

## Introduction

America is divided over gun control. With rising gun violence, gun control has become an important and controversial national issue. Recent tragedies such as Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook have had significant effects on the issue of gun control (Barry, McGinty, Vernick, and Webster 2013). With Americans currently divided over gun control, it is important to evaluate how opinions about the gun control issue have changed over time and what effect these tragedies have had. How do attitudes toward gun control change in response to gun tragedies? Studies argue that collective tragedies politicize and make salient the issue of threat control, and specifically in the issue of gun control (Spitzer, 2012, p. 77). Additionally, over time, studies also observe that people become desensitized to collective tragedies and threats that are not pervasive or are not seen as personally threatening (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, Baumgardner 2004). Lastly, the magnitude of these responses can vary by ideology, culture, and perceptions of immediate relevance (Spitzer, 2012, p. 50-54,121).

## Hypotheses

If gun tragedies politicize the issue of gun control, people become desensitized to tragedies over time, and if the magnitude of the public response can vary by ideology, local demography, and culture, we are able to develop a set of hypotheses.

- Working Hypothesis: Public response to gun tragedies will be to increase support for gun control measures
- Desensitization Hypothesis: The effect of gun tragedies on support for gun control measures will be smaller with each tragedy
- Party Hypothesis: Support for gun control generally, and attitude change after tragedies, will be highest among Democrats
- Locale Hypothesis: Support for gun control, and attitude change after tragedies, will be highest in the densely populated urban Northeast, and lowest in the sparsely populated rural South

## References

Barry, C. L., McGinty, E. E., Vernick, J. S., & Webster, D. W. (2013). After Newtown—public opinion on gun policy and mental illness. *New England journal of medicine*, 368(12) 1077-1081.

Funk, J. B., Baldacci, H. B., Pasold, T., & Baumgardner, J. (2004). Violence exposure in real-life, video games, television, movies, and the internet: is there desensitization?. *Journal of adolescence*, 27(1), 23-39.

Spitzer, R.J. (2012). *The politics of gun control* (5th ed.). Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

## Data & Methods

The survey data used for this project was gathered from the Roper Center Archives, using surveys from polling organizations such as CBS, Gallup, NORC, ABCWP, and Pew Research. In particular, the two survey questions primarily used as the basis for this project were 1. “In general, do you think gun laws should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?” (CBS News) and 2. “Which do you think is more important—to protect the rights of Americans to own guns, or to control gun ownership?” (Pew Research). Overall, the project involved 119 surveys ranging from 1959 to the present.

Survey participants’ gender, party, gun ownership, race, education, neighborhood type, and region were obtained and analyzed. To explore temporal and between-groups patterns, linear trends, descriptive frequencies, crosstabs, and chi squares were performed.

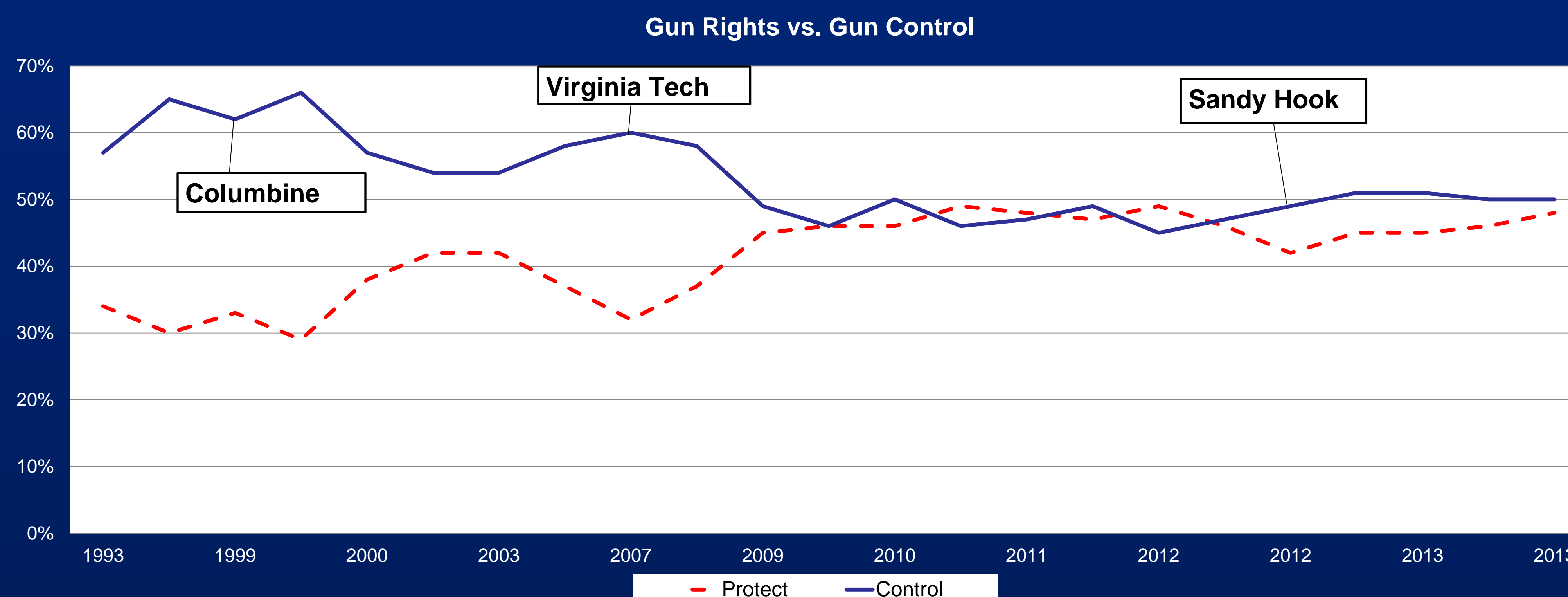


Table 1: Opinion on whether to protect the right of Americans to own guns or to control gun ownership (Source: Surveys from 1993-2013 by Pew Research)

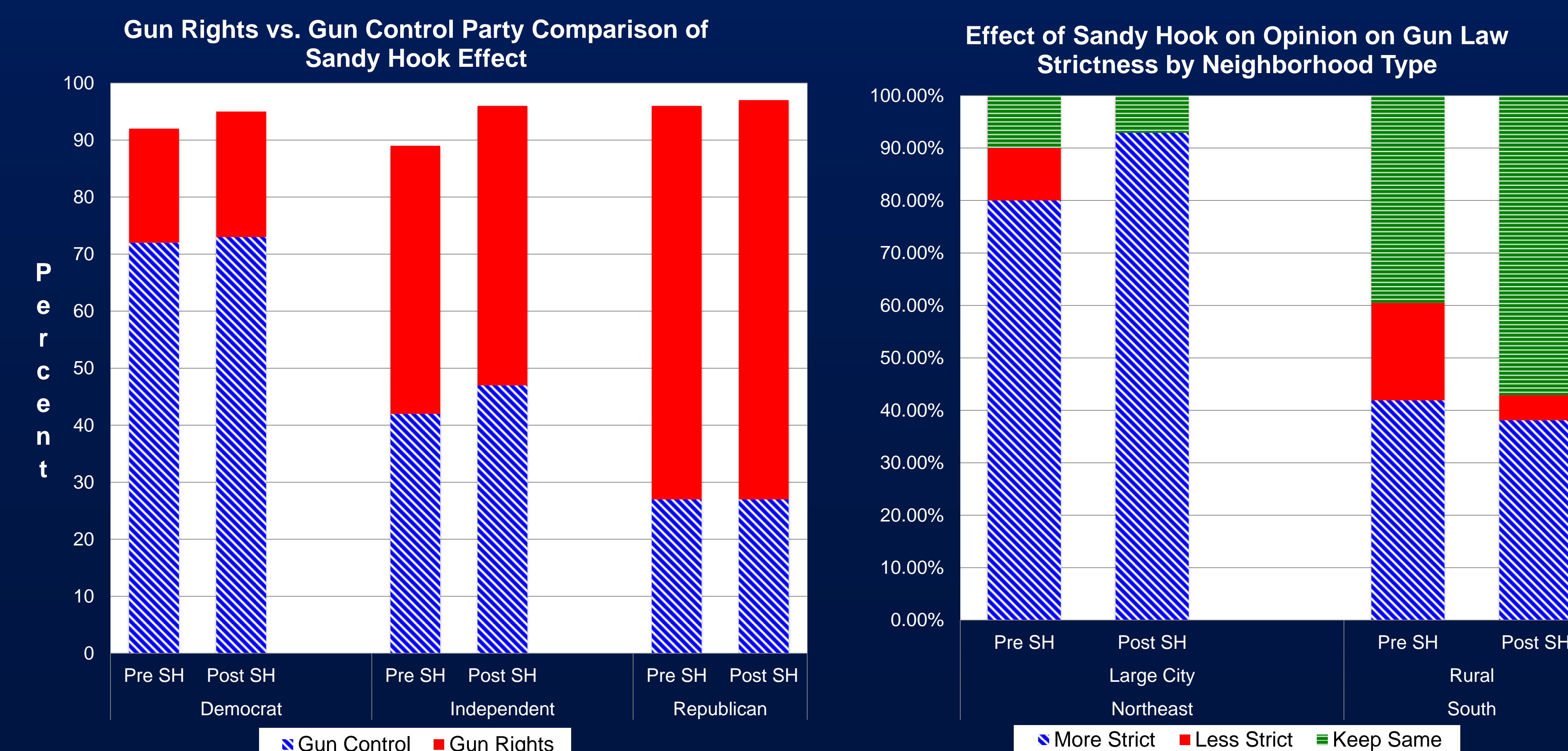


Chart 1: Effect of Sandy Hook by Party in Pew Research on Gun Rights vs. Gun Control (Source: Surveys from Pew Research 12/1/12 & 1/1/13)

Chart 2: Effect of Sandy Hook on Opinion on Gun Law Strictness by Neighborhood Type (Source: Surveys from CBS News Polls April 2012 & December 2012)

## Results

Findings indicate that the responsiveness of the public depends to some extent on the specific proposed gun control policy or question. In general, the public still supports gun control after the tragedies. Opinion responsiveness however was smaller after more recent tragedies – this is particularly evident in the Pew data. For that question wording, there was a significant response to Columbine in 1999, but a minimal response to Sandy Hook in 2012 (see Table 1). However, data from a CBS News survey employing a differently worded question showed no attitudinal responsiveness to gun tragedies after Columbine, but some responsiveness after Sandy Hook that was not sustained. Additional analyses indicate that in the aftermath of these tragedies Democrats generally had the highest support for gun control measures, but not necessarily the biggest response to tragedies. This is most likely due to the fact that Democrats had the highest levels of support previous to the tragedies and there was not much of a possible increase in support in some cases (see Chart 1). Findings also indicate that support and responsiveness vary by region and population density as well as neighborhood type. The Northeast generally had the highest support for gun control and the South, the lowest. Additionally, urbanized areas were more likely to support gun controls than rural areas (see Chart 2). Urbanized areas in the northeast were most likely to support gun control and to increase this support in response to gun tragedies. Northeast:  $X^2(6): 13.47, 0.036 < 0.05$ ; South:  $X^2(6): 36.25, 0.00 < 0.05$

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the public in the urban Northeast does support stricter control measures after tragedies, but this reaction has become smaller after more recent tragedies. However, these findings are not consistent over the different policies proposed in the poll questions and do not hold for rural, Southern, and Republican respondents. Thus, findings support the Locale and Party hypotheses, with mixed findings regarding the Working and Desensitization Hypotheses. Overall, these data confirm that public response to gun tragedies, and public opinion regarding gun control generally, varies by ideology, local demography, and regional culture.

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