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IDEOLOGY (STILL) TRUMPS REASON

When it comes to gun laws, “Red” and “Blue” remain in the driver’s seat



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Vice-President Kamala Harris’ recent visit was an inevitable heart-churner. Scheduled for demolition, Florida’s Marjory Stoneman High School [remains mostly as it was](#) in February 2018 when a former student barged in and opened fire with an AR-15, murdering fourteen students and three employees and wounding more than a dozen others.

Speaking before an audience that included the victims’ families, Ms. Harris announced a new Federal initiative, the [“National Extreme Risk Protection Order Resource Center.”](#) Established in partnership with the Bloomberg School of Public Health, it will train law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, clinicians and other service providers in the proper use of extreme risk protection orders, i.e. “Red Flag” laws, which authorize the pre-emptive seizure of firearms from dangerous persons. Such as [Nikolas Cruz](#), the deeply-troubled nineteen-year old shooter who had been expelled from Marjory Stoneman “for behavioral reasons” in the year preceding the massacre.

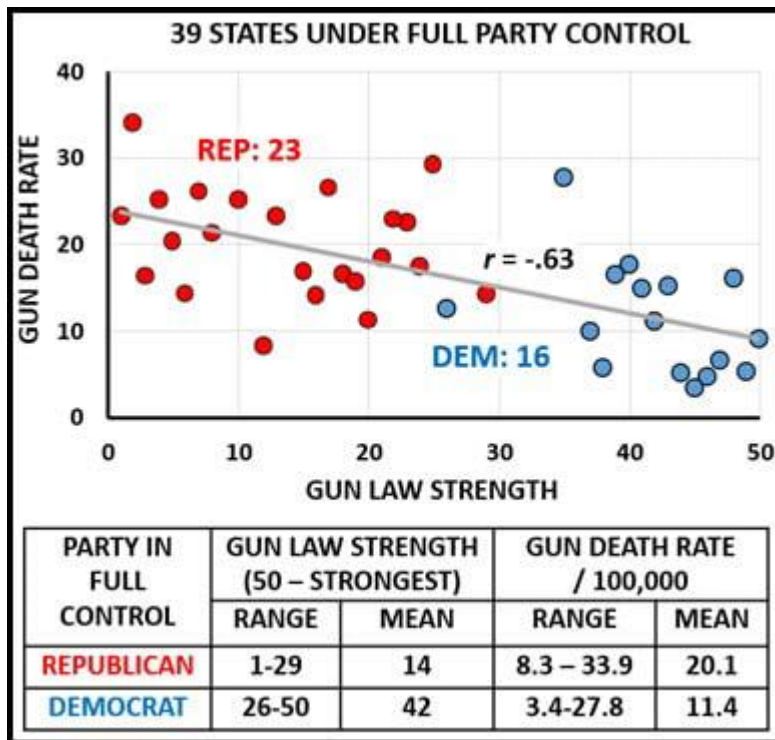
[“Ban the Damned Things!”](#) recounts Cruz’s ominous and extensive online history. Two years before his unspeakable deed, he posted photos of self-inflicted cuts and declared his intention to buy a gun. That led to a mental health referral. But a counselor cleared him, and the online ranting continued. Indeed, his intentions became so explicit (i.e., “Im going to be a professional school shooter”) that an Internet user warned the FBI about Cruz a mere month before the massacre. But nothing happened.

At the time, Florida lacked a “Red Flag” law. [That quickly changed.](#) Still, the version it adopted wasn’t a complete solution. It requires that law enforcement officers (not simply citizens or family members) file a petition in court, and a hearing and judicial order are required before guns can be seized. No shortcuts are permitted. In 2019 [a](#)

[Lakeland woman was arrested for burglary](#) when she tried to turn in her estranged husband's guns to police. He was in jail after purposely ramming her car while on the road, and she feared for her life.

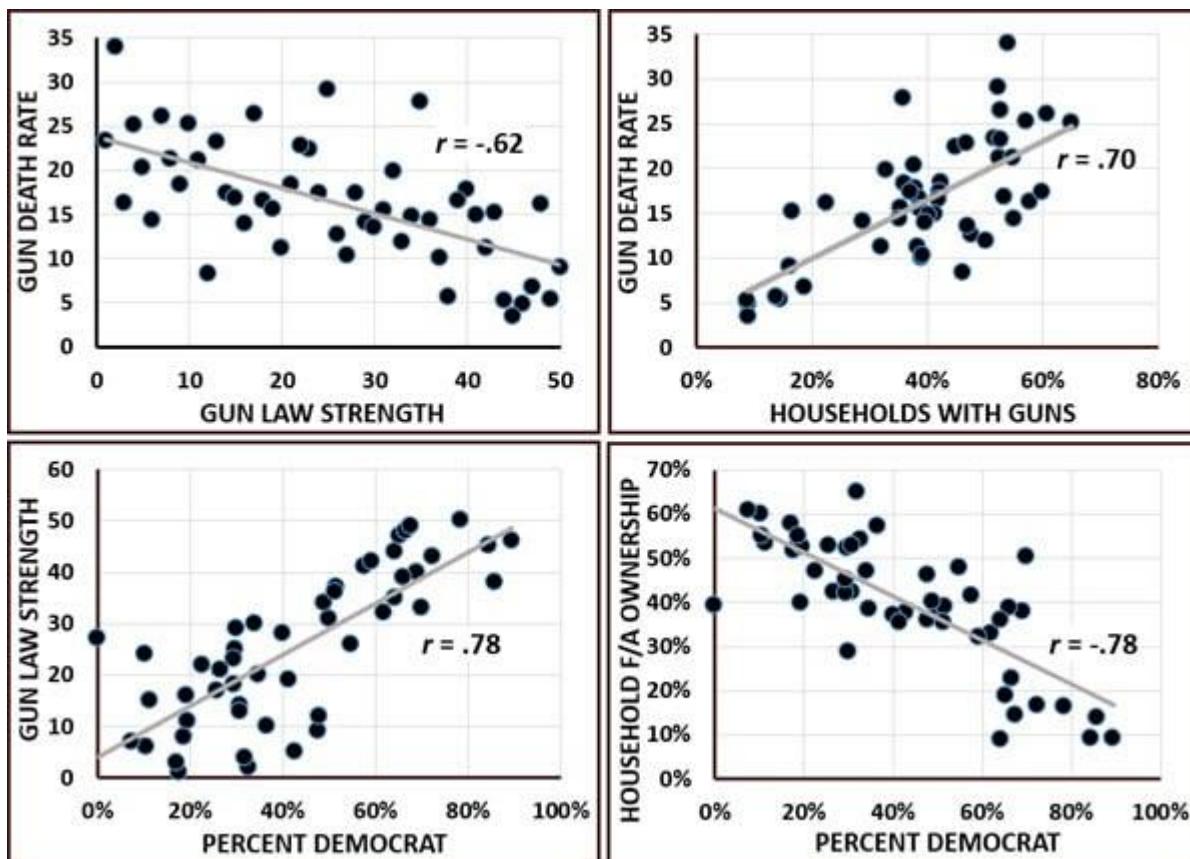
Marjory Stoneman led to another tightening. Cruz legally bought his AR-15 from a dealer when he turned eighteen, the Federal minimum. So Florida [raised the minimum age to buy long guns](#) to twenty-one. But this January, by an "11-5 party-line vote" (with "Reds" in the majority), the criminal justice committee of Florida's House chamber [sent forward a measure](#) that would restore the ability of eighteen-year olds to buy long guns. According to Rep. Bobby Payne (R-Palatka), doing so is "very important in my rural area. We do a lot of bird hunting."

That reset is still pending. But what Florida's political leaders are yet to do is define certain semi-automatic firearms like Cruz's AR-15 as simply being *too* lethal. Guns labeled as "assault weapons" [are presently banned in only ten States](#) – California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Washington. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), as of March 2024 [each of these States is one of sixteen](#) that are under complete control of the Democratic Party, meaning that *both* legislative Houses *and* the Governor are "Blue." Republicans, in turn, exercise full control over twenty-three States. None of these "Red" states has an assault weapons law. *Not one.*



Check out the above graphic. A telling partisan split extends well beyond assault weapons. Everytown For Gun Safety recently released its [2024 State gun-law-strength rankings](#). Their system assigns 1 to the State with the strongest overall gun laws, and 50 to the State with the weakest. We turned it around, creating a scale of gun law strength that ranges from 1-50, with 50 the strongest. Colored dots – red for Republicans, blue for Democrats – represent the 39 States that are fully under control of a single party.

According to the scattergram and table, there's a strong relationship between NCSL party composition, Everytown gun law strength rankings and [CDC 2021 firearm mortality death rates](#) (it includes all deaths by gunfire, including crimes, accidents and suicides). Check the table. Mean gun law strength for “Blue” States is *three times* that of “Red” States, and the mean death rate is only *half* in magnitude. Notice how neatly the “Reds” and “Blues” cluster in the scattergram, with the “Reds” displaying consistently lower gun law strength scores and higher death rates than the “Blues”. Indeed, their gun law strength scores overlap only once, in the middle. To more precisely express the relationship between gun law strength and gun death rate we computed the *r* (correlation) statistic. It ranges from zero, meaning no relationship between variables, to plus or minus 1, meaning a perfect association. For this group of 39 States, gun law strength and gun death rate have a robust *r* of $-.63$. As one goes up or down, the other consistently follows, but in the opposite direction.



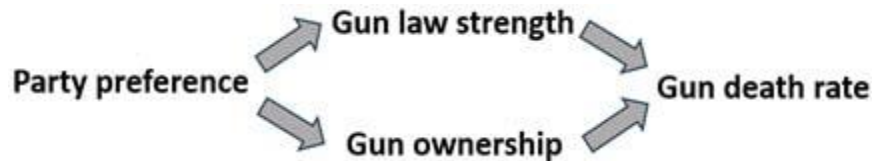
“[Policing Can’t Fix What Really Ails](#)”, our recent exploration of the role of poverty in crime, assessed relationships between poverty, household firearms ownership, violent crime, homicide and gun deaths. The above scattergrams depict the results of a 50-State analysis which examines the role of Party composition (measured by proportion of State legislators who are Democrats) as a potential driving force.

- Top left graph: Gun law strength and gun death rates have a robust r of $-.62$, virtually identical to what we computed for the 39-State sample. As one factor increases, the other decreases, and in close sync.
- Top right graph: At $r = .70$, the proportion of households with guns exhibits a strong relationship with gun deaths. Since we’re considering all manner of gun deaths, including accidents and suicides, that’s no surprise.
- Bottom left graph: To assess the potential influence of political parties on gun law strength, NCSL data was used to determine each State’s proportion of “Blue” legislators. Results are consistent with what we found for the 39-State sample. Political party and gun law strength share a strong relationship, producing an r of $.78$. That’s a “positive” relationship, meaning the variables go up and down together.
- Bottom right graph: An equally robust correlation, in the “negative” direction, characterizes the relationship between party preference and household gun ownership. As percent “Blues” goes up, gun ownership goes down, and in very close sync.

This matrix displays all the relationships:

	PCT DEMOCRAT	GUN LAW STRENGTH	HH GUN OWNERSHIP	GUN DEATH RATE
PCT DEMOCRAT		0.78	-0.78	-0.52
GUN LAW STRENGTH	0.78		-0.79	-0.62
HH GUN OWNERSHIP	-0.78	-0.80		0.70
GUN DEATH RATE	-0.52	-0.62	0.70	

Check out the bottom row. Gun death rates substantially increase with gun ownership (positive relationship) but markedly decline as percent Democrat and gun law strength increase (negative relationship). “Reds” support gun ownership and oppose gun lawmaking. And here’s how we figure things play out in the “real world”:



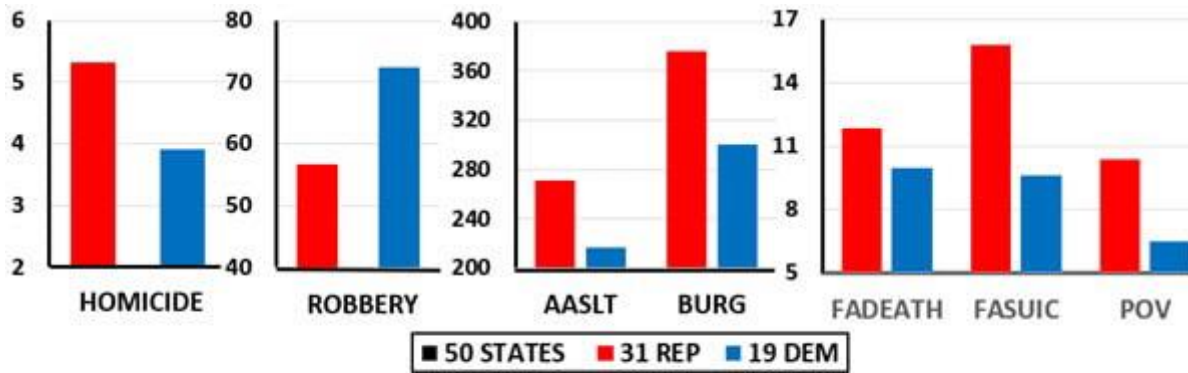
Given a reluctance, even in “Blue” places, to impose truly strict controls, guns have become ubiquitous throughout the land. [According to NBC News’ latest poll](#), 52 percent of registered voters – the highest proportion ever – have at least one gun at home. Firearms ownership was reported by 66 percent of “Reds”, 45 percent of Indies and 41 percent of “Blues”.

While full-blooded “Red” States are more deeply affected by gun violence, they don’t suffer alone. Consider Virginia. Traditionally split down the middle politics-wise, [it presently has two-member Democratic majorities](#) in its State House and Senate. But Governor Glenn Youngkin is a “Red.” [So he recently vetoed a host of gun control measures](#), including an assault-weapons ban, that had squeaked through on Party-line votes. He even turned away a prohibition on guns on college campuses that had been inspired by a [November, 2022 shooting](#) which took the lives of three University of Virginia students on a chartered bus. However, Gov. Youngkin *did* sign a bill requiring schools to remind parents of their responsibility to safely store guns. That tepidly-worded measure followed on a recent incident in which a six-year old first-grader used an unsecured gun to shoot his teacher. ([His mother just pled guilty to child neglect.](#))

Switch to deep-Blue. Consider [the recent tragedy in California](#), where a 10-year old used a gun he “stole” from his father’s car to shoot and kill another child. And the 66-year old upstate New York homeowner [who opened fire on vehicles that \(mistakenly\) drove up his driveway](#), killing one of the occupants. He just drew 25-to-life. (For many more such examples scroll through the “Updates” sections of our essays in [Gun Control 2023](#).)

Clashing ideologies aside, firearms ownership remains commonplace throughout the land. “Reds” argue that firearms are vital for protection, and many “Blues” agree. It turns out that their supposedly more “stringent” gun laws [are riddled with exceptions](#). Such as California’s assault weapons “ban”, which allows semi-automatic rifles that, other than for a ten-round limit, are the functional equivalents of the highly lethal AR-15.

So how *are* the risks of violence dispersed? These graphs report mean State crime rates from the [UCR](#), mean firearms mortality and suicide data from the [CDC](#), and State poverty data from the [Census](#):



PCT D	HOM	ROB	AASLT	BURG	FADEATH	FASUIC	POV
28.3	5.3	56.6	271.5	376.3	11.8	15.8	10.4
67.4	3.9	72.3	216.3	300.0	9.9	9.6	6.5

“Red” States suffer from higher homicide, aggravated assault and burglary rates, while “Blue” States have higher robbery rates. Residents of “Red” States seem at somewhat higher risk of crime, but the picture is mixed. What’s perfectly clear is that “Red” States contend with substantially higher rates of firearms death and firearms suicide. Given their elevated rates of gun ownership, that would seem all-too predictable.

However, their residents’ increased risk of death isn’t something that seemingly concerns “Red” politicians. Say, Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb (his State is eleventh “Reddest”, with a legislature under full “Red” control). Gary, one of the State’s few “Blue” places, had a [long-running lawsuit against the gun industry](#), which it blamed for fomenting violence. A judge recently gave it some steam. So legislators sent on, and Governor Holcomb quickly signed, a bill that prohibits cities from doing such things. And its effect is retroactive. Sorry, Gary!

Of course, the effects of partisanship go well beyond the gun debate. As we discussed in [“Judicial Detachment: Myth or Reality?”](#) ideological notions have long shaped key rulings by our vaunted Supreme Court. (Its “Reds” are presently in the driver’s seat with a one-vote advantage.) Bottom line: when it comes to critical public issues, informed, objective analysis is often elbowed aside by the unholy influences of political ideology, both “Red” and “Blue”. *That’s* what is truly scary.