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In the recent renaissance of interest in guns among sociologists, studies of the political conservatism of gun owners have proliferated, but we still know very little about politically liberal gun owners. This despite the fact that one in five U.S. gun owners (some 12 million adults) self-identifies as liberal. This exploratory study, therefore, seeks to understand what seems on the surface to be an interesting and not rare category in American society: the liberal gun owner. In particular, we seek to answer two questions: Do liberal gun owners differ from other liberals who do not own guns and from other gun owners who are not liberal? We answer these questions using data from the General Social Survey, treating liberal gun owners as a category rather than a point on a continuum. Binary and multinomial logistic regressions suggest ways in which liberal gun owners are a distinct group, more resembling their fellow gun owners in their demographic and geographic backgrounds, but differing from moderate and/or conservative gun owners in important ways, including in their propensity to be hunters, religious affiliation, religiosity, and punitive attitudes.

Introduction

In the spring of 2019, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) sent reporter Megha Mohan and video journalist Jack Slater to Southern California to explore what they called “America’s least likely gun owners.” At the Rainbow Range and Gun Club 50 miles north of San Diego, the BBC found an African American man, the founder of Armed Equality (an LGBT self-defense and gun rights organization), two members of the Socialist Rifle Association (a transgender woman and a Mexican immigrant), and the national spokesperson for the Liberal Gun Club, attorney Lara Smith. Smith opens the piece by describing herself as “a 40-something minivan driving soccer mom” and subsequently maintains “We have the right to defend ourselves, we have the right to bear arms” (Mohan and Slater 2019).

This was not the first time Smith appeared in the news on behalf of the Liberal Gun Club (LGC). Soon after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, she was featured on ABC’s long-running program “Nightline,” stating plainly: “I’m Lara, I’m a liberal, I voted for Hilary Clinton, but I’m a strong Second Amendment supporter” (ABC News 2017). During the spring 2020 Democratic presidential primary season, the Associated Press ran a

story on liberal gun owners that included Lara Smith and Kat Ellsworth, president of the Illinois Chapter of the LGC (Pane 2020).

Although the LGC was founded in 2008, it has garnered more attention and more members under the Trump presidency. According to LGC Director of Membership and Training Eric Meyers, in 2016 the organization had just over 1,000 dues-paying members and 6,000 followers on its Facebook page. By mid-2020, its membership had more than tripled (to 3,400) and its Facebook followers more than doubled (to more than 13,000). This growth has been accompanied, and also stimulated, by organizational development. There are now 25 state/regional Liberal Gun Club chapters and 50 instructors certified nationally to teach LGC's three training courses: introduction to range safety, firearms familiarization, and introduction to defensive pistol (Meyers 2020).

The same is true of a second organization that was established in 2007, Liberal Gun Owners (LGO). LGO is a 501c4 organization that seeks to construct and promote a liberal intellectual and cultural rationale for gun ownership. Unlike LGC, it is not a membership organization, but it does run a Facebook page as a private group to allow interested parties to share ideas and experiences. Even though it tightly regulates participation, Liberal Gun Owners had over 4,000 Facebook group members in November 2020, up from 850 prior to the election of Donald Trump. Executive Director Randy Miyan (2020) tells us he has observed a surge of interest in LGO recently in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although we do not have data to know with certainty, anecdotal evidence suggests that America's "least likely gun owners" were a significant part of the COVID-19 pandemic gun-buying sprees in March and April 2020 (Bethea 2020). Ray and Shankman (2020) found a *positive* correlation between liberal state ideology and FBI National Instant Criminal Background System (NICS) checks—a commonly used proxy for gun sales—from February to April. The "loneliness of the liberal gun lover" that Politico Magazine reported on in late 2017 may be a thing of the past (Strauss 2017).

Or perhaps it never was? The appropriate interest of sociologists in describing the statistically average gun owner hides this interesting diversity. While studies of the political conservatism of gun owners proliferate, as sociologists we know essentially nothing about politically liberal gun owners. This despite the fact that, as this article documents, one-in-five U.S. gun owners (some 12 million adults) self-identifies as liberal (along with about 37% moderates and 43% conservatives).

This exploratory study, therefore, seeks to understand what seems on the surface to be an interesting and not rare category in American society: the liberal gun owner. In particular, we seek to answer two questions: Do liberal gun owners differ from other liberals who do not own guns and from other gun

owners who are not liberal? We answer these questions using data from the General Social Survey, treating liberal gun owners as a category rather than a point on a continuum. Binary and multinomial logistic regressions suggest ways in which liberal gun owners are a distinct group, more resembling their fellow gun owners in their demographic and geographic backgrounds (Table 2) but differing from moderate and/or conservative gun owners in important ways, including in their propensity to be hunters, religious affiliation, religiosity, and punitive attitudes (Table 3).

Literature Review

After a period of relative dormancy, sociological interest in guns has surged in recent years. To wit: We have seen the publication both of multiple edited volumes (Carlson, Goss, and Shapira 2018; Hovey and Fischer 2017; Obert, Poe, and Sarat 2019) and special issues of journals (Metzl as editor for *Palgrave Communications* in 2019; Steidley and Yamane as editors for *Sociological Perspectives*, forthcoming in 2021; and Dowd-Arrow, Burdette, and Hill editing this issue of *Sociological Inquiry*) on the topic.

This renaissance notwithstanding, social scientists have long sought to understand the social, political, and demographic predictors of gun ownership. Many of these are well established in the scholarly literature. Over a decade ago, Legault (2008:59) characterized studies of legal gun ownership in the United States as “tedious in its agreement.” The statistically average legal gun owner is a married white man living in the rural South or West who is politically conservative, middle-aged, and middle class (see also Legault, Hendrix, and Lizotte 2019). This was so in the 1960s (Newton and Zimring 1969), 1970s (Wright and Marston 1975), 1980s (Ellison 1991), 1990s (Cook and Ludwig 1996), and 2000s (Celinska 2007). But as we know from Anscombe’s Quartet (Anscombe 1973), one problem with “averages” is that they can hide sociologically interesting forms of diversity.

More recent studies have highlighted ways in which this image of the average gun owner essentially being the men from the reality TV show “Duck Dynasty” does not tell the whole story. This is evident if we begin to examine specific subgroups of American gun owners. For example, Yamane (2016) finds that marital status and race do not predict personal handgun ownership, controlling for various demographic and geographic variables. He also incorporates three different measures of religion which predict personal handgun ownership in ways we might expect (theological conservatism positively predicts ownership) and in ways that are more surprising (religious involvement negatively predicts ownership) (see also Vegter and Kelley 2020).

Using data from the 2015 National Firearms Survey, Wertz et al. (2018) compare new gun owners to long-standing gun owners. Gun owners who have

acquired their firearms within the past 5 years are approximately 10% of all current gun owners, and they differ from long-standing gun owners in some interesting ways. They are more liberal, own fewer guns on average, and tend to own only handguns. This same dataset has more recently been used to compare directly male and female gun owners categorically. Female gun owners (about one-quarter of all U.S. gun owners) are demographically similar to male gun owners in many ways, but differ in some ways (e.g., less likely to have never been married). Like new gun owners, women own fewer total guns than men and are more likely than men to own only one gun and only handguns (Wolfson, Azrael, and Miller 2020).

These recent studies highlight the benefits of adding complexity to our understanding of gun ownership beyond “yes” or “no.” As Joslyn (2020:199) concludes his recent comprehensive study of the “gun gap” in political behaviors and attitudes, “Gun owners are not a monolith; there is a great deal of variation.” According to the 2010–2018 General Social Survey (GSS), 43% of all gun owners self-identify as “slightly conservative,” “conservative,” or “extremely conservative.” A majority of gun owners in the United States, therefore, self-identify as politically “moderate” (37.0%) or as some level of liberal (20%)

Treating this as a continuous variable highlights the conservatism of gun owners “on average,” but obscures from view American gun owners who self-identify as liberals. These liberal gun owners, and how they compare to other liberals and other gun owners, are the focus of our attention in this research note.

Data and Methods

Data for this study come from the General Social Survey (GSS), administered by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center. The GSS is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of adults in the United States asking about respondents’ religious habits, hunting habits, SES, views on the death penalty, political beliefs, and migration habits. In even-numbered years, the GSS interviews approximately 2,500 individuals. Since 1987, the GSS has used a split-ballot design, in which subsets of respondents are asked different questions. Thus, in order to ensure we have enough liberal gun owners in the data to test more complex models, the 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 datasets are aggregated into one dataset (Smith et al. 2019).¹

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is *liberal gun owners*. The GSS has been used frequently to measure gun ownership in the United States. Although many studies have examined the mere presence of a firearm in the home, the

individual-level predictors employed in this study make personal gun ownership of more importance.² Following Ellison (1991) and Yamane (2016), gun ownership is operationalized as those who respond “yes” to the question “Do you happen to have in your home any gun or revolvers?” and “yes” to the question “Do any of these guns personally belong to you?” Measured this way, 23% of GSS respondents in this analysis are personal gun owners.

Personal gun ownership was dichotomized and combined with the variable asking about respondents’ political ideology: “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I’m going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” Those who answered “Extremely Liberal” (1), “Liberal” (2), or “Slightly Liberal” (3) were combined into the *liberal* category. Those who answered “Moderate” (4) were categorized as *moderate*. Those who answered “Slightly Conservative” (5), “Conservative” (6), or “Extremely Conservative” (7) were combined into the *conservative* category.

From these distinctions, we are able to produce three categories of gun owners for this analysis: liberal gun owners ($n = 330$, 4.6% of total sample), moderate gun owners ($n = 617$, 8.5%), and conservative gun owners ($n = 724$, 10.0%). 76.9% of the sample are non-gun owners.

Independent Variables

Based on the research on correlates of gun ownership reviewed earlier, this study includes a number of demographic and geographic variables. These include gender (female = 1), marital status (married = 1), race (white = 1, all others = 0), education in years, and age.

Most hunters in the United States hunt with firearms, so not surprisingly one of the major mechanisms of socialization into gun culture (Littlefield and Ozanne 2011) and reasons for owning a firearm is hunting (Yamane 2017). We therefore include a variable for whether the respondent hunts (=1, else =0).

Because many people are socialized into gun ownership based on local and regional gun cultures, we follow Ellison (1991) and Yamane (2016) in adding several geographic variables which are intended to capture differences in exposure to these gun cultures which may make current gun ownership more likely.

Although it is not unknown in urban and suburban America, gun ownership has long been more common in rural areas of the United States (Cramer 2018; Kennett and Anderson 1975). Those who have always lived in rural areas, therefore, are expected to own guns at higher rates than others (Yamane 2016). But those who were raised in rural areas may be more likely to own firearms in the future even if they out-migrate to larger places of residence

(Cretacci and Hendrix 2017). Similarly, those who were raised in larger areas and then move to rural areas (in-migrants) may be socialized into gun ownership later in life. Therefore, we operationalize *rural/small town natives* as those living in an area with a population less than 50,000 both at age 16 and at the time of the interview. *Out-migrants* are those who had rural/small residence at age 16 but not at the time of the interview. And *in-migrants* are those who had rural/small town residence at the time of the interview but not at age 16.

A similar logic applies to region as to locality. Although gun culture in the United States is typically identified with the South (Ellison 1991; O'Connor and Lizotte 1978), American gun culture is also very strong in the Great Plains and Mountain West (Felson and Pare 2010; Yamane 2016). Therefore, we construct both a South variable and a Great Plains/Mountain West variable. Following Yamane (2016), region of residence was recoded for both the *South* (Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, DC, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas) and *Great Plains/Mountain West* (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico). In addition, because people are socialized into gun ownership, it is not simply current residence that matters but whether a person was raised in a particular region and later moved out (out-migrants) or was raised outside of a particular region and moved in (in-migrants). We therefore consider whether the respondent in-migrated to the region (did not live there at age 16 but did at the time of the interview), out-migrated (no at age 16, yes at the time of the interview), or is a native of the region (yes at 16 and yes at the time of the interview).

As noted, religion has been shown to be a predictor of gun ownership in interesting ways. Religion is also predictive of political orientation (Wilde and Glassman 2016), so we consider the relationship between religion and liberal gun ownership. *Religious tradition* is operationalized using Steensland et al. (2000) RELTRAD coding (also Smidt 2019). The RELTRAD divides religious traditions in the following way: Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Religions, and Non-Affiliated. For the present study, Evangelical Protestant is the reference category.

Additionally, four variables were combined to measure a person's *religiosity*. The first question asked is "How often do you attend religious services?" with responses: "Never" (0), "Less than once a year" (1), "Once a year" (2), "Several times a year" (3), "Once a month" (4), "2-3 times a month" (5), "Nearly every week" (6), "Every week" (7), and "More than once every week" (8). Second is the question "Would you consider yourself a strong (PREFERENCE NAMED IN RELIG) or not a very strong (PREFERENCE NAMED IN RELIG)?" with responses including "Strong" (1), "Not very strong" (2), and

“Somewhat strong” (3). Next is “About how often do you pray?” with responses “Several times a day” (1), “Once a day” (2), “Several times a week” (3), “Once a week” (4), “Less than once a week” (5), and “Never” (6). Finally, we included the question “How often do you take part in the activities and organizations of a church or place of worship other than attending services?” with responses: “Never” (1), “Less than once a year” (2), “About once or twice a year” (3), “Several times a year” (4), “About once a month” (5), “2-3 times a month” (6), “Nearly every week” (7), “Every week” (8), “Several times a week” (9), “Once a day” (10), and “Several times a day” (11). The combined variables were recoded to begin at 0 and then standardized, with higher numbers indicating higher religiosity. The religiosity variable has a range of 0 to 4 and a mean of 1.41.³

Punitive attitudes have been shown to predict gun ownership (Yamane 2016; Young and Thompson 1995), but liberals are less punitive than conservatives (Silver and Silver 2017), so we wish to investigate the possibility that liberal gun owners are less punitive in their attitudes than other gun owners. In this study, we measure punitiveness by the respondents’ attitude toward the death penalty: “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” The measure is dichotomized as favor (1) and oppose (0).

These independent variables are summarized in Table 1.

Analytic Strategy

Our data analysis proceeds in two steps. We first use binary logistic regression to explore the difference between liberal gun owners (=1) and liberals who do not own guns (=0). These results are presented in Table 2, in which we examine the relationship between our demographic and geographic independent variables, punitiveness, religious tradition, and religiosity. We then use multinomial logistic regression (MLR) to compare liberal gun owners (reference group) to moderate gun owners, conservative gun owners, and non-gun owners. The MLR parameters in Table 3 represent the relative odds that a person with the given quality will belong to the outcome group compared with the reference group.

The parameter estimates for logistic regression models indicate the rate of change in the log-odds of the dependent variable for a one-unit change in the independent variable. Because this is difficult to interpret, the logistic regression coefficients are exponentiated to produce an odds ratio. This is interpretable as the increase in the odds of the outcome of interest for each one-unit change in the explanatory variable. Odds ratios >1 indicate a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables, while odds ratios <1 indicate a negative relationship.

Table 1 Sample Characteristics, Means, and Percentages (General Social Survey, 2010–2018, weighted by WTSSALL)

Variables	Sample Mean or Pct	Non-gun owners Mean or Pct	Liberal gun owners Mean or Pct	Moderate gun owners Mean or Pct	Conservative gun owners Mean or Pct
Age (range 18–89)	48.5	47.2	53.5	52.0	54.6
Educational Attainment (range 0–20)	13.7	13.8	14.1	13.3	14.1
Female	55.6%	63.7%	28.2%	30.8%	26.1%
Married	44.2%	41.0%	52.4%	50.6%	62.4%
White	73.8%	70.8%	77.3%	85.4%	91.6%
Hunter	12.5%	5.1%	27.3%	35.2%	44.3%
Never Rural/Small Town	24.4%	27.4%	19.7%	14.4%	13.7%
Rural/Small Town Out-Migrant	13.8%	14.8%	13.9%	8.8%	10.2%
Rural/Small Town In-Migrant	24.0%	24.7%	19.1%	24.6%	23.2%
Rural Native	37.6%	33.0%	47.3%	52.2%	52.8%
Never South	58.9%	61.4%	55.5%	50.7%	49.2%
South Out-Migrant	3.3%	3.3%	2.1%	3.1%	3.2%
South In-Migrant	10.8%	11.1%	10.6%	8.8%	9.5%
South Native	27.1%	24.2%	31.8%	37.4%	38.1%
Never Great Plains/Mountain West	83.6%	84.2%	80.9%	79.9%	83.4%
Great Plains/Mountain West Out-Migrant	2.6%	2.5%	2.7%	2.9%	3.3%
Great Plains/Mountain West In-Migrant	4.9%	5.0%	5.5%	5.0%	3.9%
Great Plains/Mountain West Native	8.9%	8.3%	10.9%	12.2%	9.4%
Punitiveness	63.6%	58.4%	63.0%	81.4%	88.5%

Table 1
(continued)

Variables	Sample Mean or Pct	Non-gun owners Mean or Pct	Liberal gun owners Mean or Pct	Moderate gun owners Mean or Pct	Conservative gun owners Mean or Pct
Religious Affiliation					
Evangelical Protestant	24.7%	22.3%	14.3%	30.6%	44.2%
Mainline Protestant	13.0%	12.2%	14.6%	16.7%	18.2%
Black Protestant	7.7%	8.3%	11.5%	5.0%	3.5%
Catholic	24.3%	26.0%	18.8%	18.6%	18.5%
Jewish	1.8%	2.1%	2.9%	1.0%	.6%
Other Religion	6.2%	6.5%	6.4%	4.2%	3.5%
Non-Affiliated	22.3%	22.7%	31.5%	23.8%	11.5%
Religiosity (range 0–4)	1.407	1.412	1.219	1.272	1.607

Results

Table 2 reports the results of a binary logistic regression showing the odds of being a liberal gun owner compared with being a liberal who does not own guns. The results here show that among liberals, those who own guns look very much like the traditional gun owners Legault (2008) and others have identified over the years: Older married white men with punitive attitudes who are rural natives and natives of the South and Great Plains/Mountain West. If the stars of *Duck Dynasty* were political liberals (they are emphatically not), this would be them.

Comparing liberal gun owners to liberals who do not own guns highlights the ways in which liberal gun owners resemble all gun owners in contrast to non-owners. If we compare liberal gun owners to other gun owners, however, a slightly different story emerges from the data. Table 3 reports the results of a

Table 2 Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression of Liberal Gun Owner Compared to Liberal Non-gun Owners on Selected Independent Variables

	Exp(β)
Demographic variables	
Female	.19***
Married	1.43*
White	2.79***
Age	1.03***
Educational Attainment	1.02
Hunter	7.88***
Geographic variables	
Rural out-migrant	1.5
Rural In-Migrant	1.01
Rural Native	1.99**
South In-Migrant	1.47
South Native	1.90**
Great Plains/Mtn West Out-Migrant	1.52
Great Plains/Mtn West In-Migrant	2.28
Great Plains/Mtn West Native	1.89*
Other variables	
Evangelical Protestant	REF
Mainline Protestant	.72
Black Protestant	2.73*
Catholic	.82
Jewish	.93
Other Religion	.84
Non-Affiliated	.98
Religiosity Scale	1.22
Punitiveness	2.36***
Year	1.05
Constant	.004***

Notes: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests). General Social Survey, 2010–2018, weighted by WTSSALL ($n = 1,879$).

multinomial logistic regression comparing the odds of being a moderate gun owner, a conservative gun owner, or a non-gun owner to being a liberal gun owner. For each independent variable, there are three odds ratios shown, one

for each of the three categories being compared with the reference category (liberal gun owner).

As expected, women were no more or less likely to be moderate or conservative gun owners relative to liberal gun owners, but they were much more likely to be non-gun owners (relative risk = 4.64, $p < .001$). This reinforces the finding in Table 2 regarding gender. Similar expected patterns also hold true for marital status, race, and age. The pattern for educational attainment is interesting, as more educated individuals are less likely to be moderate gun owners (RR = .93, $p < .01$) or non-gun owners (RR = .94, $p < .01$) than liberal gun owners, but there is no significant difference between conservative and liberal gun owners in their educational attainment.

As we saw in Table 2 and previous literature on gun ownership, hunting strongly predicts gun ownership. Unsurprisingly, then, hunters are much less likely to be non-gun owners than liberal gun owners (RR = .16, $p < .001$), and hunters are no more or less likely to be moderate gun owners than liberal gun owners. Significantly, however, hunters are twice as likely to be conservative gun owners as liberal gun owners (RR = 2.11, $p < .001$). Although this warrants further investigation, it is likely connected to the inculcation of more traditional values such as the masculinity identified by Littlefield and Ozanne (2011).

Geographic variables do not reveal differences between liberal gun owners and moderate/conservative gun owners. But when compared to those who have never lived in a rural/small town setting, rural/small town natives are more likely to be liberal gun owners than non-gun owners (RR = .56, $p < .01$). And compared with those who have never lived in the South, Southern natives are more likely to be liberal gun owners than non-gun owners. These findings both highlight the normality of gun ownership in certain geographic areas regardless of political views (Wright 1995).

In comparison with Evangelical Protestants, every other religious tradition is less likely to be moderate or conservative gun owners than to be liberal gun owners (not statistically significant only for Mainline Protestants and Other Religions in the case of moderate gun owners). In the case of Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and other religions, religious affiliation does not predict being a liberal versus a non-gun owner. But in comparison with Evangelical Protestants, Black Protestants and the non-affiliated (“nones”) are more likely to be liberal gun owners than to be moderate gun owners, conservative gun owners, or non-gun owners. This points to both the power of Evangelical Protestantism in understanding American politics (Steenland and Wright 2014), as well as patterns of gun ownership (Vegter and Kelley 2020), and the complexity of those patterns (Yamane 2016).

Table 3 Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Odds of Being a Moderate Gun Owner, Conservative Gun Owner, or Non-gun Owner Compared to a Liberal Gun Owner

	Moderate gun owners	Conservative gun owners	Non-gun owners
Demographic variables			
Female	1.18	1.03	4.64***
Married	1.01	1.27	.66**
White	.95	1.50	.60*
Age	.99	1.00	.97***
Educational attainment	.93**	1.05	.94**
Hunter	1.12	2.11***	.16***
Geographic variables			
Rural Out-Migrant	.59	.89	.70
Rural In-Migrant	1.60	1.53	.99
Rural Native	1.02	.94	.56**
South Out-Migrant	2.11	2.19	1.76
South In-Migrant	1.08	.86	.85
South Native	1.39	1.00	.56**
Great Plains/Mountain West	1.53	1.15	.83
In-Migrant			
Great Plains/Mountain West	1.01	.63	.50*
Out-Migrant			
Great Plains/Mountain West	1.31	.75	.66
Native			
Other variables			
Evangelical protestant	REF	REF	REF
Mainline protestant	.68	.53*	.849
Black protestant	.29**	.29**	.26***
Catholic	.51*	.43**	.80
Jewish	.21*	.09***	.47
Other Religion	.47	.26***	.59
Non-affiliated	.38**	.24***	.51*
Religiosity	.90	1.34*	1.20
Punitiveness	2.36***	3.72***	.894
Year	.98	.99	.97
Constant	6.929**	.294	627.5***

Notes: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests). General Social Survey, 2010–2018, weighted by WTSSALL ($n = 6,351$).

As distinct from religious affiliation, those who are highly religious are no more likely to be moderate or non-gun owners than liberal gun owners, but they are more likely to be conservative gun owners than liberal gun owners. In combination with the finding that religious nones are more likely to be liberal gun owners than Evangelical Protestants, this suggests a possible avenue for further investigation for the growing field of secular studies (Zuckerman and Shook 2017).

Finally, although we saw in Table 2 that, compared with liberal non-gun owners, liberal gun owners have more punitive attitudes, and the multinomial regression in Table 3 highlights the resemblance of liberal gun owners to non-gun owners in comparison with moderate and conservative gun owners. Those with punitive attitudes are more likely to be moderate or conservative gun owners than liberal gun owners.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are many ways to slice the U.S. gun ownership pie. Historically, the most typical way has been to compare survey respondents in households that own a gun to all other respondents. This analysis slices the pie in a novel way: examining those who own guns and self-identifies as political liberals in comparison with non-gun owning liberals, moderate and conservative gun owners, and non-gun owners generally. Tables 2 and 3 here highlight some patterns worthy of further consideration by scholars seeking to understand gun ownership and gun culture in America.

Demographically and geographically, liberal gun owners resemble their fellow gun owners and differ from their fellow liberals in most of the ways we were able to capture in these models. Liberal gun owners indeed fit the stereotype of gun owners as being older married white men with punitive attitudes who are rural natives and natives of the South and Great Plains/Mountain West. This should not be read without some nuance, however. For example, those who are more religious are more likely to be conservative gun owners than liberal gun owners, but not moderates or non-gun owners. Additionally, those with punitive attitudes are more likely to be moderate or conservative gun owners than liberal gun owners, who are like non-gun owners on this dimension. Black Protestants are not only more likely than Evangelical Protestants to be liberal gun owners than conservative gun owners (Table 3), but also they are more likely to be gun owners even among liberals only (Table 2). As legal scholar Nicholas Johnson (2014) has argued, there is an African American tradition of arms in the United States that sociologists have all but ignored (but see Shapira 2017).

The fact that hunters are more likely to be conservative gun owners than liberal gun owners—despite the fact that conservative and liberal gun owners are similar in most ways demographically and geographically—suggests

another avenue of further investigation. Hunting is strongly identified with the historic tradition of guns that Yamane (2017) calls Gun Culture 1.0. There is reason to believe that liberal gun owners connect more with the rising self-defense orientation found in Gun Culture 2.0 (Wertz et al. 2018). Unfortunately, most of what we know about this is based on journalism (as highlighted in the introduction to this article) rather than scholarship. Those who have studied defensive gun owners—and all gun owners, really—to date have focused extensively on individuals and groups that tend toward political conservatism (Carlson 2015; Melzer 2009; Metzl 2019; Stroud 2016).

The fact that liberal gun owners hold attitudes that are less punitive than other gun owners highlights not only the benefit of slicing the pie of gun ownership more finely, but also suggests the need to consider not only the predictors of diverse gun ownership categories but also the consequences. Rendering understandings of gun ownership more complex may help disturb the notion that an “on average” statistical relationship is the same as an inherent connection, for example, between guns and racial resentment (Filindra and Kaplan 2016) or Christian nationalism (Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry 2018).

The “gun gap” that Joslyn (2020) finds between gun owners and non-gun owners could also frame studies of any number of other gaps among gun owners themselves. We hope this exploratory study of liberal gun owners encourages other scholars to advance the study of gun ownership even further.

ENDNOTES

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¹In addition to exploring the benefits of estimating the models separately by year, we also included year as a variable in our regression models and found no significant differences.

²Because it samples households rather than individuals, for household-level variables, the GSS is self-weighting; however, because the number of individuals in a household varies, the probability of selection differs based on household size and this must be corrected by weighting the sample. We use WTSSALL (Smith et al. 2019, Appendix A: Sample Design and Weighting).

³An iterated principal factor method of factor analysis confirms that these four items measure a single underlying construct we are calling religiosity. Factor 1 comprised of these four items explained 93.6% of the variance with factor loadings ranging from 0.52 to 0.84. After rotation, Factor 1 explained 80.0% of the variance with factor loadings from 0.41 to 0.80.

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