

On gun control, citizens support politicians who point to big picture, not specific incidents, study finds

March 25 2013

As the nation continues to grapple with the long-simmering issue of gun control, solutions are stymied by heated debates.

To effectively influence a divided America, elected officials must take a broad perspective rather than focusing on specific incidents, according to a new [psychology study](#) from The University of Texas at Austin.

The study, led by University of Texas at Austin psychology researchers Erin Burgoon and Marlene Henderson, is published in the March online issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

According to the findings, public officials who are located out of state from their constituents and the incident are more likely to gain approval by framing their arguments around the abstract rather than specific incidents. This prompts people to consider the larger picture, says Henderson, assistant professor of psychology.

As for the representatives located closer to the participants, the researchers found they scored higher approval ratings for their decisions based on single incidents, such as the shooting in Arizona of former U.S. Rep. [Gabrielle Giffords](#) in January 2011. When politicians speak at local events, they cue their constituents to focus on the specifics and look at the rich details of life, Henderson says.

"By focusing on the here-and-now, people are likely to be much more accepting of a nearby politician's stance on gun control," Henderson says. "Yet when a more geographically distant [politician](#) gives a speech or an interview, people tend to think in broader terms and want their elected officials to do the same by avoiding basing their policies on a single shooting incident."

As part of the study, 112 participants read purportedly real interview responses made by their congressional representatives regarding gun control two weeks after the Arizona shooting. After identifying the location of the participants' residence, the researchers told them that Gallup had interviewed U.S. representatives, including their representative, about [gun laws](#) in light of recent crime statistics. They varied the location of the interview with the representative. That is, participants read that the interview either occurred at the representative's district office (closer) or the representative's Washington, D.C., office (more distant). They also varied whether the congressional representatives cited the Arizona shooting or a broader set of gun-related crime statistics.

According to the results, more participants were less supportive of a distant representative whose gun control position was based on the shooting rather than the statistics. However, participants were equally supportive of the closer representative who cited the shooting or statistics.

The researchers found similar results in a series of experiments describing decisions of other elected officials on a variety of policy issues (reallocation of police forces, homeland security, gun control, etc.). The findings suggest the constituent behaviors extend beyond the issue of [gun control](#).

"Representatives should consider their distance from constituents when

communicating their stance," says Burgoon, a psychology doctoral student and lead author of the study. "For example, an official making a statement at a town hall meeting may benefit from citing a single case, but would be wise to cite statistics or trends when sending a mass email from Washington, D.C."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

Citation: On gun control, citizens support politicians who point to big picture, not specific incidents, study finds (2013, March 25) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-03-gun-citizens-politicians-big-picture.html>

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