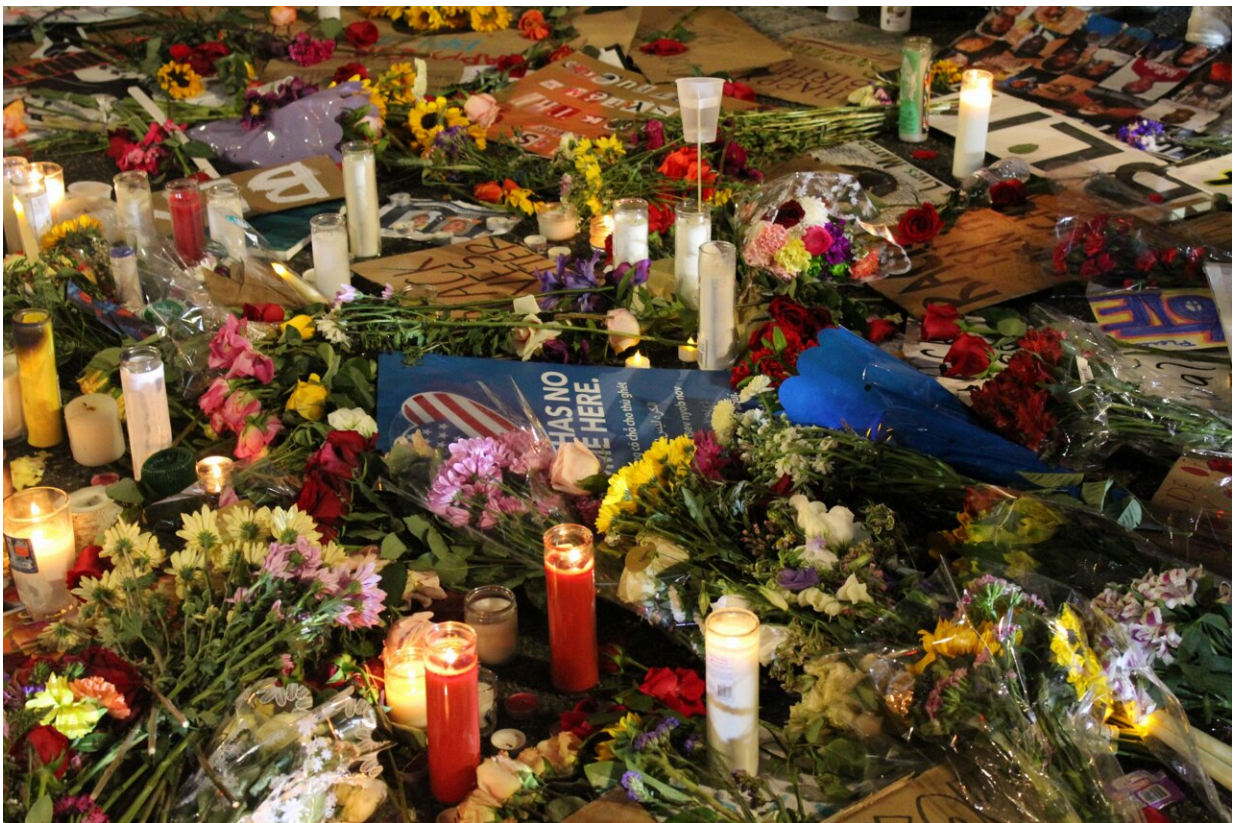


No shot: Why America won't pull the trigger on gun control

May 21 2024, by Joe Arney



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Whether you consider the Second Amendment a dangerous relic or inspiration for a tattoo, the U.S. public as a whole doesn't consider guns an important issue, except in the immediate wake of a mass shooting.

"It's a little depressing that only 8% of America thinks guns are an important issue," said Chris Vargo, an associate professor of advertising and information analytics at the University of Colorado Boulder's College of Media, Communication and Information. "It makes it obvious to me that, with this much disinterest, [gun control](#) isn't going to happen at the national level."

Vargo's research, which was [published](#) in *Mass Communication and Society* in April, looked at agenda setting and gun control to better understand whether [public sentiment](#) around guns is strong enough to pressure legislators into taking action.

He studied the impacts of traditional and partisan media coverage, posts on Twitter (now X), gun-related events, and Google search behavior to understand how important Americans consider guns against the broader tapestry of challenges facing the nation.

Long story short, they don't. Vargo's dataset goes back to 2015, and you can easily point out where devastating mass shootings like Parkland, Uvalde and even Boulder took place—there are spikes in Google searches for terms like "second amendment rights," "concealed carry permit" and "Sandy Hook donations."

But a spike is all it is. Particularly among conservatives, interest in guns and gun control quickly heads back to its baseline. And even in the immediate wake of the gruesome Parkland shootings, only about 30% of Americans considered guns an important issue.

"I expected to see a ramp on this across time—more and more interest as more people are shot, or as more people know people who are killed in mass shootings," Vargo said. "Instead, it just resets."

A zero-sum game

He admitted surprise at his findings, but as an expert on agenda setting, maybe he shouldn't be. Scholars who study agenda setting look for ways that the news media plays an outsized role in determining what issues we find important. It's particularly of interest for people in mass communications—like journalists, advertisers, PR experts and [content creators](#)—to ensure their work is more likely to generate audience interest.

"Agenda setting is a zero-sum game," Vargo said. "We can only keep maybe five major national issues in our head at one time—and while some topics, like the economy, are always going to be there, for something new to rise to the top, something else has to come out."

Guns are a new direction for Vargo's work on media effects and agenda setting, which traditionally looks at everything from fact-checking and [fake news](#) to how we choose media to form a community around like-minded people. This topic was less about a new direction and more a reaction to how unimportant guns are to Americans. Survey data list guns as a top-25 problem—in other words, invisible.

Google Trends proved to be a rich source for understanding salience around guns. Surprisingly, that wasn't true of the mainstream [news media](#), which had almost no effect on the issue. Instead, partisan players on both the left and right—think the likes of Wonkette or Breitbart—drive interest, though that polarization comes with an interesting twist of its own: Right-aligned media barely move the needle, while progressive publications get a boost from conservatives who flock there after shootings.

Vargo called this "counter-attitudinal thinking."

"When conservatives see the left is crying about something, it signals that it's an important issue to me, but only in the sense that I'm going to

refute it," he said.

Looking at issue salience is important because when a topic does reach a certain threshold, the government tends to act. Vargo pointed to gay marriage as one issue where attention built consistently over a long period, leading to same-sex marriages being legalized in 2015. As more people realized they knew gay couples over time, it helped create momentum for the issue.

Gun control, though, "is really unusual, because we just don't have a lasting memory for shootings," Vargo said. "We have this psychological desire to push out bad news, which helps keep gun control out of the spotlight."

It's why he's sure we'll never see action at the federal level, though he didn't rule out the idea of local legislation.

"Guns aren't an intrusive issue until they are," Vargo said. "But unless you have something like a Parkland every day, you're not moving a bunch of senators to take action. In those communities traumatized by gun violence, you might see local and state policies enacted to protect us."

More information: Chris J. Vargo et al, Breaking Agenda Setting Boundaries: A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Understanding Salience of Gun Control in the Polarized Public Sphere, *Mass Communication and Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2024.2333972](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2024.2333972)

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