teachers and school officials should carry guns. Additionally, based on a series of items with the prompt "thinking about gun owners who have children in their home" we created a scale based on items of keeping guns in a locked place, keeping guns unloaded, and talking to children about gun safety (Cronbach's alpha=.82). Finally, we looked at a question about whether stricter gun laws would reduce mass shootings. While this question did not mention schools, per se, a number of high profile mass shootings have been in school settings. (The question wording for all of these variables can be found in the Appendix).

Independent variables: Our primary independent variable was parenthood. Respondents were coded as parents if they were parent or guardian to children under 18 in the home. We then combined that with gender to examine mothers and fathers separately. In terms of political variables, Pew uses a five-point scale of party identification, so we created a dummy variable for Republicans (including leaners). We also used a five-point ideology scale running from very liberal to very conservative (conservatives have higher values). For demographics, we created dummy variables for marital status (1 if married), Black (1 if self-identified as Black), Hispanic (1 if self-identified as Hispanic), other race (1 if self-identified as other on race category question), education (1 if college degree or higher), religious identity as "born again" or Evangelical (1 if born again), region (1 if living in the South), and home gun ownership (1 if the respondent or other family member owns a gun). We also included age and income as defined in categories by Pew.⁶

Analyses

We began our analyses by comparing mothers versus non-mothers and fathers versus non-fathers on our gun policy dependent variables. Though we can also compare across genders, given the well-established gender gap on this issue, it is parental status within genders that presents the most interesting comparisons for this research endeavor. Due to our interests in the potential interaction with race, we also present these analyses broken down by Black, White and Hispanic respondents. In addition to these bivariate relationships, we include a series of regression models with appropriate political and demographic controls. For each of our dependent variables

⁶The Pew data does not include a measure of urban/suburban/rural or a measure of whether or not the respondent lives close to a mass shooting incident.

we ran a series of models: women only, men only, and a model adding parent x Black interaction term, and parent x conservative ideology interaction. We believe it is important to interact parental status with race and ideology, because the effects of parenthood and motherhood may be conditional on these other factors. By analyzing the dependent variables separately by gender and then adding the interaction terms on the particular variables of interest, we can much more clearly see the impact (or non-impact) of motherhood versus fatherhood while also exploring additional relationships that may interact with parenthood. Our control variables are partisanship, education, age, marital status, religious identity, income, ideology, gun ownership, and region as described above.

Results

Bivariate results

Looking first at the bivariate results in [Table 1](#) there is a clear message—mothers are decidedly not more liberal on gun policy. On all three measures of broad gun policy stances, moms, in fact, are statistically significantly *more conservative* (more pro-gun) than women who are not moms. On issues relating to children—gun safety in the home, whether teachers and school

Table 1. Gun policy positions by parent status and race.

	Gun Strict	Gun Ownership	Gun Prevalence	Gun Home Safety	Teachers and guns	Mass Shooting
All						
Moms	2.44	1.77	2.65	1.28	2.24	1.62
Non-Moms	2.05	1.65	2.52	1.31	2.13	1.53
Dads	2.75	2.17	2.95	1.49	2.45	1.83
Non-Dads	2.56	1.97	2.76	1.52	2.37	1.71
White only						
Moms	2.49	1.73	2.74	1.29	2.41	1.67
Non-Moms	2.21	1.62	2.61	1.28	2.21	1.54
Dads	2.92	2.24	3.05	1.60	2.68	1.89
Non-Dads	2.78	2.05	2.92	1.58	2.61	1.77
Black only						
Moms	2.15	1.78	2.51	1.36	1.45	1.59
Non-Moms	1.51	1.72	2.12	1.52	1.88	1.48
Dads	2.10	1.98	3.01	1.83	2.57	1.56
Non-Dads	1.85	1.65	2.24	1.33	1.74	1.54
Hispanic only						
Moms	2.12	1.83	2.44	1.11	2.44	1.38
Non-Moms	1.54	1.72	2.43	1.24	2.11	1.49
Dads	2.60	2.08	2.80	1.26	2.01	1.88
Non-Dads	2.48	1.84	2.62	1.36	2.28	1.73

Source: 2017 Pew American Trends Panel

N.B. Cells in bold indicate statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) within gender. All differences across gender are statistically significant at $p < .01$. N.B. Gun strict is 1-5; mass shooting is 1-3; all others 1-4. Higher values are more pro-gun.

officials should be armed, and whether stricter gun laws would reduce mass shootings—there is no significant difference between the views of mothers and non-mothers.⁷ The association of parenthood and conservative attitudes is true for men on some issues as well. Dads are more conservative than men who are not fathers on issues relating to gun ownership and the prevalence of guns.

The remainder of [Table 1](#) demonstrates that this pattern of results is not exclusive to white Americans. When we look at Black respondents only, the pattern is largely the same. Black mothers are either no different than or more conservative than their non-mother counterparts—although there is one notable exception. Black moms are significantly more opposed to arming schoolteachers when compared to Black women who are not mothers. Interestingly, Black dads significantly approve of the idea of arming school officials much more than Black men who are not dads. Thus, in this one case only, parenthood appears to contribute to the gender gap. There were no significant differences between the gun policy attitudes of parents and non-parents among Hispanic men or women.

Multivariate results

[Table 1](#) indicates that despite the way the issue is framed in the news and by social movement organizations who employ the term mother in their nomenclature, mothers are not a distinctive anti-gun constituency in American politics. Nonetheless, given the many demographic factors that covary with parenthood, it is important to explore the degree to which parental status may uniquely contribute to overall gun attitudes when these other factors are controlled in multivariate analysis, which is what we present in [Table 2](#). These results can provide a much clearer indication of meaningful relationships between parenthood and gun attitudes.

In order to summarize the many regression models in the most straightforward manner, [Table 2](#) presents the impact of motherhood/fatherhood on gun attitudes for all six of the dependent variables. We show the impact of parenthood for all respondents, men only, women only and results of interaction models for Black mothers and Ideology x Motherhood. The full regression models can be found in the on-line appendix.

Our first hypothesis, the liberal motherhood hypothesis, predicted that motherhood would be associated with more liberal views on gun control policy, especially policies relating to children. The results from the multivariate analyses are not consistent with this hypothesis. In no case does

⁷Even when restricting the analysis to liberals (not shown), mothers are no more anti-gun than women without children. Thus even among liberal women, we do not find evidence that motherhood is related to distinctive support for gun control measures.

Table 2. Impact of parenthood on gun attitudes: summary of regression results.

	All	Women only	Men only	Black mom interaction	Ideology mom interaction
Gun strictness	conservative	conservative	ns	ns	Ns
Gun ownership	ns	ns	ns	ns	Ns
Gun prevalence	ns	ns	conservative	ns	liberal
Gun home safety	ns	ns	ns	ns	Ns
Teachers and guns	ns	ns	ns	liberal	Ns
Mass shootings	ns	ns	ns	ns	Ns

Cell Entries indicate whether results for “parenthood dummy” variable were statistically significant at $p < .05$ in the liberal or conservative direction. ns indicates not significant. All models include controls for age, education, marital status, race, ethnicity, born again, income, Southerner, gun in the home, partisanship, and ideology. The full models can be found in tables A2-A7 in the on-line appendix.

parental status predict more liberal attitudes on gun policy for women. Motherhood does not predict attitudes concerning gun control overall or on the three gun policy issue closely connected with children: gun safety in the home, whether teachers and school administrators should be armed, or whether stricter gun laws would reduce mass shootings. Thus, while motherhood is associated with more liberal views on other policy issues, this same liberal motherhood effect does not extend to attitudes on gun policy.

The results also do not provide much support for our second hypothesis either, which predicted that motherhood may in fact lead women to support more conservative gun policies, thinking that greater access to guns would allow them to better protect their families. Even though mothers were more conservative on several gun related issues in [Table 1](#), this relationship largely disappears once controls are added to the models. As mentioned above, motherhood does not have any significant effect—conservative or liberal—in five of the six multivariate models. Only in the gun strictness model does having children remain a significant predictor of conservative views for women. Our second hypothesis also posited that the motherhood x ideology interaction would be significant and positive, suggesting that motherhood pushes conservative women to embrace even more pro-gun right positions. For the most part, the results do not support this extension of Hypothesis 2. In five of the six models the interaction between having children and ideology for women was not significant, suggesting that parenthood does not differentially effect women depending on their ideology. The one exception is in the gun prevalence model. In the ideology interaction version of this model, both the mother variable and the mother x ideology interaction variable are significant, but in opposite directions. Once the interaction term is added to the model, being a mother predicts more conservative views on gun prevalence, but rather than further

heightening this conservative effect, the mother-ideology interaction is negative, indicating a liberal or mitigating effect. In other words, relative to their child-free conservative peers, motherhood acts to liberalize the views of conservative women.⁸

Hypothesis 3 predicted that fatherhood would be associated with distinctively conservative attitudes on gun control policies, especially on policies connected to protecting families and children. This hypothesis is predominantly unsupported. Once controls were added, we found that fatherhood predicts more conservative views on only one dependent variable, the gun prevalence scale. There is no fatherhood impact on the other gun policy attitudes including items specifically about guns and kids. Nor for any of the dependent variables is the father-ideology interaction variable significant, which would have indicated that fatherhood impacts men differently based on their ideology.

Hypothesis 4 posited that Black mothers would be particularly liberal on gun control policy compared to their white counterparts. To test this hypothesis, we ran models that included an interaction term of Black mother/father to explore how race interacts with parenthood in shaping gun attitudes. The results do not support this hypothesis. The parenthood-race interaction is not significant in the women only models for five of the six dependent variables. The one exception is on the issue of whether teachers and administrators should have guns. In the ideology race interaction model, the Black mom interaction is negative indicating that motherhood pushes Black women to embrace opposition to the idea of arming teachers and school administrators relative to white mothers. Similar to the pattern revealed in [Table 1](#), the black father interaction is also significant on this issue but in the opposite direction, indicating that fatherhood is associated with more conservative views—greater support for arming teachers and administrators with guns for black fathers relative to white fathers. Beyond the issue of guns in schools, the broader pattern for black mothers is one of no effects.⁹ One possible explanation for the non-findings for Black mothers may be that the effects of race overwhelm the effects of parenthood. The Black community in the United States is significantly and substantively more liberal on most issues relating to guns than white Americans stemming from the Black communities' distinctive, and often racially unjust, experiences with gun violence.

⁸For conservative women with children, their predicted value (or margin) on the gun prevalence scale is 2.42 compared to conservative women without children at 2.79 (the variable is continuous from 1–4 with conservative views higher). For liberal women with children, their predicted value is 2.39 compared to liberal women without children at 2.20. Conservative women with children are still more conservative on gun prevalence than liberal women with children, but they are more liberal than conservative women without children.

⁹In one other case, the gun prevalence scale, the black-father interaction was significant and positive, indicating that fatherhood is associated with especially pro-gun views for black fathers relative to white fathers.

As [Table 1](#) shows, Black men and Black women, Black parents and Black non-parents have scores on most gun policy items that are substantively lower/more liberal than whites. Being a Black American is also a strong significant predictor of more liberal views in most of the multivariate models (see online appendix). The powerful, liberalizing role of race in shaping the attitudes of Black Americans on gun policy issues may leave little room for motherhood to have further liberalizing effects.

Discussion

Do moms demand liberal actions on guns? **No.** In multivariate models, on a variety of broad measures of gun policies attitudes, moms were overwhelmingly no different than women without children. Even on policies specifically tied to homes with children in them, moms had attitudes that were not significantly different than other women. Moreover, when interacting parental status with ideology, we only found one significant effect for women in terms of attitudes about guns, and it was in the opposite direction as hypothesized. So it appears that becoming a parent does little to influence the gun policy views of liberal mothers or conservative “Mama Grizzlies.” We find similar results for fathers. The few statistically significant results we find in multivariate models are somewhat idiosyncratic and overwhelmed by a clear pattern of lack of parental effects across many measures. While it may be worthwhile to further explore and theorize about these particular outlier results from a host of gun control policy indicators, there is, overall, a clear pattern that very much rejects the idea that being a mom makes women more liberal on guns and being a dad makes men more conservative.

Prior research has shown that motherhood is consistently associated with distinctively liberal views on social welfare issues from education, to helping the poor, to healthcare (Greenlee 2014; Elder and Greene 2016a, 2012; Lizotte 2017), while fatherhood is associated with fewer or in some cases conservative attitudes (Elder and Greene 2006). Yet this liberal motherhood effect does not extend to the issue of gun control policy. Perhaps, this is because the effects of motherhood on gun control attitudes is conditional on other factors such as race, religiosity, ideology, class, education level, etc. Our analysis investigates some but not all of these intersecting identities between motherhood and other demographic characteristics finding little evidence indicating a significant influence of motherhood on gun control attitudes. Then again, it is possible that the addition of more nuanced measures of parenthood, including information about the ages of children, the number of children in the home, or the amount of time parents spend with their children, might reveal some modest motherhood effects, but such measures were not available in the Pew data set. Given research showing that parenthood, especially motherhood, meaningfully shapes attitudes on other policy

issues, as well as the prominent use of motherhood and family by the media, parties, and activists in their discussions of policy (Elder and Greene 2012, 2006) we hope that Pew and other national data sets begin including a robust set of parenthood-related measures as standard in their future surveys.

Politically, this is an account of the power of rhetoric and symbols. Compared to the general population, moms are more liberal on guns, *but only because they are women*. This is ultimately a gender gap story that many political actors have turned into a motherhood story. Motherhood is a uniquely powerful political symbol, and activists against guns have turned this to their political advantage, despite the fact that moms are decidedly not more in favor of stricter gun control. Additionally, despite the prominent role of women of color, especially Black mothers, in the pro-gun control movement, the lack of a significant relationship between motherhood and gun policy is not limited to conservative women or white women. Black mothers are very liberal when it comes to gun policy, but once again this is for the most part because they are Black and because they are women, not because they are mothers. Thus despite the motherhood oriented appeals for stronger gun regulation, this is not a policy position that Black, white or Hispanic *mothers* are distinctively clamoring for.

Arguably, we are making a case for non-findings, but when it comes to the issue of parental, especially maternal, attitudes on gun policy, the general lack of statistically significant findings has notable real-world political consequences. We have a political discourse around gun policy that is substantially shaped around fears of harm to children in particular and about the roles of parents as gun activists. Insofar as our research suggests that parental status plays a very limited role in actually shaping gun policy attitudes, it should lead us to more accurate and useful explorations of the issue as social scientists. Motherhood has been used as a powerful frame for social movements and political activists demanding specific public policy changes for decades, from Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to the present moment where a “Wall of Moms” network is working with the Black Lives Matter Movement to protest racial injustices by police (Blum 2020). A fruitful avenue for further research would be to examine whether mothers actually had or have distinctive views on drunk driving laws, police reforms, and other policies that have been or remain the focus of mother-framed activism.

Finally, although the results here tell a fairly consistent and noteworthy story, they are in no way the last word on the issue. There were at least two cases where, the larger pattern of non-findings for parents, was contravened. This could just be statistical artifacts, or it could speak to a greater complexity of the issue of parenthood and guns which we were not fully able to explore and uncover here. Even though our multivariate models attempt to control for ways parents may be different than non-parents—including age, religion, race, ethnicity, and income—it is still the case that

those who become parents may be distinctive in ways not captured by the control variables, and these differences might be a factor in the lack of consistent parenthood effects on gun policy attitudes. Future research using panel data that can examine the policy attitudes of women and men before and after they have children could yield powerful insights about the role of raising children as a meaningful adult socialization experience. Furthermore, the role of guns in society and gun policy is a very dynamic issue, especially in salience, in the American political context, and it would be a mistake to over-interpret findings from just two recent waves of a national survey. We believe the balance of the evidence strongly suggests that, despite widespread belief and political discourse to the contrary, parenthood plays a very limited role, if any, on gun policy attitudes, but that the story may nonetheless be more complex, especially in a dynamic political world. Thus, we conclude by very much encouraging further research along this direction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr. Steven Greene is Professor of Political Science at North Carolina State University. He is co-author, with Laurel Elder, of *The Politics of Parenthood: Causes and Consequences of the Politicization and Polarization of the American Family*. His research explores the politics of parenthood, the gender gap, partisanship, and public opinion and Covid-19.

Dr. Melissa Deckman is the Louis L. Goldstein Professor of Public Affairs at Washington College. The author most recently of *Tea Party Women: Mama Grizzlies, Grassroots Activists, and the Changing Face of the American Right*, she writes about gender, religion, and political behavior.

Dr. Laurel Elder is a Professor of Political Science at Hartwick College. The author most recently of the forthcoming, *Women in Elective Office: A Tale of Two Parties*. Her research explores the politics of parenthood, public opinion towards presidential candidate spouses, and women's representation in elective office.

Dr. Mary-Kate Lizotte is an Associate Professor of Political Science in the Department of Social Sciences at Augusta University. She is the author of *Gender Differences in Public Opinion: Values and Political Consequences*, which was published with Temple University Press in March 2020. Much of her work focuses on investigating the origins of gender gaps in public opinion, voting, and party identification.

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