

Public Attitudes towards the Regulation of Firearms

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Support for the stricter regulation of firearms is widespread both in terms of the range of measures endorsed by the public and in terms of the high level of public approval for such measures. As Table 1 shows, majorities in 2006 favor all proposals to expand regulations: 91% support making it illegal to use guns while under the influence of alcohol, 85% want the sale of 50 caliber rifles limited, 82% want the sale of semi-automatic, assault weapons limited, 80% favor criminal background checks for all sales of guns, including private sales between individuals, 79% back requiring a police permit before a gun could be purchased, 76% believe that terrorist attacks have increased the need for stricter gun control, and 54% want illegal gun sales to be punished more severely than illegal drug sales with another 37% saying that punishments for illegal gun sales should be as tough as penalties for selling illegal drugs. (See Appendix on the surveys used in this report.)

There is nothing new about the strong public support for a wide range of measures to regulate firearms. As Table 2 indicates, in 2001 a plurality supported all measures except a total ban on individuals owning handguns. Over two-thirds supported mandatory, gun-safety courses for gun buyers, requiring police permits to purchase a gun, criminal background checks for all gun sales, mandatory registration of handguns, and restricting criminal access to guns even if that made it harder for law-abiding individuals to obtain guns, requiring that all new handguns be personalized, a mandatory, five-day waiting period to buy a handgun, regular re-registration of handguns, and a limit of one handgun purchase per month. In addition, over two-thirds of the public in 2001 wanted to deny guns to those convicted of publicly displaying a firearm in a threatening manner, carrying a concealed weapon without a permit, simple assault, or driving under the influence of alcohol (Table 3).

Moreover support for specific measures to regulate firearms has been strong and stable or even gaining ground in recent years. As Figure 1 shows, endorsement of requiring a police permit to purchase a gun has been over 70% since the early 1970s and about 80% since the early 1990s. Likewise, backing for making the penalty for illegally selling guns tougher than for illegal drug sales was unchanged from 55% supporting this in 2001 and 54% backing it in 2006 and support for criminal background checks for all gun sales, including private sales between individuals increased from 77.5% in 2001 to 80% in 2006 (Table 1 and Smith, 2001).

Some have speculated that the 9/11 terrorist attacks undermined support for the regulation of firearms, arguing that fear of terrorism increased the public desire for firearms for self-defense. However, this was not the case. First, except for a small bulge in handgun applications in September-October, 2001 which had already started to subside by November, there was no increase in firearm purchases in response to the 9/11 attacks (Smith, 2002; NICS, 2005; NICS, 2006). As Figure 2 shows gun ownership has been declining over the last 35 years and the 9/11 terrorist attacks did not reverse that trend. Second, support for requiring a police permit before a gun could be purchased was unaffected by the 9/11 attacks. As Figure 1 shows, support has been at 79% or more throughout the 2000s with no decline in the aftermath of 9/11. Finally, when directly asked whether “gun control laws should be stricter, making it harder for people to purchase firearms” as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, 76.5% backed this idea and only 16% endorsed less strict gun controls (Table 1).

In brief, strong majorities of the public back a wide range of measures to regulate firearms and stricter punishments for those who violate gun laws. Support has been high for decades and is as high or higher today than it has been in the past.

Table 1

Public Support for Measures to Regulate Firearms, 2006

| | |
|--|----|
| % for Prohibiting Gun Use When Under the Influence of Alcohol | 91 |
| % for Limiting Sales of High Power/50-caliber Rifles | 85 |
| % for Limiting Sales of Semi-automatic Assault Weapons | 82 |
| % for Criminal Background Checks for Private Gun Sales | 80 |
| % for Police Permits to Purchase Guns | 79 |
| % for Stricter Gun Control after Terrorist Attacks | 76 |
| % for Illegal Gun Sales to be Punished More than Illegal Drugs | 54 |

Source: 2006 General Social Survey, n=1364

In most states a gun owner may legally sell his or her gun without proof that the buyer has passed a criminal history check. How strongly do you favor or oppose a law that required private gun sales to be subject to the same background check requirements as sales by licensed dealers? Do you strongly favor, favor, neither favor nor oppose, oppose, or strongly oppose?

Should penalties for illegally selling guns be tougher, less tough, or about as tough as penalties for illegally selling drugs?

Should semi-automatic, assault weapons or semi-automatic guns known as assault rifles be sold to the general public or should their sales be limited to the military and police?

As a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, do you think that gun control laws should be stricter, making it harder for people to purchase firearms or that gun control laws should be less strict, making it easier for people to purchase firearms?

Currently under federal law, very high power, 50-caliber rifles that can penetrate armor from a mile away are available to people on the same basis as standard hunting rifles. Should such very high power rifles be 1) restricted only to the police and military, or 2) available to civilians like standard hunting rifles as they are at present?

In all states it is illegal to drive while under the influence of alcohol. Would you favor or oppose state laws making it illegal to carry a firearm while under the influence of alcohol?

Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?

Table 2

Support for General Gun-Control and Gun-Safety Measures, 2001^a

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| Gun buyers must take gun-safety courses | 87.9 |
| Police permit needed before gun may be purchased (GSS2000) | 79.0 |
| Require background check for private sales | 77.5 |
| Mandatory registration of handguns | 76.9 |
| Keep guns from criminals, even if harder for law-abiding | 76.7 |
| Require that all new handguns be personalized | 73.6 |
| Mandatory background check and 5-day waiting period | 73.0 |
| Regular re-registering of handguns | 69.8 |
| Limit one handgun per month per buyer | 69.1 |
| Handgun owners must at least be licensed and trained | 62.7 ^b |
| Concealed carrying only for those with special needs | 51.8 |
| Handguns for law enforcement only | 49.1 |
| Total ban on handguns | 11.0 ^b |

Source: NGPS-2001, n=1,176; GSS-2000, n=1,860

^aResults are from the 2001 survey except as marked otherwise.

^b11.0% wanted a "total ban of handgun ownership" and 51.7% said that "handguns owners should be licensed by the government and complete mandatory training." 62.7% favored licensing or a more stringent measure.

Question Wordings:

Do you think that mandatory gun-safety training should or should not be required for anyone to buy a gun?

Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun? (GSS-2000)

In most states, a gun owner may legally sell his or her gun without proof that the buyer has passed a criminal history check. How strongly do you favor or oppose a law that required private gun sales be subject to the same background check requirements as sales by licensed dealers?

Do you favor or oppose the mandatory registration of handguns and pistols?

For each of the following statements, please tell me if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree? The government should do everything it can to keep handguns out of the hands of criminals, even if it means that it will be harder for law-abiding citizens to purchase handguns.

Engineers are now designing handguns equipped with devices which can recognize the owner of a gun and not fire for anyone else. If a new law were to require all new handguns to be personalized, how strongly would you favor or oppose it. Please tell me if you would strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose it?

Table 2 (continued)

Which of the following would you most favor to regulate the sale of handguns:

Check on a buyer's criminal record and have a five-day waiting period for buying a handgun.

Check on a buyer's criminal record instantly and drop the five-day waiting period for buying a handgun.

Neither check on a buyer's criminal record nor have a five-day waiting period for buying a handgun.

Do you favor or oppose requiring gun owners to re-register their handguns and pistols at regular intervals to establish that they still own them?

Some states have passed laws limiting handgun sales to one per month per customer. Some people favor these laws as a way to prevent people from buying large quantities of handguns and selling them to criminals or teenagers. Other people oppose these laws because they say the law interferes with the right of law-abiding citizens to buy guns. Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose a law that prohibits citizens from buying more than one handgun per month?

Which of these views comes closer to your own? Legal restrictions on the sale and ownership of handguns are too strict and should be relaxed/Existing restrictions on the sale and ownership of handguns are sufficient now/Handgun owners should be licensed by the government and complete mandatory training/There should be a total ban on handgun ownership.

Most states require a special license to allow people to carry a concealed firearm. Should licenses to carry concealed firearms be issued to any adult who has passed a criminal background check and a gun safety course or only to people with a special need to carry a concealed gun such as private detectives?

Which of these views comes closer to your own? Legal restrictions on the sale and ownership of handguns are too strict and should be relaxed/Existing restrictions on the sale and ownership of handguns are sufficient now/No new handguns should be manufactured or imported, but current legal owners could keep their handguns/ Handgun possession should be allowed only by law enforcement personnel, but law-abiding citizens should still be allowed to purchase and possess shotguns and rifles.

Table 3

Attitudes to Denying Guns to Criminals, 2001

| | % for Prohibiting Gun Purchases to Criminals |
|---|--|
| Convicted of... | |
| Publicly displaying a firearm in a threatening manner | 94.7 |
| Carrying a concealed weapon without a permit | 83.7 |
| Assault and battery that does not involve a lethal weapon or serious injury | 82.9 |
| Driving under the influence of alcohol | 68.5 |

Source: NGPS-2001

Question Wording:

Now I would like to read you a list of crimes. In most states persons who have been convicted of these crimes can legally purchase firearms. In each case, tell me if you think persons who have been convicted of the crime should or should not be able to purchase firearms.

Appendix: Surveys

General Social Survey (GSS), 1972-2006: The GSS is a full-probability sample of adults living in households in the United States using in-person interviews. For more details, see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2007. GSS gets its main funding from the National Science Foundation. The added questions on the regulation of firearms in 2006 were supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation.

National Gun Policy Survey (NGPS), 2001: The NGPS is a random digit dialing sample of adults living in households with telephones. Sample size was 1,176 in 2001. For more details, see Smith, 2001. The NGPS was funded by the Joyce Foundation.

References

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Figure 1: % In Favor of Police Permit to Purchase Gun

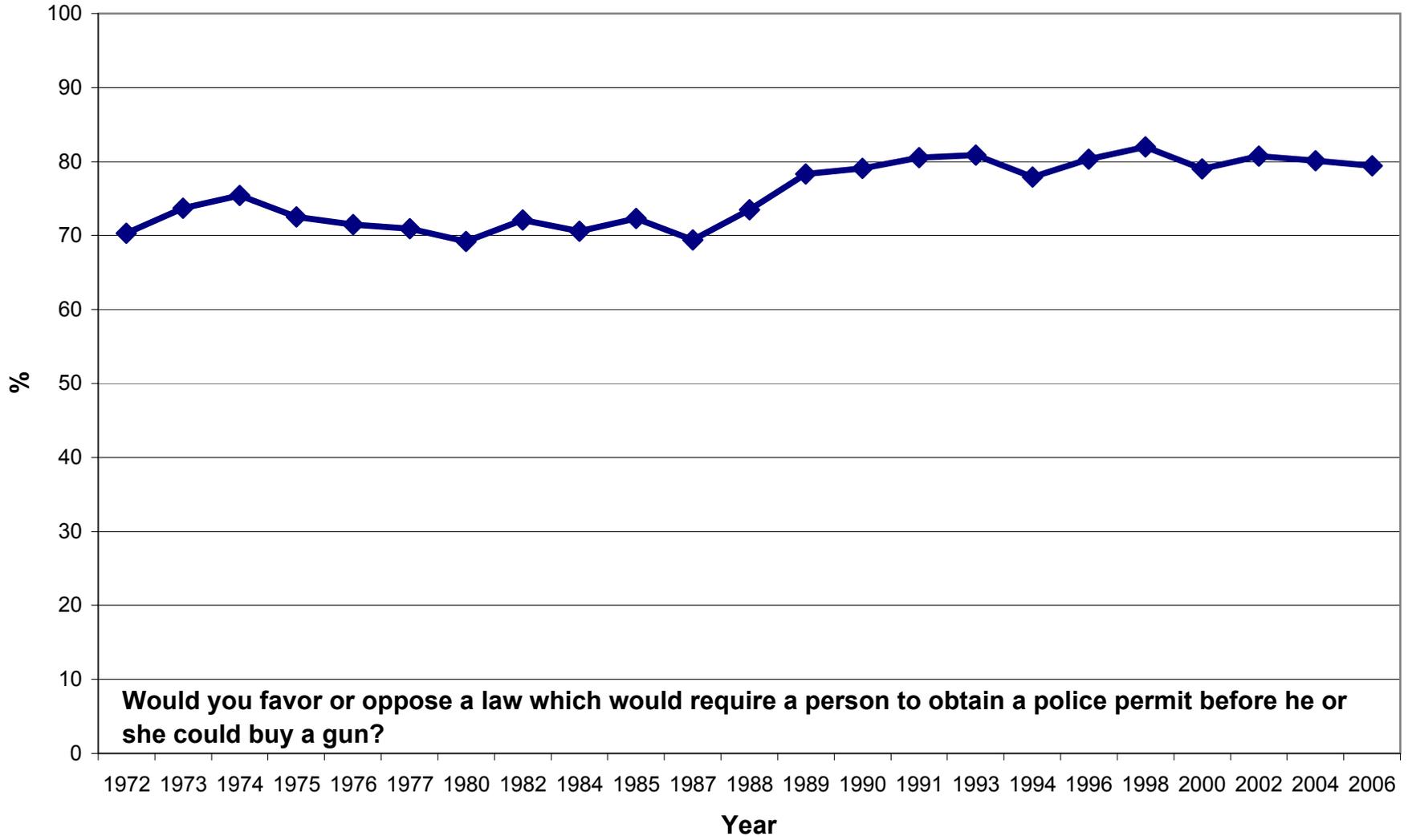


Figure 2: Trends in Personal & Household Gun Ownership

